

//Natalia Hecht //Gwendolin Lehnerer

"I see a lot of changes, but I also see a lot of resistance"

Natalia Hecht on D/Arts in conversation with Gwendolin Lehnerer

Natalia Hecht is a community artist, psychologist, and participatory curation and cultural evaluation expert from Argentina living in Vienna. She has more than twenty years of experience in the field of participatory arts. At the core of her artistic practices are participatory co-creation and learning processes with communities. As an artist, she works with a transmedia artistic approach that includes any artistic language that might be relevant, resonant, and available for a community. She is interested in observing how different forms of art dialogue with each other, and she facilitates art projects that involve performances, collective drawings, photography, writing, sculpture, dance, and public space interventions, among other forms. Her projects explore central topics such as connection, emotion, diversity, migration, transculturality, human rights, self-representation, environmental awareness, and collective change through the arts.

Natalia has specialized in designing and leading curation and evaluation processes in the art and cultural sector with an art-based, discrimination-sensitive, participatory approach. In her work, participatory curation and learning processes take a central role in supporting artistic and cultural organizations to open themselves to diversity and anchor these changes in sustainable ways.

She has been part of the Brunnenpassage team for many years, developing artistic projects and leading curation and evaluation processes; she is also an active member of the D/Arts network of experts.



Natalia, it's nice that we can meet today. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself

and your role within D/Arts?

My name is Natalia Hecht and I come from Argentina. I'm a community artist and psychologist. I have been working in participatory arts for more than twenty years – already in Argentina and in many other countries in Latin America. Then I came to Europe thirteen years ago. I started working on different projects, many of which are related to migration as a topic, a lot of them in the Spanish speaking community in Vienna, and then I started working for Brunnenpassage nine years ago. Now I am working on different projects again – for example, for a clown organization in Vienna. Last year, I also worked a lot in crisis settings around Europe. And as a curator, I am rethinking programming in different cultures.

What is your specific role within D/Arts?

Within D/Arts, I am a collective collaborator of the arts, and I am part of the core team. D/Arts is a project that was connected to Brunnenpassage, so I have seen the entire evolution of the project since the idea started. It was important to create a project like this, and I follow the activity of D/Arts very closely. Mainly, I have been collaborating in the field of arts evaluation. Last time, in the context of an event at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, where we were looking at the topic of transformation in cultural institutions, my contribution was from the perspective of evaluation, and how evaluation can be an important process for generating change in cultural institutions.

"Generate change in society"

And what is particularly important to you about D/Arts? How can D/Arts contribute to change?

For me, D/Arts is an essential, crucial project in Vienna, Austria, and beyond, because D/Arts brings awareness to the topic of diversity, making it an urgent topic in cultural institutions – something that is not so common, unfortunately. And if cultural institutions are dealing with the topic, they sometimes do not bring the diversity that is needed to the table, so that we can refer to the processes and generate changes, or they are just initiatives that can be very isolated and do not have the sustainability needed for real transformation. I think D/Arts is giving all of that: It's providing awareness, showing all this amazing palette of knowledge that we have in Vienna, in Austria, and around the world in terms of diversity practitioners – artists that have been working within this topic for years. When we work at cultural institutions, we sometimes face this obstacle: The question that comes up of who could do this work. To be able to show them that there is a network – a network of practitioners who are ready to work on the topics, who have been working on these topics for a long time – is amazing.

An important aspect in D/Arts is the network. It aims to bring together people who are working on the topic of diversity, or who want to start working on it, as well as cultural institutions and different players like policymakers – to connect them so that synergies are created. Especially for activists, having a network is crucial: Activists are more vulnerable to burnouts, because they suffer from situations where their work is not taken seriously. So having a support network in this field is an essential aspect. Also, through the network, collective knowledge becomes stronger and stronger.

Another point is that you cannot work on diversity if you do not have diversity in the core team – this is essential. By generating these interactions, we are really working on the topic. There is a very careful and thoughtful process of curation that is also important. To understand, for example, when there is an event, how to involve different perspectives, and how to make sure that it's really a sustainable process and not just a way of avoiding things by silencing people.

"It's 'Fake it till you make it'"

What difficulties do you encounter inside and outside of these processes?

One of the issues that always becomes a challenge is funding. This is important, because if we don't have resources, we start compromising everything, so we cannot do the things we need to do. If you receive funding for one year and one year only, it's like creating something that is against what we're trying to establish. Working on diversity requires a lot of reflection; it is not enough to do it, but to be self-critical about what we do to ensure space for different perspectives, to become critical about what we do. We really need time; we need structures of work, so that what we have the necessary space. Funding is crucial, so the case of D/Arts is quite interesting, because it is an artistic project – it's 'fake it till you make it': You create a project that does not exist yet, but you 'fake it till you make it,' and it becomes more than a vision – you start doing it, and by that, you start creating legitimization. It's a proof that it's possible to do it, and what we need is just real support to do it, in terms of the resources and policies and structures that make this job more and more sustainable.

"It's like being in a boat and rowing it, but you don't see where you are going."

Another challenge is related to how we cooperate with institutions. This is important in diversity discourses, because we see these isolated efforts that are not aleatory – they're about power, they're about privilege. Sometimes institutions approve certain projects, but they do not tolerate a critical rethinking of the institution as a whole and its systems of power and privilege. I think D/Arts has the potential to bring this systemic change to cultural institutions.

Established cultural institutions in particular have a long history of hierarchical structures and systems of keeping power in place, so it's not easy to enter these institutions and create change when there is no commitment at the level of decision making. Sometimes, for us, it's like being in a boat and rowing it, but you don't see where you are going. It is a lot of strategic work. This was also the basis for starting D/Arts: doing an evaluation of Brunnenpassage's partnership with big cultural institutions. It was mainly based in understanding asymmetries of power in institutions that have years of social recognition, very big budgets, and a lot of resources, and with institutions that work more in the suburbs of the city with various audiences and less resources. Trying to understand those power relationships was useful for us to create alternatives for those who are in disadvantaged positions, and also to create strategies, tools, and systems.

Are there institutions that are not at all interested, and say, 'Sorry, we won't do it.'?

A lot, unfortunately. There are institutions that remain at the discursive level

by saying they want to do something, and you notice that there is no real work on the topic. They don't know what it's about or they have a very superficial idea of it, or they don't really want to devote time or resources, or they're not open to change. This is the main challenge, and for me, as an activist, an artist, a practitioner in the field of diversity for years, it's just what I see, unfortunately. I see a lot of changes, but I also experience a lot of resistance. Creating projects like D/Arts is helping a lot, because it doesn't become the work of an individual person trying to change something. It's about solidarity – together we can accomplish more. Politics and the government also play a role, and therefore the monitoring aspect of D/Arts is important. It doesn't only have to come from the inner commitment of an institution; it can come from the level of politics, government, and policy. It's about a little bit of direction, and bringing this topic to the centre of all the institutions.

Yes, I can well imagine that! Austrian politics also plays a major role here. In Berlin, for example, such projects are already occasionally supported by the government. Does D/Arts have any role model – an institution or network that allows you to say if this is going well?

Well, the Diversity Arts Culture project office in Berlin is a very good example. I mean, we have different practices in different fields, because it's complex. You have methods that are more about how to collaborate between institutions, and others that are more related to how to influence politics and policy and so on. You also have practices that are more about how to evolve perspectives, because this is also a very sensitive and important topic. I, for example, work a lot with the community of Black women here in Vienna, and they have so many examples of how to work with the topic and become aware: If you're a white person, it's about how to understand your role in the system and how to open doors for others. The work of Brunnenpassage is also interesting in terms of transculturality. For us, it has been a crucial practice in what we do, to realize that you can have a team that has very different backgrounds, languages, and biographical experiences, and that you can work together and base the work on all these different perspectives. Another aspect is the topic of aesthetics and how we work with content, with processes of co-creation, and what those processes of cocreation are. Sometimes you have practices that say, 'okay, this is participatory' or 'this is co-creative,' but we really need to see in-depth what it means, how those processes are created, and whether they really engage people or not. The topic of diversity is very sensitive, because the intentions are mostly good, but the way we develop or implement a project might be counterproductive. Sometimes, someone might come with a very good intention, but lacks the knowledge of how to carry out these processes and how not to instrumentalize people while trying to promote diversity. And in terms of aesthetics, the question of knowledge is also important. Epistemic diversity is central to what we do – to understand that there are different forms of knowledge and to be very critical about the institutions that legitimize knowledge and the kinds of knowledge that remain excluded. Art has a very central role because it brings so many possibilities for how to experience life and create meaning about social issues and our reality. Sometimes, forms of knowledge are more mind-dominated, more based on the history of what knowledge has been historically legitimated. When we work with different perspectives or experiences of life, we need to see all the other ways of accessing and creating meaning about our interactions with others, and about how we see the world. All these things are essential because we're dealing with global challenges that are very urgent, so we

need to act in a holistic way in what we do. Therefore, I see projects like D/Arts as central for this work, because in cultural institutions, sometimes we tend to forget the context we are in and the urgencies we have. These institutions have heavy processes, and can become a bit like machines. When you need to create global change immediately, you need to act differently. You need to become dynamic, open, and adaptable.

"We work a lot - and very deeply - on ourselves."

In your opinion, what could a white de-colonial perspective or position be within D/Arts?

We work a lot - and very deeply - on ourselves. This is the grounding of the work: to develop awareness and critical thinking. Always ask yourself: What is my position, how am I interacting with others, how am I using my privilege? Am I profiting from a certain position or am I not? How can I open the door for others? If I am a white person, do I have white privilege, do I get a white pass? How can I become an ally? There are so many things, and being in a permanent state of reflection on these things is so important, because in anything you do in your daily life, you can think about it. You can become more and more aware of your position, and we as a team we work a lot in thinking through our processes. I think we still have a lot of potential for learning about how white privilege, for example, or colonial thinking have formed our ways of working together. Or this tendency of prioritizing time, like 'let's do this very quickly.' Not allowing reflection or learning. Also, when you work with other people who have very different perspectives, the process becomes different. You need to be open to other ways of learning from other needs. It's good to be in a permanent state of reflection. For example, how do we make decisions about things? Who profits from those decisions? How can we play a little bit in creating other power dynamics in what we do intentionally? Or if we create a panel, who are the ones talking, who is moderating, where are they sitting, what relationship do they have to the audience, how much is the audience able to participate in what we are doing? It's many things. There's also the content: Which kinds of content are we giving space? Being aware of how to bring in other forms of content that puzzle us and create new questions about things like multi-critical thinking is crucial.



Also, the sustainability of our work is very important. How are we engaging with communities that have historically been excluded, or with positions that are often excluded - are we working with them in a sustainable way? Are we

really interested in their work, too, or is it more like we're engaging with our own interest in something? The work is fluid, and it is also beautiful. It makes me passionate to think about this, because diversity is at the core of the human experience. Diversity is also in nature, in life. It is this gift that we have as living beings, of not having a permanent definition of our identity, or a very singular point of view. It's a permanent, ongoing process.

When you start to see all the different aspects of diversity in our work, like gender or body configurations or abilities – these are very different perspectives. If we leave these things out, we are losing something so important about all of us. Listen to these processes and be open to the new – this is why all these approaches are connected with art, because through art, we create these processes in society.

To come back: What do you think about cancel culture?

Well, this is a very important aspect of how we use language. Language matters a lot, and it's also a part of how we've become sensitive about many things. If you are sensitive and you work on your sensitivity toward others, you will try to find words that are resonant with the realities of other people, and that do not perpetrate stereotypes, or exclude in the way you communicate about others. I see these a lot, because I work with the topic of exile, and with experiences of exile; I work in camps, in projects that had to do with communities who were forced into exile because of war, or because of structural situations. And I see how the use of language already shows different levels of sensitivity about a topic. For example, if you talk about refugees, if you become more empathic about those relationships, when you understand what others are going through and try to connect with them, you also become aware of how words can affect people. I think you can see it on different levels: You can see it on the institutional level, like in the way that an organization that is not actively working on diversity is creating harm, unfortunately, because they are determining ways of thinking about art – they are promoting stereotypes. You can see it on a group level; you can also see it individually. Personally, I believe that a big challenge for us – and especially for those who are at the forefront of this movement – is to work on creating connections. The moment people disconnect from each other and don't want to talk about this, we lose a big opportunity. That's why we must be strategic, and it's a slow process to connect with others and create this awareness. If we do not speak to one another, the possibilities of change also become less. I think we need to see it as waves of change: There is an openness to one aspect, and we can work on that one, and then we can change things a little bit more. I think we have learned a lot with D/Arts and Brunnenpassage about how to be strategic and say: 'Now our step is this, and we'll do that.' Being inside the institution, having one person in the team – this little step is already the basis for more. For me, it's connecting, in a way. Sometimes it's not easy: Being an activist for diversity, you sometimes feel drained, because it's a lot of energy to try. And sometimes people might even tell you: 'Can you train me in what I must do?' And it's not about that. People who have already been excluded or disadvantaged are sometimes dealing with their own survival situations, and they also have the task of training others, or doing this emotional work with others. This is where we must also take care of the people who are involved. It's about the politics of care – collective care and self-care.

In the fall of 2022, we will start a D/Arts Forum Salzburg. What tips can you give us

here?

For me, at the beginning, when you come to a place, it's important to create relationships: to be with people, to spend time with them. Sometimes, it's having a picnic with someone, or having lunch, or visiting someone, or being part of the life of someone else. This already creates a basis for starting something. I think the fact that this has already been initiated is such a big step - that D/Arts is being presented in Salzburg is a very important step. Everywhere, there are people who have more sensitivity or who want to create change, and sometimes they are all alone. Who can be an ally in those situations? This is more about identifying allies and multipliers; that's a very important aspect of the work. Try to identify who these people are, who are already change-makers in what they do, in their interactions, and figure out how can you connect with them and bring them together somehow. Start creating this network of change. And once you have this, the work with the institutions at the beginning is a lot of work. As I said, it's strategic work. Find a way to start. It helps a lot when you have a great deal of knowledge, and I see that D/Arts has this potential, because we have been working on this for so many years with so much depth that we have all these strategies and all these resources, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also at the action level. Go to this source and think together. We are here for your work and for whatever you need; we can think together about how to do it, how to create strategic relationships, and how to identify the allies and to engage them. Our artistic projects are a good platform for connecting people. Start to work on these levels of awareness through co-creation.

Thank you very much for your advice and your time!

Thank you and good luck with D/Arts Salzburg. We will keep in touch!

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Gwendolin Lehnerer

Gwendolin Lehnerer studierte Theater-, und Kulturwissenschaft sowie Philosophie an der LMU München und absolvierte im Jahr 2018 den Lehrgang „Kuratieren in den szenischen Künsten“ in Salzburg. Hierfür erhielt sie ein Teil-Stipendium der Kulturstiftung Allianz. Seit 2019 ist sie Doktorandin im Doktoratskolleg „Die Künste und ihre öffentliche Wirkung: Dynamiken des Wandels“ an der Universität Salzburg und dem Mozarteum und arbeitet als freie Dramaturgin in Berlin und Wien.