//Laila Huber

Thoughts about a Decentralized Academy in Graz – (Un)Learning Contemporary Art?

"Trial Mode 01," a symposium held from March 28th to 30th, 2014 at Forum Stadtpark in Graz raised the question of what a decentralized academy of contemporary art might look like. The symposium originated from the wish and demand expressed by arts practitioners in Graz who have lobbied for the past fifteen years, thus far unsuccessfully, for the implementation of an art academy in the city.

The aim was to show what a (decentralized academy) might look like: A dense program of lectures, workshops, and discussions provided an opportunity to explore questions related to alternative education and arts education while gathering art practitioners, theorists, and curators from around the world. A critical mass was achieved with ca. 70 participants, which made the three days a worthwhile endeavor and a lively space of debate.

Graz – in search of the missing academy? *(1)

Graz is a city with a lively arts scene – institutional as well as autonomous. Lacking, however, seems to be an academy for the visual arts: present are the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz and architectural studies at the Graz University of Technology. In the field of visual arts, however, the city offers no higher education. An education in visual arts in Graz is limited to a secondary school level with the department of Art and Design at Graz Ortweinschule.

Nevertheless, institutions such as Forum Stadtpark and the internationally renowned "steirischer herbst" festival contribute to a rich and critical art discourse in the city.

Forum Stadtpark, the site of the "Trial Mode 01" symposium, was initiated in 1959 by a group of artists, scientists, and cultural workers as a grassroots initiative that continues to successfully renew itself and remain connected to the local arts scene at a grassroots level. Nevertheless, this art institution has had a tumultuous history at various times. No least, when the idea of creating an art academy based in Forum Stadtpark was raised in 1996. Back then the process failed. *(2)

Today, almost 20 years later, an in-part new generation of protagonists in the arts field are once again expressing concern over the city's lack of a permanent space dedicated to teaching, learning, and exploring contemporary arts.

Protagonists from diverse arts institutions and organizations *(3) have gathered yet again to discuss the question of whether Graz should have an academy for contemporary visual arts and what this academy might look like.

The title of the symposium "(Un)Learning Contemporary Art" points ironically to the local situation of a long standing demand for an arts academy that until the present day has not been seriously considered by local cultural politics. At the same time it opens up a space to think anew what, for instance, a decentralized self-organized art academy might look like with reference to the discourse of unlearning privileges (Spivak 1988): Not being an exclusive institution of higher education, but instead, creating structures and spaces of self-organization in arts and education, merging

arts into everyday life and grassroots activism. Examples of initiatives from all over the world linking arts, politics, and education were presented at the symposium in lectures and workshops.

Kuba Szreder, Free/Slow University of Warsaw, Life-Work-Salad

Lectures & Workshops

The lectures and workshops at the symposium discussed various issues relating to alternative self-organized learning environments linked to the arts as well as questions of unlearning privileges of contemporary arts.

I was especially impressed by the talks by Shuruq Harb presenting the project “ArtTerritories” (Ramallah/Amman) and Alanna Lockward presenting the platform “Transnational Decolonial Institut” (Berlin/Port-au-Prince). Both lectures presented self-organized structures beyond the Western “white cube” of contemporary visual arts and raised the question of how these structures and practices can bring privileged “white cube” practitioners and participants from Western countries to unlearn what are perhaps narrow perspectives of the arts field, and their beliefs, norms, and expectations of the arts and its practitioners.

The project “ArtTerritories” is an online platform of artists, researchers, and curators for critical exchange and debate about the arts in the Middle East and Arab World. It deals, for instance, with the problem of freedom of movement and denial of movement based on one’s passport – although international mobility is a must for building up a career in the Western contemporary arts scene.

In her talk “Curating Afropean Decoloniality in the Arts Plantations of Modernity,” Alanna Lockward pointed out that her aim was not primarily to bring insight to blind Western eyes but to create structures and spaces of self-empowerment, for instance, with the festival “BE.BOP – Black Europe Body Politics” (*2012).

Saturday’s workshops were dedicated mainly to exploring concrete techniques and practices of “unlearning.” Participants explored their behavior and tried out new behavior that is oriented towards a different society and is unusual in institutional learning settings:

“No-Work No-Shop: an errorist De-Educational Experience” with Loreto Garin Guzmán and Federico Zukerfeld from “Grupo Etcétera” (Buenos Aires), basically questioned the workshop format itself and the setting of having a workshop leader or lecturer teaching participants. In an open workshop setting they developed, together with the participants, the theme, structure and output of the time spent together: Their presentation and performance at the end of the day questioned the participatory paradigm ironically leaving the audience uncertain as to what they had

done together during the course of the workshop.

The workshop “Exploring Self-designed Learning as a New Movement of Self-Social-Systemic Transformation” with Manish Jain from “Shikshantar: The Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development” (Udaipur), led participants to experience diverse exercises of group-solidarity and trust building as metaphorical and physical explorations of how a different society might work, and the kinds of principles and practices on which it might be built.

And in the workshop “Building a Living Bibliography” by Emilio Fantin, Alissa Firth-Eagland, and Alessandra Pomarico from the “FreeHome University” (Lecce), participants went to a public library in Graz with the task of finding a book in a way that is different than their usual selection procedures. Based on their chosen book, each participant compiled one page for a collectively produced zine, which would represent the day’s findings.

A Decentralized Academy – Workshop with Stephan Dillemuth

I participated in the workshop “A decentralized Academy” to learn more about the history and former visions surrounding the issue in Graz. It was the only theoretical workshop dedicated to exploring the meta question of the symposium. Stephan Dillemuth discussed with the participants what former quests and concepts for a decentralized academy from 1996 *(4) are still relevant today, what has changed, and possible starting points in the present.

Around twenty participants from various fields joined the workshop. Nevertheless, the presence of a group of eight students from the “free class” of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna directed the discussion for a while around questions of how to change and transform art institutions from inside (e.g., with concepts such as the “Freie Klasse,” which emerged during the university protests “uni:brennt“” in 2009 and has since allowed participants from outside the academy to join the class’ lectures). *(5)

Sabeth Buchmann, head of the Institute of Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, joined the workshop and offered her experiences from the 1990s, when she was a young cultural worker. Similar to Stephan Dillemuth, she highlighted the importance of her experience with self-organization in the arts scene in Germany at that time.

Nonetheless, their conclusions about the subjective experiences of self-organization differed: while Dillemuth underscored that his experience of running an autonomous arts space together with other artists had been of utmost importance for him in learning and sharing knowledge, Sabeth Buchmann pointed out that self-organization should not be romanticized, since informal hierarchies must be consciously reflected. She claimed that one should be open to both self-organized and institutional structures.

However, due to lack of time and the fact that most workshop participants were not local, the discussions culminated in concrete suggestions on how to proceed with the idea of a decentralized academy in the city of Graz.

Prospect

A decentralized academy would not produce art for the market, but would assert an understanding of art as critical practice and as a mode and mood of trying to develop autonomous and sustainable models of living on a regional basis. This vision might include – as Stephen Dillemuth pointed out during his workshops – a

kind of “tinker- economy,” which would combine producing objects and immaterial artistic work, both merging into the political. This raises the key questions of “How do artists as well as non-artists make a living?” and “Where are potential points for organizing solidarity?”

Surprising at the gathering in Graz was that the symposium participants represented only part of the arts field, thus indicating that the process of constituting an open and decentralized educational structure in Graz linking the arts and grassroots activism must still endeavor to bring together the stakeholders of the different fields in order to imagine on a larger scale what this decentralized academy might look like as a joint project.

//Zur Person

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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).

//Literaturnachweise

*1 *Spivak, Gayatri (1988), “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson, Cary/ Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, London: Macmillan.*

//Fussnoten

*1 *Inspired by Annette Krauss’ lecture “In search of the missing lessons“ (Symposium “Artistic interventions and education as Critical practice,” April 4, 2014, Salzburg)*

*2 *There was an intense process around the idea of developing an arts academy based in Forum Stadtpark, which ended in controversies within the project group and ultimately led to an end of the process. What*

remains is the documentation of a Symposium and some articles in a publication.

** 3* *Akademie Graz, Camera Austria, esc medien kunst labor, FORUM STADTPARK, Grazer Kunstverein, IZK/TU Graz, Künstlerhaus – km – Halle für Kunst &Medien, < rotor >, Freies Atelierhaus Graz. As well as the moderators and facilitators, in part from those institutions, some of whom are from other backgrounds: Daniela Brasil, Reinhard Braun, Nayari Castillo, Agnieska Czejkowska, Sandro Droschl, Krist Gruijthuijsen, Tanja Gurke, Reni Hofmüller, Anita Inzinger, Brigitte Kovacs, Birgit Kulterer, Astrid Kury, Judith Laister, Anton Lederer, Margarethe Markovec, Dirck Möllmann, Heidrun Primas, Eva Ursprung, and Imre Withalm.*

** 4* *In 1996 Stephan Dillemuth was invited to moderate the process of the development of a concept for an art academy in Graz based in Forum Stadtpark.*

** 5* *In 2010 the Europe wide movement of occupying universities and academies started with student protests in Vienna.*