A(c/r)tivism

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# Introduction

The intersections of art and social activism could be a subject for a whole summer school, or even a whole study program. What I will present you, is therefore highly compressed and highly selective at the same time. I will quickly thrown in a lot of references to give you pointers for your own continued reading and research, and I will slow down to focus on three projects that we can jointly discuss and which are from 1971, 2003 and 2012 respectively:

* *Shapolsky et al.* by the German-American artist Hans Haacke
* *Nike Ground* by the Italian artist duo Franco and Eva Mattes
* and the contemporary activities of the Indonesian ruang rupa collective.

But first a historical ‘fast-backward’: In the early 20th century, the debate about art and political activism was mainly one of and in the Marxist left, and yielded different concepts and practices:

* Activist art as agitprop (agitation and propaganda) and proletkult (proletarian culture): "Beat the White (troops) with the red wedge) by El Lissitzky, a propaganda poster supporting the Red Army in the Russian civil war against the pro-Tsarist troops, uses the language of abstract and constructivist art for a political message;
* Activist art as political think pieces: Epic theater of Bertolt Brecht, which does not ask the viewer to emotionally identify, but breaks the dramatic illusion and formulates its political message through making the viewers distance themselves and critically reflect.

In both examples, autonomy of art is at least partly rejected.

* Critical aesthetics which is *not* activist, but critical through upholding autonomy: Atonal composition of the Vienna school, one of the main examples for Theodor Adorno’s concept of art as a “social antithesis to society”.

Arguably, the latter has become a dominant paradigm for contemporary art as it is shown at Biennials and contemporary spaces, and its most recent philosophical update is the book “Anywhere or not at all: a philosophy of contemporary art” by the British philosopher Peter Osborne. (His point of departure, btw., is the work of Walid Raad which is currently shown at Stedelijk Amsterdam.) However, there is currently much debate within the contemporary art system on the continued viability of this paradigm. The fact that the ruang rupa collective, which I will cover last in my presentation, has been made curators of the next Documenta in Kassel, is a strong indicator of this.

# Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et. al.

Hans Haacke is a German-American artist whose career began in the 1960s as part of abstract and minimal art. (He was associated to the German Zero group.) In the early 1970s, he practically reinvented himself as a political artist. His work was part of the first exhibitions of conceptual art, and he was strongly involved in what today is known as “institutional critique”, art that addresses and criticizes the political, economic and working conditions in the art system itself. (To drop some names: Art Workers Coalition [of which Haacke was a part], Guerilla Girls, Andrea Frazer.)

The title of this work is: *Shapolsky et. al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. This work was shown in the same year at the Guggenheim Museum, but its director canceled the exhibition, calling the work “incompatible with the functions of an artistic institution”. The curator of the exhibition, who defended the work, was fired.

What is this work about? It shows real estate holdings in New York’s Lower East Side and Harlem, back then ghetto neighborhoods, their ownership through more than 70 real estate companies, and the interconnectedness of these companies to factually only one owner family, Shapolsky brothers, who in that time were major slum lords of New York City. (They were also rumored to have been sponsors of the Guggenheim Museum, which explains the cancellation of the exhibition.)

This piece is a textbook example of artistic research, where the artist had done the research (based on public real estate and company records) but turned it into an art piece - and a piece of visual research - rather than a research paper. (When we re-read the title of this presentation, then it is also “arctivism” in the literal sense of archival art with an activist edge.)

The title, “a Real-Time Social System”, references General System Theory (notably Ludwig von Bertalanffy; Niklas Luhmann’s application of this theory to social sciences originated around the same time). Haacke had used General System Theory in his earlier work, such the installation piece *condensation cube* from 1964, in which water condensed inside a glass cube with the rising room temperature caused by the visitors of the exhibition. This piece embodies systems theories of open and closed systems and real-time metabolisms between them in a still non-political way.

In 1983, he rehashed the cube in the piece *Isolation Box*, which showed a wooden box used as a prison cell by U.S. military during the Grenada invasion.

In 2014, the artist-research Trevor Paglen and the Internet rights activist Jacob Appelbaum (who was part of Wikileaks) rehashed Haacke in their *Autonomy Cube*, a museum installation that contains a server computer that anonymizes Internet traffic (a TOR node) and which uses the art museum as a space where it can be not as easily taken down as in an ordinary server room.

If we think of the three modes of political art discussed in the early 20th century, then the *Autonomy Cube* might best fit with El Lissitzky as a piece of hands-on functional agitprop, *Shapolsky et al* and *Isolation Box* could be interpreted as Brechtian critical reflection pieces, and the 1964 *Condensation Cube* as a piece of autonomous art in the sense of Adorno (for whom art was both autonomous and “fait social”, and a “social antithesis to society”).

When *Shapolsky et al* was newly exhibited in New York in 1987, the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto wrote in a review that the piece had turned against itself in the course of time: What had been a denouncement of slum lords in 1971 could now be interpreted as a piece celebrating the business genius of the Shapolsky brothers, buying up cheap property in areas that would later become hip and expensive neighborhoods. Danto even suggested that the Shapolsky brothers buy the piece and hang it in their corporate headquarters.

# Franco & Eva Mattes, *Nike Ground*

I fast-forward to 2003, and from real estate development in New York to real estate development in Vienna. The Italian artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes (which are pseudonyms) was better known in that time as part of the early generation of Internet artists under their website name 0100101110101101.org. This project was one of their first which no longer took place on their website, but in urban public space. At the same time, it was clearly conceived as what we nowadays call a meme, or a piece of fake news made to be picked up and virally spread by the media.

Under the guise of Nike corporation, they installed an information pavilion on Karlsplatz, one of Vienna’s most popular squares in the historical city center, announcing that the square had been bought up by Nike, would be renamed Nikeplatz (“Nike Ground”) and be decorated with Nike’s corporate symbol as a monumental open air sculpture.

This prank had been perfectly executed in collaboration with designers so that the pavilion and the visual mock-ups lived up to the standards of Nike’s slick corporate design. Unlike Haacke’s piece, which was about private ownership of residential housing, this was about the privatization and corporatization of the public sphere, much in line with neoliberal economic developments since the 1990s; a development which made the privatization of Karlplatz through Nike actually believable.

The activist as well as research character of this project does lie in the visual work itself, but rather in the public reactions it triggered. These have been documented on a video of which I play a short excerpt. […]

In this respect, *Nike Ground* followed the blueprint of an earlier public art project in Vienna where the German film and theater director Christoph Schlingensief imitated the reality tv show Big Brother by placing two containers in the city and having people vote on the residence permission of asylum seekers who lived in the containers.

# ruang rupa

From Haacke to *Nike Ground* and Schlingensief, we see a shift from art that still exists in white cube spaces to art whose political provocation can only work through the fact that it is placed outside museums and galleries and not even recognizable as art pieces, but running under the fake disguise of corporate advertising and popular entertainment.

What in all the previously shown examples is quite stable, if not traditional, is the role of the artist: The artist works as the author of a physical and/or performative piece.

This mode of working has been questioned and revised recently, particularly in the context of community-oriented art practices that seek to address and involve non-traditional and marginalized audiences. As an example for these practices, I chose the Indonesian ruang rupa collective that was founded in 2000, shortly after the fall of the Suharto regime, and was nominated curators for the next Documenta in Kassel in 2022.

I mostly lean here on the work of my colleague reinaart vanhoe who wrote the first and today only book on ruang rupa and other Indonesia artist collectives, as part of our research program at Willem de Kooning Academy.

ruangrupa is an interdisciplinary collective, consisting of artists, musicians, historians, ITers, architects and journalists. For the most part, it no longer produces art works in a classical sense, but creates participatory spaces. The initial photograph was taken at ruang rupa’s own space in Jakarta, and exemplifies the informal, hospitable and social character of what the collective does, where everything is decided as a group. In their exhibition projects such as “Lekker eten zonder betalen” from 2013, hosting and creating communal participatory spaces is the central activity. The title is Dutch and means “Eating well without paying”, and thus is a reference to the colonial history of Indonesia.

ruang rupa’s work can be read as de-colonial and highly political, but not in an agitprop sense, but by questioning existing hierarchies and models of production and participation in culture. In 2016, ruang rupa were the curators of the Sonsbeek Biennial, a biennial for open-air sculpture in Arnhem that has been existing since 1958. Here, ruang rupa changed the definition of sculpture and public art by opening a community house in Arnhem’s city center prior to the biennial and inviting people for social activities and sharing their stories and visions of the city.

The following is ruang rupa’s statement for the curatorshop of the next Documenta. ruang rupa’s ambition could thus be called a convivial and friendly form of social activism thinking from the periphery rather than the center, removing the brand-name artist, removing the traditional idea of art’s autonomy and art works, and replacing them with an approach of “healing”.