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I. Two Displays of Being Together

A Russian group of artists and theoreticians, named after the disreputable programmatic book of Lenin, *What is to Be Done* (Chto delat), participated with a work with the same name at the exhibition, *Collective Creativity*, which recently ended in Kassel Fridericianum. In a dark room there were two screens side by side. On one, there was a straight succession of slides, still shots of the members of the group, *What is to be done*. On the other, there were subtitles of their discussions: chatting about ways of working together, ideologies of collectivity and collaboration, oscillating between irony and dedication, individual approaches and objective statements; at the same time it was a talk of friends and collaborators. This was a group of young people, standing with some drinks and cigarettes in an anonymous urban place in the middle of a cold night, there was a weed-ridden wall to stand on or sit upon, the background was dark and alighted only by the lights necessary for the video. The group of people could not be more contingently together in the time of the night and they could not be more incoherently placed in an anonymous place. The discussions seemed to be almost non-obligatory: there was something easygoing in the dark and cold air. At the end of their discussion the last slide of the group of people standing together was combined with another image on the second screen: the well-known painting of Victor Popkov, *The Builders of Bratsk*, from 1957. The image, done in the style of socialist realism, showed a group of workers standing together. The spatial arrangement of the *What is to be done* group and Popkov's *Builders of Bratsk* was entirely the same but at the same time two images could not be more unlike.

What we can clearly see here are the two displays which disclose two different ways of being together and two different representations of community. If we understand community as a notion for the group which has something particular in common, then in the first image, what they have in common seems more as a supplement of the photographic frame, or better, the supplement of the contingent common moment, of being together in the presence of the night. In the second image, the common is the only thing which is depicted, the people are together because of their common future, the commonality here is the core of the depiction, to which it is impossible to add something. The gap among the same displays has something to do with the ways of understanding the community, the commonality of their collaboration and being together. There is some incoherence of the space on the first image even if there is the same spatial arrangement as on Popkov's image. Beside this, there is also some contingency of time at work with the first image, very distinct from the importance of the common moment, depicted by Popkov. Young artists and theoreticians are namely not together, because their togetherness would be subjugated to progress, teleology, finality, to the future common goal. The common on the first image is more an appendix of the framed moment, it is the community as described by French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy: community on the contrary is ordinary being together, without any assumption of common identity, without any strong intensity, but exposed to banality, to

the common of existence. It is not the depiction of the common dominated by finality, which can take different forms (total man, society without classes, liberated body, liberated subjectivity, etc.). Neither is the common that is tightly intertwined with the active transformation of 20th century history, but merely this is the ordinary being together, deprived of all the historical tasks. If we follow Nancy, this would then be the common of always already, this that we already share in relation to our banal and daily life (like the question of our own finitude, by example), the sacred profane which arrange us together incoherently on the picture. This is then the community, where there is no exchange, no universality, no economy, no coherence, no identity, because, at the same time, nothing can be shared; there is no being of togetherness, or to put it differently: the community is made of the retreat of the common. The retreat opens and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed.

This strange being-the-one with the other is in the work *What is to be done* exposed with framing the group of young people in a series of still shots, which show them constantly in different spatial positions, their bodies always framed in different spatial arrangements, which seem to be caused only by the contingency of their talk. We can say that the still shots follow each other in a constant flow of changed positions. With constant positioning taking place in the anonymous night, the bodies are re-positioning themselves in a relaxed, but at the same time, engaged way. The group belongs to the space of the night through the contingent and incoherent relations among them. *What is to be done* becomes not the question of the common goal or program, but becomes a contingent process of spatialization, it is a result of taking positions in language (talk) which cannot be done without at the same time taking positions in space. The work can be read as a good example of how to understand the spatialization which can happen in the void of the night, because there is no presupposed space and time behind, nobody is there for somebody from behind. The people are together because they are in a particular relation to time and space, they are active through the open process of spatialization which is tightly linked with their positioning when connecting and communicating. They encounter each other because at the same time the space is being constructed through their agency, disclosed through the active positioning of their subjectivities. Their subjectivities are always situated through the ways of talking together, negotiating, communicating, touching, looking, relaxing, even smoking together, they spatialize the void of the night through their desires and activities. This void of the night is then a political space par excellence, not because somebody there is standing and speaking for somebody or something else, but because we are witnessing the active re-articulation of the space. The programmatic and historically much-contaminated question about what is to be done becomes a critical disclosure not only of the ways how we are doing something together through negotiation, disagreement, dispute, statement, etc., but also why we are doing something together. The night, even if it is an anonymous and contingent night, becomes a true public space, indeed. The common is tightly connected to a different understanding of space, when people being together are not arranged, and are not arranging themselves for the task and to be efficient, but nevertheless they are continuously engaged in activity. The alliances of the common activity are changed, the common is put in a void because through it, the

particular spatialization and rearrangement of the space is happening all the time. Concurrently, the question of time is also changed: the common as something contingent which nevertheless reveals itself in the present, it is no longer the question of loss in the past or gain in the future.

II. Collaborating and Floating

There is a certain inoperativeness in the What is to be done way of being together, which results in interruption, fragmentation, suspense and opens up community to the void: they are thousand of people behind the builders of Bratsk, but who is behind us? When open to the void, the time of the meeting is always contingent and spatial arrangements are constantly a result of incoherence. Nevertheless, the relations and connections keeping people in proximity are not weaker and less binding, even if they seem to appear only as an inessential supplement of the encounter.

But it is important to stress that such inoperativeness has nothing to do with the fetishised status of collaboration, which is today becoming the main commonality of being together. Today, the encounters, meetings and collaborations are happening all the time, the ways of being together are multiple, fluid and dynamic, they are all the time changing with immense speed, and of course all the time challenging also the institutionalisation of collaboration. It namely seems that today collaboration is exactly this presupposed commonality of work, the value of the work is namely based in the constant production of communication, relations, signs, languages, money, subjectivities, desires. There is relating and connecting all the time going on since it is the collaboration which enables the flows of the capital and people are all the time connected together in the urgency of their mobility. Collaboration places people in the present (time) and on the map (space), it makes them visible in the present time, where they constantly add their part in the contemporary flow of money, capital and signs. From this point of view, it is interesting that the other can be encountered most of the time through belonging exactly to the community of work which is enabling the contemporary mobility, and with that, more and more non-belonging people or groups of people move in the invisible and deadly channels of illegality, poverty, invisibility and escape. We can say that social exchange, collaborations, communications and connections are one of the most fetishized areas of today. When thinking about the places for negotiation and collaboration, an interesting issue becomes the fact that the most dynamic places for collaboration today are no longer parliaments (with the crisis of parliamentary democracy where collaboration and negotiation is deeply involved in a complex network of media simulations). They can be found in corporations and not surprisingly artistic institutions: especially museums and galleries, also sometimes theatres. Not only the disappearing public space, but also the complexity of contemporary globalization with its multicultural flows and movements, adds something to this shift in art institutions. They have become spaces to collaborate with the other (artist, audience, cultural other, curator, institution) and at the same time expose the other in its presence, to open up the spaces for so called aesthetic contemporariness of the other. It is then no coincidence that almost a decade ago French art critic and

curator Nicolas Bourriaud formed the notion of relational aesthetics, which was quite influential for many collaborative and participatory artistic projects in the last decade. Collaboration and social exchange became a core of the relational aesthetics, the notion with which Bourriaud wanted to give the critical and political potential to immaterialization of the artistic object in the 90thies. The processes of immaterialization are interpreted as a flow of sensations, communications, concepts and perceptions. Relational aesthetics then deals with the processes of transitivity, participation, collaboration and contracts, where artworks are not only understood as moments of sociability but also produce sociability with exploration of relations (which can be personal, politic, economical, institutional etc.). We can say that collaboration here is tightly linked with the social exchange and critical use of the flexible working processes governing everyday life. Here the art is taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than an assertion of an independent and private symbolic space. (...) Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavours to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue. Bourriauds statement is very problematic and questionable especially on the point where he links the relational aesthetics with the political project. Many of the projects which are interpreted as being a part of relational aesthetics belong to an institutional community of work which fetishizes mobility, participation and communication, and in many examples, the issue of collaboration is turned into a behavioural game for an audience. The problem is because positioning here is not critically dealt with, but lost in the fluid multiplicity of many ways how we are doing something together; subjectivities dynamicly interact, nevertheless they do that as an empty circulating signs. Relations are the commonality of the aesthetic acts which are bringing audience (and artists and curators) together, but they dont really shift the processes of spatialization, they dont really rearticulate the space in which meetings are taking place. The sociability which is here produced is already framed and presupposed as a sociability of a transparent artistic space and have a certain common being which is in a good neoliberal manner always testing and improving the ways in which certain things are communicated and negotiated.

At this point a still very valuable concept of Henri Lefebvre can be helpful. It is well-known that Lefebvre develops the concept of an active spatialization, which replaces a static notion of the space. Space cannot be understood through the named activity for which is intended (a tennis court in which a game of tennis is played) or through the titles that its buildings or other solid entities might uphold. The space is all the time produced through the active processes of spatialization which are connected among designated activities, physical properties and structures of subjectivities with their social relations, anxieties, desires, etc. The realm of the contemporary galleries and museums as the relational venues can be very similar to what is taking place in the space of antechambre, the well-known example of Lefebvre. Antechambre, the space of negotiation between king and royal petitioners, this constant space of negotiation, where petitioners became more empowered because they were meeting the king in person, and the absolute monarch has diminished in power, as his space has been infiltrated with commoners, not only discloses to us how tricky can be the open and relational contacts between artist and the audience, but also the complexity of relation

between space and subjectivity. Lefebvre showed us how the space of negotiation has never to be placed in the void, it has to be strictly physically codified as static and unchangeable. It is no wonder spaces for negotiation and collaboration are one of the most monumental of spaces of today like parliaments, corporation buildings, theatres and nevertheless museums. Only in a stable space a flow of subjectivities can collaborate through a constant flow of opinions and works so that the stable space is not endangered with uncontrollable and unpredictable disagreement. The important part of spatial stability is also an illusion of transparency of such places they have to be always disclosed in their visibility and potentiality, always producing the illusion of possibility to participate and act free. Lefebvre warns us exactly of this illusion of transparency where space appears as luminous, intelligible, as giving action free rein, it is a view of space as innocent and free of traps. The institutional space for negotiation is a prime example of the illusion of transparency.

How then to resist the multiplying flows of signs where communication and collaboration are the symbolic value, fetishizing even more the participation and constant activity of the contemporary subjectivity? How to avoid that the desires included in the agency would not become a main gear to produce constant flow of freedoms and possibilities but always in an enlightened and redeeming space of artistic institution? In the artistic institutions today, there is still too much the illusion of transparency at work, even if it many times today artistic institutions look more similar to a baroque museum of curiosities. The stable space has to be there at the end to enable non-stability, flows of disagreements, continuous changing of the roles, and the common of agency. The problem is that with this illusion of transparency certain collaborative subjectivities become even more visible and even more presentable, some even less, depending on the common measure of collaborative contemporariness which is all the time produced in this institutional machine.

III. Spatial Consequences of Collaboration

To understand the political shift in the understanding of collaboration as inoperativity, it is then necessary to deal with the question of space. Collaboration which is taking positions in the language can be put close to some observations by Charles Esche. Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part community centre, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function. Esche is convinced about the need of particular engaged autonomous relationship to capitalism which has to be at work in the art institutions of today, where there is an oscillation between the irrelevance of art and the possibilities which can be opened through it. The cultural palaces and museums of today have to become acknowledged spaces for democratic deviances, where museums are permissive and imaginative spaces for expressing individual and collective desires that could not be

accommodated, or even thought of, within current political discourses. Disagreement, incoherence and unpredictable results are encouraged also with the help of the re-definition of the museums social actors (curators, audience, artists, etc.). It seems that art institutions want to become the places of the parallel processes of collaboration and participation, which are not anymore possible in a privatised public space. With the crisis of parliamentary democracy (which is circulating with its negotiations in a complex network of simulations), with the privatisation and commercialisation of the public space, with the corporative fetishisation of collaboration, artistic institutions should be engaged at least in the idea of freedom challenge it and at the same time still suggest the idea of a society of free thinking citizens as a possible reality, if only for a particular moment and in a certain place. The critical focus of collaboration is neither the institutional question of authorship, which attacked the modernistic idea of the autonomous artist and economy of the artistic institution, nor the aesthetic framing of spaces for relational negotiation with the observers/audience/spectators, where art becomes the space of encounter, as described by Bourriaud. It is then not enough to be satisfied with the shift of artistic institutions in the last decade as the shift from the dematerialization of the artistic object which was the main strategy of the institutional critique, to the fluid and relational engagement of subjectivities. Esche is radicalising this shift and thinking about the artistic institution in the realm of the possible, the institution is opening up the the possibility for a democratic deviance, possibility for production of sociability, which as possibility (and deviance) has immediately its spatial consequences.

But what exactly is this possibility and how to think the possibility in relation to the space? The collaboration is tightly linked with plurality, mutuality, with commonality. If there is a collaboration, there is also a certain commonality, there has to be something in-common lurking from the agency of collaboration. Is it possible then to speak also about the production of a certain we? Despite the prevailing mythologies that continue to link the experience of art to individual reflection, we do look at art, inhabit the spaces of art in various forms of collectivity and in the process we produce new forms of mutuality, of relations between viewers and spaces rather between viewers and objects. Beyond the shared categories of class, or taste or political or sexual orientations another form of WE is produced. This is the we of constant positioning, of taking the place through language in the same way the group What is to be done positions themselves in the anonymous night. When Irit Rogoff describes the ways how to understand the notion of WE when thinking about different collectivities in art, she also mentions the shift from the analytical to the performative function of observation and participation, we can agree that meaning is not excavated but it Takes Place in the present. There is an important connection between meaning (which is always a result of connectedness, it never takes place in isolation), taking place and the present: connections between us are always spatialized and this is also one of the main political impetus of the performative function: the way how the common is revealed and how it inhabits is tightly linked with the issue of performativity. This is then not the flow of relations in the open space with many possibilities for flights, it is not being active in the transparency of possibilities, neither experimental changing of the roles and each other contemporariness and a constant multicultural crossing to understand the other, but something much more fragile, located and demanding in its fragility. Ö action and

speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as they appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living and inanimate things, but make their appearance explicitly. Exactly through making our appearance explicitly, the connection between meaning, place and time become visible. This is a constant process of inhabitation, positioning in the void to re-articulate spaces and open them to parallel commonalities. This is the way that different multiplicities form themselves through language, and as Donna Haraway would say, situated knowledges.

This notion is very important when we would like to speak about certain ways of being together (collectives, collaborations, movements, participations) which are no longer linked to progress and history, to the common goal, but rather, articulate and demand the space through incoherency and contingency of their meeting. The space of appearance can be read in a proximity to the inoperativity as developed by Nancy, especially since this is inoperativity the communication (this becomes especially interesting when thinking about media art collaborations), it is a community constantly undergoing its sharing. But at the same time this appearance becomes mutual exactly through the ability to stage the actions and to read them for what they are, we can say it is mutual through a constant spatialization of the action and production of the meaning in the present. So we is not the result of the exchange of relations, economy of participations, of the flow of signs and networks, but results of complex incoherent networks of positioning, taking place together, being contingently present in the moment and articulating this presence at the same time. This ability to stage the actions and to read them for what they are, this production of the meaning in the present, has been in the last decade extremely disabled with the privatisation of the public space and with the appropriation of the procedures and protocols by corporations and media. Exactly from this point I also see the place of the artistic institutions as a spaces of possibility for a parallel articulations of mutuality, for the production of a certain we; but only if at the same time this is also the rearticulation of the same space where we is being articulated. Each we namely demand the space in the void, that means it is continuously variable and its coordinates are never settled.

IV. Taking the Space in the Void

In such collaboration we are not taking the place for the other but with the other in a void, we inhabit the space, or better, we are in a process of multi-inhabitation of spaces through bodies, social relations and physical dynamics. Only then the night of What is to be done can become a political night, because it is a night fully inhabited and at the same time open to the void. We are still standing in a dark, even if the space is full of meaning, since it is not transparent and enlightened. The darkness which accompanies the collaboration is of utmost importance here: the common is namely never visible, but it only appears as a contingent appendix of the positioned relation. In such collaboration we do not encounter each other as individual subjectivities where one is the one and another is the other, and one can be for the other, and the other can be for the other in this encounter there is still too much to cross, to pass, to get over with. We

live in the world where we are crossing each other all the time, but is it possible to shift this crossing into the parallel demand for space and present time? Is it possible to put the parallel crossings on the map? If it is not the finality, history, religion, the end of man, if it is not a loss (loss of community, history, country), if it is not belonging since belonging is too full of contradictory ambivalences, if it is not the common of the work, what is it then that holds us together and makes the WE?

Here, I will answer only briefly with one example, with the work of Oliver Ressler, the artist whose work is concerned with issues of racism, genetic engineering, economics, forms of resistance, etc. What is interesting is not only the way that his work can make important shifts in the critical understanding of visibility. One series of photographs (Untitled, Geneva 03.06.03) which were taken in Geneva in connection to the anti-globalization riots, can help us to understand the processes of spatialization, tightly linked with the ways people are being together. With photographs showing shopping windows protected with wooden desks, which turned out to become an endless plateau for the demonstrations texts, graffiti and images and sometimes combined with the signs and names of global companies still visible outside the wooden desks, we can see how the incoherency of space and contingency of time enables the disclosure of the common. What is interesting here is exactly the mixture of spatial incoherency and contingency of time of the common, which revealed a completely different mapping of the city streets, movements, languages of the city, parallel spatial meanings. What holds these images together is not the common goal, not even the common meaning, but the alternative production of language with by taking the space and opening up the time. The common appearance is made explicit, this is the spectacle of appearance as Hannah Arendt would say. The spectacle is spatially incoherent as a consequence (it is namely done as a protection nevertheless establishing plateaux for momentarily spatial appropriation) and contingent in the sense of making the common explicit not as a program, but as a response to the momentarily urgency of appearance.

From here it is possible to conclude with the tricky language of WE, which, of course, already includes some hints of engagement. When asking ourselves what is to be done, the future of the common is already taken for granted by being asked what. But it is also not enough only to ask how it can be done, since we can quickly end in an open situation of the 60s ideal of participatory democracy. More important is to dwell into the questions of why we are doing something together, why we are nevertheless holding together. In this way not only the ways how are we making our appearance to each other explicitly become visible, but also we have to open up the question of why are we making our appearance to each other explicit at all. What kind of contingent urgency is here at work and what kind of incoherent space is glimmering in the anonymous night?