//Janna Graham //Nicolas Vass //Annette Krauss //Laila Huber

“I think the artistic is like a double-edged sword.“

An Interview with Janna Graham, Nicolas Vass, and Annette Krauss by Laila Huber

Cultural worker Janna Graham (Centre for Possible Studies), artist Nicolas Vass (Precarious Workers Brigade), and artist, educator, and activist Annette Krauss (Utrecht/Vienna), were our guests at the “Artistic Interventions and Education as Critical Practice. (Un)learning Processes, Community Engagement and Solidarity” Symposium at the Program Area Contemporary Arts & Cultural Production in April 2014. In the interview with Laila Huber they talked about artistic interventions in relation to social movements, about creative skills, institutional critique, and the interweaving of activism, popular education, research and arts, and the undoing or unlearning of the artistic. *(2)

Could you explain how you relate to the term artistic intervention in your practice? What do you understand by artistic intervention and is it a viable term for you?

> *Janna Graham:* I have probably used the term “intervention” quite a lot over the past several years, but “artistic intervention” is something I have not thought about in a while. I remember using it a lot in the 1990s when speaking about institutional critique and artists intervening in collections. Thinking about the trajectory that I have taken from then, working with groups like Ultra-red, I have moved away from always characterizing or gauging interventions only in relation to art. As artists working within social movements this does not mean we stopped being artists necessarily, but that when working as and with organizers on projects of social justice, interventions are hybridized as both artistic and political and assessed and described according to other criteria and efficacies. So a lot of other terms complicate the artistic side of the intervention. In many social movement interventions with which I have been involved there has been a move away from artistic visibility, as a way to sidestep the authorial hierarchization process that often accompanies the naming of artists as exceptional to others. In the midst of the anti-cuts movement in the UK, for example, a number of people—artists and non-artists—formed the Precarious Workers Brigade and re-focused their work on the intersections between cultural politics and workers’ rights. When individual group members wanted to be recognized for their work as artists—I remember one circumstance when someone wanted to use an action as part of her course material for her Master of Fine Arts— it was a matter for significant debate. There were some people who felt that it would be fine because we all put work into activism at a time when we should be doing our “own work” (that is, our work to make a living). And at the same time, many felt it was inappropriate to put this work into the world of art or academia or to re-present it in any other kind of context. That word “artistic” often negates the collectivity of the process and also the fact that there are people in the process who do not identify as artists.
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> *Nicolas Vass:* There is something about the term artistic intervention that doesn’t really address where an intervention is, so it is like this abstract thing

that could be applied to anything. And it presupposes that there is an idea that the artistic intervention will necessarily be better than any other type of intervention because it will be more creative, by virtue of being artistic, or it will be different or something like that.

Janna Graham: Yes, like the future-looking artistic avant-garde will come before the rest of the world's interventions.

Nicolas Vass: So, I am a little bit suspicious of that because in some of the things that we have experienced in these past years, really creative ideas that could be deemed "artistic interventions" occurred in collective processes. A lot of people who don't come from an artistic background came up with ideas for what was most relevant, so much to the point instead of theorizing about "how do we conceptualize a strike, how do we think about occupation within a museum?" People just said, "OK, we'll do this, and this is how we plan it."
Janna Graham: This is definitely the case in the moments that social movements are alive and things are moving quickly. At other times, when they are more static the artistic sometimes stands in as a placeholder for other ways of thinking. I think it is a bit like holding onto the two poles, you can't get rid of the term artistic because it sometimes allows for a certain kind of space and a certain amount of poetry, specific resources and maybe something less formulaic to be made possible. And yet you don't want it to be there because it also comes with authorship, signature, and commodity. And those things cause real tensions in collective work. Sometimes this tension is useful. Other times it gets in the way.

Annette Krauss: What I would like to add to this in terms of intervention and the artistic, is the tension again between long-term and short-term moments: an intervention, at least this is my vision about the notion of intervention, is long term. And in a strange way, when the term artistic comes with it, I immediately think about it as [snapping fingers] momentary.

Janna Graham: For me, even intervention sits on the edge. When it is used in melodramatic TV series in relation to the family of someone with an addiction, for example, "We staged an intervention" means you are going to bring people together and interrupt a person at the height of their issue and get them into rehab. So it has a long term goal—rehabilitation—but a temporariness to it in the act; it is a dramatic moment where you make a disruption or rupture and then something comes after. If you add artistic to it, it concretizes it as gesture or short-term action that is also somewhat patronizing, i.e., rehabilitation of another. So, I think you have to actually work at the term and the practice to make it long term because the first connotation for me is very much symbolic, short term, rupture, a little bit more in keeping with the avant-garde notion of the artistic or activist versus one who is engaged in long-term social justice work.

Annette Krauss: With this kind of intervention intending to cause a rupture, the problem is always: what comes after the rupture? It is this moment of putting something out of balance, which could happen very dramatically, but what does it need after the rupture to not become a dramatic backlash. For example, with school projects I am involved in, it always sounds big: "a year, amazing," or half a year, but just as important would be the question of how to establish a continuation of the discussions and practices with the students? This is something that bothers me. I was always quite happy when teachers where not around so much when the students and I met, and I would always ask, "Do we want to have the teachers with us when we are working

> together?" Now I actually think that there is also a downside to the situation that teachers are not with us, since I believe it is very important that they understand the kind of process we went through—although maybe the process might be completely different when they are there. It is about entering a structure that is so tough, so tight, at the same time there is a certain thinking process happening. That is what made me think about this long-term aspect, and the tension between long-term and short-term engagements. And I agree that there is a tremendous process of authorship that goes along with the "artistic." That is what we struggle with all the time. If you enter this "artistic intervention" as a group, it is already something, but even then there are forces (art worlds, art discourses, and I don't want to exclude myself here) that want to brand it, which is very often quite counterproductive.

And to use the example of the "ASK!" solidarity campaign with domestic workers, there is this inverted graffiti: is this an artistic intervention or could this just be an intervention? What is the artistic part when you engage in processes that are outside of the art field? And will you still bring it back to the arts, or is that not important to you?

> *Annette Krauss:* Isn't it also about the question of where there is a field where you can act? Where can you initiate certain processes? And sometimes it is easier within the arts, and sometimes it doesn't work at all. The members of Ask! experiment with making visible the conditions and demands of "invisible work" of migrant domestic workers in the Netherlands. At the same time, we try to reflect on our own domestic working conditions asking what are the politics of (in)visibility? Since most of the members are cultural workers, it most definitely is grounded in the "artistic," but that's certainly not enough. I think at this specific moment of the ASK! campaign we had the capacity and the possibility to initiate particular actions together with the migrant domestic workers. But, for example, right at the moment the discussions about migrant domestic work happen in the realm of the trade union, I am pretty sure it will move back, then our work can gain meaning and have an impact again, so it kind of goes back and forth, hopefully it works supporting each other.

> *Janna Graham:* The way you presented ASK! I didn't interpret it as representing artistic work, but rather, as a space where artists and activists learn and unlearn. And yet the work is still aesthetically very powerful. My experience is similar to this, and to what Nico said earlier—that the most potent and aesthetically powerful projects I have been involved with are often the ones that involve people who do not identify as artists working towards social aims. These kinds of interventions that involve artists working with non-artists somehow have more energy and more potency because the analysis that precedes and exceeds the act is much deeper, and that's why what is produces resonates. You can't abstract the one from the other, they become something else altogether. For me, using "artistic" is, on the one hand, about provoking routines, because people understand art to be something that is outside of their routines. On the other hand, art has its own routines. It can be extremely divisive in the process of creating something to delineate, something as artistic or saying, "I am the artist and you are not." It is very different to saying, "We are working towards a social goal or a political goal and we want to be the most powerful we can possibly be with that." But with these artistic routines come resources: local councils will not give you money to do projects that are critical of the local council's policy but it may be possible to secure funding for a less defined, longer term project within the realm of art. When you call it artistic it does not always have to adhere to the same kind of instrumentalized outcomes; though sometimes it's right at the

heart of these kinds of instrumentalizations. So it really is a double-edged sword.

So what is the artistic contribution to these social struggles? Is there a specific contribution?

Annette Krauss: The re-distribution of what we understand as aesthetic; what we see and hear and what we don't see and hear, and why, which is closely connected with hierarchies of power.

Janna Graham: Sometimes it is something visual. Sometimes it is about crystallizing the message, really making the message more powerful. But I hesitate to say the artist causes this crystallization; sometimes it is the artist, sometimes, as I've said, it isn't. And, yes, for me art—because it is still a field very much embedded within bourgeois hegemonic culture and power structures—always has the potential for re-distribution: whether of symbolic capital or actual funding.

Nicolas Vass: For me, representation is a key word here because it seems to me that it is usually the case, and it has become normal for artists to represent something when it comes to, let's say, a struggle or a problem, instead of engaging with people who are actually living the problem and it is always as though filtered through art and it is the same with the term: you expect a professional "artistic intervention," you expect some form of professionalized representation.

Janna Graham: Yes, for example when we [Precarious Workers Brigade] began working with the Latin American Workers' Association, with whom we developed tools for the Anti-Raids Network, it was very interesting because the first conversation began with them saying "Oh well, you are artists, so you could bring these skills, to produce our banner" and then somebody else from their group said, "Why? We have artists and we have people who make the banners, we have people who work on these things." I think it is really important that we challenge the assumed and programmatic binary between artists and community people or community participants that has come out of the increase of socially and pedagogically oriented arts practices. It is the market and educational processes and various institutional frameworks that construct that distinction between who is an artist and who is not. So sometimes the artistic is actually just producing the space in which you can undo the artistic. Sometimes the arts produce the conditions under which these kinds of encounters can take place, but they always bear the potential to equally striate and affirm assigned social hierarchies.

But don't you make a distinction or draw a boundary between cultural and artistic work and political work?

Janna Graham: Not really. For me it is first about commitments and desires and then about the multiple disciplines that intersect with them. You live a life, you have multiple commitments, some of them are more aesthetic and some of them are more political. Those paradigms that produce something as "artistic" or "political" are often imposed; they are social frameworks that produce a difference in what could otherwise just be called a life or a practice. From the perspective of commitments, for me there are not very many differences between cultural work and political work. But there are different spaces, habits, and accountabilities associated with the professionalized arts

and with the paradigm of political work. It is very important to see where these paradigms or fields generate conflicts between the two. Why is one project called art and another designated as political? Who names them? What are their investments in describing something as “artistic” or “political”? What are the assigned projects and attributes expected of each paradigm? Why shouldn’t they overlap?

Annette Krauss: I guess for me it relates back to what I said about the redistribution of what we understand as aesthetic: The moment that I would name it artistic, I need to work through my complicities in naming it so. For example, with artistic intervention what also comes to mind is how aware I am about my complicities with, for example, the creative industries. Maybe in this way, I am able to make better distinctions, how to act. It is also very much about trying to find out how I can continue to move in affinity with political groups and ideas and maybe at certain moments I realize quite late that I am moving in the wrong direction, but this doesn’t mean that I can’t turn.

Janna Graham: It is also interesting how you describe yourself to the people that you work with, who aren’t from the arts. Because I’ve had this conversation many times, with young people involved with the Centre for Possible Studies when going to do a street intervention, they ask, “Is it better to say, we are a group of artists or is it better to say, we are a group of students or is it better to say, we are a group of activists?” The terms we use are about the reaction we want to produce. When you are speaking to the police about your action, for example, you use “artist” because that gives you more license, whereas when you are speaking to a group of people on the street who disagree with you, you might not say “artistic” because they might think that is not important politically. They might think, “Oh, look at them doing their crazy art thing.” Art has this capacity to create a buffer and people understand it as a buffer, as not being real. So the term can work both ways, as protective, but also as completely neutralizing. It is always important to consider which strategy is actually the most useful at that particular moment.

In your practice, education and research also play an important role—how did this develop and why is it so central to your work? How do you understand, for example, research?

Annette Krauss: I am interested in institutions, although in many cases I dislike them; nevertheless, I find it necessary to work in them, with the somewhat utopian aim of transforming them. Institutional critique, as a kind of research into the production processes within and of institutional structures, is very helpful here, not necessarily as a self-referential artistic strategy, but more, for instance, using it for the work in education (at universities or secondary schools), and at the same time adding or commenting on the artistic understanding of institutional critique. What I am frustrated about is the somewhat hermetic split between institutional critique in art and the work on institutions in other fields, let’s say, education. They could be fruitful for each other and provoke synergies.

What I want to add here is that in the 1968 movement, for example, in Germany, institutional critique in the arts and in pedagogy was actually much more connected and thought of together than has been the case since the 1980s/1990s. We need to learn from connected movements in Argentina, Brazil. Now, when you hear or read about institutional critique, struggles around school education and critical pedagogy are rarely cited, and that is

something that I find very interesting and unfortunate. I work as an artist, not only within the educational field and schools, but also with the aim of commenting on, if not intervening in a certain legacy within the art field. And hereby, I mean, which kind of legacy of institutional critique is visible. I think it would be much more enriching to many social fields if this homogenous arts critique were opened up and vice versa. I have learned a lot going through institutional critique and artistic practices, but also found other voices and practices that looked into and did critical work in institutions, such as schools or universities, not to forget self-organizing or what it is sometimes called, “alternative instituting.”

Janna Graham: I have a very similar history, working in a gallery at the moment when institutional critique was quite alive and at the same time having gone through training in popular education by indigenous activists and those who were involved in the Nicaraguan literacy movements. To me, the commitments in each of these practices seemed aligned, but also quite different, because institutional critique already focused very much on museums themselves by then, and not on broader social consequences. I wondered how this had come to be. Less positively, where I found real similarities between my work in the arts and in the more symbolic side of social movements, was that they often both adhered to the banking concept. *(1) Popular education and popular research proposed a provocation to both of these fields: against the idea of a top-down-activism that tries to profess the message of the left on the one hand, and a museology that proposes to change the perspective of visitors by changing the content of its exhibitions on the other hand. Rather than asking “How can we get the people to like contemporary art?” or “How can we get people to agree with our analysis?” popular education re-positions the production of knowledge, culture, and politics in the collective investigation of conditions of power. But this kind of collective analysis requires time. Making use of the term research and the practices of popular education allow one to smuggle sustained commitments to social justice projects into the art world. The difficulty here is to mark the difference between conventional academic research and popular or militant research, because the resources of research in the university are still primarily funneled to academics, producing similar authorial problems to those encountered in the art world.

Annette Krauss: It is again the question, to which group are you talking or to which participants are you talking, when it comes to research? Are you talking to an academic community or are you talking to an arts community or art funding bodies?

Janna Graham: Or neither. At the Center for Possible Studies, the idea of the study or studying has been compelling for people that we work with. We say, this is a study, but no one is telling you where and what you have to study. It is about something you want to impact in the world. This is not the standard connotation of research. Over time, community groups have walked through the door of our space and said “I think I have a possible study.” So it is also important to reclaim some of these terms that have become relegated to particular domains, like the university, so that people feel that they can use them, like art-making, we all have a right to do research, we all do it every day.

Thank your very much for the interview!

//Zur Person

Janna Graham

Originally trained in Geography, Janna Graham has developed radical research and pedagogical projects in and outside of the arts for many years. Graham is a member of the international sound and political art collective Ultra-red, works with the Precarious Workers Brigade in London and is currently Projects Curator at the Serpentine Gallery. There she and others have created the Centre for Possible Studies, a research space and artistic residency in which artists and local people create 'studies of the possible' that expose and respond to social inequities in the Edgware Road neighbourhood of London.

http://centreforpossiblestudies.wordpress.com/about/
http://serpentinegalleries.org/about/projects
http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/edgware-road
www.ultrared.org
http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/ultra-reds-reassembly
http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/organising_free_labour

//Zur Person

Nicolas Vass

Nicolas Vass works with a number of London-based collectives in response to injustices in education, arts and culture as well as UK migration policy. As an artist he has developed *Re-constructing Hasil*, a performance based on the work and music of depression era one-man band Hasil Adkins. With this project, he looks at issues of contemporary artistic and cultural labour, austerity and performativity. He is currently a Phd candidate at the University of Leicester, where he is doing research on micro-politics and value production in the contemporary art industry.

http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/Toolbox
http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/antiraidscampaign
http://thedictionaryofreceivedideas.wordpress.com/zoe-charaktinou/
http://vimeo.com/user1392704

//Zur Person

Annette Krauss

Annette Krauss (based in Utrecht/NL) works as an artist. In her conceptual-based practice she addresses the intersection of art, politics, and everyday life. Her work

revolves around informal knowledge and (institutionalized) normalization processes that shape our bodies, the way we use objects, engage in social practices, and how these influence the way we know and act in the world. Her artistic work emerges through the intersection of different media, such as performance, film, historical and everyday research, pedagogy, and texts.
Krauss explores the possibilities of participatory practices, self-organization and investigations into institutional structures in order to work/think through how we perceive the world around us, what we sense and what we don't see.

Krauss has (co-)initiated various long-term collaborative practices (Hidden Curriculum / Read-in / ASK! / Read the Masks. Tradition is Not Given / School of Temporalities.) These projects reflect and build upon the potential of collaborative practices while aiming at disrupting taken for granted "truths" in theory and practice.

//Zur Person

Laila Huber

geb. 1980, studierte Kulturanthropologie und Kulturmanagement in Graz und Neapel/Italien. Ihre Arbeits- und Forschungsschwerpunkte sind partizipative Kunst- und Kulturarbeit, Selbstorganisation, autonome Räume, Stadtforschung sowie Interkulturalität. Ihre Dissertation „Topografie(n) des Möglichen (in) der Stadt Salzburg" wurde im Rahmen des Doktoratskollegs „Kunst und Öffentlichkeit" (2010-2013), am Schwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst /Universität Salzburg und Mozarteum, ausgearbeitet und 2014 abgeschlossen (Publikation in Vorbereitung im transcript Verlag). Von Jan. 2011-Jan. 2014 war sie ehrenamtlich in der Salzburger Kunstinitiative periscope tätig. Und seit Januar 2012 ist sie Mitglied des Salzburger Landeskulturbeirats in den Fachbeiräten „Bildende Kunst" und „Kulturelle Bildung". Seit Okt. 2013 ist sie wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Programmbereich „Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kulturproduktion" am Kooperationsschwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst (der Paris-Lodron-Universität und Mozarteum Salzburg) – u.a. im Sparkling-Science-Projekt „Making Art – Taking Part! Künstlerische und kulturelle Interventionen zur Herstellung partizipativer Öffentlichkeiten von und mit Jugendlichen" (www.takingpart.at).

//Fussnoten

*1 *Paolo Freire developed the banking concept of education in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Pedagogia do Oprimido, 1968), 1970.*

*2 *Many thanks to Veronika Aqra for the transcription.*