

Interview with Manuela Johanna Covini

I would like the material to be presented in a careful and good way., in the form of a show, presentation, video

Mexico City

Questions to ask Manuela

1. Definition of art

I understand this as a Modernist problem, that acknowledges Modernist terminology. What do I mean by that? Having said that you have put your finger on one of the key problems today, the atomised fragmented incoherent look of the art world around the definition of art.

Is this just a sophist problem? Arent there more important problems than worrying about the definition of something such as art?

One of the characteristics that mark recent times is the question of how to define whatever this entity art is. But, also why we need to define art and why art is so difficult as a category to pin down, and why around the definition of art there is a battle ground.

On the one hand we have Hirst as the spokesperson for the art market and people linking art up with the super wealthy, with the return to Modernism, through clear references to Modernist masters and categories of work, paintings, impressionism, Bacon, colour and reduction of art to commodified art works and its financial value with the removal of the conceptualisation of art itself.

In many respects this atomised picture or internalised autonomous zone of art reflects the individual within Capitalism and its ideology, the promotion of the nation state and the west, which is so obvious it is hardly worth repeating. When you ask for a definition of art you are tempted to look for a self-definition of art, whereas whatever art is, is a social political construct, that wants to reach and glue as many people together under the category of art.

Then we have Seth Price and Suhail Malik's problematisation of the fragmented incoherent field of art, the problems and inability of existing terms to define this field and with Price the problems of existing in a field without categories and definitions, that taps into a new form of Globalisation and cultural colonialism with its use of a dislocated Global culture through virtual space. [David Joslett]

Having said that research into the forms we use and take for granted such as exhibitions, curating, Biennials, the role of art within a Global setting are under researched, even from this position we understand the platforms we use from a prism that barely works.

I only found this out in recent research into Biennials for a conference on Biennials and on curating and exhibitions, and the global structure of art, the structuring of art and thinking through existing centres of culture, research which has only started since 2016/17, confirming many of my suspicions and intuitions. So, in many respects we are looking at art through the prism of 19th century platforms and formulations of art.

The intellectual route into understanding these issues in the West is via the Metaphysics of Deleuze, Deleuze thinking is used to give shape to many elements of the art world, we can see this in Gillicks work and influence, Ottlith group.

It is difficult to pin down why art is so difficult to define or why institutions prefer that we exist in this state of unknowing.

I think this blur that we experience is both a registering of a mutation and fundamental shift in the use of art in the West.

Whatever we understand by the condition of art or a definition of art as it exists is outdated [whatever that means and I need to quantify this statement because this can sound crude etc] and many of the descriptions and categories we use are at least 20 years Old, and for that reason art has collapsed back into the single category of "art" and "modernism". primarily because the institutions of art want to encourage a seamless historical progression of art to protect their legacy. Many institutions seem to be undergoing revisions of its history and purpose without actually undertaking real change.

To summarise I think the material forms and platforms we use are outdated and are unable to allow us to present art as it actually exists.

But it is very difficult to understand precisely what is taking place, so the following are just my attempt to second guess the current state of affairs

I think or suspect that much of the existing complexity and expansion of an orthodox notion of art and its institutions revolves around the role and definition of art in the EU and at the End of time.

So that I wonder whether in the past few years we have experienced a rethinking, a reinvention of art and an expansion of art, art is now more than it is

The shift from contemporary art to art institutions role in changing the cultural mix of society and converting the west into global centres.

The shift to art institutions taking on an even greater role as political and governmental institutions and as soft power shaping a global world where reference to migration seems to be a code for this reshaping of the west as a global centre

It is only now in the past few years that artists have appeared who register this very complexity.

2. Is art a way of expression?

Again, this appears to be a modernist term, however I will try to answer you. How is art not propaganda? Art primarily appears to be preoccupied with peoples and nations or about people living in a particular time. There are a set of basic principles which are tied to very clearly defined cultures, places and politics. Within the existing context I am not so sure what expression is or why it should have any relevance.

I think what people understand by expression is basically branding and style. If I was asked, how do we as individuals construct a work or a language that is actually personal or individualistic that escapes propaganda? I am not sure I have an answer, other than the program I outlined in this Historical Moment.

But art is certainly a space for thinking in concrete terms in the world.

3. If yes why, if no why not?

4. Why are you working in the art sector? What is it that attracts you? Why are you interested in art?

I think the field of art is a valid area to frame questions in material concrete terms and to think at the centre of cultural power, in that respect it is a cultural, philosophical and political activity.

5. What was your first encounter with art? Do you remember a key experience?

Well there are a few small anecdotal incidents which are not very interesting but I distinctly remember that I made a yellow clay bear when I was about 8 and decided I wanted to be an artist. I am not sure why but during the mid 60's I remember my grandfather saying that we were not to have anything to do with Bourgeois culture, books, classical music etc which triggered a worm in my mind, asking why is that, what does he mean? My step father inherited volumes of magazines and books on the history of art, architecture and archaeology which I read through and which made a big impression, setting off a huge explosion of curiosity, of reading, then at some point I found I could draw quite well so I started drawing everything every day. While still at school we were taken to see a huge exhibition of Munch's work at the Hayward gallery in London. And I went to art school at the point when classic Modernism ended and a more figurative style became popular, which was basically an internal collapse and search for another agenda which is still going on to this day. My interest in Contemporary art only started towards the end of my BA and it took me a long time to work out my own interests which developed alongside my interest in philosophy.

As important as my interest in art and philosophy is my interest or anxiety about the English Imperial and Colonial legacy and the circumstances in which history is written.

6. Regarding your own art practice what are you discovering? Looking for? Trying to find out?

Since 2010 my practice has changed. It occurred to me for some time that my language was under developed. What do I mean by that? The material manifestation and substance that I use and think with. I find it difficult to put my finger on the problem, I sense it, but it is difficult to conceptualise the problem or locate a practice that I find satisfactory, but what I am looking at now is a language comprising "negation" and "developing a new language". Negation by its very nature is hard to pinpoint and hold still long enough to think about, it is constantly escaping, moving on. The overriding characteristic is doubt and scepticism, similar to Descartes, Nietzsche, Sturtevant, Darren Badar

This sign of open brackets [] the sign of Post autonomy, is the clearest representation of my practice

Given the difficulty in determining what art is or what its foundation is I approach each project by using each concrete context to pose a question, this way each new project is a new beginning, in other words I use art as a location to pose questions and to think within concrete contexts primarily to challenge existing centres and formations of power and to test out my own thinking and doing things.

7 How would you define your own art practice?

Post Autonomy provides the intellectual framework in which I work and think after I came across a book sketching out an idea something akin to Post Autonomy in 1998.

I operate on two levels. One within the existing formats and platforms for staging art, and, 2 where I am working with forms or formats that are not fixed and that suspend or step back from existing formats and platforms, this is where I would locate much of my writing and diagrams. This extends

Claire Fontaine's program for a Human strike, a non-visual art practice, and Agamben's notion of the inoperative.

As I said above I now see my practice as a form of thinking and philosophising within concrete material forms, where the context and material become the focal point to collect together my thinking, understanding and research up to that point. Now I think my work or practice is most successful when all the elements are in discussion and testing each other out. So, there is a totality, a complete view, of how we understand contemporary art, within a context, within the existing formats and platforms to stage art. I am not sure whether I have succeeded in staging a work that accomplishes this yet but the project for Odessa and the response to the work showed a way forward and a glimpse of how it can work. The ideas for this historical moment crystalized this thinking and visualisation even more.

8. You are working with Post Autonomy, what does it mean?

Post Autonomy was one of two terms the Hamburg theorist Michael Lingner in the early 1990's coined for a description of art that charted Post Modernism and the effects of Post Modernism on the art industry [he wanted a term that sounded similar to Post Modernism and Post Autonomy was one of the terms] culminating in the ybas and Saatchi's and the White Cube to monetirisie art through aligning British art to the Hollywood system, where art became about money and entertainment. In other words, this description looked at branding, the art star, the corporatisation of art, promotion etc. Another version of Post Autonomy sprang up in Moscow and looked at Hirst to signal the death or end of art. Both of these narratives looked at how autonomy was taken over and compromised or extinguished. I personally thought this was a little nostalgic and thought what they were actually trying to plot was something entirely different and new, and invisible and even more destructive the unseen forces of Neoliberalism. But what is true is that now the art system or industry has assimilated these external forces.

At the same time Post autonomy alludes to the other reference that Lingner uses, Luhmann's Systems theory, and the idea of autonomy having achieved itself, it is autonomous and cannot go any further. What does this actually mean? This gave rise to thoughts of mutation but also the possibility of ideas of transition and transformation. Luhmann's system doesn't recognise the notion of artwork, artist or audience just participant, for that reason this offered a useful critique of Modernism and its terms and categories.

If we combine these ideas together of Neoliberalism, of the death of art, of autonomy completing itself then another possibility and another space of art starts to open up. It was by joining together these aspects or attributes of the historical trajectory of art that gave rise to the current scheme of Post Autonomy comprising two parts, the time of arts obliteration by Neoliberalism and corporations to leave a blank and the plotting, inhabiting, navigating of this new space.

At the same time, I also think it is positive that we know longer have terms and categories to pin down and inhibit whatever thinking and art is, here I would agree with Claire Fontaine.

9. Where do you position art as a social fact?

You have asked a cluster of similar sounding questions in 9, 10 and 11 so I will try to answer these questions here.

I haven't undertaken sufficient research to properly answer this question fully or with the necessary accuracy and insider insights, other than to say that in recent years from 2010 and maybe earlier, the role of art has expanded. The role of art in the West as a definition of the West has taken on urgent and a special function or a central function. You sense that the initial idea of the art industry and art

institutions have out grown themselves and have new important responsibilities for shaping and guiding whatever the West is now under the EU and as part of the centre of Global power and centres of cultural power. I suspect from other readings and research that art has been given the responsibility of an arm of the government or is the government for organising everyday life in the west. And that what we thought was politics the political and social world is now filtered through the prism of art.

This is very crudely stated and I am painting things in terrible generalisations but what I have said here are ideas I have reached after reading about the ybas, the role of art under Blair, and insights into the role of new institutionalism, listening to Hirst, and Gillick etc.

10. Do we as individuals and as a society really need art?

11. What is the benefit of art?

12. You are working with Camilla on the project this Historical Moment

13 What is the project about and from what need did the project emerge?

It is a declaration of liberty and emancipation

The project basically looks at a situation which is now, today, where we find an exit point out of Neo Liberalism to realise we are in a historically unique situation where we take advantage of neoliberalism's complete destruction of art and thinking to acknowledge that there is a potential for peoples to come together to assemble a completely new art that overcomes colonialism and imperialism.

My scheme and ideas for a demarcation of what is and isn't art reflects Badiou's scheme

It is intended to expose the intellectual and cultural impasse we are in, the state of stasis, and the very dilemma that we do not know how to resolve from with art the problems of colonialism and imperialism. Another process is required. This is against the background of course where the art system would have us believe that the problem has been resolved, but it hasn't, the only problem that has been resolved is the assimilation of multiple cultures through the filter of art into the West, against the backdrop of the terrible destruction of peoples in the Middle East, Congo, North Africa, Western governments hypocrisy in addressing these issues. On top of this we have the destruction of the Earth's resources and environment, the animals and fish which is unspeakably stupid and barbaric. For all these reasons the veneer of our society has slipped away and we can now see how barbaric we are.

These ideas go back to my earlier anxiety over British imperialism and colonialism, forward to today and my continued existence inside this context and the increasing anxiety over this problem. The sense that time has stood still and the increasing awareness of unfreedom. Again, this could just be a register of a time in transition and mutation where existing forms of government and thinking have reached a dead-end.

At the same time and in recent years there is a sense and it is not clear what this is or why it has occurred now, but the narratives we have used to make sense of existence have slipped, or different planes have shifted, we can now clearly see the existing narratives as being very crude and inaccurate, and that things should not be as they are, we still find ourselves in a state of barbarism, we should not be like this and we need to move forward. Here I am talking about the position of women, the narratives that make sense of places and history, and interspecies communication.

All these issues paint a picture of stasis and a glimpse of an opening into a new space.

14. Where does the idea come from? What is the goal of the project?

The ideas for this Historical moment developed in an installation that I produced for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest in 2014 as a summary of a mobile biennial project I had taken part in, or at least that is where the term started to be used. Although the term itself is another word for entrance into the space of Post Autonomy where I had used an open bracket [] to allude to this new space, with references to Barnett Newman Zip and Heidegger's End of Metaphysics, and the idea of the brackets to stand in for Post Autonomy came about in note books [a book form was produced for an exhibition in 2013] and the floor drawing installation for the Vanabbemuseum in 2010. The idea was taken a stage further when I produce an installation for the Bodrum Biennial which I titled Collapse [] in 2015. Then conceptually and materially taken even further when I collaborated with Camilla on a project in Italy in 2016 "Distributing Obsolescence: Food bank, Art bank, technology bank". I used the image of Martin Kippenberger's work showing a skip with trashed paintings as the image for this project and the over production of art. When I googled over production of art or art waste, I was expecting to see mountains of rejected destroyed art works, since I had already heard that the Dutch government had burnt much of the work it had collected from artists during one of its schemes to pay artists to work during the 1990's, I couldn't find a photo of the bonfires of artworks, and I was never able to come up with another image or another definition, which I think shows very clearly the value the system puts on art and art production. There can never be too much art, there can never be too many artists, and art can never be seen to be without value, even so the space for actual art within the system, within the commercial art system and within the international circuit is tiny.

In 2017 Camilla was invited by the Odessa Biennial to curate a special section which she titled Distributing Obsolescence, which I was invited to take part in. My work was without a title and I didn't use a press release instead I kept existing titles from the previous exhibition and I used press releases that I had collected in London. The intention here was to remove a layer in art production which fixes and normalises, and encourages the continuity of thinking, organising and staging art.

The title Distributing Obsolescence sought to provide a more concise definition of art today i.e. we are caught in a system that is distributing one monolithic concept of art Globally, allied to Global capitalism, where art products function as money with its ability to cross borders, in the same manner as liquid money, and whose prices keep rising, although it is difficult to determine the criteria of the value of these works. And I sought an idea of art that is going through the motions of vast over production, caught between a social system in collapse where we have increasing amounts of people living on the street and food banks to feed poor homeless and working people, set against a vast global technological industry built on obsolescence and redundancy. The notes for this Historical Moment synthesised ideas from these previous projects and took as its point of departure the text mural I produced in one of the rooms I had to stage my installation in Odessa that discussed this Historical Moment.

I structured the work along the same lines as Alexandra Kluger's show for the Prada Foundation in 2017 where each room had its own characteristics and was in discussion with each other, very similar to how Sturtevant's work is organised, where the principle intention is to test out and break with style, and the individual brand, and dig deep into the formation of art, thinking and cultural formations. Here I started to pin down something I have been thinking about since the 1990's, my problems with the way art is exhibited and displayed, the naivety shown in presenting art. I couldn't pin down the problem until my show in 2013 in Milan "The scenarios of Post Autonomy", although I still could not conceptualise the problem until I read an article by Claire Fontaine on how the two systems we use to present art, the single show and the group show embody and internalise branding, the promotion of a capitalist model of the individual and products plus the monetarisation of art. The new artists

following Sturtevant you can see are addressing this very problem, where the artist becomes a curator. Here Nietzsche scheme of "The eternal return of the same" becomes the background conceptual framework, how do you select and pick out something that already exists and arrange it into new patterns? Which basically forefronts the material we use to think and the very process of thinking, but most importantly leads into the issue of what thinking do we use today to think with? This is one of my central concerns.