

h.arta

About art and the ways we look at the world

„Receiving in a personal manner the artistic message from the visual universe:

Competence: Highlight the plastic language elements and their inter-connections, with the purpose of interpreting bi- and tri-dimensional artistic images – drawings, paintings, photographs, sculptures and architecture.

Contents: morphology and syntax of the bi- and tri-dimensional image; specific means: drawing; value harmony and contrast; colour harmony and contrast; suggestions for material choice.

Competence: Analyse the way time and space are represented in the bi- and tri-dimensional image

Contents: artistic composition structures: classical and romantic, static and dynamic;

Competence: Plastic analysis, through personal interpretation, of bi- and tri-dimensional works of art from the local artistic heritage

Contents: analyse bi- and tri-dimensional images (a drawing, a painting, a statuary or architectural monument, an indoor sculpture, an outdoor statue, on a street or in a park, a church and a city hall).”

(Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, National Curriculum Council – School curriculum for grades 9 and 10, junior high-school, plastic education)

These are the official indications about how to explain to 15 and 16-year-olds what art is and what its roles are, the law explaining to the teachers how to provide their pupils with "the universal key for decoding any image"¹. Once one knows the formal laws of producing artwork, if one knows how to recognize a contrast or how to discern between closed and open compositions, one automatically understands the message as well. A photograph of Joseph Kosuth's "One and Three Chairs" is printed in the ambient design chapter in one of the 10th grade schoolbooks.

High-school pupils are taught, generation after generation, that art is mainly a matter of technique, a domain in which, if one studies with reverence and attention the great masterpieces, one acquires knowledge about "accepting values form the universal heritage of plastic arts"² and develops "a taste for the beautiful"³.

This vision, presenting art as a combination of traditional techniques and abstract symbols, undermines its place in society, causes it to be perceived, and therefore to become, a useless thing, pure decoration that does nothing to change our lives.

Young people continue to be educated in the spirit of the old totalitarian methods, which tried to separate art and culture from real life, so that they would lose their essential justification, lose the real reason for their necessity: their status as a realm of freedom, where reality is analysed critically, their status as an instrument that helps us be equal and able to listen to each other.

¹ Ministry of Education, Research and Youth, National Curriculum Council – School curriculum for grades 9 and 10, junior high-school, plastic education

² ibidem

³ ibidem

After graduation from the faculty of arts, one wonders what to do next, in a confusing context where the artist's status is, for various reasons, an awkward one. Whatever one says is not taken seriously, because artists are "dreamers", living in their own world; on the other hand, if what one says is too serious, it is no longer art, because art should always talk about "beautiful" things. This being the situation, we ask ourselves what could break this logical chain. Maybe proposing a different point of view would change something, however little.

Introduction

I. How do we attain knowledge?

How do we find our bearings in the world? Are there objective criteria to guide us? If yes, who establishes these criteria? What happens to those who are outside the active range of these criteria? What of those who are excluded?

A. The principles of modernity

In the 18th century, the philosophy of the Enlightenment marked the dawn of modernity, a philosophy which, until a few decades ago, still structured and legitimised our culture and still underpins, in many occasions, the way we relate to the world, the way we see ourselves and the others, the way we organise the access to knowledge etc.

According to this philosophy, the world is a place we can know and master by using an eternal and unchanging feature of our being: reason. Scientific knowledge (a cause-effect type of knowledge), derived from the right use of reason, can make us understand the mechanism of things, the laws according to which they are built, can makes us comprehend the Truth and thus to control the outside world and our own lives, to ensure the progress of society and to be free beings, determining their own existence.

*In the following list (according to Jane Flax, *Postmodernism and gender relations in feminist theory, Feminisms*, edited by Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires, Oxford University Press 1997, p. 170) we can find some of these ideas, derived from Enlightenment thought:*

- 1. The existence of a stable, coherent, reasonable self. This enlightened self is capable of knowing in a rational manner its own processes and "the laws of nature".*
- 2. Reason and its "science"--philosophy--can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge.*
- 3. The Knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be "true". Such knowledge will represent something real and unchanging (universal) about our minds and the structure of the natural world.*
- 4. Reason itself has transcendent and universal qualities. It exists independently of the self's (that is of each human's) transient and accidental existence. Experiences pertaining to the body, to history or to the social do not affect the structure of reason and its ability to produce atemporal knowledge.*

5. *There are complex connections between reason, autonomy, and freedom. All claims to truth and rightful authority are to be submitted to the tribunal of reason. Freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason. (The laws that are good for me as a rational being will necessarily be good for all rational beings). By obeying these laws I obey the best, the eternal part of my being (reason) and thus exercise my autonomy and assert my own existence as a free being. It is such acts that allow me to control and determine my existence.*
6. *If reason is the main authority, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome. Truth can serve power without distortion; in turn, by utilizing knowledge in the service of power, both freedom and progress will be assured. Knowledge can be at the same time neutral (being grounded in universal reason and not in particular "interest") and beneficial to the development of society.*
7. *Science, as the main product of the right use of reason, is also the paradigm of all knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents, but beneficial to society in its results. Due to its process of discovery, we can use "the laws of nature" for the good of the society. But, in order for science to progress, scientists must be free to follow the laws or reason, rather than to be concerned with the social "interest" coming from outside rational discourse.*

B. What are the consequences of these principles?

Naturally, if we think about these principles about the autonomy of reason, about objective truth and progress through scientific discovery, we can conclude that they are right. Reason, science, progress, individual freedom, emancipation, all these beautiful words can build the image of a world we long to live in, of a utopia we might want to make real. But the questions arising from here are: Is the world such a transparent and clear place and can we truly master it with our minds? Then, who decides what is rational and what isn't? What are to do those whose lives and experiences do not match the universal Truth? Is rational knowledge the only possible means for knowledge? What happens with the multiplicity of the world, with all those slices of existence these ideas banish into penumbra and silence?

Modernity, the age that dawned together with the Enlightenment, was founded on the individuals' and the peoples' desire for liberation. Technological progress, access to knowledge and the improvement of work conditions were all achieved with the purpose of building a better society. In exchange for the hope of liberation, the advance of technology and reason lead instead to the exploitation of the less developed areas of the planet, blindly replaced human labour with machine labour and developed more numerous and more sophisticated methods of enslavement, all under the sign of the complete rationalisation of the production process.

C. A paradigm shift

A paradigm shift happens when all the concepts and principles that underpin a culture turn to be ineffective at some point and are replaced. Once the idea of a world founded on

reason failed, and once the downfall of this idea brought the European knowledge in a deadlock, **postmodernism** marked this paradigm shift. Postmodernism is built both on the separation from modernism (founded on the principles of Enlightenment), as well as on its re-definition and re-interpretation. Here are some of the postmodern ideas (we shall list those ideas that have a particular connection with the contents of this handbook):

1. Reality is a cultural construction, it doesn't exist as such, but it is structured, constructed as a result of our perceptions, ideas, actions. We make reality be a certain way. (According to the modernist principles, reality is a given, and man can get to master it by using reason; things are a certain way and we just need to know them rationally in order to be able to control them).
2. De-canonising classical culture, that is the European elitist culture, and bringing to light other values from outside the traditional West-European model, values belonging to other races, religions, areas etc.
3. The search for the right to freedom, to self-determination, to difference, to an expression free from any constraints, a search materialised in movements such as:
 - **feminism** - politics "directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure" (C. Weedon, 1992, p.1).
 - **multiculturalism** – in reference to the right to ethno-racial, sexual etc. identity and specificity.

II. What is art?

What are the questions we should ask ourselves when we think about art? What exactly makes a certain thing be called art? What is an artist? Could I be an artist? What is the role of art? How can it help me, what connection is there between art and my life? Can art change anything? What can art institutions offer me (museums, galleries)?

*"Art does not reproduce what is visible; it makes things visible." **Paul Klee** "One cannot stop the present. Every day, one must give up the past... And since one cannot stop it, one must re-create it." **Louise Bourgeois** "La pittura è una cosa mentale." **Leonardo Da Vinci** "A «thing» isn't art: the idea expressed by the same «thing» can be."
Michelangelo Pistoletto "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting: I do not wish to add any more." **Douglas Huebler** "The essential thing today is to recognise the universal value of individual mythology." **Piero Manzoni** "...painting is not made to decorate apartments, it's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy." **Pablo Picasso** "If you ask me why I sculpt, I must answer that it is my way of life, my balance, my reason for being. If you ask me for whom I make art, I'll say that I make it for all those who approach it without prejudice." **David Smith** "I believe that the time I live in is the most important moment in the world. That the art of my time is the most important art. That the art before this moment has no immediate contribution towards my aesthetics, since the history of art explains behaviours from the past, but doesn't*

necessarily provide solutions to my problems.” **David Smith** “*The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.*” **Allan Kaprow** “*The conventions of art are altered by works of art.*” **Sol Le Witt** „*Art is all around us.*” **Claes Oldenburg** “*I am for an art which would be in immediate connection with daily life, an art which would start from small things and be a very direct and very sincere expression of our real life and our real worlds.*” **Jean Dubuffet** “*Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.*” **Sol Le Witt** “*I consciously look for an art form that is not tied in any way to tradition and in which a work of art is less important than the research that lead to that work of art.*” **Jan Dibbets** “*We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted.*” **Group Material** “*Art is a potential link across differences.*” **Suzanne Lacy** “*Everyone is an artist.*” **Joseph Beuys**

The list of these possible answers, of these opinions, definitions, ideas about art could go on forever, because our questions have no generally applicable answer, one that would silence the rest of the opinions. We can choose as the definition of art any of the quotations above, or, obviously, we can also choose to consider art in the terms we have grown used to until now. To tell ourselves that art is something majestic and inaccessible, something that speaks about things from outside the real world and has no connection with our lives, something that can only generate passive admiration. We can believe that the artist is always a genius, not understood by his contemporaries, someone completely different from us, "ordinary people".

It depends on all of us whether we want to perpetuate these ideas about art, whether we want our attitude towards art (and culture in general) to be a reverent and humble one or we want, on the contrary, to consider that art can be something intimate, normal, natural and useful, something that speaks about our lives, something that does not only passively reflect reality, but something that can truly change things.

A. A few milestones

If we follow the course of art history, we can identify moments in which it became very clear that art is not just decoration, but that it can change something, that art doesn't speak just about "lofty" and foreign things, but also about the most ordinary reality, that more important than mystique can be daily life, more important than simple technical mastery can be the topics and ideas we can recognise ourselves in, more important than pure aesthetic distancing can be the active and ethical engagement in society.

Here are some of those moments:

At the end of the 19th century, a group of artists, called the Impressionists, stop painting historical and mythological scenes and paint instead images capturing the passing moment, images of everyday life.

In 1912, Pablo Picasso, during the cubist stage of his creation, paints "Still Life with Chair Caning". The chair caning is not painted, instead, the actual object is inserted in the illusory space of the painting, so that we no longer know whether we look at a representation of reality or at reality itself.

Between 1915 and 1923, in Zurich and New York, the Dadaist artists use irony, chance and the absurd in order to be able to see the world with fresh eyes, to reconsider norms, clichés, all the imposed notions, all the culture taken for granted, without questioning, and to verify the truthfulness of these things.

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp wants to exhibit at the Armory Show in New York a urinal he dubs "Fountain" and which he signs with the name of the manufacturer, R Mutt. Duchamp chose an ordinary object, from everyday life, and he placed it in such a way in a new light, that its practical significance disappears, becoming a pretext for questioning the nature of art, the institutions endorsing art, the condition of the artist.

In 1921, Francis Picabia asks all those visiting him to sign or to write something on a large canvas in his drawing room. The result is at the same time a painting and a deconstruction of painting, because that canvas is no longer the individual expression of only one artist, but rather the meeting place for several individuals.

In 1949, during the exhibition „The Objects through the Ages”, organised by the Cobra group in Brussels, Christian Dotremont exhibits potatoes in a glass case, perishable objects, which had to be replaced regularly, and thus anyone could regularly replace Dotremont as the author.

Starting with 1957, the Situationists try to create a new urbanism, where people could be free, and not ideology slaves. The Situationists' main strategy, the "détournement", consists of the subversive use of certain "fixed points" in culture and putting them in contexts that change their meaning and reconsiders their validity.

For the show „Environments, Situations, Spaces”, opened in New York in 1961, the Fluxus artist George Brecht placed a plain chair in the gallery, one in the toilet and one before the front door. Sitting on the chair could be a modest and natural work of art.

B. What is the use of art?

The forms and models of artistic activity aren't immutable, they change according to the time and the contexts they develop in.

When studying art, we could start from multiple perspectives. But in the following chapters of this handbook we shall talk about various ideas and directions in art, trying to establish possible answers to the question "What is the use of art?" and trying to clarify for ourselves the way art can:

1. speak about our lives, make us recognise ourselves in it
2. induce dialogue and sociability
3. reconsider the notions we take for granted, question the culture we usually consider immutable and sheltered from any doubt
4. help us accept/understand those around us

5. change our viewing angle, make us aware that there are many positions from which to know a thing and that there is no transcendental and atemporal truth
6. attract attention on problems, give a voice to the excluded ones
7. effectively solve problems in society

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Make a list with all the pre-conceived ideas about art that cross your mind. For example: "Art is something beautiful", "It is better to be a man if you want to be an artist", "The appropriate attitude towards art is respect and contemplation". In parallel, make another list with sentences in which to describe in a natural tone your personal expectations about art.

Chapter I

About ordinary life

What should art speak about? What is relevant? Can we recognise in a work of art our real concerns, interests, problems? What role does daily life play in art and which of its aspects determine artists to produce works that reflect it or comment on it?

I. Art and the daily life

Many of the ancient and traditional cultures did not consider art as a separate category and some of them didn't even have a specific word for designating art, because the latter was considered as being a part of life. Art wasn't something only certain people can produce or understand, instead, creativity was considered as accessible to everyone. This is a very different view from the views about art most frequent nowadays. At some point in history, art became a distinct category, being associated, first of all, with the elite. The artists' individuality, their status as "geniuses" became important, and the work of art became a luxury object and a commodity. The idea that the artist is isolated from the social environment took shape vaguely in the Renaissance and after that became the fundamental theme of the Romantic art, but whereas this type of attitude towards art was justified in the context of that age, it does not mean that it is natural for us to continue to see the artist as a genius not understood by his age and art as a place outside reality. Art objects in museums have their histories, now hidden by their status as aesthetic objects, subject to our contemplation, but still visible upon closer examination. Art and the daily life are only artificially separated, as a result of our habit of considering art as something remote and inaccessible, something that needs to be approached with caution and humility. We have the tendency to forget that many of the art objects we can see now in museums have had their own lives, mixed in the daily existence, that they have served the most practical of purposes, facilitating daily existence, from the vessels that used to store food to the paintings that used to "store" events and meanings, all of them helping people live in this world.

What one cannot share with others is unbearable, be it joy or sadness. When something happens and we cannot talk about it in a certain way, we can point towards a work of art as an example, we can produce it as an argument, as a proof. We can use art as an instrument in order to speak about ourselves, to clarify to ourselves what we feel and believe, to clarify these to others, we can use art as a dictionary, from which we can pick words and make up phrases when it seems that what we have to say is too difficult to explain. Also, if we can find described by someone else something that happened to us, something we experience, we can feel that we belong to a larger community of people who have lives similar to ours.

All these describe an essential function of art, a utilitarian one, that of storing the memory, exploring the unknown, building connections between people, helping us understand ourselves and the others, making us reflect into it, as if in a mirror.

II. "The personal is political"

The way we understand the term "personal" eludes dialogue and analysis, a thing that can be summarised in the phrase "It's personal". To say about something that it is personal does not only mean to say that that particular thing is private, but also to declare it as not relevant in the broader sense, as not political, and to say, as a consequence, that our personal lives don't say anything, either, about the political and the social. Also, in the same manner, it is assumed that there is a separation between art and life and, the same as the private realm, art is autonomous from the larger field of economics and politics. But what is personal is in fact relevant in a larger sphere. In the '70s, the phrase, radical for that time, "the personal is political" was asserted by the feminists in order to summarise the fact that things in everyday life, usually considered as devoid of meaning, in fact reflect and determine the way society is structured. A real change in the rules and prescriptions, often unjust, that govern us, can also come from changing things in the private realm. When a work of art uses elements pertaining to everyday life, pertaining to the private and the psychological, they can, in fact reveal things and project changes in the broader field of social relations and politics.

Here are some works of art about daily life:

Sophie Calle observes, follows and performs surveillance work on others in many of her works, which use and document situations from ordinary life. For "**The Venetian Suite**", the artist follows an unknown man on the streets of Venice, secretly photographing him and keeping a detailed diary of his movements. This is how the text written by the artist begins: „I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me. I photographed them without their knowledge, took notes of their movements, then finally lost sight of them and forgot them. At the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of the conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. So I decided to follow him." The text and the

photographs that make up this work, and which seem to be a mix between an intimate diary and a detective story, give only a vague image of the person being followed and, in fact, we find out more about the follower. The work challenges art's potential (and sometimes failure) to make us enter other people's lives, of helping us understand the others.

Maria Lindberg uses in "**Sunset and coffee stains**" simple elements, drawn from daily life, in order to create ambiguous situations, at the same time mundane and unexpected, unsettling. The marks left by a mug of coffee sat carelessly on a photograph of a lavish sunset, create an ironic and mysterious image, about which we can imagine what we please (is it about disappointment? about the contrast between the extraordinary things we imagine and their mundane reality?).

Felix Gonzales-Torres, in his intervention "**Untitled**", placed on 24 billboards in various locations in New York the image of a double bed, with rumpled sheets, that had been slept in. The picture wasn't accompanied by any text explanation. The passers-by could see, instead of the usual advertising images one expects to see on billboards, this familiar image that each of us sees in the morning. The empty bed in the photograph was the one the artist had shared with his partner, Ross, before the latter died. Of course, few of those who saw the work in the street could have known the artist's personal motivation, but this image about love and absence allowed them the freedom to fill it with their own stories and meanings.

Starting with 1977, **Jenny Holzer** posted in various ways (on posters on the street, on electronic billboards, inscribed on marble benches in parks etc) her sequence of "**Truisms**", hundreds of sentences that, in a multitude of voices, express various views and prejudices, so that from these relative truths the viewer needs to actively determine what is legitimate and what isn't. "Money creates taste", "Protect me from what I want", "Abuse of power comes as no surprise", "Your oldest fears are the worst ones", "A man can't know what it is to be a mother", "An elite is inevitable", "Class structure is as artificial as plastic", "At times your unconsciousness is truer than your conscious mind" etc. All these phrases that combine reference to personal things with political messages were conceived in such a manner, so as to be found in places where one wouldn't expect a text addressing the individual directly, making one think about oneself and one's context.

Who are the artists?

Sophie Calle (born 1953). Artist of French origin, who combines in her works photography and text, recounting in a direct language personal events, using the circumstances of her own life in her artistic practice.

Maria Lindberg (born 1958). Swedish artist whose drawings, paintings, photographs and interventions contain fragments of apparently mundane situations and unexpected interpretations of colloquial phrases.

Felix Gonzales Torres (1957 – 1996). American artist of Cuban origin, whose works, containing daily-use objects and requiring the viewer's participation, speak about the relevance of topics such as disease, death, love and loneliness.

Jenny Holzer (born 1950). Artist of American origin, whose works consist mainly of placing in public spaces (on electronic billboards, on benches in parks etc.) of personal and political sentences.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Describe a work of art that you consider as saying something about your life (in general or at a given moment). Explain the way the elements in the work are connected to the concrete things in your reality.

2. Choose a day in which to note, draw, and, if possible, document with photographs the things you see and do, in as direct and as natural a tone as possible. Mix objective facts with your own opinions and feelings. Exhibit in the classroom the texts and images you have obtained, as simple and natural "proof" of your daily life.

3. List the things in daily life you think should change. For example, what do you think about the ever-increasing presence of advertising on the street, on television, in the newspapers? Or about discriminatory, racist and sexist remarks we can often hear on television, or overhear in a conversation on the bus? Do you think art could be a means for attracting attention to these things and on the reasons for which they displease us?

Selected sources:

Nadine Wasserman, *A Pabulum on the Art and the Everyday*
www.mundanebehavior.org/issues/v1n3/wasserman.htm

Chapter II

About dialogue and sociability

Is contemplation the only attitude one should have towards a work of art? Can the viewer take part in the elaboration of the form and meaning of a work of art, or are these tasks assigned strictly to the artist?

I. Relational aesthetics

The avant-garde still believed in utopias. It still hoped for a radical change in the world and in the construction of a society that would be completely different from what it had been so far. When modernity ended, the global visions about the world were discarded. The role of art is no longer to shape imaginary or utopian realities, but rather to find ways of being or action models within the existing reality.

By the end of the '90s, Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the concept of "relational art" in order to designate that art which takes as theoretical horizon "the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space". In relational art, the artist is no longer the nucleus, but rather the catalyst. He engages in his work someone else, most often his audience, sometimes an institution or a certain person (another artist or a curator, etc.). He is no longer necessarily interested in producing art objects meant for sterile contemplation, but instead attempts to create open, interactive works, which often have the aspect of a thing in progress rather than of a finished object. The artist works with whatever present provides him. He uses common gestures and materials and tries to transform the context of his life into a world that would last. The idea of "new" is no longer meaningful today. It has been replaced by the idea of relevance, of usefulness. Artists use today the practices of tinkering with and recycling the cultural given, in their invention of the everyday and their arrangement of the past.

II. Some historical milestones

The idea of an art that would start from the social, from human interactions, is not new. The approach of art as a potential call to participation can be found in the practice of artists in the '60s and '70s: Allan Kaprow's happenings, Fluxus performances, the works of Joseph Beuys.

Allan Kaprow, the inventor of the term "happening" in the late '50s, was especially interested in blurring the separation between artwork and audience. According to him, such an art, taken to its ultimate consequences, would be without audience, because every participant would be a part of the work. He used to say that "the separation between art and life should be maintained as fluid as possible, and maybe even elusive."

Joseph Beuys invented the term "social sculpture" and defined it as "how we mould and shape the world in which we live". It is in this context that he made his famous statement that "everyone is an artist". Social sculpture moves the aesthetic out from its traditional realm and into a wider space, where it is no longer the exclusive privilege of artists, but instead it can be used by all of us, in order to re-think and to re-structure our lives according to our creative potential.

Fluxus was a worldwide association of artists, organising in the early '60s a series of events that led to the subsequent organisation of the Fluxus festivals in Europe. The Fluxus festivals included group and individual performances, which, through the manner they were produced, offered a new opening towards numerous individual or collective

interpretations of art. The artists in this movement speak about art as having a social, rather than aesthetic, purpose. Fluxus was against art as a medium for the promotion of an artist's ego and tended to encourage the collective spirit, anonymity and anti-individualism. Fluxus proposed an art that would be a way of life, whose purpose would be selfless and socially constructive work.

Bourriaud makes the distinction between the performances and the happenings of the '60s and '70s, where audience participation was used in order to change the modernist vision of art as a fetish, and the works of the '90s, where audience participation is encouraged as a kind of game and as a moment of direct, immediate connection between people. Bourriaud places this change in artistic practice in the context of the development of the service-based industry. The capitalist notion of consumption, applied in the past only to tangible commodities, is now applied also to experiences (for example, we pay for services such as internet chat, mobile telephony etc.)

III. Some examples of works associated to relational aesthetics

The '90s artists offered massages to the gallery visitors, prepared food, kept the gallery open day and night as a socialising place for everyone. They offered, instead of objects, services and experiences.

The artists propose as artwork:

- sociability moments:

Jens Haaning, in his work "**Turkish Jokes**" broadcast jokes told in Turkish in a square in Copenhagen, directing them at the community of Turkish immigrants, whose situation as exiles was thus temporarily cancelled. The jokes could only be understood by the minority, while the majority could have a feeling of insecurity hearing the others laugh.

In the project "**Untitled (Free)**", at the 303 gallery in New York, **Rirkrit Tiravanija** gathered all the things he found in the gallery storage room and office and placed them in the exhibition space. He used the space thus freed for cooking Thai food for the gallery visitors throughout the show. Apart the fact that they could eat and watch the artist cook, the visitors could also see the things that are usually hidden, the packed artwork from the storage room, the files and all the other things from the office. Thus, the distance between gallery, artist and audience was further decreased.

- objects that produce sociability:

Apolonija Šuštersić created within the Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, a room with bright lights, inspired by the usual reaction to the Northern winter, with its characteristic lack of daylight. This causes a mild form of depression in the people of the North, curable with the help of light therapy. This therapy means sitting in a room lit with an artificial light as strong as natural daylight. In Sweden, these rooms can be used in hospitals and in shopping centres, and at the Moderna Museet, during the exhibition of Apolonija Šuštersić's installation, the artist commenting through her work the relations between the physical, the psychological and the social environments.

- the artists start from types of already existing relations and try to become integrated in their structures and to extract their forms from them:

In the town of Firminy, in France, took place the project *Unité*, in a building designed by the modernist architect Le Corbusier, a building that symbolised for a while the modernists' hopes for progress. Finished in 1967, as part of a larger complex, including a youth centre, a stadium and a church, the building aimed to be a visionary response to the problems caused by rapid industrialisation. But continued recession reduced the local population, and those who didn't leave preferred private housing. Today, the building is half-empty. French curator Yves Aupetitallot chose this building for his project precisely due to its symbolic complex, for its status as a monument made by France's greatest architect and as a model for a new way of urban collective living. The invited artists answered the situation in various ways. For example, Austrian artist **Heimo Zoberning** transformed one of the apartments in the building into a coffee shop, offering a functional answer to the question: what exactly makes the difference between public and private space in the quasi-collective living conditions in the building? **Clegg & Guttmann** asked the inhabitants of the building to lend them tapes or CD-s with their favourite music, which they arranged in a cabinet in the shape of Le Corbusier's building, each tape/CD being placed in a niche corresponding to the position of the apartment occupied by the lender. Although the names of the owners did not appear on the tapes, their personality was nevertheless made visible through the music they listened to. The **Premiata Ditta** group examined the building the way they would an organic community, drawing a map that indicated the social relations between its inhabitants.

- or they try to re-create social and professional models and apply them in their own production models:

Henry Bond and **Liam Gillick**, in their project "**Documents**", after finding out information in its raw form, the way it came off the press agency's teletypes, hurried to the places where those things happened, together with their journalist "colleagues", but the images they captured were completely different from those obtained routinely, using the criteria of journalism.

Who are the artists?

Jens Haaning (born 1965). Danish artist, who discusses in his works issues related to the periphery and to the conflict areas in the social, economic and political context of the Western societies.

Rirkrit Tiravanija (born 1961). Thai artist, born Argentine, known for his projects in which the audience participates, not only watches. He asks the visitors to forego the customary behaviour rules in a museum and participate themselves in the creation of the work, by eating, working, talking.

Apolonija Šuštersić (born 1965). Artist and architect from Slovenia who investigates in her works the social and political features of space.

Heimo Zoberning (born 1959). Austrian conceptualist artist concerned with architecture and exhibition design.

Michael Clegg and Martin Guttman (born 1957, Dublin and Jerusalem respectively). Artists making films, taking photographs and producing functional objects based on the collaboration with the audience.

Premiata Ditta – group of female artists from Italy

Henry Bond (born 1966). British artist working with various media: video, photography, text.

Liam Gillick (born 1964). British artist who investigates in his works (combinations of text and installations) power relations, decision-making processes, the systems which, although often invisible, influence our lives.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Attach a few large cardboard sheets to a wall in the classroom. Then think about some things you would like to talk about, such as the favourite novel, author, music, movie etc.; or you could talk about important moments in your lives or about your friends. Choose together, in class, the topics you would like to discuss. During the semester, gradually fill the cardboards on the wall with your thoughts and opinions about the topics chosen, with news clippings, texts, images, thus obtaining a collective portrait of your class.

Selected sources:

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Presses du réel, 2000

Sal Randolph, *Notes on Social Architectures as Artforms*
www.salrandolph.com/index.php?id=17

Chapter III

About art institutions

What do we expect to see when we visit a museum? How do the conditions in which the works of art are exhibited influence our perception about them? How do dominant ideologies reflect in the way art institutions are organised?

I. What legitimises art?

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp wants to exhibit at the Armory Show in New York a urinal he dubs "Fountain" and which he signs with the name of the manufacturer, R Mutt.

"Fountain" was a urinal, whose signature and location in a gallery designate as art. Thus, a mundane, everyday object, threw light on the exclusivist nature of modern institutions of art. Although it didn't have any of the qualities people usually expect from a work of art, it wasn't unique (the urinal was an industrial, mass-manufactured product), it wasn't made by the artist, it didn't have aesthetic, formal qualities it had a practical significance in everyday life, and still, the "Fountain" placed in the gallery environment becomes art, challenging through this very contradiction, the nature of art, the condition of the artist and the way institutions legitimise art.

The definition of art broadened considerably in the last few decades. While traditional aesthetics could define art by referring to the medium used for its creation (painting, sculpture, drawing etc.), to the activities within it (imitate, describe etc.) and to its purpose (to create artistic values such as, for example, the beautiful or the sublime), lately all these rules do not apply when defining art. The works can no longer be necessarily categorised according to a certain technique, to a certain number of specific activities, and they can no longer be recognised as art according to their purely aesthetic purpose. Oftentimes, the gestures or the objects that make up works of art can be found in daily life as well (as is the case with Duchamp's urinal), except that the artist's intention (what the artists wishes to communicate) and the context in which that particular object or gesture is placed can turn them into art. Often, this context that legitimises the works of art, that gives them the status of artistic objects, is the museum, the gallery, the art institution. Therefore, could we say that art is that which is exhibited in museums?

II. The museum from a historical point of view

Before the establishment of public museums, art collections were part of the "curiosity cabinets" owned by the nobility and the kings, and were exhibited in the private galleries in the aristocrats' castles and salons. Also, many art objects belonged to churches and were used as a part of worshipping. All these objects, which used to be part of the daily life of certain people, were taken from their environment and moved to the neutral, anonymous environment of the public museums, once they were established, during the Enlightenment. Moreover, art objects were removed from their counties of origin, from the environment they had been created for, in order to end up in museums, in times of war, the way, for example, Napoleon's victorious army brought to the Louvre, as spoils of war, art objects from Egypt. It is of course democratic and useful that art is accessible to as many people as possible, and the museums have the intention to ensure this accessibility. But when a work of art is taken from its original habitat and exhibited on the anonymous walls of a museum or gallery, that work of art loses its context and becomes just another "exhibit", a cold and distant object, remote from those viewing it. The abstract environment of the museum is unfamiliar and unreal, by comparison with the way we lead our daily life.

III. The sterile environment of the museum

The way works of art are exhibited in museums, the way they are classified, associated, the sequence in which we view them, the architectural framework, the lighting, the atmosphere, the attitude imposed to us as audience, all these influence our perception of these objects. Usually, the museum is as neutral a place as possible, with white walls, with uniform lighting, a place where we must tread lightly and lower our voices, to respectfully watch the exhibited masterpieces. According to the conception about art promoted by this type of museum, the important thing is neither the process through which artwork is born (with the entire halo of motivations, desires, implications, facts, gestures that surround a work of art), nor our reactions, feeling, thoughts as viewers, but the object itself, the masterpiece. The object is exhibited like a relic, removed from any context pertaining to real life, and quarantined in the independent space of the museum. The attitude expected from us, the audience, is that of distant contemplation, an attitude implying that art belongs to a strictly aesthetic realm, with no connection to the real world and its problems, that art must not consciously explore the way it was created, it must not incorporate the values and structures of society and has no connection with ethics and with moral imperatives.

In addition, this art, protected in the museum or gallery from any reference to daily reality, must also be eternal. Given the fact that, generally, worldly things are transient and that, oftentimes, life is precarious, we have the tendency to expect art, in compensation, to be stable and unchanging. Moreover, this association of art with something eternal is a common thing, coming to mind automatically also because of the way we are used to see art, in the isolated space of the museum.

But at the same time there are things we appreciate precisely because they are transient, whose beauty and ability to move us comes precisely from the fact that they are ephemeral, such as sunsets, and snow, and a stranger glimpsed fleetingly on the street. Therefore, why shouldn't we allow art to be as alive and changing as our lives? If we expect art to be of a different essence from the real life, we can no longer hope that art can still be something in which we could recognise ourselves, something that would help us understand more about ourselves and about the world around us. If art is always exhibited the same way, in the same uniform and anonymous space, we can no longer expect it to be a language of the right to one's own individuality, of the right to difference, of freedom. Moreover, if we consider art as being outside ethical principles, we can no longer expect it to have an impact on society, to change anything.

IV. Institutional critique

Beginning with the '60s, art institutions and the power they have to decide what is art and what isn't and to produce knowledge were reflected in a critical manner by artists and art historians, the projects and writings of this kind (discussing the museum and the gallery) falling in the category of "institutional critique". The purpose of these reflections on institutions and the reason for the artists positioning themselves in relation to institutions

is to gradually change them, to make them become more flexible, more alive, better adapted to reality.

Here is a series of projects, works, exhibitions discussing the relation between institutions, artist and audience:

Yves Klein, at the Iris Clert gallery, in Paris, paints the walls white and leaves the space empty for the exhibition *Le Vide*.

In response, **Arman** opens the exhibition *Le Plein* at the Iris Clert Gallery, filling it to the brim with garbage, so that no-one could get in.

Daniel Buren sealed the door of the Apollinaire gallery in Milan with white and green painted stripes.

Robert Barry sends invitations saying "The gallery will be closed during the exhibition" - and this is what indeed happens.

Michael Asher, at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles does not exhibit anything, but removes the wall separating the office from the exhibition space, the object of the exhibition becoming thus the custodian, her office and all the activities taking place therein.

Goran Trbuljak reflects ironically the artist/gallery relationship in the action titled: "From time to time I stuck my finger through a hole in the door of the Modern Art Gallery without the management's knowledge".

These gestures, that left the gallery space empty, like a casing, or made it inaccessible to the public, had the role of attracting attention to the fact that the institution is more than a mere place where we can see art, but a meaning-generating element in itself.

In his project, "**Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles**" ("**Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles**"), **Marcel Broodthaers** collects various objects (fragments of ancient vessels, wine bottle labels, paintings, pictures from newspapers, any objects bearing the image of eagles) and exhibits them as if in a museum, in glass cases, on pedestals or on the walls. Each of the over two hundred exhibits is inscribed with a catalogue number and with the sentence "This is not a work of art". The exhibition is a parody of a museum, seeming to reflect truths and to show facts the way they were, but which instead offers just a sequence of objects that have been given meaning by the way they are exhibited and classified. Whoever decides the way these objects are displayed, determines the meaning.

Fred Wilson, while artist in residence at the Maryland Historical Museum, in Baltimore – a museum of decorative arts and historical curiosities – tried to evoke the history of those people who were overlooked by the white and aristocratic founders of the museum: the American Indians, the coloured people and the women. The exhibits' order was changed, so as to tell the slaves' story at the same time with that of the masters. Elegant 19th century chairs were displayed on pedestals, facing a whipping pole. In the silverware case were also displayed chains. Wilson did not add any objects brought from outside the museum, his work consisted only of researching and rearranging whatever he found in the museum.

Hans Haacke, invited to exhibit his artwork at the Wallraf- Richartz museum in Cologne, presents the following proposal: a painting by the Impressionist Edouard Manet, "Bunch of Asparagus", from the museum's collection, to be exhibited on an easel, in a room with the walls covered in display boards presenting the social and economic standing of the persons in whose possession the painting (painted in 1880) had been throughout the years, as well as the prices paid for it. This research, taking the same shape as the research made by art historians concerning the origin of a painting, had the role of examining the social and economic conditions determining the art system. Haacke did not only name the nine successive owners of the painting, but he also described their activities, in business and politics. The last display board was about Hermann Abs, director of the "Association of the Friends of the Museum", who had helped the museum acquire the painting, and who had been a Nazi businessman. Neither he, nor the museum wished this detail mentioned, and so Hans Haacke's project was rejected. The project was however presented at the Paul Maenz Gallery in Cologne, with a colour reproduction of Manet's painting standing in for the original.

Palle Nielsen transformed the Moderna Museet in Stockholm into a playground within the project "**Model for a Qualitative Society**". New walls and floors were built, and the space was filled with swings, slides, climbing ropes, a pool with foam shapes etc. The museum's white and neutral space was transformed into a place for play and socialisation, with free access for all children. Children had the opportunity to play, paint on the wooden wall, make collages, build. Tools and all sorts of materials were available to the children, so that they were able to modify and continue to build the playground, developing their creativity. Children were given the possibility to put on costumes and organise plays, to play recorded music– which could be heard at full volume from the speakers placed in every corner of the space. In the museum restaurant there were monitors broadcasting live what was going on in the playground, so that the parents were able to supervise their children and to observe what was happening in the whole space. From a distant and cold space, designed for contemplation, the museum space became a model for the way the child's social life, his/her relationship with the others turn him/her into a "qualitative individual".

Tomo Savić-Gecan moved one of the walls of the Modern Art Gallery in Zagreb to the Maksimir park, attempting thus to destabilise the conventional ways of seeing the museum (and art) as separate from reality. Those who walked in the park could marvel at the museum wall when walking past it.

Gabriel Orozco, during his show at the New York Museum of Modern Art, asked the people whose windows overlooked the museum to place an orange each on the windowsill. The museum would send fresh oranges every week to the people living and working in the neighbouring buildings, so that they could eat the oranges or replace them, if they wished so. Anyone could join the project, by simply placing an orange on the windowsill, a simple and poetic gesture about things and actions in our ordinary life.

Who are the artists?

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). French artist, associated with the Paris avant-garde of the early 20th century. Around 1913 he gives up painting, choosing instead to produce works that challenge the notion of "art". Inventor of the term "ready-made", describing a pre-existing object, most often mundane, ordinary, chosen by the artist and being thus given the status of art.

Yves Klein (1928-1962). French artist, he painted monochrome paintings, staged actions and performances with a taste for the sensational and the ironic.

Arman (1928-2005). French artist, known especially for his assemblages, giant sculptures made from scrap.

Daniel Buren (born 1938). French artist, whose interventions consisting mainly of vertical stripes, at first painted, then made of various materials, have the role of attracting attention to the architectural, social or economic context in which they appear.

Robert Barry (born 1936.) American artist whose minimalist interventions, sometimes almost imperceptible or using language, challenge our perception of space.

Michael Asher (born 1943). American artist whose interventions attract attention to the economic and ideological context in which we perceive and understand art.

Goran Trbuljak (born 1948). Croatian artist whose photographs, posters, performances question the nature of art, the status of the artist and of the gallery.

Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976). Belgian artist doing works of painting, sculpture, film and poetry. His works, often imitating the museum ambiance, challenge the status of art and of institutions.

Fred Wilson (born 1945). American conceptual artist, whose works speak about race, ethnicity and culture and about the lives of the marginalised. Wilson combines sculpture, painting, texts, found objects, photography, the video and audio media in order to create a dialogue between objects and the viewer. An important theme is the critique of the role the museum has in creating political and cultural meaning.

Hans Haacke (born 1936). German artist, interested in the analysis of environmental, social and ideological systems. Beginning with 1960, his works start being very critical towards art institutions.

Palle Nielsen (1920-2000). Danish artist and activist, whose practice can be categorized under social aesthetics and political art.

Tomo Savić-Gecan (born 1967). Croatian artist whose interventions challenge the status of art institutions.

Gabriel Orozco (born 1962). Mexican artist whose works, produced in various media, challenge in a poetic manner everyday objects as symbols of social changes and interactions.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

- 1. Describe an art exhibition you saw in your city or on television, talking especially about the way the works were displayed. Try to find out and write down as many objective things about that exhibition: how many works on display, how they are organised by rooms etc. and try to understand the criteria according to which they were arranged. Imagine the same exhibition in another location (on the street, in the gym etc.). In what way do you think this would affect your perception of the works?*
- 2. Together, in class, make a list with all the unconventional places where you would like to see an art exhibition.*
- 3. Draw the plan of an imaginary museum, noting the activities that should take place there.*

Selected sources:

Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. Notes on the Gallery Space*
www.societyofcontrol.com/whitecube/insidewc.htm

Christiane Mennicke, *The Office and the Exhibition. Tensions between an Unlikely Couple*
www.societyofcontrol.com/library/htm_pdf/mennicke_office_exhibition

Breaking Out the White Cube. Suzi Gablik interviewing Richard Shusterman
www.artsandletters.fau.edu/humanitieschair/white-cube.html

Igor Zabel, *The Para-Mirror of the New Parasitism*
absoluteone.ljudmila.org/igorz_en.php

Chapter IV

About those who are different, about the others, about us

What does ethnicity, minority, nationality, identity mean and to what extent are we aware that our view of the world and our place in it are constructs we do not question too often? Who establishes them? How equitable are these social constructs for all the members of a community? What does it mean to be different? What is

race? Who defines it? How does art change our viewing angle, by making us question ourselves and the others?

I. The multiculturalist perspective

Multiculturalism is best understood neither as a political doctrine with programmatic content, nor as a philosophical school with a distinct theory, but as a perspective on human life.

It is a word that was first used in 1957 in order to describe Switzerland, but it has entered everyday language in Canada in the late '60s. The early '70s mark the development of the multicultural movement, at first in Canada and Australia and then in the US, the UK, Germany and in other parts of the world.

The concern for introducing in the educational curriculum in public schools more cultural diversity has its origins in the social and intellectual movements associated with the Civil Rights Revolution of the '60s, including Black Power, La Raza, The American Indian Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, each asking questions about the way education, through its curriculum and politics, imposes to the society a certain type of values. Specifically, the argument was given by the fact that the study matter in history, literature, social studies and other areas reflected in their contents ideas that have been categorised as Eurocentric prejudice. Women, people of colour or people from outside the Western-European tradition did not appear with contributions in the school curriculum of the time. This material absence was interpreted as a sign of dangerous ethnocentric and even racist attitudes.

It can be said that multiculturalism relies on three main arguments:

1. Necessarily, the world is viewed from within a culture, be it an inherited and uncritically accepted one or a reflectively revised or, in rare cases, a consciously adopted one.

It is a reality that humans are constructed by their own culture, but the influences of one's culture can be overcome, even if not completely.

2. Different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the good life. Since each individual can comprehend a limited range of human capacities and emotions and grasps only a part of the totality of human existence, people need other cultures to help them understand themselves better, expand their intellectual and moral horizon, save them from narcissism and from the obvious temptation to absolutise themselves. This does not mean that one cannot lead a good life within one's own culture, but in this modern, mobile and interdependent world we can no longer talk about a life contained in a single culture. Nor does it mean that each culture is good for its members, or that they cannot be compared and critically assessed. All it means is that no culture is wholly worthless, that it deserves at least some respect because of what it means to its members, but that no culture is perfect and has no right to impose itself on others.

3. Every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation between its different traditions and strands of thought. A dialogue between cultures requires an

openness to influences, a desire to learn from other cultures, and this presupposes that each culture is capable of self-criticism.

No attempts to homogenize a culture and impose a single identity on it can lead to any good. All attempts by a culture to present itself as one whose origins lie within itself, as self-generating, should be viewed with scepticism, because they represent an unrealistic and conflict-generating construction. All cultures are born out of interaction with others and are shaped by wider economic, political and other forces.

From a multiculturalist perspective, no political doctrine or ideology can represent the whole truth about human life. Each of them, be it liberalism, conservatism, socialism or nationalism, by representing a vision, is necessarily limited and partial.

II. The pressure of dominant culture

Although equal citizenship is essential to fostering a common sense of belonging, it is not enough. Citizenship is about status and rights; belonging is about acceptance, feeling welcome, a sense of identification within that particular culture. These two do not necessarily coincide. This feeling of being fully a citizen and yet an outsider is difficult to analyse and explain. It is caused by, among other things, the manner in which the wider society defines itself, the demeaning ways in which the rest of its members talk about minority groups, and the dismissive or patronizing ways in which they treat them.

Although members of these groups are in principle free to participate in public life, they often stay away for fear of rejection and ridicule or out of a deep sense of alienation. When the dominant culture defines the minorities in a demeaning way and systematically reinforces it by all the institutional and other means at its disposal, it consciously or unconsciously induces in the minority groups a negative self-image, lack self-esteem, and the feeling of alienation from the mainstream/conventional/majority/"normal" society. Social recognition is central to the individual's identity and self-worth. Misrecognition has both a cultural and a material basis and it can be countered by undertaking a rigorous critique of the dominant culture and radically restructuring the prevailing inequalities of economic and political power.

Multiculturalism concludes that, since multiple descriptions of reality exist, no one view can be true in any ultimate sense. Since truth is a function of language, and all language is created by humans, all truth is created by humans. No one can say that truth transcends culture.

Multiculturalism has categorised the dominant culture as white, Western, male, Christian, middle-class and heterosexual. Education, for example, prevalently promotes this perspective, leaving out the contributions of many: people of colour, women, homosexuals and people representing various religious traditions, which have been ignored and silenced. As a result, what passes for knowledge is in fact prejudice. In this sense, the mainstream culture is seen as white supremacy, a culture of bigotry and discrimination, and the remedy for it would be a greater importance given to the individual features and the virtues of certain cultural groups.

Some examples about the way some of these issues are discussed by artists:

In his "**Words and Gestures of the Town Hall Tower**", artist **Krzysztof Wodiczko** tells the story of "the other", "the different", of alienation, projecting in a public space, on the walls of edifices associated with power, images of hands as attributes of human fate. The images were accompanied by voices resonating across the square. One of the voices tells the story of an abused wife, another talks about the life of a drug addict, a third voice talks about the fate of a blind old man. Another image shows hands gesturing. The voice accompanying it tells the story of a young gay man, about the physical pain of being beaten and the mental pain of being rejected by the family. The hands of the abused wife, of the alcoholic, of the blind man, of the drug addict and of the gay man are emblems of the excluded and the silent. For the moment, "the others" are allowed a presence in the public space, in society, in the centre of attention.

Emily Jacir makes an installation titled "**Where We Come From**", consisting of photographs, texts and projections. The starting point of the piece is the question addressed by the artist to Palestinians living in exile: "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" The artist used her US passport and the liberty of movement provided by it to fulfil the wishes of the people who have limited or no access to this territory. The "assignments" received by the artist are diverse, starting from the simplest things, such as: "Drink the water in my parents' village", "Do something on a normal day in Haifa, something I might do if I was living there now", "Go to Haifa and play soccer with the first Palestinian boy you see on the street", and go to the more painful ones: "Go to my mother's grave"... The show is a documentation in texts, photographs and video of the way the artist fulfils these wishes, across artificial and dangerous borders.

The action-installation "**Silence**", by the gay artist **Krzysztof Malec**, alters the institutional space. The Office of the Director of the Provincial Centre of Culture in Gdansk was transformed for three days by covering the interior with vegetal down. Filling the room with this weightless matter created, through its mysterious atmosphere, a metaphor for the secrets hidden by the society's official silence. It is a subtle revelation of the absence and negation of the rights for the sexual minorities in the discussions over the new 'democratic' Constitution of Poland, in the early '90s. This entire sector of society was then excluded from access to civic rights.

III. The issue of racism

Racism is not intrinsic to the human psyche, but rather a social phenomenon with material causes. The historical origins of racism lie in the 400 years of conquests: in centuries in which it has been said that Europeans are superior to the people of colour and this actually contributed to the spread of European culture.

As a result of these prejudices, each new generation assimilates society's racism by various channels. Education, which is one of the most important influence factors, could be used as a way to combat this. In order to determine what can pass as knowledge, we must confront the past and the way we construct our reality.

Eventually, multiculturalism has become a more popular term also because the term "race" had lost its credibility as a concept, scientists reaching the conclusion that in terms of genetics and DNA, "race" is meaningless and cannot be a way to label the differences between people. Thus, the term "culture" began replacing that of "race" in order to categorise distinct groups of people.

In a 1990 interview in the magazine *Afterimage*, **Adrian Piper** said: "I actually want to change people. I want my work to help people stop being racist whether they ask for it or not." The work "**Calling cards**" started off as an action. The artist printed two types of calling cards, in order to present them to people who made assumptions about her identity. One of the cards was made for those who, assuming she was white, did not hesitate to make in her presence racist remarks about people of colour. The other card was made for those who assumed she was sexually available because she was unaccompanied.

The work "**See and Be Seen. Iasi 1842**" by **Matts Leiderstam** is an intervention in the permanent exhibition within the Palace of Culture in Iași. The artist raises in subtle manner a question about a past, and also a present, reality. In his installation, Matts Leiderstam uses two telescopes, one aimed at Ludovic Stavski's (1806-1887) painting showing a scene with a street in Iași, and the other viewing, through the window of the Palace of Culture, a similar image of the street, the latter in real time. A significant detail is the fact that the scene in the painting wishes to show the image of a prosperous and cosmopolitan Iași, but in the detailed description of the painting, which can be found in the museum documents, there is absolutely no mention of the group of Roma characters appearing in the painting. This overlooked group is shown to us in a symbolic manner. It is a question about the way in which, constructing culture and history, we construct our reality.

In the site-specific installation "**Speak of Me as I Am**", **Fred Wilson** shows us the kaleidoscopic multiculturalism of a historical Venice, from the perspective of an African-American of the 21st century. In Venice, for centuries the cultural and economic gateway between East and West, the image of the African Moslems in the Venetian art and architecture is that of anonymous, decorative figures. The artist wonders: who are these black individuals? What was their situation, what did they think about their lives? Was there a black community in Venice? In order to ask these questions, Wilson uses a variety of media, placing side by side an array of works, objects, some produced by modern Venetian artisans, mannequins reproducing the coloured characters in the paintings of famous Renaissance painters, reproductions, historical artefacts, photographs and film. The material diversity of this work, going from expensive chandeliers to cheap glass figurines, speaks about the power of culture to embed and fetishize difference. Wilson wanted to emphasise the fact that history, race, gender, representation, and even opulence and power, are constructed in the imaginations of cultures, but persist in reality. This array of unusual resources actually includes a map locating black Venice in art, myth, history, and the popular imagination, but where each voice tells the "true" story behind its image as an exotic figure in the Venetian myth.

Who are the artists?

Krzysztof Wodiczko (born 1943). Polish artist challenging the way public space and architecture reflect collective memory and history. His works scrutinize the notions of truth, democracy, violence, and all the inhuman aspects of social interaction in the contemporary world.

Emily Jacir (born 1970). Artist of Palestinian origin, working in a diversity of media, many of her conceptual works being texts, photographs and video. One of the artist's fundamental themes is the restriction of movement and of freedom.

Krzysztof Malec (born 1965). Polish artist.

Adrian Piper (born 1948). Conceptual artist and philosopher of African-American ancestry, concentrating on the issues of racism, racial stereotyping and xenophobia.

Matts Leiderstam (born 1956). Swedish artist exploring the themes of identity, difference, power relations, especially concerning sexual orientation. Often working with paintings from museum collections, he adapts various scripts with the purpose of challenging social conventions, show repressed desires or expose the subliminal violence of various situations.

Fred Wilson (born 1945). American conceptual artist, whose works speak about race, ethnicity and culture, and about the lives of those marginalised. Wilson combines sculpture, painting, text, found objects, photography, video and audio in order to create a dialogue between objects and the viewer. An important topic is the critique of the role the museum has in creating political and cultural meaning.

Practical assignments, topics for discussion:

1. For a week, write down all the discriminatory remarks or situations that happen to you / you see around you. Often, one may be discriminated against when belonging to an ethnic minority, to a religious minority, if one is a woman, for reasons of gender, material or social status. The reasons for discrimination being diverse, try to pay attention to the details of a conversation or attitude you can find in various environments: on the street, on television, in the opinions of acquaintances, neighbours etc.

Selected sources:

Gregory Jay, What is multiculturalism?

<http://www.uwm.edu/%7Egjay/Multicult/Multiculturalism.html>

Chapter V

About women, the feminine, feminism

What is the foundation of power relations between men and women? What exactly justifies the rules about how a woman should behave, should be, and about how a man should be? How do these rules, these preconceived ideas, structure our everyday life? Can art help us overcome the restrictions imposed by these stereotypes?

I. What is feminism?

Feminism is a complex and contradictory notion, therefore any definition can only be temporary and can only refer to certain areas, certain parts of this movement, ideology or philosophy. More accurate than discussing feminism would be to discuss *feminisms*.

Feminism means politics "directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure" (C. Weedon, 1992, pag. 1) – this would be a possible definition.

These "power relations", the way society is organised, the roles both sexes need to assume, the fact that certain experiences (usually those belonging mostly to men) have been considered important, while other experiences (especially those belonging to women) have always been considered irrelevant, all these have been taken for granted, without being debated. Thus, the subordination of women has been considered as natural, as a predestination that cannot be overcome, justified by biological inferiority and not as a social construct that can be changed, redefined.

Feminism contributed precisely to challenge these issues, to add nuance to the way of thinking about the issues of identity, about the right to define oneself in freedom from discriminatory laws and traditions.

II. The binary structure of society

As early as the Antiquity, European thought has been grounded in the oppositions resulting from the polarisation of the two genders. Whereas the feminine is usually understood as an expression of the passive nature, of amorphous nature, weak and obedient, the masculine is characterised by the active principle, creative and rational, producing clear, scientifically verifiable, universal values. In the Western traditions, the masculine principle transcends everything that is transient, unconscious, illogical, unknown, irrational, sensual, hysterical, that is everything that is associated, according to the same tradition, to women. Through this original distinction, made by the classical

myth inherited by us via the Platonic tradition, human creation and everything that is human – mind, spirit, history, language, art – is defined by opposition to chaos, nature, the instinctual, to everything that is associated with the feminine. On the basis of this primary opposition all the others are formulated: culture/nature, order/chaos, activity/passivity, intelligence/affectivity, rational/instinctive, (the feminine being always linked to the second term). The stereotypes associated to femininity construct it as the negative, ephemeral, dependent, passive, non-political, non-social pole.

This dualism appears in many forms in philosophy, science, political theory, and in the way social relations are structured in our everyday lives. Once women are associated with something almost non-human, with the unconscious and the instincts, once women are systematically used as examples of beings whose lives are run by the body rather than by reason, then their role in society can only be an inferior and subordinated one.

III. Stereotypes

A stereotype is that pre-conceived idea, that image oftentimes untrue that people can have about a certain thing. Stereotypes act as prescriptions, as rules one must follow in order to fit in the role to which one "belongs" in society, irrespective of whether these rules are fair or not, irrespective of whether they correspond or not to one's aspirations. For example, sentences such as "The role of a woman is to be a wife, a mother and a homemaker" or "It is shameful for a man to show his feelings in public" are formulations of stereotypes.

Here are some works that challenge about women-related stereotypes:

Alla Georgieva's "Alla's Secret" consists of three posters referring to the glamorous lingerie ads, especially those belonging to Victoria's Secret. Only here the background is not some exotic beach or a swimming pool, but the kitchen, the place where it is commonly assumed that the woman belongs. Thus are revealed the tensions between reality and the others' expectations, between the glamorous shots in magazines (which reinforce stereotypes) and everyday life.

In the sequence of photographs "**Back to nature**", **Annika von Hausswolff** places the bodies of abused women in the middle of landscapes that remind of Romantic Scandinavian paintings. These photographs speak, with bitter irony, about the belief that death is a return to nature, in the context in which woman is associated with nature and in the context in which the visual culture of the 20th century is obsessed with the image of woman as a victim, of the women's bodies as places of violence and death.

Barbara Kruger associates image (a photograph appropriated from advertising, showing the face of a woman, in the grass, with her eyes covered by leaves) and text (deconstructing the message the advertising picture was originally supposed to communicate) in "**We won't play nature to your culture**", in order to speak about the stereotype representations justifying the woman's subordinate position, as a "product" of nature in a culture made by men.

In her work, "**You know that it's real if you feel that it's real**", **Naomi Fisher** speaks about the woman-nature relation in a more nuanced and ironical manner. The character poses, sword in hand, in a landscape of tropical flora, but this personification of triumphant nature is undermined in multiple ways. The heroine wears camouflage-print lingerie that looks completely inappropriate for the battle to come. Moreover, while the character's triumphant attitude before the wild nature and the red sky in the background make her seem like their mistress, a few details (the horizon line, the roof that can be seen through the plants) point to the artificiality and the comic of the picture, top the fact that we are witness to a performance. We are not looking at a warrior princess, but at a young woman posing as a princess, in her back yard, in Florida. But, as the title suggests, even if this fantasy can't be real, the mere dreaming about it, dreaming about this feeling of power and freedom can be enough in a world in which not only women, but all people, in general, can feel powerless, confused and excluded.

IV Absence, oblivion and silence

If we think about who usually speaks in history, who are the known, visible people, what kind of facts, experiences, ideas we hear about most often, we soon realise that often, women and their experiences are ignored, that women make up "the silent half" (M. Miroiu quoted in Adina Brădeanu, Otilia Dragomir, Daniela Rovența-Frumușani, Romina Surugiu, *Femei, cuvinte și imagini*, Polirom, 2002) of the planet population.

In "**People's Heroines**", **Sanja Iveković** appropriates the methods and strategies of the advertising image in order to tell a different story, about what has been deliberately forgotten, or about what was simply erased from collective memory. With minimal intervention - the substitution of texts - the artist transforms the original advertisement into an obituary for the women killed for their anti-fascist activities from 1941 to 1945 in Croatia. The original advertising photograph, those of a beautiful and glamorous woman, remains untouched. Iveković simply changes the text surrounding the image, replacing the company logo with the code Gene XX, and the advertising message and the name of the product with a short and stark case history listing details such as: the name and surname of the woman, the reason for her arrest, the date of her death and her age at the time of death. The altered pictures are published in fashion magazines, and thus the inattentive eye could mistake them for real advertisements. The last photograph published in the series shows a normal young girl (not a model), the artist's mother, arrested and sent to Auschwitz at the age of 23. The work speaks not only of a certain moment in history, but also about the way we are threatened by oblivion and silence.

Guerrilla Girls is a group of women activists, active mainly in New York, as well as in other cities, a group promoting gender and race equality. The group members are artists, curators, women working in an art system where visibility is denied to them, scrutinizing the way women are systematically ignored by the art world. An example for their activity is the image below: a nude with a gorilla mask covering her face, with the text: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan Museum? Less than five percent of

the artists in the Modern Arts section are women, but 85 percent of the nudes are female. Guerrilla Girls”.

V. Idealised body and real body

Our image about the body, although we might think of it as "by default", is in fact, a social construct. The images communicated by society, especially by the media, impose a series of regulations and prescriptions about what beauty is, about what we should look like and how we should behave, about what we should expect from our bodies and from the bodies of others.

In her work "**My voluntary punishments**", **Annette Messenger** photographs the countless treatments and manipulations women submit to in the quest for beauty and youth. The actions, often frightening, the body is subject to, are catalogued: prodding, cutting, electrocuting, squeezing with the cosmetic instruments of the '70s, which often looked like torture instruments.

The work by **Maja Rakocević**, "**Lucky couples**", consists of a series of photographs mimicking advertising images showing happy couples. The artist and her friends pose like the characters in the magazines, wearing similar clothes, in similar surroundings, trying to reproduce as close as possible the original picture from the media. Between the two images however, there are always differences, revealing the clash between the fiction about love and couples promoted by the media on the one hand, and the real relationships we can experience or observe around us, on the other, taking jabs at the way we try to adapt to a socially-imposed picture of what happiness should be.

Who are the artists?

Alla Georgieva (born 1957). Bulgarian artist, member of the female artist group "8th of March".

Annika von Hausswolff (born 1967). Swedish artist, working in photography.

Barbara Kruger (born 1945). American artist, known for her works in which she appropriates images and styles from the world of fashion and advertising, which she then associates with texts meant to subvert their original meaning and to transform them in a criticism of stereotypes.

Naomi Fisher (born 1976). American artist; in her photographs and drawings she explores the complex and unresolved relation between humans, technology and nature.

Sanja Iveković (born 1949). Croatian artist whose performances and multimedia artwork challenge women's history, memory and status.

Guerrilla Girls. Female activist group, established in 1985, active mainly in New York, as well as in other cities, promoting gender and racial equality.

Annette Messager (born 1943). French artist whose works, involving everyday materials and objects, such as toys, photographs, embroidered dusters etc., challenge the traditional roles of women and men.

Maja Rakocević (born 1975). Serbian artist.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Which do you think are the most commonly found opinions about the roles of men and women? Would you like to fit in these roles, or do you think that it would limit your freedom? Do you think that, if we are aware of the limitations imposed by gender-related stereotypes, we can overcome these limitations? Bearing these questions in mind, look in newspapers, magazines, in the books you are reading, in your families and in your friends' families examples of gender-related stereotypes. Recount events, clip texts and images from the media, photograph aspects of the street and use these materials to make collages reflecting your own opinions about these stereotypes.

2. In parallel, make two lists, one with all the male artists you can think of and one with all the female artists you remember. Are the two lists balanced? If not, what, do you think, are the causes for one category being more visible than the other?

3. Write a short essay about what makes you satisfied and what makes you unsatisfied in the way you look, in relation to the idealised body images in advertising. How do you relate to these images? Describe the way they influence you.

Selected sources:

Adina Brădeanu, Otilia Dragomir, Daniela Roventă-Frumușani, Romina Surugiu, Femei, cuvinte și imagini, Polirom, 2002

Chapter VI

About power, criticism and dialogue

Who establishes values? Why do we need ideals? When and how does art act in the sense of finding a space where people can be free?

I. Political art in Eastern Europe and the West

Politics refers to the decision-making processes in a group. Although the term designates most often the actions of the leadership of a country, it is also used in order to describe interactions in any group and institution.

The concept of political art is most often linked to activist art, defending the rights of minorities, giving a voice to the excluded and proposing the existence of alternative social models. Moreover, political art can serve to give visibility and to preserve in the collective memory social and political facts that would otherwise be overlooked or forgotten.

In Eastern Europe the relation to political art was different from that in the West, as a result of the different history each of these parts of the world had. Communism created an art and a culture in the service of its own doctrine. To be a "politically engaged artist" in these conditions meant to renounce personal dignity and the right to personal opinion in exchange for a position in the hierarchy imposed by a totalitarian regime; moreover, only those "politically engaged artists" could be visible, "thus, we can speak about a true cultural «schizophrenia»: on the one hand official, thematic art, as a direct response to the «political order», on the other, an individualist art expressing singular searches, the experiments of artists who tried to evade these ideological pressures." (Ileana Pintilie, *Acciónismul în România în timpul comunismului*, Idea Design &Print, Cluj, 2000). In a democratic society, artists themselves choose whether to be politically engaged or not, whether to consider or not that it is important to change things, in their position as artists, citizens and human beings.

In the sequence of photographs "**In prison**", **Ion Grigorescu** poses in his room, dressed in a striped pyjama (similar to a convict's uniform) in attitudes reminding actions in prison. The photographs are taken with a fish-eye lens, in a round framing, as if shot through the spy-hole in the cell door. The atmosphere of continuous surveillance, of freedom limitation, of narrow and stifling space during communism are the theme of this work.

In his work "**Self-portrait as a chestnut**", artist **Rudolf Bone** appears with a multitude of sticks jammed in his beard, sticks that prevent him from talking.

The Croatian group **Red Peristylum**, active in Split between 1968 and 1969, painted red the stones of the Roman peristylum in Split. The action, carefully planned, caused fierce protests from the part of the authorities, culminating with arrests.

Designed as an alternative to the "red" communism, the **Orange Alternative** was a Polish group consisting of artists, art historians and art critics, activists who, in the '80s, staged street actions, peaceful and full of absurd humour. Their actions, received with enthusiasm by the public and with uncertainty by the authorities, ridiculed official parades and their claim to have the monopoly of "truth". Led by art historian and activist Waldemar Fydrych, the Orange Alternative was a direct response to the imposition, between 1981 and 1983 of the martial law.

The fictional hero of **Ilya Kabakov's** installation, "**The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment**", is a dreamer who carries out an impossible project: to go into space by himself. The work comments ironically on the Soviet project of "conquering" the cosmos and on the propaganda around it. Building a propulsion system in his modest apartment, the character disappears into space. The destitute and depressing room in an apartment building and the improvised propulsion system suggest the everyday reality behind the Soviet utopia of victory and progress.

II. Eastern Europe

But what is Eastern Europe? Its definitions, geographical, political, economic and social are many. It has been described as the region where most of the Slavs live, where the great empires – Russia, Prussia, the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian – disputed influence and power, as the European "limes" where Western civilisation blends with a culture that is non-European, and most often as the place where Soviet domination and communism separated West from East. This separation, which could not be effectively overcome even after the fall of communism, is caused, mainly, by the different circumstances in which cultural discourse developed in the East and in the West, circumstances that make it difficult for us to understand each other. The circumstances in the former socialist countries differed from one country to another, but the constraints on the freedom of expression and the nostalgia for the capitalist West, associated with prosperity, freedom and civilisation, were common to all. At the same time, for many intellectuals in the Western countries, the former socialist bloc represented the place where Marxist ideas had been put into practice, where, finally, the utopias about equality had come to life, where an alternative to capitalism had been found. Even now, after the fall of communism, the clash caused by this kind of misunderstandings has not been overcome.

The film "**Shoes for Europe**", by artist **Pavel Brăila**, documents in real time the change of wheels of a Russian train in Ungheni station, on the border between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The wheels need to be changed in order to fit the European rail gauge. The carriages are lifted by workers and put on the new sets of wheels, this operation being a leftover of the Cold War, a symbol for the difference between the old and the new Europe and of the consequences of the fall of communism in the countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc.

After the fall of communism in 1989, following the economic and political transformations, many people were forced to find new ways of survival, from informal economies to migration. In **Mladen Stilinović's** installation, "**Bag people**", the photographs of people leaving a flea-market in Zagreb are juxtaposed to random press cuttings with articles and news stories published under the sections Politics, Economy, Zagreb, World, etc. In the flea market, people, pushed by poverty, sell all sorts of things exhibited on newspapers spread on the ground. The news published in those newspapers reflects the political context, and thus the routine of daily life and international news are placed side by side.

In **Adrian Paci's** film, „**Klodi**”, a young Albanian tells about his repeated attempts to secure a decent life for himself outside Albania, about his attempts to emigrate, about travelling with forged documents, about bribing the police, about the way he was separated from his family, living in America. As a background for Klodi's monologue, appears, from time to time a foggy picture of the Statue of Liberty and his itineraries through the world, which we can follow on an animate map, always ending where they started, in Albania.

After 1989, the communist symbols were for the most part removed from public space. Artist **Tamás St.Auby** changed for a few days the monument to the Soviet soldier in Budapest into a phantom of communism ("**Spirit of Freedom Statue**"), the central figure being shrouded under white sheets. Thus was marked, in a symbolic manner, the process undergone by the ex-communist countries, and an ironical solution was given for the issue of communist monuments (should they be demolished, preserved or hidden?).

Alena Kotzmannova placed in a transparent plastic bag a miniature of the monument of St.Wencle (national symbol and the hero of the construction of Czech national identity, a construction in which women did not have the opportunity to take part), and then photographed the bag in various locations around the world. She later exhibited these pictures of the bag with St.Wencle in tram stops in Prague, accompanied by the slogan "Shopping is my hobby". By appropriating this symbolic image of the Czech national autonomy, the artist "reduces" this symbol and transforms it into an image of capitalist ideology, whose imperative is not "to be", but rather "to have", an ideology also spreading in Eastern Europe.

III. Culture jamming

Cultural activism consists of building independent platforms for cultural expression outside the limits imposed by commercialism and institutions. One form of cultural activism is culture jamming, meaning the disruption of the messages sent by the dominant media in order to undermine the power forms that restrain and determine culture. Culture jamming means using already existing media (such as advertising billboards) in order to reflect on them and on society in general, by using their own communication methods. It is based on the idea that advertising is a form of propaganda and that there are few ways to avoid the effects of this propaganda in the industrialised countries. Culture jamming practices contribute to the idea that there should be a place for independent ways of communication and that cultural expression should be more democratic and more liberated from the limitations imposed by the economic system. There are many different aspects of cultural activism, using very diverse strategies and methods, such as: setting up pirate radio stations and establishing independent media, using video cameras in order to document police brutality and corruption acts, the same way common people are usually exposed to surveillance cameras, subverting the messages on billboards, illegally modifying the contents of websites in order to expose injustices perpetrated by institutions or corporations, mimicking the corporatist behaviours and tactics with the purpose of subverting them, and many others. All these

have the same target: the big corporations and their advertising campaigns, and the same purpose: to throw some light on the power these corporations have in a society where the citizen is increasingly replaced by the consumer.

Culture jamming strategies have much in common with the methods semiotics use in the attempt of finding the meaning of things and to highlight the interpretations that are alternative to the dominant ideologies. Semiotics deals with the study of a "system of meanings" (Roland Barthes), consisting of verbal and non-verbal communication means, containing images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and their complex associations.

With the help of semiotic methods one can examine the rules, codes and conventions, usually hidden, which cause "the meanings that are specific to a certain social group (i.e. those in power), [to be] rendered universal and 'given' for the whole of society" (Roland Barthes).

Culture jamming strategies try to ensure the right to choose over a univocal view of the world, determined by those in power, a polyvalent image of the world. "The message receiver seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read the message in a different way. I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation" (Umberto Eco).

IV. Advertising and public space

Graffiti and advertising have much in common. Both spread messages in the public space and both are ubiquitous and unavoidable. The advertising industry and the politically-engaged artists who act in the public space have some common strategies: in order to communicate their messages they use various psychological, aesthetic, emotional, narrative approaches. The idea of change, so important for the politically-engaged artists, is also present in advertising, which tries to connect with its audience, the consumer, by means of narrative, imagination and style. This is done by using endless repetition, by the amazement generated by the technical level at which advertising is produced, by using humour, sexuality, and by promoting the "cool" image.

There are though fundamental differences between them: advertising is made in order to manipulate people, while graffiti is a means of self-expression. Advertising is encouraged and helped by the authorities, while graffiti is illegal. The entire legitimacy of advertising derives from the money paid for its presentation and the profit it generates, while graffiti is free in every sense and therefore condemnable. Expression in the public space is illegal when it is for free.

If advertising monopolises the public space with its messages, from motorways to radio waves and the internet, people should feel free to combat these messages, to criticise them and to replace them with their own.

Here are some examples of culture jamming:

The relationship between graffiti and advertising, between art and vandalism, between expression and manipulation, between freedom and money, has been systematically explored by **Ron English**. In broad daylight, he repaints billboards with subversive messages. For example, he placed the image of a dead body, at the morgue, next to the

logo for Kool cigarettes, "Forever Kool". On another occasion he intervened in a McDonald's billboard, writing, next to the picture of a grotesque clown with a pig's face, "McDonald's: better living through chemistry".

Billboard Liberation Front (www.billboardliberation.com) is a group of activists who alter keywords on billboards so as to radically change the message, transforming it from an advertising message into an anti-corporatist one. For example, over the billboard for Fact cigarettes they pasted the text "I'm real sick. I only smoke Facts". Or, on an ad for Nike, they added the text: "You're running, because you want that raise, to be all you can be. But it's not easy when you work sixty hours a week making sneakers in an Indonesian factory and your friends disappear when they ask for a raise. So think globally before you decide it's so cool to wear Nike". The group also published a text with the title "The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement", a kind of handbook in which they explain how billboards can be modified.

The Yes Men (www.theyesmen.org) are a group of culture jamming activists who impersonate powerful men or corporations and then use the authority thus acquired in order to expose the true ideas and intentions of these groups in power. For example, they created a website (www.gatt.org) masquerading as the World Trade Organization website. When they received, due to this website, invitations to participate in international conferences, the group members held speeches that at first sight looked very serious and professional, but in fact proposed absurd and unimaginable solutions for the real business people listening to them, such as changing the global monetary system for the benefit of the poorer countries.

Joey Skaggs, (www.joeyskaggs.com), media activist and artist, dramatizes the inherent dangers present in a press that prefers to entertain its reader, rather than to inform them. He explains the way news are propagated: "[you] get someone from an out-of-state newspaper to run a story on something sight unseen, and then you Xerox that story and include it in a second mailing. Journalists see that it has appeared in print and think, therefore, that there's no need to do any further research. That's how a snowflake becomes a snowball and finally an avalanche, which is the scary part. There's a point at which it becomes very difficult to believe anything the media tells you." Beginning with 1966, Joey Skaggs persuaded several newspapers to publish absurd stories, invented by him (such as a story about a hormone extracted from mutant cockroaches that could cure arthritis, acne, and nuclear radiation sickness). Later, at a press conference where he revealed the deception, Skaggs stated: "The hoax is just the hook. The second phase, in which I reveal the hoax, is the important part. As Joey Skaggs, I can't call a press conference to talk about how the media has been turned into a government propaganda machine, manipulating us into believing we've got to go to war in the Middle East. But as a jammer, I can go into these issues in the process of revealing a hoax".

Who are the artists?

Ion Grigorescu (born 1945). Romanian artist, a representative of conceptual art, using as media: painting, photography, performance, film, installation.

Rudolf Bone (born 1951). Romanian artist working in performance and photography.

Ilya Kabakov (born 1933). Russian artist, representative of conceptual art; his installations, where fiction, personal and collective memories mesh together, speak about the oppressive conditions of life under communism and about the ways to elude these conditions.

Pavel Brăila (born 1971). Media artist from the Republic of Moldova.

Mladen Stilinović (born 1947). Croatian artist, who uses humour and irony in his works in various media in order to speak about ideology and politics.

Adrian Paci (born 1969). Albanian artist; in his works produced in various media (video, photography etc.) tackles social and political issues from a personal perspective.

Tamás St.Auby. Hungarian conceptualist artist.

Alena Kotzmannova (born 1974). Czech artist concerned with feminist issues.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Interview your parents about the communist era. Ask them to tell you about their memories of that period, about their everyday life, about the job they had then, about their relationship with the others (friends, neighbours, co-workers), about the television shows they watched, the books and newspapers they read, about the way they related to other countries. Also ask questions about the changes after 1989 and about the way they affected their (your) lives. Write down your questions and their answers in the form of an interview.

2. Find on the street situations where the images on advertising billboards are in stark contrast with the environment in which they are located. For example, a billboard with the picture of a happy family enjoying a beautiful house, placed in an impoverished area at the outskirts. Or an advert for a travel agency placed on a hospital building. Photograph them or describe in words these situations where the clash between the things promised by advertising and real life is obvious.

3. Write a short essay about the importance (or lack thereof) "designer label" clothes have for you. Explain the way owning these objects changes or not your self-image or the way the others see you.

Selected sources:

Ileana Pintilie, Acționismul în România în timpul comunismului, Idea Design &Print, Cluj, 2000

*Mark Dery, Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs
www.levity.com/markdery/culturjam.html*

Chapter VII

About the way we are shaped and the way we shape the world

What are the mechanisms of power? How much are we aware of the way the laws governing the society and the world condition our lives? In what way do our actions determine the lives of those around us?

I. The situationist movement

The Situationist movement (1957) raises seminal questions about the way hierarchies, mentalities, power positions are constructed in society and in the world, and about the role of culture in this interdependent system. Guy Debord, one of the movement initiators and its main theorist, by accusing capitalism as a pernicious and unjust form of society structure, analyses and exposes the tactics through which the ruling class constructs its ideologies. He believes that social constructions, whose mechanisms the ruling class has always tried to hide and mystify, can be challenged and analysed in the realm of culture, predicting that a possible change in society can be brought about by a cultural revolution. In the '50s, the Situationists saw the current forms of social control as based on consensus rather than force, as a cultural hegemony attained through the metamorphoses of the consumer and media society into the "society of the spectacle". In this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own. In the shift from 19th century competitive capitalism, organized around production, to a later form of capitalism organized around consumption, media, information, and technology, new forms of domination and abstraction appear, greatly complicating social reality. "Spectacle" is a complex term which "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Guy Debord). In one sense, it refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities and spectacles, but the concept also refers to the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, to all the means and methods power employs, to relegate subjects passive to societal manipulation and to obscure the nature and effects of capitalism's power and deprivations. Spectacle is used as a tool of pacification and depolitization, capturing the individuals and distracting them from the most urgent task of real life, while expanding the profits of the capitalist class. What the society of the spectacle "sells" is the dream that a life filled with luxury and happiness is open to all, that anyone can buy valuable objects and display, access and consume entertainment and information; but in reality only those with sufficient wealth can fully enjoy the benefits of this society, whose opulence is extracted out of the lives and dreams of the others. Those who can't afford to live out their fantasies of owning the commodities promised by the society of the spectacle are motivated to work harder and harder, until they are trapped in the cycle of working and spending, spending and working. In society, culture reflects and prefigures possible ways of organising life. Being one of the movements trying to promote liberating innovations in culture and in everyday life,

the situationist movement states that a revolutionary action in culture should attack suffering on every front, bring to an end the exploitation of humanity and stop the passions, compensations and habits this exploitation is built on.

II. Two types of logic dividing the world: the profit-based society and the gift-based society

The institutions and social structures running the society seem to be based on the principles of domination, competition, selfishness and definitely not on caring for others. But what if things can be seen from another perspective? We could review everything in different terms, relying on another type of economy instead of the one currently dominating the world, for example on an economy of gift-giving.

The thread of gift giving and receiving begins in every life in the unilateral need satisfaction provided by mothers. As time goes on in the individual life and in the existence of institutions and social structures, this thread is altered, turned back upon itself, moved to different levels, used for domination, used metaphorically. One particularly important loop in the thread of gift giving is the double gift: giving in order to receive a return gift. Our present economic system is based upon this logic of exchange. Exchange that has profit as its purpose is at the opposite pole from gift-giving. Based on these two principles (exchange and gift giving), two very different worldviews are formed, of which one in particular shapes mentalities, society and life.

Capitalism is based on the idea of profit-generating exchange. One of the ways the exchange paradigm wins its competition with the gift paradigm is by defining everything in terms of its own aspects of categorization, competition, quantification and measurement. Because exchange is so much a part of our lives, we use its logic as a natural way for seeing and understanding every aspect of our lives. A mistake that seems trivial is becoming used to ignoring the fundamental distinction between giving in order to receive and giving in order to satisfy the need of the other. Every person well integrated in the capitalist system tries to give less and get more, an attitude which creates antagonism and distance among the players. Inhuman behaviour among humans is not natural, but has more complex causes, such as the confusion generated by strategies and logics promoting competitive behaviour.

Art is an important terrain for mediation, communicative rationality and action, as well as a realm constantly negotiating its boundaries. Within the past few years however, the practice of giving seems to have become more readily appreciated as a *modus operandi* for producing ethical, socially responsive and politically efficacious art. Art in the public space as a social intervention, for example, is a complex form of artistic practice. It consists of works materialised in objects or actions that are emblematic for social issues or showing the assumption of a political stance; they are designed and created in order to provide help, and their continuity makes them have an effect in the real-life social system. Also, these works are participative processes, where the concept of the work and maybe even the production itself are the result of a collaborative process. They have the purpose of creating a lasting impact on the lives of the individuals involved, be it by

creating a productive service, or a social connection, or contributing to solving a social problem.

For example:

The project „**Giving**” took place in an end-of-year Intermedia Area exhibition organised by the final year students at NSCAD (the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax). Gallery window posters and other promotion tools informed gallery visitors that during the duration of the exhibition and at certain times of the day, they could take advantage of the following free services: bicycle repairs, button sewing, telephone calls, letter writing, kids' crafts, hair cuts, readings and others. The hair-cutting service was the greatest hit among the students attending the exhibition, a service offered by Leah Miller, for whom one of the beneficiaries of her service, her colleague, Andrew McLaren, repaired her bicycle in exchange. Similar deals were struck throughout the show. This action mirrored thus in some senses the informal economy common amongst students, this time around expanding the exchange of labour and services by providing it to the larger public. This action raised questions about altruism, reciprocity and exchange.

Based in a rural context in Northbrook, Illinois, the **Hirsch Farm Project** is described as "an arts based think tank concerned with public art, the environment and community" that brings together individuals from a wide range of disciplines to meet in camera for a period of a week to discuss specific topics and sub-topics. Their project titled "**Non-spectacle and the Limitations of Popular Opinion**" examined "the dynamics of how artists and other professionals communicate with a specified audience or community, and how these intentions are received" Each participant in HFP `focus groups' develops a proposal or essay that reflects or responds to the conversations generated during the week long discussion sessions. This results in a publication that is distributed to individuals and organisations in the arts, sciences and humanities. The goal of HFP is to "stimulate dialogue and elevate the standards of conversation between different communities and disciplines whose paths would normally not cross."

The collaborative activities of an Austrian based group of artists, **WochenKlausur**, have so far been identified by titles that simply represent the length of time they spend working on each project, for example, 6, 8 or 11 WochenKlausur (6, 8 or 11 Weeks of Enclosure). In one of the works, this group (made up of eight artists) used the existing social infra-structure of the Wiener Secession, a famous exhibition hall for contemporary art in Vienna, "to work on the problem of homelessness". Through a series of informal discussions with individuals and various groups, including homeless people, representatives from government and social agencies, they discovered that a major problem for the Viennese homeless was that they did not have access to medical care, the result of not being officially registered for health insurance. Over the course of several days of round table discussions, the artists decided to raise funds to purchase a bus that was remodelled into a multi-purpose ambulance. The group also lobbied the local government to provide a physician to work with the bus and subsequently the overall

management of the ambulance was taken over by the Caritas organisation. Since its inception the medical health service has provided medical aid for more than 500 homeless people a month.

The next example is an international relief aid project developed by **Michael LeBlanc**, **Sara-Marie Loupe**, and **Michael Smedley**. The three developed a proposal to use digital photography to construct a computer database to reunite refugee families from Bosnia and Rwanda, both countries devastated by their recent and continuing conflicts. The project, named "**The Refugee Family Relocation Project**" began with Sara-Marie Loupe's concern for the plight of approximately 100,000 Rwandan refugee children separated from their families. After some preliminary work the Halifax group began collaborating on line with other people interested in supporting the project and a few NGO's in the U.S. The database was developed in such a way so it can be used effortlessly in the field by those working directly with refugee populations.

Practical assignments, discussion topics:

1. Working in groups, try to identify a social problem in the community you live in. Given the fact that the organised society we live in has laws, institutions, rights and responsibilities, try to find out (to a reasonable extent) who are those responsible, to what extent and at what level, for that particular state of affairs. Assemble a documentary material concerning the causes of that particular problem. The material may include interviews with the individuals involved or with other people (illustrating thus the way the society recognises that problem).

Selected sources:

situationist international online
<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/index.html>

Bruce Barber, *Littoralist Art Practice and Communicative Action*
www.banffcentre.ca/wpg/nmsc/squat/giving.art.htm

Glossary

Appropriation – term used in order to describe the act by which an artist uses in his/her practice the work of another artist or other materials, belonging, for example, to the advertising field, defying the rules concerning the uniqueness of the work of art and the traditional notions of copyright.

Assemblage – sculptures made by combining various manufactured materials, scrap etc.

Avant-garde – a notion which, with the militant aspects it entails, is the product of recent historical circumstances speaking about the need for a revolutionary programme in culture. The avant-garde groups try to include in their domain of activity certain methods and organisation concepts originating in revolutionary politics, therefore often connected to political criticism. In this sense were established and developed (in the first half of the 20th century) the avant-garde currents such as *futurism*, *Dadaism*, *surrealism* etc., each of them, in their incipient stages, discovering the same desire to change the real world.

Bricolage – cultural process of improvisation or adaptation whereby objects, signs or practises are appropriated into different meaning systems and cultural settings and, as a result, are resignified. There is a trend towards emphasizing the subversive functions of bricolage, whereby elements of dominant or taken-for-granted culture are given new critical meanings.

Conceptual art – movement born in the '60s in Europe and America, aiming to be an investigation of the bases of the concept of "art". In conceptual works, the idea, the concept is foremost, and material realisation is secondary, transient, unpretentious, dematerialised.

Culture – term designating a series of distinct characteristics of a society or social group in spiritual, material, intellectual or emotional terms. It is grounded in the human capacity of classifying experiences, of encoding them and in communicating through symbols. As a result, people living apart from one another develop unique cultures, but the elements of different cultures can easily spread from one group of people to another.

Curator – the person who organizes an exhibition. In contemporary art, the role of the curator is being re-thought, from arranging the museum or gallery collection according to a certain principle, to finding personal methods in organising the exhibition, to assuming multiple roles; thus, it is possible for the curator to be a participant in the process of creating the artwork, the catalogue editor, a collaborator in designing the exhibition space etc.

Democracy – a system based on the equality of each individual's rights and opportunities in society.

Documentation – texts, maps, sketches, photographs shown in an exhibition or publication in order to present a piece of art, a concept or an action taking place in the past or which cannot be made visible another way.

Enlightenment - spiritual movement led by European intellectuals throughout the 18th century. The defining feature of this movement was the faith in reason as a primary source of the entire knowledge, as a guideline for human activities and as a measure of all values. In rational thought and actions determined by same reason, the representatives of the Enlightenment recognised the guarantee for the permanent progress of humankind

with the purpose of mastering the forces of nature, as well as implementing a new, more just social order.

Happening – term invented by American artist Allan Kaprow in 1959 in order to describe an action apparently anarchic, but in fact structured.

Hegemony – term referring to supremacy, domination and authority.

Ideologies – arrays of beliefs and phrases with symbolic load, in which the world is presented, interpreted and evaluated in a way designed to shape, mobilise, orient, organise and justify certain ways or directions of action and to anathemise others.

Installation – work that can be experienced spatially and consisting of the placing in relation of the various objects, materials and media that form it, attempting to modify the way we relate to a certain space.

Intervention – term used when objects, images or text are placed in a certain context (such as museum, street, newspapers) in order to change the habitual way of perceiving art and to attract attention on the ideological and institutional circumstances of that particular context.

Media art – generic term used to describe an art connected to, or produced with the help of technologies invented or made available beginning with the middle of the 20th century (such as video, computers etc.).

Performance – term designating those ephemeral, irreproducible, improvised actions, carried out instantaneously, usually related to the body and its limitations, and requiring the participation of an audience.

Politics – refers to the decision-making processes in a group. Although the term designates most often the actions of the leadership of a country, it is also used in order to describe interactions in any group and institution.

Site-specific – works produced specifically for a certain location/site, adapting to it and highlighting the physical circumstances as well as the concept-related circumstances of that location/site.