

IVANA KESER: "Is an artist an activist or an atavist?"

Ivana Keser's impressive artistic trajectory from the 1990s and onwards presents three distinctive, interrelated and mutually correlated levels of art production and active involvement in contemporary culture.

The first level of work focuses on making newspapers; she writes, illustrates and publishes them. In her newspapers she publishes news from private life, commentaries, brief articles and authorial photographs, all displayed within a public domain. Her newspapers bear significant titles such as *Local-Global*, *Nothing Personal*, *Obsessions & Frustrations*, *Migrants*. She began making newspapers in 1994 with her project entitled *Exhibition of Local Newspapers*, displayed as a work-in-progress. On that occasion she published only one copy of her *Personal Newspaper*, dated February 25, 1994. With only one copy of a mass media product, she reversed the Warholian machine, which in contrast takes uniqueness to be serially (re)produced. With her one copy of *Newspaper* she exchanged seriality for uniqueness, and radically transposed the meaning of a mass media product into a different context.

Along with making newspapers, while investigating the relations between private and public domains, she also edits pages with texts and images that are inserted in local newspapers. Keser constructs installations and re-arranges ambiances. In 1997 she exhibited *Salle d'Indoctrination*, a pink environment (I would say "Barbie-like") filled with her newspapers with quite a lot of counter "Ken" punctuations.

The second layer of her work presents her engagement within the project *Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill* (a project by Aleksandar Battista Ilić), in which Ivana Keser along with Aleksandar Battista Ilić and Tomislav Gotovac rethink the conditions of production of contemporary arts and the conditions of life and labour of contemporary artists. Every Sunday since 1995 Aleksandar Battista Ilić, Ivana Keser and Tomislav Gotovac have climbed the Medvednica Hill near Zagreb. In searching for an alternative expression of life, the project evolved into (as termed by Aleksandar Battista Ilić) "a performance without an audience" but one that was thoroughly documented; to date thousands of photographs have been taken. As Aleksandar Battista Ilić explains, *Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill* is closely related to the subject of body and mind, it is an outcome of a deep friendship, "our conversations in nature always tended to focus on literature, film, and philosophy, and on different manifestations of daily life."

Today they use their bodies as screens, and these thousands of photographs (slides) are projected onto their naked skin. What we have here is a process of making the invisible visible and presenting the unrepresentable through a constant, I would say, persisting hesitation, once defined by Deleuze as the hesitation between "thought without an image" and "the new image of thought." This is why we simply cannot think of *Weekend Art* as an incarnation of the 1970s popular demand for *Change of Life* as expressed by the Situationist. What I will insist on is that for *Weekend Art* it is more important to find the ontological ground or the environment upon which thought is built than to simply start with ideas of thought in itself.

The third layer of Keser's work is the collaborative project *Community Art* with Aleksandar Battista Ilić with activities ranging from lectures to workshops. In this way they build a specific community of listeners and participants in Zagreb. These community interventions on a specific location do not have as their final end a concrete manifestation in the form of an art object or product; instead, community interventions have more to do with an active engagement with the local community-based audience. With *Community Art* Keser and Ilić aspire to provide a public forum for those interested in the development of their community and to those ready to rearticulate a proper social and cultural space, establishing connections through exchange.

There exists a body of well-articulated and consistent thought about what is at work on these various levels, formulated precisely by Keser herself: "Behind our projects there are three

points regarding relationships in art. The first point is the relationship between the local and the global. The global only occurs as a consequence of local circumstances. The local multiplies and becomes global through the power of the voice. The second point is the relationship between the private and the public. No artist wants to be called a “weekend artist” because they all think they are professionals. The final point is the relationship that emerges between the natural and the artificial in art.”

Therefore it is possible to say that Keser’s art aims toward guarding a certain heterogeneity that is different from a direct politicisation of the field of art. Keser’s positions can be understood and developed along with Jean-François Lyotard’s aesthetics and politics. For Lyotard, for example, totalising theories are incapable of allowing the full heterogeneity of voices in society to be heard.¹

Ivana Keser opens and closes certain textual concepts that can be termed as *sensus communis*. Her work is *against* the ideology of simply reconstructing reality in the (convenient) name of “truth” based on common sense, though she is constantly referring to it. For example, in 1993 she presented *Genealogy*, a series of ink-jet printed maps on which she had written sentences as (stereotypical?) phrases: *England is the cradle of culture surrounded by Barbarians...* and ... *La France est un berceau de la culture entouré de Barbares....* In order to capture the emergence of a certain meaning differently, although the meaning in these sentences is persistently and stereotypically ideological, she calls for a diffracted reflection. In this way Keser clearly shows that her work with language and text constantly tries to expose the gap between the possible and the already established phrase regimes. A move that comes close to Lyotard, as he developed the unstable state and the instant of language, saying that something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be put as such. As he formulated in *Heidegger and “the Jews”* – what art can do is not say the unsayable, but say that it cannot say it.²

“Information is filling the emptiness.” (I. Keser)

“England [France] is the cradle of culture surrounded by Barbarians” is also an effort to put “wrongs” into phrases while displaying an ethical, legal and ideological territory that is formed through the linking of precise phrases. With such a procedure she attacks specific genres of discourse at their heart. Producing blanks in texts, pointing to voids in meaning, this is how the heterogeneity of meaning appears. What we get here is also a diagnosis of contemporary [“western”] civilization.

Keser’s sentences and statements thus prove to be of vital importance in a period when we are witness to all sorts of attempts to rewrite “reality” in the name of truth’s common sense. It is a procedure dealing with the disruption of sets of rules; Lyotard casts them as “language games.”³ Disruptions in language games are, according to Lyotard, a “war on totality” that step outside established economies by discovering new “phrase regimens” irrespective of the existing “genres of discourse.” To understand this, we need to examine these two concepts: “phrase regimen” and “genre of discourse.” Phrase regimen is that which comes into being as a way to communicate. Lyotard calls the regimen a mode of presenting a universe. The second concept here, the genre of discourse, is the way Lyotard sees phrase regimens linking together. The genre of discourse thus becomes an imposition, limiting and setting the phrase regimens in use, while silencing others incommensurable with that genre. The gap between the possible and established phrase regimens becomes visible as a “differend,” the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.⁴

This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are possible in principle ... in the differend, something “asks” to be put into phrases ...

¹ Cf. Gary Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2000), p. 2.

² Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews,”* trans. by Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1990), p. 47.

³ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988), p. 9-11 and 16.

⁴ Ibid.,

[human beings] are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to ... institute idioms which do not yet exist.⁵

Therefore Keser's sentences and statements are [Keser's] differends, as is this one: "Words must be arranged so as not to hurt anybody."

In this world of ready-mades, certain places – as is argued by Lyotard – have to be made blank, twisted, also emptied from meaning in order to make the emergence of something different which needs to be reflected possible.⁶ And even more, as it is possible precisely to be captured always again with Keser's differends, if not now, "Something, however, will make itself understood, 'later'."⁷ If a difference exists that demands the reconfiguration of meaning, and it is not understood immediately, its axiomatic structure waits patiently (almost as a patiently constructed documentary genealogy) for a future context.

Sensus communis also stands in relation to what Pierre Klossowski, elaborating on simulacra and Nietzsche, calls a *stereotype*.⁸ Stereotype is what he calls "the code of everyday signs" that expresses the gregarious aspect of a lived experience in a form schematised by the habitual usage of feelings and thoughts. Therefore, according to Klossowski, in this sense the code of everyday signs, by making them intelligible, necessarily inverts and falsifies the singularity of the soul's intensive movements. Klossowski argues: "How can one give an account of an irreducible depth of sensibility except by acts that betray?" Going back to: "England [France] [...] is the cradle of culture surrounded by Barbarians...", isn't this a form that presupposes a betrayal of the supposedly civilized addressers? Soon after recognizing himself or herself in the truth of the sentence, he or she sees that they are just a language game. What could be the truth of a certain reality is only a discursive construction. Keser, in introducing precisely these parallel meanings, raises questions not only concerning the relation between mass media and the silent majority, but also the question of class, race and sexuality through gender. As she warns us: "Be short and funny, if published in the media." (I. Keser)

Ivana Keser's insistence on engaging with the medium in itself means to take a profound view of the slogans and sentences produced and delivered within mass media. In the past, numerous conceptual artists have taken similar approaches. A certain genealogy does exist and this must be acknowledged, but what she does is take it a step further, she returns the analysis back to the medium (printing personal newspapers, or inserts that are included in daily magazines). Even more, I dare to call her a language hacker (based on a description of the hacker by Tilman Baumgärtel); her work is parallel to computer hackers with whom she shares both a disrespect for mass media (for mass media's empty rhetoric and common places) and the potentiality of expression and public access that this context offers. She uses the context of mass media as an interface to enter the language and meanings of the contemporary, mass-media modelled community, in the way one of her sentence advises us firmly: "If you don't like the news, go out and make some." (I. Keser)

She deals with the protocols of mass media language, with its common sense, aspirations and abstractions; she highlights these known or yet unnoticed clichés, ways of thinking, phraseology within the mass media context and returns them back to where they were supposedly taken. Why? Because, "No one is the author of his/her words." (I. Keser)

Keser's implicit and very specific critique of mass media can be compared with the critique developed by Guy Debord in his book entitled *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), where

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman – Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1991).

⁷ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews"*, p. 13.

⁸ Cf. Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997).

spectacle is defined as “the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule.”⁹ Last but not least, this is a process envisioned by Ivana Kesper with her question “can we democratise the media?” Debord is even more pessimistic in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, written in 1988, when he stated: “There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organised to relay it.”¹⁰

Kesper asks: “Is media influencing time, or is time influencing media?”

Debord is precise: “The empty debate on the spectacle – that is, on the activities of the world’s owners – is thus organized by the spectacle itself: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure that nothing is said about their extensive deployment. Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term “media.” And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial “professionalism” would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through mass media – a form of communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for passive admiration. For what is communicated are orders; and with perfect harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them.”¹¹

What follows today is an even more deadly punctuation by Kesper on the state of affairs in art and society: “You can do anything you want, as long as what you do never challenges the existing economic order.” (I. Kesper, in *You Can*, Kesper’s video from 1998).

Essay-dramas are also an important part of Kesper’s working with language; through them she connects, as she states, the three levels of her work which are the newspapers, *Community Art* and *Weekend Art*. In which way can her essay-dramas be understood when some of them bear very telling titles such as “The Future is a Luxury” or “Sanatorium”? Kesper’s essay-dramas enter a field that is today mostly associated with the name of science fiction: a field that was determined by writers such as Stephenson, Gibson, Stirling, etc., and which was re-actualised along with the advent of cyberspace, cyberpunk and cyberfiction. In order to understand Kesper’s essay-dramas it is necessary to seriously take the differences brought between the two poles of what is today perceived as science fiction into our focus. François Roche, an architect and writer from France, in his “(Science) Fiction & Mass Culture Crisis” gives an excellent overview in which way to understand the differences, when he writes:

“Leaving behind its Galilean scrutinizing of the future, an exploration of inaccessible worlds that only Science (*fiction*) from the heights of its certitude could drive, (*science*) fiction has slipped into the meanders of our digital society. (...) The books of Stephenson, Gibson, Stirling and others, while marketed as speculative fiction, were in fact live broadcasts, and the funhouse mirror that the genre tended to create between the space of the imagination and that of our daily lives expanded throughout a universe of plausibilities and melted into the news, with all its social dimensions. Astonishingly, (*science*) fiction has shifted neither forward nor rearward but into the here and now. The unfolding scenarios it follows to manipulate our reality are becoming true transformation tools and paradoxically strategic levers to grasp the wobbling of our postdigital societies, our choked mass media culture. But the main interest of this sudden in vivo matrix immersion lies in the anxieties it provokes. Instead of Science (*fiction*) remaining a domain for positivist and determinist propaganda, (*science*) fiction should nourish the seeds of our own monstrosity – our own loss of control amid indeterminism, chaos theory and biogenetics – as a force striking alliances with harpies and earthly creatures, the Faustian Dark Side and the *Sturm und Drang*, against the rationalist wigs and the works of the Hegelian spirit, and open up to a world where even

⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995, 3rd edition), p. 19.

¹⁰ Cf. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) published on the www: http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html#_ednref6

¹¹ Ibid.

fears become fable, as lovely as they are carnal. (...) Fiction differs from utopia in that it does not seek to be right. Why would we seek to be right when there are so many people who carry the banner of morality – they are a legion, as dangerous and common as criminals. Fiction has nothing to do with a nostalgic idealization of the world in a museum soap bubble, nor a New Age utopia with its kindly moral presuppositions.”¹²

Through Roche, whose words I recut and pasted together in order to extract the points that are important for us, we can precisely dissociate Keser’s essay-dramas from utopia, nostalgia and new age, and read them as (*science*) fictions. Why? The recovery of the world, as argued by Laymert Garcia Dos Santos, a sociologist from Sao Paulo, lies perhaps in fighting what the capital machine is performing today through science: “a rationalisation of utopias.”¹³

Community Art opens a broad array of philosophical and political questions, also coming close to those topics exposed by Lyotard’s differend: erasure and incommensurability. With *Community Art*, Ivana Keser and Aleksandar Battista Ilić address what can be seen as two adversaries of contemporary art: on its outside, the genre of economic discourse (art market exchange, capital); and on its inside, the genre of academic discourse (mastery of art history).¹⁴ Why? Community today is a paradoxical and impossible paradigm, everybody talks about community, but no large efforts are invested into a direction to try to build up a community. *Community Art* is precisely about exposing what is possible to be recaptured in almost Lacanian terms: Community cannot be presented because it is so thoroughly erased, and the art [market] cannot be erased because it is so present and empowered.

These presuppositions by Keser and Battista Ilić’s *Community Art* are rooted in the open source and “social software” ideas of networking.¹⁵ As Tilman Baumgärtel, media critic and theorist from Germany, stated: ... “international network of global communications is among the most important factors in the current re-negotiations of political power, economic wealth and social change. ... It fulfils some of the central demands that Fredric Jameson puts forward in his famous essay on postmodernism.”¹⁶

Jameson, as summarized by Baumgärtel, calls for an art that is able to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. The point today is that a move is proposed in the rearticulating of representation that is capable of dealing with interventions within networks and as well with building networks in art. As Geert Lovink reports on the topic of community and proceeding in the same direction as Baumgärtel: “Howard Rheingold¹⁷ writes that the “killer apps” of tomorrow won’t be hardware devices or software programs but social practices. The most far-reaching changes will come, as they often do, from the kinds of relationships, enterprises, communities, and markets that infrastructure makes possible.”¹⁸ Lovink continues exposing this valuable point: “Smart mobs are able to act in concert even if they do not know each other. Virtual communities have turned into social networks, as defined by Clay Shirky.”¹⁹

¹² Cf. François Roche, “(Science) Fiction & Mass Culture Crisis,” in *Zehar*, no.52 (San Sebastain: Arteleku 2004).

¹³ Cf. also on this topic Marina Gržinić, *Situated Contemporary Art Practice. Art, Theory and Activism from (the East of) Europe* (Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU and Frankfurt am Main: Revolver 2004).

¹⁴ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, p. xiii.

¹⁵ Cf. Clay Shirky: The thing that makes social software behave differently than other communications tools is that groups are entities in their own right. A group of people interacting with one another will exhibit behaviors that cannot be predicted by examining the individuals in isolation, peculiarly social effects like flaming and trolling or concerns about trust and reputation.

In Clay Shirky http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_politics.html First published March 9, 2003 on the “Networks, Economics, and Culture” mailing list.

¹⁶ Cf. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press 1991), in: Tilman Baumgärtel, “Net Art,” in: *Art meets Media: Adventures in Perception* (Tokyo: NTTICC 2005).

¹⁷ Cf. Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Group Books 2002).

¹⁸ Geert Lovink, “Community,” in: *Art meets Media: Adventures in Perception* (Tokyo: NTT ICC 2005).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

It is possible to define *Community Art* as a specific kind of relationship, of community and enterprise that, based on an auto-organisation of forces and social interactions, developed a new sort of audience in Zagreb, Croatia.

In the context of *Weekend Art* it is possible to expend these community features, and refer to Ivana Keser, Aleksandar Battista Ilić and Tomislav Gotovac as not being simply performers, but users as well. With their way of behaving and the processes within the project, they build a social network and take emotional and reflective advantages from it. A social network is, as is written by Geert Lovink, who quotes from Alain Badiou, “not an after effect or a spin-off but originates in an event. That a network is built, must precede it to an encounter, must be, according to Badiou, something which cannot be calculated, predicted or managed. Networks are rooted in unknown events, and cannot be reduced to casual opinions or instituted knowledge.”²⁰ As Battista Ilić explains, what happened first was an event, a pure friendship, and a wish to escape the unbearable autistic art space of the 1990s in Croatia.

And if we also take into consideration the context of *Weekend Art* (Keser: “No artist wants to be called a “weekend artist” because they all think they are professionals.”), we are soon forced to rethink the contemporary artist today also in relation to the precarity of contemporary labour. Being weekend artists points not only to a post-conceptual condition of contemporary art performativity, but also to a new form of art proletariat: “We are the precariat. We are hireable on demand, available on call, exploitable at will and fireable at whim. We have become skilful jugglers of jobs and contortionists of flexibility. But beware, we are agitating with a common strategy to share our flex fights.”²¹ Something that is possible to think in analogy with what was stated by Lyotard approximately 25 years ago for science in *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Art today is, via Lyotard, at the crossroads to be operative (i.e. fully integrated in the art market and transgressive as much it allows it to be) or simply to vanish! Or, perhaps it is possible to re-open the third way of a new brand of labour activism, geared to young/female/foreign-born Précaires that have no prior political experience other than the toil of their bodies and minds in the giant outlets of the chain stores, malls, transportation hubs and call centres of the Brave New Postmodern World.²²

Therefore Keser’s question “Is an artist an activist or an atavist?” is not a rebus, but a *differend* of erasure and incommensurability, of art contemporaneity. It is not strange that Lyotard insists on the differend, to defend, as it is brilliantly shown by Keser’s art works, not the profit of quantity of information communicable through existing idioms but to ... institute idioms, which do not yet exist, at least not in such (a Keser) way, and definitely not in such (a Keser) place.

But let us stay with the question “Is an artist an activist or an atavist?” In “Stubborn Structures and Insistent Seepage in a Networked World”²³ the Raqs Media Collective writes: “The worker of the twenty first century, who has to survive in a marker that places the utmost value on the making of signs, finds that her tools, her labour, her skills are all to do with varying degrees of creative, interpretative and performative agency. She makes brands shine, she sculpts data, she mines meaning, and she hews code. The real global factory is a network of neural processes, no less material than the blast furnaces and chimneys of manufacturing and industrial capitalism. The worker of the twenty first century is also a performer, a creator of value from meaning. She creates, researches and interprets, in the ordinary course of a working day to the order that would merit her being considered an artist or a researcher, if by “artist” or “researcher” we understand a person to be a figure who creates meaning or produces knowledge.”²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <http://eu.d-a-s-h.org/node/view/178>

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf. Raqs Media Collective, “Stubborn Structures and Insistent Seepage in a Networked World,” in: *Work, Research & Art*, eds. Marina Vishmidt and Melanie Gilligan (London/New York: Black Dog Publishing 2004).

²⁴ Distributed by Monica Narula [Raqs Media Collective] Sarai-CSDS 29 Rajpur Road, Delhi 110 054 www.raqsmediacollective.net www.sarai.net; via <nettime> <http://www.nettime.org>

Because of this terminally changed situation of labour and art, the precarity of labour and the immateriality of life structures that suffocate and destroy millions and enrich only some, it is time that “nature,” “labour,” and “art” also include everything constituting the human subject: its nervous system, genetic code, cortical processor, visual and auditory receptors, communication systems (particularly linguistic), its organisations of group life etc.²⁵ *Weekend Art* clearly shows that nature has to imbricate with the human nervous system and visual receptors. Are they not consuming friendships and building dangerous liaisons while strolling through the woods? Taking photographs while trying to build a friendship, without human witnesses.

Only an archive of thousands of photographs will indeed make visible what was to us invisible. And finally, when they expose their naked bodies as the most suitable screens, “screaming skins,” it seems that this lightning slide-project flash, which flashes and bursts out in the nothingness of the gallery space, “also brings about a feeling that the impossible is possible. That the necessary is contingent.”²⁶ Or, to put this differently, via Lyotard: Here in *Weekend Art* something as impossible as friendships and relations are present, there, in the cold blood art milieu, though not so far from these experiences, something that cannot be negated, an artwork resists (photographs as installations, skins as screens).

Community Art and *Weekend Art* share the same tactical mental space that Susana Noguero, an independent curator based in Barcelona, describes as community memory. “Community Memory, which was set up in Berkeley, California, in the early 1970s within the framework of the counterculture, was the first precursor of the community networks we know today. (...) In Community Memory we can see how from the “collectivism” of the era, a social use was made of technology, finding new means of communication, organisation and other previously untried strategies. Currently, the terms digitisation, computerisation and globalisation encompass a large number of political, socio-cultural, economic and social conflicts whose dimension and scope cannot easily be predicted. Some time ago, in the midst of this disorder, the road to a collectivism with new political forms of expression and action was opened up.”²⁷ It is important to inform “History” about history, even more it is important to report information for a possible future genealogy (that I am connecting right here) of communities that develop forms of networked life and action within contemporary art and culture. *Weekend Art* and *Community Art* have a place already within this genealogy.

How? Because: “Information is [as well, the beginning of] interpretation.” (I. Keser)

Marina Gržinić, Ljubljana/Vienna, February 2005

²⁵ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children – Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround 1992).

²⁶ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, p. 75.

²⁷ Cf. Susana Noguero, “Air Unconditioning,” in *Zehar*, no.50 (San Sebastain: Arteleku 2003).