

Freedom

or Artistic Freedom in the times of cultural policies

(a script scenario-long version of the film *Rosa*)

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We are three women working in the art field in Greece. We are curators, art theorists, art critics. We first met and worked together at the 4th Athens Biennale, AGORA. Back then, in 2013 and already five years into the economic and social crisis, we were under the euphoria of expecting a new, young left government of SYRIZA. We had the aspiration of creating a contemporary agora, an assembly of deliberation, collective experiment, establishment of new artistic strategies, proposed as a creative alternative to the misery of the crisis rhetorics that were dominant at the time. The working group of AGORA and the collective working methods that were devised and adopted created a hype. Visitors from different backgrounds and geographical contexts were expressing their enthusiasm seeing AGORA as an example that seemed radical and exotic, proposing a model of collective, novel economy, a “total” way of creative living. That was intensified even more when the artistic director of the prestigious and established institution of documenta14, that took place in Athens and Kassel in 2017, in his initial announcements three years before the exhibition opening, referenced AGORA as a point of inspiration for documenta’s concept. This event came after the experience of a phase of immobility in the art field, one of the effects of the crisis that have resulted in the confinement in our “peripheral role”. Therefore many of us, were more eager to embrace this moment of attention as a possible way out of our predicament (without abandoning totally our provincial reservations and suspicion).

Did this condition enhance our professional situation, our creative output, our everyday condition, our freedom as subjects?

In the following years before and during the exhibition of documenta14, through various differing outlooks, perspectives and collective frustrations, emerged a series of new articulations, clearer position-taking, an opening up to discursive encounters with the global art contexts and a self-reflective evaluation of our conditions and practices. The Temporary Academy of Arts (PAT), a quasi institution, was one of the coalitions that came forth during that period, created after our meeting and working together under these conditions. The years between 2013 to 2017 was a period of creative

inflation connected with ideas about, flexibility, creativity, positive informality, enterprenuity, that were promising a different kind of freedom. A new kind of freedom that would produce subjects and articulations that would be resistant and resilient, that could find solutions of exodus to the strict capitalist global condition. However, what has been the typical romanticized perception of artistic work connected to ideas about freedom and autonomy, without the conventions of the 8-hour workday, has been appropriated and repositioned, so that the precarious conditions also present in artistic labour became the blueprint for the globalised working conditions at large. So, we ask ourselves, *is this new model of work any better or resistant?*

It is indicative that art institutions, as well as the academy in Greece, in many cases, depend on "free of charge" work or on underpaid services, short term or one off contracts or collaborations. Other than the fact that application forms for these jobs demand arduous labour, even if hired, they also, usually, leave no possibility for continuity and establishment of more lasting (working) relations with the rest of the in-house employees, the audience, the students, the human infrastructure. In contrast, lasting working relations mean that you can become, even for a period of time, involved in the procedures of the institutions, taking part in decision making, thus being able to participate in possible shifts, make coalitions and take part in claiming of rights. As art professionals in Greece, being by definition external collaborators, we are excluded from policy making procedures and we were always in the loophole of legality in terms of our health benefits and taxation. Currently we see that same model being replicated in many businesses and freelancers even outside the art field. As for documenta some loose networks were indeed created. However networks are not coalitions of commitment, they are based in an economy of friendship, occasion and opportunity, whereas commitment demands persistence, investment and dedication to certain causes.
Freedom, exhaustion, withdrawal, adjustment.

How free are we on "freedom" project(s)?

What are the limits and semblances of the so-called freedom to articulate, are there visible and implicit constraints?

In the last twenty years more or less, European institutions have shifted their cultural management politics towards strengthening the so called common values of the European Union. A number of funded programs were addressed to the cultural sector in order to tackle and normalize the challenging socio-political circumstanc-

es critical at the time, such as the fall of the eastern bloc, the Mediterranean and southern countries, the migration wave, etc., issues that in the last years became more urgent and were connected with the so called crisis of democracy, humanitarian crisis and crisis of the European Union in general. Nowadays, there is an increase in number of such programs, which, one could say, hold a key role as regards to the multiplication of artistic practices operating in the "social field". In Greece, a number of such designated topics, are also programmatically adopted by prestigious private institutions that constitute the primary source of funding for art and cultural projects. Since many of us are depended for our livelihood on such funding, we find ourselves having to deal with the hidden challenges and compromises these projects require.

In Athens, for example, in the past years there is an increased interest for projects that focus on urbanism and art in the public space. In tandem with european union politics, different institutions, such as NEON and Onassis Cultural Centre, claim the role of the benefactor and regulator of a new inclusive public space, advocating a naive humanism that does not take into account the inherent conflicts present in all relations. Further the way their agendas towards these issues are articulated in a specific and predetermined manner, canalize the discourse, limiting it into a romanticized or sensational categorization of the status of the immigrant, of the so called "vulnerable subjects", of public space etc. This interest from such institutions and organisations, seems to meet local state politics attention and efforts towards the canonisation of urban space. Many of these projects insist on an emphasis on collaboration between different localities, working under the same given subjects. Such a process, can indeed produce experiences and possibilities, however limited and at times reductive, since this form of generic, often superficial exchange, is not sufficient to address historical, social, political, everyday local specificities and is inclined to essentialize similarities in the detriment of the specific circumstances of every locality. PAT has been invited to a number of such projects -both local and international- to implement these particular agendas. One main challenge that these projects bring forth, is the fact that they assume or connote generalized notions of inclusiveness, universality, openness and a romanticized civil society conceptualized in homogenous terms, presupposing common values; freedom, freedom of speech, the existence or production of a non conflictual public space, absolute social meanings that cannot be contested and thus subdue the expression of any kind of conflict, ignoring the fundamental exclusions that constitute the social. Administering towards a civil society which is by definition a unity between rightful citizens

and is based on a conception of protecting specific common values, is thus problematic. Freedom and democracy conceived through the idea of a civil society, are “settled” notions.

But only the constant negotiation of freedom can set us free.

Not one public space, not one freedom exists.

Is it possible to negotiate through loose networks of opportunity or do we need firmer alliances, coalitions of commitment?

We have been working in the cultural field for years but we are still not professionals. Through working on flexible, short term, precarious conditions, collaborating with private institutions, the academy, setting up networks based on friendship or acquaintances, we have indeed developed a certain set of skills in addition to our educational capital. These skills however are scattered, not recognised officially as professional experience since most of the times, as mentioned above, we don't have contracts, we are not part of a long-term employment and we are excluded from social benefits. This makes us consumable human capital in the labour market, a condition that we constantly reproduce throughout our practice.

Recently there has been a statement by the Chamber of fine arts of Greece against a new bill that connects the State Museum of Contemporary Art to the private Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, with the argument that such an alliance between a public and private institution promotes business interests in the visual arts, instrumentalizing arts and culture towards EU cultural politics and ends. The chamber claims that this bill deepens the dependent relation of art and artists to the cultural industry, forcing creativity to succumb to market requirements and identity building. The chamber calls for an artistic freedom of expression and for artists a freedom to create without any restrictions since such a bill would suppose the manipulation of the artists and consequently the greek people. Such a declaration places art in an autonomous sphere of an absolute freedom. Such an autonomy does not exist.

One can only work towards a relative autonomy where art takes into consideration the historical parameters (of its existence), claiming every time anew its own criteria and constantly being in a dialectic relation to the social, political and economic context. As Gene Ray asserts “Relative autonomy, is both the condition of resistance and the condition that actually obtains most of time. What varies – in the specifics of place, position and conjuncture – is the extent and kind of relative autonomy.”

In that context, PAT does not partake in the generalized

anti-institutional sentiment. Instead of withdrawing or not participating in projects that have “predetermined” agendas, it participates by adopting a self-reflective method of work. We try to question the above mentioned compromises, often making them the subject matter of our projects. For instance, through rephrasing the requirements and language of the given agendas, PAT tries to produce small shifts inside these projects, attempting to influence as much as possible the modus operandi within the institutions it collaborates with, aiming towards a more conscious approach as regards the stakes involved.

Part of these shifts is the affirmation of firmer alliances, the quest of relative autonomy and strategic compromising. By insisting towards conditions that makes us less consumable and by coming up with strategies that are directed towards concrete aims, starting from smaller causes such as enhancing the recognisability and official acknowledgment of our skills, to more significant ones, such as transforming our pessimism and terror created by capitalist determinism, by organising and aiming it.

As we have been asked by colleagues from Slovakia, *can we really influence and contribute through participating in “socially sensitive”, ambitious projects to the dramaturgy of public discourse on, freedom and democracy effectively?*

We remind ourselves that projects with generalised, sweeping humanitarianism still trace a road to hell paved with good intentions. Recently we have attended a round table discussion on the idea of education, activism and art. Different people from different fields, artists, educators, social workers have gathered to share their experiences. What we have witnessed was superficial ideas being heard louder than the ones that were more subtle and conscious. Those ideas span from bigmouth philanthropy to activism, homogenised under a common benevolent artistic vocabulary. Proclamations of awakening the “underprivileged subjects”, whereas the art discourse, supposedly par excellence more creative and free, hegemonizes, in these contexts, all other fields, practices and methodologies. Let alone that most of the times these socially engaged art projects are eclectic one-off, short term commissions, therefore of limited commitment, whereas other social practices demand by definition long term research and involvement. This sweeping creative privilege, by even bringing together unconditionally heterogeneous practices, ends up disempowering rather than empowering, under-rating every party involved. At the same time, different “creative” self-centered subjects, usually attracted to socially engaged prac-

tices, fantasize themselves as the benjaminian "angels of history", talking about inclusive actions of sympathy towards, as they phrase it, "special categories" of human beings, "homeless, homosexuals and crazy people", not even realising that they reproduce by default the abusive negative politics of language. And this is where our scepticism for cultural and institutional "socially engaged" policies comes from, ascertaining that in many cases it is through the implicit function of cultural policies that the immanence of society and the essentialisms of the art field is performed, becoming more and more sophisticated and persistent.

Cultural Policies. A field for Detournement.

Temporary Academy of Arts, cats on a hot tin roof.

As three women coming together to collaborate not as friends but as professionals with particular interests and positions, we had to 'excuse' ourselves more than once against various offensive attributions aiming to undermine and compromise our work and positions, such as for example that we are "cats on a hot tin roof". Making explicit these implicit tactics intended to impede, is a strategy to transform this and other terrors.

We are in many ways exposed, as in the situation described above. In such circumstances we have always to restate issues that are considered self evident and to often perform the killjoy. Nothing is self-evident or common sense.