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Interview with Ana Dević and Ivet Ćurlin, members of the curatorial collective WHW, Zagreb, March, 2019

Exhibition *What, How and Who for* as the basis for the formation of the WHW collective

Ana Dević: In the late 1990's, in 1999, actually, Nataša Ilić, Sabina Sabolović and me (Ana Dević) discussed the chances of doing an exhibition, which provided us with the name of the collective *What, How and Who for*, on the occasion of the 152th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto. An invisible agent in our gathering was the fifth member of our collective, Dejan Kršić, who had re-published the Communist Manifesto translated by Moša Pijade, within Arkzin and the famous Bastard edition of publications, with Slavoj Žižek's preface. Then, for this milestone anniversary, the 98th book passed somehow unnoticed by the very dominant nationalism-oriented policies and turned towards a certain type of cultural exclusion that somehow swept this whole repertoire of Communism, including theory, philosophy and art under the carpet. The exhibition was actually being created through a series of gatherings and discussions for almost two years. During that period we all began to work, either in the field of curatorial practices or critique practices, journalism, etc. And it was a moment, both social and personal, when the political climate was changed, the circumstances for this exhibition matured. It happened in 2000, which was in a way also a ground-breaking year for Croatian politics, but also generally for what we call today an independent culture. The exhibition was held in the HDLU (Croatian Association of Visual Artists) in the so-called Mosque and was an institutional venture of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists, headed by Nevenka Tudor, who supported the project. At that time, we were simple individuals, without institutional backing, however, many of our colleagues from mama (mi2) helped us a lot. The Multimedia Institute had already existed and there were a lot of supporting programs going on there. In some ways, after the 1990s, the exhibition set up a new paradigm; it established broken contacts in the former Yugoslavia, but also in a wider international context. It was important for us to touch the context of art and of a social reality, politics, economy, the past and the present. Along with the circle of international artists, we called for the cooperation of a large number of local artists, the generation of artists who mainly worked in the new artistic practice in the 1970s. They were Goran Trbuljak, Tomislav Gotovac, Sanja Iveković and we joined them with the young generation of artists: Andrej Kulunčić, Kristina Leko, Igor Grubić and others.

Ivet Ćurlin: I was in America when the girls began to work on the exhibition and I returned after those two years from America, perhaps a week after the exhibition was opened. I liked it very much. I liked them, some of them I knew well. I worked for various American organisations. Those were the 1990s, helping the development of civil society. I liked it all together. I asked:

Can I work with you, girls? I like what you do. In 2001, when we started talking about Tesla, we decided to start the Association.

Ana: Somehow, our manifesto is always our exhibitions. And in that sense, we informally called the first exhibition the Manifesto, because it was dedicated to the Communist Manifesto, and simply, after that, we felt no need bind it in the law, but in everything we do, we are trying to answer these three questions from our name, according to the first exhibition *What, how and who for*. Since this is a leitmotif of our work, then it is every attempt to articulate it through a project of setting up this platform of why we exist, what we do, who we are talking to, who are those users, participants, etc. And in these twenty years of work, much has changed, but this initial desire for our programmes to be available and free of charge, or if possible, that a certain hosting organisation allows for free access to these contents, are still some guidelines for our work.

Transformation of organisational working models within the collective

Ivet: In fact, each [of our] new concepts is a new process, so even though we are now an already a well-*experienced* team, there are many different situations, and the [process] is being transformed, it changes. One major structural transformation was the Galerija Nova. Another big structural transformation was when it all became a day job. I quit my American organization where I was working at the time, at the end of 2004. Ana quit working in the Gallery of Modern Art in 2007. Obligation was imposed, the need to structure time, finances, working life, and everything else differently. When all of us, one by one, slowly started leaving all our other obligations and focused our efforts on WHW, this was changed consequently. The next major structural change occurred when one member went to live in Berlin. A different city and a different country. The relationship in our communication and the way of organising our day-to-day work also changed greatly. Even what was happening to us then would also be a new exit from Croatia, leading a new institution. It would also be a new structural change. It changes, evolves. It's never the same and it's good. At one point we realised that it was very helpful and nice to us when we did some things with a fifth person. Like Kathrin Rhomberg was, Oliver Frljić, or Emily Pethick from London, because this shook up our ossified dynamics a bit. And as far as the ossified dynamics is concerned, I'm good at figures, Sabina has worked as a journalist, and so she's great at doing PR. There are some things that some of us do faster, but we also have tried very hard from the very beginning not to do certain things by default, just because one is faster at doing something. We negotiate it a lot; we think, trying to find common solutions. We work together on the contents. In the sense that we talk about all the exhibitions - which exhibitions we shall do; if there is a point in doing them; what will the basic direction of that exhibition, project, discursive program be. What the title will be; what artists will be in it; what kind of venue it will be; whether we will be over the budget, and it is also a kind of conceptual framework. And then, if we work with twenty artists, we divide them, so each gets five of them

to coordinate and push. We used to do things a lot more physically together. The girls always joke how the three of them used to write first e-mails together. Then, of course, at one point many things have to be done in a day, so this division becomes inevitable. Giving each other a little breathing space. The big structural change happened when Ana Šeba, our head of the office, came to work with us. She started working part-time, now she is on full-time. The collective is not just the four of us, plus Dejan being our fifth *secret* member; a secret weapon, but also Ana, who has been working with us for ten years now.

Ana: It's a distinction between the organisation and the collective. The collective is seen as a separate body that is based on the sharing and making of this creative cultural capital, and the capacities of organisations can be built on various bases. But we've had and still have many associates with whom we've been working for many years. Ana Šeba is more than a coordinator. She is someone who has bought a ticket for each of our guests for the last ten years and took care of them. She participated in these conditions, which we, as a collective, wanted to create and share, as a kind of cultural production. She is also one of our faces, first of all to our associates, but also in relation to a whole range of administrative matters, which is known to us all who have been in this business for the last ten, fifteen, and even twenty years. We are required to do almost impossible things as leaders and participants of self-organized NGOs. This bureaucratisation has taken things over in the last ten years. I am not saying that this occurs only in our sector, but there is this joke that about a short interval between writing applications and the reporting period. And it seems to me now in this new era, some other indicators have been placed on evaluation, a whole set of certain things we have to learn, so that we can do this job.

Thematic framework of WHW collective (11:57)

Ivet: I think that *forming content* always intertwines somehow. We are now in a new turmoil and wondering what the autonomy of art is, since we have always been on the side, of course, of the engaged art and against art for art's sake. On the other hand, we need to fight against a great instrumentalisation of art, for its freedom and autonomy, too, should be fought. These are some of the issues that we have been dealing with for the last few years. I think that the thematically more political framework opened up topics and they were always similar to us. What we felt and saw, in the last few years, when we were about to prepare for the Academy, we all simultaneously realized that the war had finished 25 years before. Some of our obsessions were and still are, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the breakup of socialism, the transition to a new neo-liberal capitalist society, nationalism, the conservatisation of the environment where we live. These are the themes. About a decade ago, Marko Golub wrote in one review for us, and we keep on quoting him, that we are constantly doing one and the same exhibition.

Collaborative experiences and networking with other actors on the scene (13:30)

Ana: It is interesting to note that it was not exclusively the topics of engagement that influenced the organisational structure, but also our experiences. We had the opportunity to do the Istanbul Biennial, it was not our first international exhibition, but it was the first Biennial. And there you had the opportunity to feel this first breakthrough in the global art world from that perspective. And for example, one of the first things that came out of the Istanbul Biennial is that after that, regardless of the kind of project we've done and how much the budget has been limited, since then every artist who has worked with us has been paid.

Ivet: From the very beginning, artists always supported us in our work; and they were artists ranging from the *new artistic practice* generation to the generation of our peers. Then there were collectives, but not necessarily from the field of visual arts, but from the field of contemporary dance, new media and architecture. There was a critical mass in Zagreb in 2000, and as Ana says, had it not been for it, we would have probably vanished. And there was a decisive role for people around the Multimedia Institute, who found a good method to initiate and build networks from people through self-organization, and even though we were all under pressure, we always found motivation for yet another meeting and assembly. They created a critical mass, where many of us who did not have more than half an hour of our spare time, yet half an hour by half an hour, we created one critical mass that has done a lot in the area of independent/non-institutional culture. And at one point in time people began to deal professionally within these organisations. They were a small group, who then brought us together and pulled us all together. They were really our crucial support.

Ana: On the other hand, we have given them a kind of legitimacy, and with the exception of mutual support, there are some wider issues in linking with activism regarding the problem of the *commons*. Which were the issues regarding institutions, too; self-organization and also what we, as a society and as social actors do not want to agree on and why we will fight and why there is a chance that what we do exits the narrow frameworks. There are three interesting layers here. One is cultural production from this perspective, on the other hand, the influence on cultural policies, the establishment of these bodies, legalization processes which are then spread into society because they do not want to stay in that one *bubble*, that was a definitive starting point for everything.

Individual contributions and joint work within the collective

Ana: It is difficult to measure how much of our ideas, the operations are WHW within any of us, using any external instrument. How much we are dedicated to our individual interests. But we have certainly developed some of those methods together. I believe that if either of us now enters some interaction with other individuals or collectives, there will be some methods. Perhaps in some other collective this method will be less pronounced, but simply, I think we share a lot.

Until now, I cannot really remember that there has been a project with only one of us working on it, which we signed collectively.

Ivet: It happens more often with texts. Sometimes we write texts together, and sometimes just one writes them. Times are simply such and so we divided the work. And then at one point we made the agreement, because there are various organisational and administrative reasons, and also because it is important for us to hear individual voices. There are texts that are signed by people individually, but we have agreed on some of our texts, our WHW, our programme texts, and it is important for us write that text together. And we had mildly tense discussions on how to do it and how to sign texts written by only one person who's been sitting at home and writing for ten days. And this woman's signature would be important to her. And then we agreed about those texts which deal with the programme, that we would discuss each and every one of them, and that it mattered to us that regardless of the fact that one person wrote it, be it me, Ana, anyone, they should be signed on *case-to-case basis*.

Influences of the tradition of arts organizations in Yugoslavia

Ana: I would return to something Ivet said about the appropriation of the methods of work of art collectives. I'm not sure if the term appropriation is right, I would call it some sort of inspiration or consultation. More consultation. Because there are many important differences that these two situations determine, other than the term bureaucratisation, mentioned a number of times. And it is a matter of pleasure. Then there is Mladen Stilinović, who was also a member of an informal group, who could not have been much different from what we are now, in a long wave of professionalisation. Stile said that those collectives of the '60s and '70s faded away the moment the level of pleasure that had gathered them began to dilute, or other dynamics occurred in some way. In this regard, the example of IRWIN was interesting because they continued after that *decline of pleasure*. It's inevitable. And that's why we looked up to them. It's hard to *copy-paste* a method, especially from the artistic collective, but I think that they are more ideals and consultants to us in some situations.

Ivet: Mentors.

Ana: Mentors, in terms of organization, we are building it now. This is something else, it's something new.

Dynamics within the collective

Ana: I think one learns a lot. I think people gather for a reason and there is some sort of fil rouge that connects them, and that it's hard to cram it into a mission that you put on your website. *The mission is this and that ...* But I think there is something that *is* the mission of a particular group

they work together on. And there are the same invisible processes, and these are the processes of maturation, the work on oneself. You learn a lot about yourself through conflicts. Learning about conflicts opened my eyes regarding boundaries. On the one hand, this is a question of personal boundaries, sometimes in that collective you have to set a personal boundary. I think it's necessary. On the other hand, it is also the boundary to the outside world and the boundary of one's own capacities. It seems to me that it is a disease that many collectives suffer from - a risk of burning out. It is precisely in these situations where external stress is exacerbated. On the other hand, it does not only need to be a very visible work you do with great care, or you do it in poor conditions. This can be an extremely unfavourable, this threatening financial and political climate, which in a way really puts you in that position. So the way that you emotionally and physiologically function is not equal to being normal. And now, since we are all different as individuals, now everyone also reacts differently to such a situation. However, someone said that it is not important to hide these conflicts, to lessen their tiny or big dramas, but rather the question of what we as groups or as individuals learn from these conflicts. I think that there is a certain kind of knowledge that comes out from that experience, where a piece of work could not provide you with that kind of cognition in other situations.

Ivet: I think this is similar to what we mentioned in the context of exhibitions and methods of work. The Istanbul Biennial, to be precise, we are returning to it. It was a big problem regarding the ratio of visibility and working conditions. At that moment they did not have much money, and they had been labelled as a super-important exhibition. Ana mentioned that no artist received a fee, and we were also terribly paid. It was simply a huge disparity. The tension was enormous and we were not the best supporters to one another in that whole situation. For that year and a half or two. And sometimes the situation would be similarly horrible, and we regrouped, and this awful situation made us stronger. Something else happens, so it ends up okay. We cover each other's backs. So it's hard to say. It's changes somehow. But I think of that when you work and spend time with someone for a long time. And we know each other well, I would say quite well, the four of us. There is some basic trust and respect for each other, regardless of the outbursts of big words and eruptions. The basic belief that we are allies, that we will not let each other down just like that. These are very fragile issues and they should be worked on. I think that the biggest problems don't happen when they erupt, but things are not good when *the machine* is so big that things do not get thematised, nor reflected, nothing at all. Simply, it's a machine, and there is this *silent thought* - as we say in Dalmatia, within it - *an elephant in the room* and we do not have time to deal with it. That can be difficult then. Very difficult. And then something happens. Something always happens. It pulls to one side and things get levelled.

Self-organization vs. institutional politics

Ivet: We founded the organisation and thus we became a little semi-institution. We can call it that way. However, we do not have ...

Ana: Not a small semi-institution. We are an institution.

Ivet: Institution is when you are on some budget support that is more or less guaranteed.

Ana: But look at the number of exhibits.

Ivet: I know, but we finance our organisation based on free-lancing principles. And that's why you find yourself in a situation where you do not have work for a year and you do not know how to pay for your individual loan, or the office space, and then you have four events at once and you have to strain and you cannot bear it.

Ana: Well, these are the worst pressures. It is a breaking point for a large number of organisations. Because it's not human. Because, on the one hand, you want and you must advance and you want to ensure both your own existence and the one of the collective, and on the other hand the system is unstable to such an extent that there is no middle-ground. As a rule, people either work too much, or not at all.

Ivet: Here in particular, we have not had too much work for the past half of the year. We have, but we did not have enough to close our financial structure, regardless of the Academy. And then you have to seek other work, which takes a lot of your energy. Applying for various competitions that are closed - invite-only competitions, and you can consider yourself lucky to be invited at all.

Ana: On the other hand, in a wider, institutional landscape, neither the state nor the city institutions are monoliths and guarantors. And they also deal with different processes. Precarisation processes take place there, too. And there are very concrete struggles for these institutions within these institutions, which are done in different ways. Often, these processes are not open to the outside world. And when I think from the perspective that I have this privilege to work for so long within a collective where, even if there are fights or conflicts or some serious crisis periods caused by external factors, I have the privilege of working with people with whom I share a lot of beliefs and attitudes. And this struggle can then go outwards towards some other things.