

A degree of functionalisation doesn't immediately derail the cultural train

Olafur talks to Joanna Warsza
11 January and 8 March 2017

JW Many of us, in the times in which we live, might feel that art is suddenly unnecessary. What is art compared to the rise of populism or the war in Syria? But art is nonetheless what we do, what we know how to do. And so we go around wanting to do something more with art – to reach out, to create real communities, to show the complexity of reality. We try to do it, but too often we find ourselves in an echo chamber. Olafur, you have become increasingly interested in the performativity and power of art and have been reaching out, taking art into contexts where it is usually disregarded or undervalued. Some consider your example helpful or even inspiring, while others believe that engagement and art should be kept separate, and still others see it as just part of the path of a successful artist enabled by capitalism and neoliberalism. The truth is that you are consistently trying to use your, by now, quite exposed status for something more. Where are you now?

OE Over the years I have grown increasingly confident that the cultural sector is very resourceful. When I was in art school in Copenhagen, the general sentiment was that the cultural sector was at the periphery of the rational world and I saw myself as marginalised. An escapist longing to step out of society was prevalent; the young artists' way of thinking was, 'I am so not gonna have a normal job.' It was both naive and visionary. My art school celebrated the non-functional, and since I had grown up with a relatively high degree of normativity, this was incredibly liberating. But gradually it became clear to me that I was, in fact, not on the periphery of the world when doing art. To stick with the banal idea of a centre and a periphery, I was, in fact, at the centre. That was the first time it struck me that I myself am co-producing reality just as much as anybody else is. I realised that society also saw me as a contributor, which prompted me to move to Germany, where art was taken very seriously. Once I had moved, I gained more self-confidence and experienced an increasing sense of responsibility. I came to recognise that the agency of art isn't just in theory or ideology – you feel it in your body. This was also the moment when I realised that

Remarks made by Olafur in conversations with Anna Engberg-Pedersen at the Copenhagen studio and on the go

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The studio archive has to become more introverted *and* more extroverted – it's too much in the middle. We need more transmissions, more research. The why of what we do has to appear more clearly in our work.

the studio could be a platform for me to get involved with society in more polyphonic ways, without actually changing my way of working. In Germany, culture had a very integrated position – not least because of the extreme need after the war to create a new identity in a country where self-perception had essentially gone terribly wrong.

Although nominally there hasn't been a real Ministry of Culture in Germany since the Second World War. Culture has been decentralised.

Right. I think that every ministry should have a department for cultural integration that weighs in on all decisions. I have seen countries with ministries of culture that are so disconnected, so detached, that their only option is to reach out to the foreign ministry to push a cultural agenda in support of export optimisation. Børn Nørgaard, a Danish artist, famously announced an artists-driven government in 2001 in a project called *The imagination to power*. Artists were to take over all ministries. He redefined the Ministry of Justice, for instance, as the Ministry of Human Rights and also included a Ministry of Creation and Human Experience. But today you see countries where the ministries of culture, in fact, only promote national values. They consider national identity an export good and so on. . . . It's not about culture.

A very inspiring figure in that regard is Antanas Mockus, a former mayor of Bogota, who treated art both very seriously and not seriously enough. He said he looked for inspiration in museums, not in church. During official political meetings he proudly wore a bullet-proof jacket with a heart-shaped hole cut through it. In the mid-nineties, in a Colombia filled with hostility and bloodshed, he initiated a non-violent, performative politics of images and gestures – an exchange of weapons for toys, a night out for women only, traffic controlled by mimes, a series of performances in the empty graves in the local cemetery that made the homicide rate visible. He followed artists' ideas and turned them into what he called 'sub-art', into a playful mode of governance in Bogota. All this brings us to the question of how boring policymaking can become exciting politics, how to combine your position as an artist with real politics and implementation.

Good questions. For me, learning this is a process. I've gradually realised that every exhibition has resonance both on the cultural scene and beyond it, and that although the resonance beyond is less sophisticated it is sometimes even more interesting. Through my work as an artist, making exhibitions over the years, I have come to know a large network of people. I've been talking to some big companies, trying to verbalise how I think that art and culture, as a resource, could be relevant for them instead of polarising the situation by stressing the differences between us. The first large-scale collaboration I did with a big company was with BMW, back

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I'm bored and I want to do something else, new stuff. I feel like learning, like understanding what the UN really is, understanding their language. I feel there's this incredible network that I don't get to take advantage of. I meet so many people but have a terrible follow-through rate. The thing is, I change my opinion more quickly than the studio can change its direction.

in 2006. I called the project *Your mobile expectations*. It was clear from the beginning that I did not want to look at the car simply as an object. So we spent a few years in the studio looking at form, mobility, and environmental concerns to reinvent the *questions* that are relevant to car design. We did a lot of surface studies, for example, with nets, mirrors, and water. In the end they got a car made out of ice and light. Its appearance changed as you moved around it, and your movement became as important as that of the car. The research part of the project was extensive – I wanted to explore how the processes of car design could be seen as more than just processes for optimising profits. The consequences of driving should also be questioned altogether, which raises questions about collectivity and singularity. Driving a car is very egotistical. I introduced a number of issues that were motivated by ecological and social-psychological concerns.

This is what you think. But they got what they wanted – an ‘art car’ – while they continue selling luxury SUVs. Don’t you think you got commodified?

I wouldn’t call it commodified. It was more about being *functionalised*. I was made into a function of a bigger machine that was beyond my reach. But culture is very robust, very strong. I don’t think a degree of functionalisation immediately derails the cultural train. It does rattle the train, but it doesn’t stop it and it doesn’t make it drive in a different direction. I think that when we immediately think about commodification when we are challenged, ideologically speaking, we underestimate the strength and the authority art has. If culture is not capable of going into the hot zone of McKinsey-driven capitalism, or whatever you might call it, then we underestimate ourselves. We’re not that vulnerable. I think we could easily make a project with people who are not ideologically in sync with us. If we, on the contrary, only work with companies who are fully synchronised and we all fully agree, the blue would be playing with the blue and the red with the red. I think we have to have blue and red playing together.

The common purpose of the avant-garde movements that we all like to refer to was to serve an idea, while today it feels that artists lose some of their supposed liberty if they are connected to a particular agenda – even though we are all connected to the neoliberal agenda, whether or not we want to be. There are – a few – beautiful examples of the opposite. American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been the artist-in-residence at New York City’s Department of Sanitation since 1975, a position she created. The motivation to do this was her private experience of becoming a mother. The daily tedious work of domestic maintenance led her to investigate the sanitation system of the entire city. She also famously claimed that as a mother she could only continue to be an artist by reframing everyday maintenance work as art.

18 May 2016

I worry that my soul is being privatised. How to present a complex argument and make it convincing? How do I develop my language to have more impact?

Amazing. She found her way, not shying away from saying, 'I have one clear agenda and therefore I make art.' I often wish I had the ability to leapfrog or quantum-leap, but sadly I am the kind of person who has to work my way through things. I would identify with her, except that I don't have a vision in front of me. I don't know what being visionary feels like. But what I am sure about, for instance, is that the energy sector is polluting, centralised, and counterproductive and fossil fuels are bad. So when, some years back, I was lucky enough to meet Frederik Ottesen, a scientist who works with solar power, a few elements came together. I was very interested in decentralising access to energy and light, a concern that grew out of working in areas where there is no access to light, like in east Africa. I thought, 'OK, this is an interesting project.' For me it's a work of art. I have seen that referring to the Little Sun solar-powered lamp as a work of art is occasionally an advantage and occasionally compromising. So I use the term 'art' whenever it is advantageous.

What do you think really sparks a will to change?

What really makes us change, whether art is involved or not?

By far the strongest motivation for change is a desire to improve quality of life. There are two ways to address that: one is to increase it by simply generating more profit for individual households, for instance, especially in areas with few economic resources. Access to resources leads to better education and social empowerment. The other is to address more abstract issues, like energy and respiratory conditions. We don't reflect on the fact that we are inhaling car exhaust in big cities like Berlin because we are still relatively unaware that our quality of life is dependent on the quality of the air – making explicit our dependence on air is something that Bruno Latour has written about beautifully. Respiratory health is relatively abstract in my part of the world, just like our understanding of energy. By bringing awareness to those aspects of our quality of life, we can make explicit that pollution has a direct impact on our lives.

Scientists like Elke Weber have published really interesting findings. Elke, a professor at Princeton, looks at decision-making and behavioural patterns in economic and climate contexts and was involved in writing the fifth climate report for the UN. It's incredibly inspiring to hear her talk about decision-making, about how hard it is for us to change our habits and what can prompt these changes. Many people actually think a lot about climate change or pollution without acting on it. Providing access to knowledge or data in general is much less of a challenge than turning knowledge into action. What I'm interested in is not just personal, inner change, but also institutional and large-scale behavioural change. How do you take power and decentralise it? How do you move from having one narrator to a plural narrative in which everybody feels that they are co-producing the story? I am interested in these ideas because they help me to investigate how culture can successfully listen to people in ways that politicians very rarely do.

26 October 2016

We have to do a dynamic manifesto: artists' studios are the parliaments of the future! The psycho-social work that comes out of an artist's studio is what's important. Cultural diplomacy, advocacy – these are the concepts we have to co-shape, pioneer.

And we need to do more with our bodies. Like when we were dancing with Fukiko or making the film about embodiment in the studio. It was a not-yet pragmatic, not-yet verbalised project. We should do that kind of un-prescribed thing once a day!

Indeed. Though perhaps art can't do anything by itself, I believe it can start a snowball effect that becomes politically effective when it reaches other fields of society . . .

Let's say that you experience an artwork or participate in a cultural event and you are presented with a particular artistic agenda. I would like to suggest that this agenda can have one of two approaches: one turns you into an object and the other turns you into a subject. When acknowledged as a subject, you are given responsibility to co-author that particular situation, whereas the object approach tells you that you are a consumer – it disconnects you from acting, making it impossible for you to negotiate your own space. *Riverbed*, my artwork at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art a few years back, is a good example of the approach that allows you to be a subject. It was basically a large indoor landscape inserted into the white gallery spaces of a modern-type museum. The landscape was just sitting there, challenging the institution and its ways of hosting art. You could take a stroll or settle down by the water and look at what other visitors were doing. There was an element of behavioural experimentation to it in that there was no master narrative – you had to decide for yourself. The Louisiana is a very resilient museum and they were able to cope with this really well. I think, though, that some cultural settings actually turn us into objects or consumers – often because of the institutional tissue that surrounds the artworks, which seems to cater to a consumer-driven infrastructure, whereas art promotes a more subjective, co-authored narrative with an engaged viewer.

But aren't we conditioned to be consumers? Hasn't neoliberalism appropriated the very possibility of being receptive? I was recently reading about the term *publicity*. It was originally used to indicate a platform to share matters of public concern, but has since been completely appropriated. Today *publicity* only means consumer-oriented communication. It's an unfriendly takeover. But you continue using appropriated terms like *creativity*.

There are a few words that are very difficult to use – creativity, beauty, love, affection. We need to reclaim them! If we are not able to talk about creativity in an artist's studio, I think we have already lost. I want to suggest that we can demystify the word *creativity*. We are one of several cultural institutions in Berlin, some of which are publicly funded, some of which are privately funded. I'm quite interested in this map of cultural agents and organisms. Within this, we can say that the artist's studio is a place in which we are conscious of working creatively. I personally find some satisfaction in using this very straightforward and even banal word. It's a little bit like talking about beauty. When something really is beautiful, I don't know why I shouldn't call it beautiful.

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I am afraid that the book will not be artistic enough. The book shouldn't represent the studio. It's not enough to just walk around with a Hoover and suck up the atmosphere: the book should transmit a feeling, something unique. We need to look for the as yet un-used potential in the studio. There's this great feeling among people – Sebastian, Caroline, Anja, Frank – they're very ethically engaged. It's the sum of this engagement that the book has to transmit.

I am happy to advocate taking *publicity* back, but with *creativity* I am not yet there. I am not convinced. Maybe this is because the current general understanding of it comes with such a strong corporate flavour. But you also flirt with this in how the studio is organised, for example.

It's difficult to find a better word than *creativity* to cover this particular activity, and I do not want to cave in to an anti-emotional belief in the absence of creativity. It's making us poorer.

In the studio we have a lot of very playful processes. There's experimentation that sometimes seems almost nonsensical or like a surrealist exercise – like when we did physical shock experiments with Fukiko Takase, who's a friend and a really sophisticated dancer. It was literally just standing in a group at the studio and making sudden movements together. We filmed it, of course, and did a little video to test the relevance of what we were doing. I enjoy this informal time – loops, pockets, sequences of thoughts and movements. Typically they are more frequent in the process of sketching ideas. It's a way of freeing up space. When I feel uninspired, then physical activity, whether the hand dancing on a paper or the body dancing through a room, is where the thinking happens. For me this has agency and meaning. And it is also creative. Even though this invites an element of ridicule, I am not afraid of it.

This happens within the overall structure of the studio. At the same time the studio does have some 'corporate elements', as you called them. It is not an anarchic system – I don't believe in that. But I actually see the studio more as a parliament than a corporate structure. It's the parliament of things that Bruno Latour talked about. That's my studio, the Thingvellir of Berlin. In the end, it's really about creativity.

Is it maybe some kind of colonised creativity that we practice?

It's good for me to hear the kind of linguistic desynchronisation that we have within our field. As I said, I myself take the liberty to reclaim creativity, however clumsily.

Clumsy or not clumsy, this is still very much connected with your personal capacities of outreach and your rhetorical skill.

My personal skills are not to be disconnected from the studio. There is a lot of distributed artistic thinking. Last year's show at Versailles was a tremendous effort by the whole team. The palace and gardens are so vast. Simply to get from A to B was a challenge, both physically and in terms of organisation. Our conversations about what would and wouldn't work there were led by Caroline, Kerstin, and Sebastian, based on a lot of in-house research. These conversations included both detailed artistic considerations and super-pragmatic exchanges with the French teams on site. A huge collective effort was required to take on a place as powerful as Versailles. And so we made our way into this

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What I think is interesting is not only what Andreas Roepstorff says, but the fact that he is part of this network of people who say interesting things. If we look at the network like a landscape, it comprises the contemplative people we know, like Joan Halifax, and goes from her to Tania Singer, Andreas, and Dan Zahavi, and from them to Daniel Birnbaum, to Bruno Latour and Tim Morton and Jane Bennett. Then there's our dialogue with Christine Macel about the biennale project. That leads to more structural considerations and to Little Sun, which leads to Mike Bloomberg and Patti Harris, C40, and so on. It's a big patchwork blanket. I'm interested in the psychographic element. It's this network that we are working to activate. There's Jonathan Ledgard and Umesh Khimji and Paola Antonelli. . . . We should make a map, a cloud. I'm interested in the book giving people an understanding of this network, giving them access. I see the potential of individuals best when I see the larger network.

complex place that hosts the strong expectations of the visitors and the weight of the traditions that have built up over the centuries. Once all of this had been conceived and realised, I was able to also make use of the network that emerged from doing the exhibition to campaign for the environment and Little Sun. At the time, I was hoping to initiate new Little Sun projects in France with Felix Hallwachs. I also had the support of Didier Saulnier, who is an art advisor with a business background. He was the one to push through the negotiations that made it possible for *Ice Watch* to happen at COP21, and he was the local producer of the project. When I did the exhibition, he introduced me to Ségolène Royale, the minister of ecology and energy in France, who was also the president of COP21. I showed her around my exhibition at Versailles, and later she pushed to have Little Suns handed out to the UN delegates in Marrakesh for COP22. But we really didn't know it would take place until the moment it actually happened. It was a huge effort. What I am saying is, the studio is not just me.

You want art to be taken more seriously and have a broader impact, but does that come at the price of compromising the content?

My feeling is that those involved in art increasingly see the relevance of talking to politicians and policymakers. There are, of course, artistic positions that are much less about reaching out or dialogue-driven progress. I would say those positions are parallel to mine, not the opposite. I absolutely respect artists who say, 'I do not want to talk to a politician.' I am just more of the collaborative type myself. The truth is, I have often been in situations where I had to make a decision – do I want to progress and maybe face compromise, or do I stop here and say I cannot go further because then I would risk compromising my work? I have become better at presenting my views and negotiating my position, at being resilient. I wouldn't call it good at selling, but I've become good at creating space for the soft-power quality of culture so that it becomes relevant and interesting to the partner with whom I am working, whether in the public or private sector. I was brought up in a Scandinavian context, in which culture was seen as something that everybody owns. But there are moments when a collaborator wants to make decisions that have an impact on my artistic idea. Instead of saying, 'This is not acceptable', I say, 'Listen, if you really want a work of art, you have no interest in my saying afterwards that it was actually you who decided on the colour for pragmatic reasons, which will result in the perception that it's not a work of art.' You can simply explain this to people. My experience is that once you have explained it people also respect it. The ideological authority of art is so strong. It's just about using it in an inclusive and non-polarising way. In the end, nobody wants bad art.

29 November 2016

Yesterday I was at this literature event about climate. I thought it would be about the power of art, the power of literature. There was this really lovely author, but she spoke about her book on the climate as separate from the rest of her production: as if art and agency can't be one and the same thing.

But when we talk about the power of culture we think differently. I often wonder why people don't understand that culture is a sort of trust-generating machine that shapes society. Why don't they grasp this power of culture? Perhaps our communication from the studio is misguided, has failed?

It's complex, but I really trust the robustness of art and literature and culture. It shows a lack of self-confidence when the fear of being functionalised pushes you away from agenda-driven cultural activities. An agenda-driven thought can be free and liberating; abstract, avant-garde thinking can be highly political too. The answer lies in the jazziness of things, not in cultural dogmatism that promotes isolationism.

Let me ask something a little more personal. Considering what you have achieved, how do you avoid falling in love with yourself and becoming totally narcissistic? How do you deal with all the attention you receive? We see that many people who have attained such success find it harder and harder to get straightforward critical feedback and that, in the end, this is counterproductive. One studio member told me that there is a continual worry that the studio is not critical enough . . .

There are two different tracks. On one, I feel interdependent with the world around me, whether through dialogue or art-making. On the other I feel disconnected and on my own. At that moment of disconnection I lose perspective, and then I tend to get egocentric and self-promotional. That's why we focus on processes in the studio in relationship with the world outside the studio. The larger network of scientists, politicians, policymakers, cultural workers, and so on is crucial to the work we do and it helps me not to fall out of balance and develop an over-inflated ego. I'm very interested in the evolution of the studio. In the past five years I've become more engaged in activities which are both at the heart of art-making and at its very periphery or even outside the art world. On the one hand, there's the development of new artworks and exhibitions. Sometimes doing an exhibition can be stressful, but I love the in-depth work, the opportunity to address institutional questions, civic engagement, and so on. We're an artist's studio, so that is what we do. And at the same time there's a project like Little Sun, which is a good example of something that, in my view, has agency from within the art world but that works outside of it. By maintaining a changing structure within the studio, keeping focus on the content that inspires me, and working site-specifically, I keep my feet on the ground. This brings the exposure that I have into perspective.

I am convinced that what we do in the studio and why we do it has a critical impact. It creates a good dynamic that some studio members disagree.

What is your trick to continuously reinvent the studio's structure?

On the one hand, the studio structure follows the content of the artworks and the projects that we do. First there's the content of the artworks, then their form, and, finally, the shape of the studio. At the same time, the studio has a certain agency. Its structure, the skills built into it, and so on also determine, to some extent, which projects we take on. The danger is that the moment you do something for the third or the fourth time, formalisation takes over and the content becomes predictable. Sometimes you think you are working on content which then turns out to be form. It's not that I have a clear-cut plan. I play around a lot. It's sometimes messy and slow. I am intuitively motivated, but I know that intuition is a not-so-popular word in post-structural, anti-capitalist discourse.

12 December 2016

In ten years' time I want to be a strong source of cultural news. I want to be the media platform on which Adam Curtis's *Hypernormalisation* is launched. I don't see only our own content, but a cultural-scientific-political platform. The future will ask cultural institutions to be more active in generating dialogue. I see our platform in that field as a content driver. I might change my mind and say 'fuck it' – sorry, 'damn it' – because sometimes I struggle a bit to match the vision with the infrastructure and funding to develop a really robust endeavour. But it all comes down to content production and confidence in culture. We'll gradually introduce new content online with friends and people who are not friends but whose work has a similar quality and direction. We'll curate and host the presence of other people. Then I'll be more of a journalist, while others deliver the content. I'm not so worried about blurry lines. I like them.

Indeed . . .

Don't mistake intuition for an over-cooked noodle. Intuition can be fierce. I have never worked programmatically, saying, 'Now we have done enough of this, let's change strategy, let's be more focused on that.' Nor am I just an alchemist sitting in my secluded studio. I am interested in weird, integrated networks and in the question of how one brings people to the realisation that art has consequences in the world – just like all other activities. This mix of data and feeling is sometimes easier to understand when I say that I am very interested in cognitive science, behavioural psychology, cultural geography, anthropology, and even, lately, economics, and I've been in contact with researchers from all of these fields within the last six months. It's this group of people that gives shape to the intuition I am talking about. It's not just *my* intuition, coming exclusively from inside – the intuition arises from the network.

You planned to create an advocacy position at the studio, but then decided against it. Why?

Advocacy and policy are huge fields, and I see an overlap with the cultural sector in language, strategies, and modalities. So I considered hiring a policy person. But then I thought, should I really extend the studio into something external to its DNA? I insist that we do not hire people who are not in some way connected to art. So I'd rather work with policy from within art, which means that the team that I already have also takes on policy-related questions. We ended up making policy Florian's focus, so now he's expanding his activities there.

Since we are calling this book *Open house* there are certain things we cannot skip over. One is the question of how it is even possible for you to have such a big studio. Where does the money come from?

This is absolutely non-mystical. Some activities generate income and some don't. Sometimes it's very predictable, sometimes not. The basics are that we work with art galleries, and the sales through these are our primary source of income. The galleries make exhibitions of my work and they work to secure commissions from collectors. That's about two-thirds of the studio economy. The galleries that I have worked with for twenty-five years now, neugerriemschneider in Berlin and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York, focus on the primary market. You can split the art market into the primary and the secondary market; the secondary is about the resale of artworks with the auction houses, and fortunately my work is less exposed in that market. These two galleries are active with collectors who are sincerely committed to art, and they have a high percentage of sales to museums. The way they built up their galleries has brought them close to curators, museums, and art historians. For the work that I do, which can be quite complex, that dialogue is crucial. Exhibiting or owning a rainbow brings you challenges well beyond those desired by more investment-driven collectors.

12 December 2016

I think I could close the studio and still be a good artist. I wouldn't be able to do all the art I wanted to, but I could still do art. I don't think I'd close it, though.

The studio has some autonomy. It is this very beautiful machine. But still, I don't think that the studio would make work that is as interesting without me. And if I closed the studio I would immediately make another one, of course.

Another chunk of income comes to the studio directly from projects like the public commissions on which we work together with institutions like city government offices or combinations of private and public entities. These projects require negotiations and often involve taxpayers' money. A good example is *Cirkelbroen* [The circle bridge], in Copenhagen, which was a collaboration between the municipality and the Nordea Foundation. This was a great project. Other collaborations with the public sector can get quite bureaucratic, and sometimes they end up not happening. But we put a lot of effort into making it work out. We're strongly committed to such projects – I am very interested in working in public space because it serves the interest of larger groups of people. The public sector handles money that taxpayers have trusted it to handle on their behalf and that's why it's a really important type of work for me.

The costs of almost everything at the studio are attributed to specific projects. When we build a small sculpture, the labour that goes into the making of it and into the building of the shipping crate, the hours spent organising transport, the phone calls made because of that sculpture – all these are put into the budget of that little sculpture. Everything is run this way. We know up front that we have an exhibition here, a project there. We know which costs fall outside of the conventional categories and we know when we need to raise money. Otherwise we couldn't do our projects. So, financially-speaking, it is quite pragmatic. The costs for this book have to be split between other projects, and covering them also involved me calling Anders Byriel, who runs the Danish textile company Kvadrat. He felt the book is a relevant undertaking and worth supporting.

I come from a scene where many people didn't make it to the market. American writer Gregory Sholette calls them 'dark matter'. Something like 95 per cent of artists never actually make it into the market, but they are nonetheless necessary to the market, since the 5 per cent who are really successful shine in the light of those 95 per cent. I remember at your art school, the Institut für Raumexperimente [Institute for Spatial Experiments], you had critical comments for the participants about how to handle the market. The studio also employs a number of artists who could not sustain themselves in the market. Have you ever thought of investing your time in policy changes within the art field? It seems that if any change would be possible, it would have to come from powerful players like you, rather than from dark matter outside of it.

I've often spoken up against the negative influence of the art market. It's a very common mistake to see the art market as *being* the art world, though actually there is only a tiny overlap. I've pointed to the fact that art fairs and auction houses are mismanaging the word that I am not supposed to use: *creativity*.

21 February 2017

Content is created on the go. It's all about entanglement.

[Laughs] **You are free to do so . . .**

Art is interested in the world, whereas the art market is interested in itself as a system, in investment. It's a challenge to get the art market interested in the world – beyond a small number of dedicated collectors. If the art market were really about art, more money would be spent to collaborate with art institutions that focus on younger, more experimental, and less resale-friendly art. During the years that I ran the Institut für Raumexperimente, our attention was on the fact that the art market has also had a strong influence on education. The argument is that young artists have to learn how to handle the market because it's so predominant, and not learning will make them easy targets. And so therefore art schools have a responsibility towards aspiring artists to teach them to be resilient and strong. But I think that a sense of criticality is enough for you to be able to navigate the ruthless art market when you're a relatively young and vulnerable artist. It would be a mistake to explicitly train young artists in this. At the institute, I chose to promote the idea that we become good artists by insisting on quality, not by learning to read the market. Though when I look at my students today, I'm not sure if I succeeded.

You involve a grain of idealism.

I would call it pragmatism. You have to have a lot of self-confidence, because to sell an artwork is considered success and nobody sees non-quantifiable artistic potential as a success indicator. There is so little left in the art world to indicate success outside of galleries, art fairs, and auction houses. This is a shame. There is art beyond the market.

At the Venice Biennale you are presenting another iteration of the *Green light* project. For me it contains a dilemma. On the one hand, I find it totally necessary to stop business as usual and open art spaces up to direct contact with the reality around them and have art contribute to what in Germany is called *Willkommenskultur* – especially since the curatorial frame of the biennale wants to bring us into artists' studios while the world outside looks like it does in 2017. On the other hand, there is a set of obvious questions that arise when working with refugees, such as whether one is reducing human beings to a project or an issue. Creating a workshop, a studio-like situation for them can give rise to feelings of discomfort, of misuse, of not engaging with the real issues of the participants' condition, like the source of the conflict. One such question is how you recognise your own and the biennale visitors' privilege? Another is: What happens when the artist leaves?

I think it's a bit like taking a training course: when the course is over, you have built up a network and a skill set. I think that by respecting all of the participants in a project like *Green light* – from people with refugee status to language teachers, volunteers, students, and the organisers – on a very basic, human level, the privilege that you talk about becomes

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Ideas are not simply there or not there – they have to be watered like a garden. So give me a minute to think about the real content of this project. It's about bringing culture to the heart of the climate change discussion

included within the conditions, becomes something that you can actively address together. There *is* a difference, of course, and one that we cannot do away with in an art project, but that shouldn't lead us to not do anything. To visit the Venice Biennale is not to step away from the world and into a dream with no responsibilities, into an escapist representation of reality. On the contrary, it is to go *deeper into* reality. As a cultural platform, the biennale can host social projects like *Green light* as a work of art very well.

The idea with *Green light* is to show that cultural strategies can actually be put to use in a collective effort by nonprofessionals, by civil society. Very few of the team members working on *Green light* are trained in working with refugees. But even with little specialist knowledge about humanitarian work and work with displaced people, the cultural sector can still engage and make a difference – it speaks to the participants as, simply, human beings, at eye level. All it takes is a small green lamp – as beautiful and simple as it is, it's really not rocket science, which I think is a part of the point – and a good deal of energy getting the social structure in place.

It is important to remember that refugee status is not a 'profession' and that refugees' struggles are not our opportunity.

Of course not. The principle of the project is actually very basic: it's to improve the social conditions for people who are refugees. This means providing support for developing language skills and shared cultural understanding. It is also about supporting the people who receive the refugees. And it's about building awareness – by bringing up a topic that needs our attention, by facilitating a situation in which participants and visitors alike feel spoken to, not spoken about. Where they feel listened to.

The first iteration of the project took place at TBA21–Augarten, in Vienna, in 2016. The founder of TBA21, Francesca von Habsburg; its curator, Daniela Zyman; and I talked a lot about the urgent need to address the situation of the large numbers of refugees that were coming to Europe at the time. I wanted to propose a cultural model, a collaborative space with an economic structure built into it. The money raised by selling the *Green light* lamps is invested in the Shared-learning platform, in which everyone is welcome to participate. It is a small ecosystem, where the focus on budgeting and scale is important. And we also introduce success criteria like having fun. Working together should involve an element of pleasure.

I think that the capacity of culture to work *for* people, not at their expense, is becoming clearer in society. There is no *one* strategy, of course, no *one* answer or method or critical approach – there are many ways, approaches, and types of engagement. And we need this heterogeneity, this plurality. The cultural sector is like pebbles on the beach – sprawling, messy, and robust.