

Art, Criticism, and Institution

Panel 8

MODERATION
NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT

JULIA VOSS
MISCHA KUBALL
GREGOR H. LERSCH

Art and Activism

Julia Voss

The Tate Galleries' announcement in 2019 that they would no longer accept donations from the Sackler family was preceded by protests initiated by Nan Goldin, the American photo artist. Her example set a precedent. In the past six months, many other demands have been published in which artists have spoken out against cooperation with donors whose wealth comes, for example, from the manufacture and sale of weapons or from investing in them. The lecture gives an overview of these movements initiated by artists and discusses the possible consequences. How does activism relate to art criticism? Is it another phase of institutional critique or are we facing a new phenomenon?

Populism vs Democracy and Social Media

Mischa Kuball and Gregor H. Lersch

In this conversation, Mischa Kuball and Gregor Lersch analyze the contemporary artistic and curatorial definitions of public space, democracy, and art. Recently, these three definitions have taken center stage in history and have undergone a substantial change from the interpretations and attributions they had in the 1970s. The current conversation will serve as a platform to discuss, based on the project series *public preposition* and the exhibition *res.o.nant* by Mischa Kuball, the aesthetic and curatorial implications of addressing these topics within an extended socio-cultural context. The conversation will focus on the relationship between historical sites and their context, using, as one example among others, the Jewish Museum in Berlin and Lersch's curatorial approach to issues that extend the role of the museum beyond traditional definitions and borders. Anticipation and interaction in the context of art performances and time-based interventions are the aesthetic tools that the artist employs in order to engage with democratic frameworks and new media. The works of art and projects spring from site-specific analyses of the locus in which they take place. Within their aesthetic structures, they incorporate social, political, or communal specificities and challenge the audience by being fleeting and temporary interventions that rely on the potential of an altered perception of seemingly familiar/suddenly unfamiliar urban and social contexts. These projects ask their viewers to reconsider the modalities of their engagement with democracy, populism, and new media.

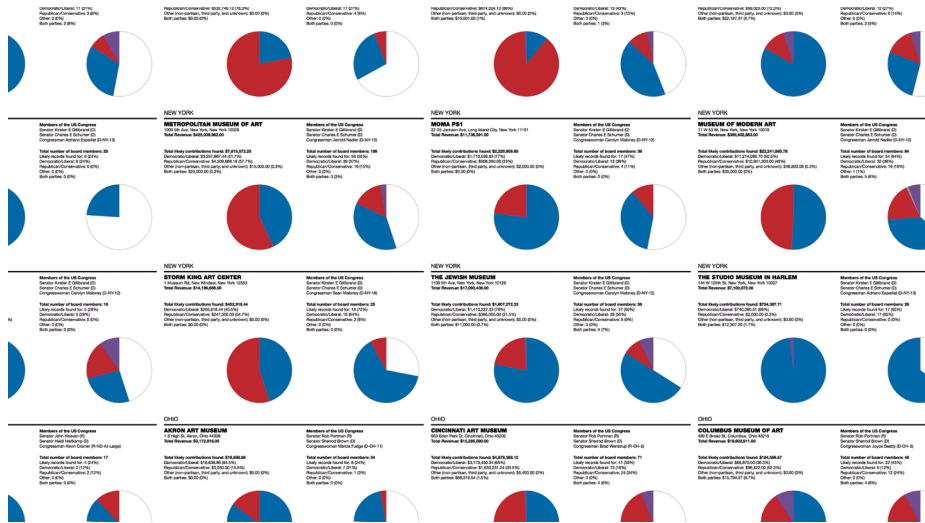


Fig. 23: Andrea Fraser, 2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics (Detail), 2018

Julia Voss

When one speaks of ›populism‹, what is often meant is the right-wing spectrum of political movements. This is considered – with good reason – to be an antagonist of the art world, including art criticism, as well as of freedom of the press and of opinion in general. The right-wing attacks on artistic freedom are repeatedly mentioned in this volume. In my contribution, however, I shall focus on the opposite phenomenon, which the artist Andrea Fraser has vividly pointed out in her book *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*:

»What if populism and the art world were also allies? What if it turned out that art supports, helps, and ingratiate itself with the populists in an exceptional way, and glorifies them to boot?«

At first glance, this assessment does not sound very plausible. Fraser, however, has presented many arguments for this thesis, which can be summarised in a three-step approach and will be illustrated here by means of quotations from her publication:

1) The New Right, Fraser argues, are »conservatives who ran as populists – in order to rule as plutocrats«. ¹

2) The influence of capital on politics has become so far-reaching that sociologists, political scientists, and other observers of the system have concluded that the form of government can no longer be considered a ›democracy‹: »Instead, the United States has become a plutocracy – government by the wealthy«. ²

3) This development is particularly evident in the art world: »Art organisations in the United States also have benefited from increasing concentrations of wealth. [...] The 128 arts organisations included in this study had combined total revenues of over \$ 4.2 billion in 2015. [...] Despite the common identification of many art museums as ›public‹ institutions, most operate with little or no democratic input, oversight, or recognition of government support. Instead, with well-publicised fundraising galas and donor recognition on nearly every wall, many art museums have become prominent showcases for highly concentrated private wealth, identifying that wealth with generosity, creativity, and cultural accomplishment.« ³

In short, art museums have become places where the plutocratic conditions are glorified in a media-effective way, which, in the opinion of many analysts, provide the breeding ground for populism.

1 Andrea Fraser, *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2018, p. 31.

2 Ibid., p. 13.

3 Ibid.

With her extensive research, published in this book, Fraser provided for the first time figures and statistics which enabled her to trace this development on a broad basis. At the same time, she found herself in the company of other artists who were also concerned about the transformation of the art museum into a plutocratic instrument of power, and who used performative interventions to counter the situation. In the following, I will focus on these activists and the astonishing successes they have achieved in recent years. It will begin with a review that takes us back almost five decades, into the twentieth century, when the power structure still seemed straightforward.

When, in 1971, Hans Haacke received the news that his exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum had been cancelled and its curator fired, he had no idea that he would eventually become famous for it. Only many years later did the most unlikely of all situations occur. Haacke rose to become an artist that subsequent generations also revered for what he had not shown. His installation *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System as of May 1, 1971*, which dealt with the wheeling and dealing of a New York real estate speculator and led to the cancellation of his exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, turned into a kind of relic of activism with Haacke as its martyr.

It was to take nearly half a century however, before the tables were turned. It was only when the National Portrait Gallery in London invited Nan Goldin to present her work in a major retrospective in 2019 that the artist threatened to turn the museum down. If the institution accepted the million British pounds that the Sackler Trust had announced it would donate, Goldin said she would withdraw from the planned exhibition. The National Portrait Gallery then turned down the money, followed by the Tate Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Louvre. The Sackler family is accused of having earned several billion dollars with the Purdue Pharma company in the so-called Opioid Crisis, which has reached epidemic proportions in the United States.

And Nan Goldin was not the only artist in 2019 who was committed to examining the large belly of the museum world in more detail. In July, Warren Kanders, a member of the board of the Whitney Museum in New York, whose company Safariland produces tear gas that is used against migrants at the Mexican border, was forced to resign. Among the artists who, prior to this, had cancelled their participation in the Whitney Biennial in protest, were Michael Rakowitz, Nicole Eisenman, and Forensic Architecture.

And in October 2019, The Museum of Modern Art in New York received an open letter addressed to Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock Corporate Management and trustee of the museum. The letter urged Fink to cease investing in private prison businesses and was signed by, among others, Hito Steyerl and Andrea Fraser.

One last example, New York cultural workers, who came together under the group name ›Bad Barcode‹, recently succeeded in taking action against Amazon's plans to set up a headquarters in the borough of Queens. The protesters included people from all levels of society. In a recent interview, the artist Andreas Petrossiants, one of the organi-

sers, stressed the importance of all ›cultural workers‹ banding together – from the artist to the employee at the museum’s ticket counter.⁴

But where was art criticism in these activities? With the exception of the art magazine *Hyperallergic*, which appears online and provides extensive coverage of art activism, comparatively few art critics have thus far spoken out. Art history, the academic sister of art criticism, has also largely failed to address the conditions in which art is created and exhibited. The silence is all the more astonishing because no Renaissance scholar would think of writing about art production in fifteenth-century Italy without at the same time taking a look at the political situation, the clients, their intentions and goals. However, the closer art comes temporally, the less its context is included. Most contributions dealing with contemporary or even modern art, content themselves with a formal analysis of a painting, sculpture, installation or film, and use historical works for comparison. In my opinion, art criticism and art history thus fall short of the standards of their craft.⁵

Artist activism in 2020 can, however, also draw on an old tradition. Already, one hundred years ago, it was argued that »No amount of charity in spending such fortunes can compensate in any way for the misconduct in acquiring them«. Who said this? Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth President of the United States.⁶

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow

4 See: »Andreas Petrossiants and Vanessa Thill in Conversation on the Cultural Work in Anti-Displacement Struggles«, in: *AAD*, 28 October 2019, URL: <https://aad.nyc/blog/2019/10/28/andreas-petrossiants-and-vanessa-thill-in-conversation-on-the-cultural-work-in-anti-displacement-struggle/> [last visit on 28 November 2020].

5 For more detailed information, see: Julia Voss and Philipp Deines, *Hinter weißen Wänden/Behind the White Cube*, Berlin 2015, p. 129.

6 Fraser 2016 (see note 1), p. 23.



Fig. 24: Mischa Kuball, *res.o.nant*, 2017

POPULISM VS DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL MEDIA. A DISCUSSION WITH MISCHA KUBALL AND GREGOR H. LERSCH

195

Moderator Norman L. Kleeblatt

Norman L. Kleeblatt

Welcome; this session will revolve around Mischa Kuball's project with Gregor H. Lersch at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, *res.o.nant*, which asks the question: what is public art? Gregor is the head of exhibitions at the Jewish Museum Berlin and the curator of *res.o.nant*, and Mischa is an artist who has worked a long time in the public art realm and is also a professor of public art in Cologne. So I'd like to invite Mischa to start by discussing the project.

Mischa Kuball

Thanks Norman for welcoming us here on the stage, and good morning to everyone. In the summer of 2017 I received an invitation to the Jewish Museum to meet curatorial director Léontine Meijer-van-Mensch, along with Gregor H. Lersch and Klaus Teuschler, to look at this space which has been dedicated the public as the so-called ›Education Centre‹. The museum had been thinking about new ways to use that space. The invitation arrived on Monday. By Tuesday, Gregor and I had a phone conversation and the project started the next day. So I arrived that Wednesday. That was two years ago and we just finished the project on September 1st 2017. Our idea was to look at the space and to consider that Daniel Libeskind's design already had a very strong emphasis on the question of how we can engage with the memory of the unspeakable and the unimaginable. This is a very difficult starting point. My first impulse was to leave the architecture as it was, or bring it back to its original power and force, while making it more accessible to audiences. So the interventions were subtle.

There are different forms of activism. What can museums do? This question led us to an idea to have two mind-maps, one inside the museum and the other connecting the museum with the city. The first, most radical thing, that you won't find in the paper so far, and even not really printed in the catalogue and the essays about the project, is the *open call*. Why is the open call interesting and, I would say, political? Because everything in the museum is controlled by the curator, by the institution and its preexisting standards. The open call invited musicians from around the world to contribute to *res.o.nant*. We reviewed and discussed every submission we received - 250 in total. So that was, I think, the most radical invisible aspect of that project. A wide variety of audio forms were proposed, electronic, acoustic, spoken word, acapella, to give just some examples. And we did this in a very specific moment when music and sound were not perceived in an innocent way anymore, especially in Berlin, but maybe we'll get to that point later on.

Gregor H. Lersch

I would like to take up the theme of how museums can also have an effect in the public realm. For the Jewish Museum Berlin in particular, this poses a special challenge. I think most of you are familiar with the building and the urban situation of the Jewish Museum here in Berlin, with its large underground areas, the aesthetic presence of concrete and metal, the police surveillance. The consequence is that, at first glance, the museum does not appear inviting to the public at all and actually does not allow for any direct interaction with the public space. With *res.o.nant*, however, Mischa – as artist – and

I – as curator of the project – wanted to address a public at all costs and involve it in the concept. This was to be achieved first of all by involving dozens of musicians and artists, whom we contacted personally as well as through a public open call. The musicians contributed audio tracks, which were then integrated into the installation. We created as a kind of public in digital space, and brought them into the protected museum space.

With *res.o.nant*, a deliberately experimental format, we later left this safe space of the museum to intervene in the actual public space in Berlin. To this end, we orientated ourselves on the architectural design and the urban spatial concept of Daniel Libeskind, which is connected to specific places in Berlin's urban space by a grid of lines leading out of the museum. The ends of the lines lead to various 'lieux de memoire' in the urban landscape, which refer to events in German-Jewish history, such as the place where Rosa Luxemburg was murdered in 1919. For the intervention of *res.o.nant*, the artist chose



Fig. 25: Mischa Kuball, *res.o.nant*, with the poem by Paul Celan »Oranienstrasse 1«

the line that ended at *Oranienstrasse 1* in Berlin-Kreuzberg. Libeskind had included this location, which is located at the very busy corner of Oranienstrasse and Manteuffelstrasse, into the urban concept by referring to Paul Celan's poem *Oranienstrasse 1*, written in 1967. The disturbing and enigmatic poem refers to the death of Carl von Ossietzky, a German pacifist who died in 1938 when he was arrested by the Nazis. Today, at the address Oranienstrasse 1, there is a wasteland without buildings, surrounded by large billboards. Fascinated by this situation, we decided to rent the billboards and present the poem's text there in a highly visible way.

After the poem had been on display there for two days, something unexpected happened, because a printout with text had been added to the billboard. At first, it looked almost like vandalism, but the opposite was true; an anonymous person, most likely a neighbour, was probably fascinated by the text of the poem and had added an interpretation of it, which is available on the Internet. Printed out in poster format, this now complemented the text of the poem and gave passers-by more information and the stimulus to engage in discussion.

Norman Kleeblatt

Mischa, you mentioned the Libeskind building, the heavy, imposing, concrete structure, however, Libeskind also played with invisibility, for example, the cubic empty spaces, the voids. And I think this is one of the things we have within the art world as Julia Voss said, the things that are not uttered, the things that are taken for granted. How do we bring them into the public sphere? How do we make them part of the popular consciousness? One example from the United States is our huge debate about monuments that honor the confederacy. This debate is not resolved but it is important that the conversation take place in the public realm. Now, the other thing is that *res.o.nant* happened during a time where there was a pressing conversation about what the Jewish Museum should be doing, and what another exhibition in the Jewish Museum was properly or improperly taking part in. How did *res.o.nant* - which tried to be somewhere between inside and outside - function within that discourse?

Gregor H. Lersch:

In a certain sense, *res.o.nant* took place in the eye of the hurricane, since the project was shown at the same time as the controversially discussed exhibition *Welcome to Jerusalem*. The discussions led to extensive criticism of the Jewish Museum's programme and ultimately to the resignation of the director. Curatorial processes in a Jewish museum in Germany are always particularly delicate. And so, in the process of conceiving *res.o.nant*, we too had to carefully consider what could happen if we activated and invited a large group of unknown individuals - in our case, the potential responders to our open call. The highly topical issues of anti-Semitism and BDS were discussed, and we talked about this very openly between the institution, the curator, and the artist. In order not to fall into a kind of self-censorship, we finally decided to implement the open call without restrictions and to include all incoming audio tracks and musicians in the installation.

This form of openness also led to some of the pioneers of electronic music from Detroit participating in the project and performing live in the installation. Some of my

museum colleagues were initially very critical of this because at first glance electronic music might seem inappropriate in the context of Jewish Berlin – how can Techno and Holocaust remembrance go together? The musical performances, however, showed that artists such as Mike Banks and Monika Werkstatt were very sensitive and musically very stimulating, fitting in with *res.o.nant* and the emblematic »voids« of Daniel Libeskind.

In the end, *res.o.nant* did not become part of the fierce criticism of the museum's programming. This criticism focused very much on two things: the aforementioned exhibition on Jerusalem and the programme of the museum's academy. Nevertheless, the project with Mischa Kuball was implemented in a very conflictual atmosphere, and every step had to be carefully considered.

Mischa Kuball

I would like to add a very personal moment. There are two things I remember from working with the artist Mike Banks. We were waiting for him, and he called and said: »Mischa, I cannot get into the building because there are so many police out there.« I never considered how it might be for a foreigner to come to the Jewish Museum, being invited, and then be immediately confronted with the police. The second memory is, after he was finished setting up his very impressive installation he called his mother in Detroit. She cried and she said, I'm so proud of you being a member of the Black Jewish community in Detroit performing in the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Before this we had not thought about these complex identities we were dealing with. It is not *black* and *white*, it is not even black, white and grey. It's so diverse. Every artist we invited considered the weight of the space and all were frightened of that particular part of German history. But maybe it's not only a moment of silence but the way we speak out and the way we introduce different voices.

Publications are another tool to engage the public outside of the institution. We invited eighteen writers from diverse backgrounds to contribute to our publication. This is another way to avoid a single channel reception. Regarding the question of BDS, there is a danger that people say, this is a BDS supporter so this person needs to be criticised or rejected. This is happening now with Walid Raad who was nominated to receive the *Aachen Kunstpreis*. He is an activist artist and we knew that. If you invite Hans Haacke to your museum you cannot be surprised if your institution is criticised. I really admire the decision Léontine Meijer-van-Mensch and Gregor Lersch made to invite artists without knowing in advance what the results would be. People accused the museum of not being a Jewish Museum, and even of being anti-Jewish. Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, has criticised the museum. To remain true to the commitment we made to the project, I think is brave. I think this is uniting artists, curators, museum directors, and critics to stand against these populist attempts.

Norman Kleeblatt

I'd like to add another wrinkle to the issue, along with Julia's presentation on activism and the political and economic power channeled through museums, to say that at least we in the United States are under enormous pressure to diversify museums, to diversify programs, to diversify collections and diversify audiences. That runs in contra-

distinction to the standard support of museums. So it's two ends pulling each other in opposite directions. How can one even justify the diversification, given the absolute power structure of the museums and galleries as institutions?

Julia Voss

The question is, who is putting up the pressure? I think if we look at Germany we have a development where we have more and more private donors rather than public funding. Also, we have an explosion of institutions and in order to survive all of them need to cooperate with private donors, which is not necessarily bad but there is certainly a trend to make the inner workings of these institutions less transparent. A big issue here is also taxes. In German we say *unter Geheimhaltung* – it's not public. There are a lot of things we cannot even publicly inquire about because by law it's protected. So we don't always know where the money is coming from or how much there is. I think there are all kind of escape routes where you do a kind of formal diversification while museums are being privatised. What is really needed is one showcase of a democratic museum. I'm still waiting for the kind of director or group of activists or whoever who puts up that kind of model institution and says, listen, we can do it differently and we're going to show how we can do it differently.

Gregor H. Lersch

Yes, I can only agree with that. And if you are referring to the museum as an institution, it is fundamental to mention the discussions about the definition put forth by ICOM and the involvement of communities. This also leads to the question of what happens when a community demands an attitude from a museum that it – as a liberal orientated institution – does not want to share or even promote. This poses new questions regarding the concept of participation in the context of multiple populisms, which is omnipresent in the museum sector.

For example, the criticism with which we were confronted at the Jewish Museum was voiced by very different protagonists with very different political agendas and was transformed via social media into permanent pressure. This came from both politically conservative and left-wing circles, as well as from the Jewish and non-Jewish perspectives. All worked with tools that are also used by populist movements. Many people are not yet aware of this in the German context. The idea of populism – this is not just the German right-wing party AfD (Alternative for Germany), this is not an exclusively right-wing matter. It is something that happens everywhere. It is a tendency, it is an attitude, a kind of discourse. It is something that we can feel everywhere.

Norman Kleebblatt

In response to Julia's notion of the democratic institution, I think Marcia Tucker, when she founded the New Museum, tried to make it incredibly democratic. Everyone on staff, whether you were a porter, a secretary officer, a curator or a director, were paid the same amount of money. And I think it's ironic that now there is a real problem with a union at the New Museum, where workers are organising for higher pay. This is just one example.

Henry Meyric Hughes

It's not really a question but just an answer to Julia's particular demand for a new kind of museum. I want to draw your attention to a book by Piotr Piotrowski which was his last publication. It's called something like 'New Museum' and it imagines a new kind of museum that would engage directly with the public and fight this populist tendency. I recommend it.

Julia Voss

Thank you.

Norman Kleeblatt

There is another question out there.

Jamie Keesling

I appreciate that this panel has begun to delineate the contradiction bound up in the concept of populism. What do we mean when we talk about the success of activist art? This question is particularly pertinent right now considering the museum protests happening in New York. Most recently, the resignation of Warren Kanders from the Whitney Museum's board was widely claimed as a success by protesters. However, as critics, we would ask, what are the ultimate aims of these protests? In a time when museums and other art institutions are becoming more and more dependent on private philanthropy, the demand seems to be to replace board members whose millions have come from unethical means with either wealthy people who have accumulated their wealth through ethical means, or with non-wealthy people, which presents a contradiction. As critics, we might pose the question – and I wonder what your thoughts are about this – of what are the ultimate political aims of art activism, or how can critique clarify what those possibilities might look like when art activism gets it wrong or is insufficient?

Julia Voss

This is a very important question and I wish I had a ready answer to it. In the United States there is a big discussion on what's called philanthro-capitalism. Through tax incentives that were introduced in the 90s there was a big redistribution of public money to the private sector. This is also a big thing in Germany, though people are less aware of it. All of these wonderful institutions depend on the generosity of private donors. Meanwhile, the donors receive incentives for their donations. It was actually Bill Clinton who had the idea that these entrepreneurs who ran successful companies could be models for reforming the welfare state. This clearly failed, and this is why I'm also so thankful for the kind of activism we have in the United States, because it is so well-informed. It's not just some bold claim. If you read the open letters, if you read the books on philanthro-capitalism and so forth, it's a wave of activism now that is very well-informed.

Norman Kleeblatt

Let's take one more question.

Liam Kelly

How is the Jewish Museum funded? And is it distinctly different from the examples that Julia cited and their related problems?

Mischa Kuball

As a German federal museum it is mainly publicly supported by federal funds. There is a smaller yet important portion of private, mainly corporate money in the museum. But I have to say that we have a Sackler staircase. It is not formally named, but it is funded by Sackler. When the museum was opened, we had a German-Jewish-American director, so the museum has a very American system. We have a department for development, we have a lot of private money involved, even though we are a public institution.

Norman Kleeblatt

I thank you for your attention. Thank you, Julia, Mischa, and Gregor, and all of you.

Translation: Jochen Stremmel/Gérard A. Goodrow (Lersch)



Fig. 26: Mischa Kuball, *res.o.nant*, 2017