

Century of the Artist

In this question we are interested in the time when you first decided to become an artist. Do you remember a particular moment in your life when your political desires and your wish to actively create something in society came close to the surface, you have had an artist? Please try to recall what image of an artist you had when you chose to become an artist. What seemed possible and desirable about being an artist? What kind of political influence or social relevance seemed attached to that role? What were your primary political/personal/subjective/concerns of age struggles and concerns at that time?

cultural worker, gallery director, 32

I suppose that in my young age (primary school) I connected being an artist with strong subjectivity, with somebody who exists a bit 'outside' of the whole 'normal' society. Artists, designers, musicians appeared to be more free and independent than the rest of hard-working people I saw on the streets and in the 'normality'. At that time like the English edition of the magazine Burda, I was in love with her, with 'Western' fashion, which she represented. I didn't think about artists as somebody engaged with politics, rather somebody who can allow herself or himself to be autonomous.

My first art teacher was a woman, a wonderful! person and also my aunt, who painted herself, made collages and sewed beautiful clothes out of very ordinary materials. They both looked different than the rest of women I had contact with at that time in a provincial town in the East of Poland where I grew up. I suppose that I started to paint to wear 'arty' clothes and listen to grunge music on MTV, because I wanted to be a part of this special (almost) not existing in my hometown) international society of artists, special creators, who looked a bit like my aunt, sang like Alanis Morissette and dressed like these arty, androgynous figures from Vogue.

Projecting the role of an artist onto myself gave me the feeling that my hometown is just a station, not a destination and when I will be grown up I will live with anybody I like to. I will be happy to live with smoke joints and love affairs.

Politics was totally indifferent to me at that time, something which old males with mustaches were doing, something absolutely useless, and boring which had nothing to do with my beloved art society, to which I belonged except my twin sister, sometimes my aunt and other people from posters, books and MTV channel.

cultural worker, 37

I started to study in art school at the age of 15 and by that time all political thoughts were diminished by the social environment. I am part of a generation that watched live, as a very young kid, a bourgeois revolution, a fake military trial for 'genocide', an execution of the presidential couple, a TV, stream-bait by the Romanian Television. During the last week of December 89 I have also been taught that 24h TV means 'normality'. Therefore liberal democracy entered very violently in my life. But then, from that point on, everything that followed seemed natural and free.

cultural worker, (1)

The first moment was when I was running the tenants committee. I had to work on articulation and rearticulation of what I would define now as the imaginative capacity of the community (of tenants in the building where I lived). I needed so much creativity, wisdom and vision to (re)organize the collaboration and cooperation in the building that I realized that this is something very close to artists' creativity and imaginarity... The wellbeing and the progress of the given (or any other) collective in times of disintegration of so many social networks and formations, seemed to me very highly and protective in the context of wars for Yugoslavian heritage and related collective and individual traumas.

artist, 44

I grew up in an artist setting parts of it as a son of time in my father's studio who was a painter. Even when my parents moved at an age I spent lots of time on the attic of my grandfather's house making things. I was drawing and making things since I can remember. And I was just following this heirin, going to drawing classes, secondary art school and Faculty of Arts. All the process of formal education occurred very fast as I jumped some years as a talented scholar. I started to do exhibitions that were successful etc but still done in conventional formats - objects and paintings. But only when I took some distance from the formal educational and institutional setting and started to work on the street with people, a big break came where I became and artist I could say I am now. This was also the period when I had to unlearn all the previous knowledge about art and found my own basis. But all this new learning and unlearning work was shared, and I did it together with other people, some of them involved in various social struggles.

This question inquires about the time of art education. In becoming artists we learn to imply the knowledge about history of art, formal language, and values as much as the knowledge of artistic forms, procedures and gestures. (Western) art schools such as modernism, formalism, conceptualism, minimalism and abstraction are learned and internalized in the course of artistic education. They are not formal language but produce values, power structures and regimes of literacy. Can you recall a situation of implicit learning in becoming an artist and describe it here? What did you learn? Did you have to unlearn something in return? Was that what was learned and what was unlearned? expressed and described? Did you realize then what you were learning?

artist, 40

At the art academy I was not cool enough for the feminists. Did not take enough space, should grab things first and not be so polite and ask etc. The type played a more important role than before, to contribute to the work. We were in a studio in a room, where we were used to work in the acceptance of the bourgeois culture and middle class privilege.

Then I was in Hackney, London, for a summer, assisting a woman with a relational/aesthetic project, which was also an art form that was popular then. One day, while walking home, I was dragged into a scenario in the park I was passing by each day. A group of maintenance workers in the park spoke to me and welcomed me to hang out and watch them work in the afternoons, strangely enough. I listened to stories of exploitation, wages and how stressed they were of winning various competitions in gardening. I was invited there with their consent and support actually.

Here, I can see today, was the first time I reconnected to my own social background during 4 years of study and I did that on my own. The sum of this is, that no teacher actually discussed class the way one could have expected or thought. I did it on my own. They did not pay attention, of course, having their own agendas. Site-specific art or conceptual art did not help me, though they did not. The future class perspectives were at an angle. Another thing that did not help me was that I was not used to walking and talking while moving - because I do not feel comfortable, which is also why I am barred out. The class travel I have made has played a large part in a negative health spiral.

cultural worker, 37

This unspoken canon of the contemporary art was NOT learned by me in the art university but, in the context of Iasi having the first biennial of contemporary art in Romania, by the several international networks of professionals intersecting each other in Iasi. In many instances I have been taught that there are standards in international contemporary art producing and exhibition making related issues, equipment, printing conditions, packing, art transportation, etc. In the contemporary art history in Iasi there are only few among many international artists that credited Petreicuț Biernădi as the producer of one's work in the later international art circuit of the art work.

author, dramaturge, 40

Yes, one of the most striking learning experiences of mine concerning the art field was the first semester in the course "introduction into contemporary art". Already in the first sessions we were taught Bourdieu's Field Theory and the Habitus Concept. Although Bourdieu's theory was supposed to be a useful tool to dismantle power- and class-structures in different disciplinary fields, we were taught the theory in order to position ourselves the best way possible for the competition in the art field. We learned that in order to compete we have to know the 'currency' of the art field, we need to know with whom we want to be associated with in order to succeed and for that we need to strategically act out a certain habitus, (...) who to quote and/or who not to quote, (...) what kind of terminology and the wording itself, or even what clothes we should wear or how our hair should look like. I experienced these lessons as violence and to use Bourdieu to be strategic in the field was not the way to go for me. I was angry... Bourdieu and his theory are a whole approach to the art field till today... That is functionalist and also a bit

In pop-feminism I found a powerful tool to intervene in society. My colleagues made a mainstream magazine. I was very happy they did so because all of a sudden we had a public! A big one! People were talking about our articles, we had a voice. A voice I could not have for so many years in the K-Gruppe. So yes, I think that especially pop is a strategy. But yet again, none of them is a real tool for class-struggle in the narrow sense of the term. A strategy in this direction is still missing for me.

curator, cultural anthropologist, gender scholer, 39

As a freelance curator and nowadays as a curator of a feminist gallery I am concentrating more on collaboration-oriented, discussion-based, interactive and performative as well as research-based formats and workshops. Do not get me wrong, I have not stopped working with the traditional way of people with an art, space, and money. Rather, I have learned that I have learned that I have learned with their varied experiences, perspectives and practices. I have learned, e.g. to break with various types of normative thinking or to become more sensitive towards different needs, desires, backgrounds as well as regarding the use and the power of language.

This question concerns the formats we have come to naturally accept as forms of contemporary art. Which forms, thought patterns and logics of producing contemporary art have become natural to you? Are there specific formats you often employ or have you become used to plan your work in a particular manner? How do these proceedings affect and shape the way political desire and content takes form in your work? How would you describe your relation to political content in your work today?

designer, artist, PhD, researcher, visual arts, 28

I see myself as a designer, mainly in the sense that I use tools and methods of production. Thinking socially became most natural. Actually, we as a group, used most often inquires in order to extract public opinion on a particular topic. Afterwards, we want to diffuse the content in the exhibition or public space by using representational means. Hmm, the personal/political desire was a tabu, positioning was a nightmare, while the content was (quasi) self-censored but yet pretty powerful and motivating in moving forward: build, act, perform critique. Today, political content is fascinating and more present. In the neoliberal system I still have my doubts about any real impact of the arts towards the concrete political. I can see the desire for both change and ownership of course but it seems hard not to be used by the invisible hand.

performance artist, writer, curator, 34

Quickly internalized forms of working: creating project ideas, writing applications and trying to get funding, and while doing that adjusting one's ideas to the funding themes, carefully choosing and then applying for grants, and to a degree to festival themes if there were any (but that were already connected to the themes I worked on). At one point the problem of not having an own space or studio backed I. I or we quickly internalized production logics such as creating a website, thinking about advertisement to reach (a certain amount of) public such as printing flyers, posters, sending mail-outs etc. Also, intense and stressful production periods before showing the performance, partly also just producing new work when an application was successful. These production logics often led to groups exchanging working processes and working continuously.

This question concerns the present. If your artistic practice has political aspects and topics, which are they? How do these topics relate to your actual working conditions as an artist? How would you describe your relation towards your colleagues from a political point of view?

artist, 44

Most of the work I do is done, with other people and most part of it is done outside of art institutions. More political than the topics in these works is the methodology that is applied - for example the way how material and symbolic value (created through the work) is shared/distributed.

If the term 'colleagues' relates to 'other professional artists' — in most occasions I used to collaborate with 'non-professional artists' but, in some occasions, I also had the opportunity to collaborate with in some cases this was somewhat uneasy. It is mostly due to the unwillingness of professional artists to renounce the privileges that are 'naturally' assigned to them by the art system (authorship, accumulating power in making decisions, transparency in sharing fees, etc).

author, dramaturge, 40

Concerning my relation to my colleagues, I've had a personal relation that is at the moment being worked out. My way of dealing with whom I can have a fight and with whom not, because I might lose job opportunities. I fight with one or the other friend and colleague. Sometimes this subjects me to obedience. (...) Nobody wants to protest their 'friends' and colleagues...

I have been working on the topic relating to my own social group and its being in many ways conflictive.

I am often tired of colleagues complaining, often unsorted and unreflected. I now identify more with the choice I have taken to become an artist. I feel privileged as the first academic in my family. I got this chance and I should also enjoy. My sister is unemployed taking care of her kid alone, never finished her grade in college. We did not go on tourist trips to Europe. Our parents could not pay for any extras.

My father did not miss anything, until I was older and met with the middle class. He had a high comfortable life and I was very proud of that. Observing it would not have triggered the personal crisis or trauma in life. The social security is minimum and I want have a family heritage to fall back onto.

Our encounters in the art context are often mediated through funding apparatuses and selection processes which largely function along categories such as nationality/country of origin/residence, race and gender. The art field is characterized by racism and sexist exclinations. Despite individual political intentions, these categories parake in our interactions. We are often involved in reproducing them. In how far do these mechanisms shape and determine your encounters in the art context? How do they determine the way you relate to colleagues? What concrete engagement, interaction, strategic interruptions are you lacking?

curator, cultural anthropologist, gender scholar, 39

As an artist and curator, I definitely mention the fact that we (like every artist group) produce permanent exclusions by choosing certain topics and by inviting certain people to collaborate. We cannot ignore but rather we have to problematize the fact that we are white academic women who are the art directors of the space. So we also mostly produce an audience that is similar and

we reproduce a space that is white although the ideal situation would be to generate a heterogeneous and inclusive space. We have to ask ourselves how we can share power, responsibility and resources in a more open and transparent way and what the preconditions might be for practices based on honest solidarity and involvement.

cultural worker (1)

I understand well in which context I operate and produce. The inherited obstacles and structural inequalities that you describe are omnipresent and omnipresently fighting back against me. Of course experienced questioning of the practical level which are often futile, only de-stabilizing claims and attempts, because in the contemporary world the forces that shape described contextual/categorical frames, are dominant and in fact monopolistic when it is about most of art production. Nevertheless, the hegemony of neoliberalism is one (seemingly) good feature. It insists on 'freedom of thought and speech', which gives us at least opportunity to produce everything. What neoliberalism deprives us of is the time, space and resource to the project and produce alternatives in any form of social production, not to artistic one.

artist, 40

I am aware of the structures, but they don't define my work anymore. I also apply to funding bodies under the state like everyone else but I have less and less hope that things will progress towards socialist values. The already wealthy and commercialized practices are premured also within arts. If I like to do a project I start to think about ways to be independent. My colleagues do not help much, I start to think about it myself. I have also rejected supporting artist practices that I dislike for some reasons.

Looking at our social position more generally: Most artists could choose for this privileged middle-class backgrounds. Most artists could choose for this or society. Many artists have been introduced to the places and roles of high art already through their family background as a young age. What role did your selection play in your life and professional choices? How would you describe your social surrounding in view of privilege and class today?

designer, artist, PhD researcher, visual arts, 28

My family was middle-class until the end of the '90. After, they became proletarian. They didn't have financial safety, but with a bit of money (saved mostly by not using it themselves) and an early public scholarship, I've been able to go to art school and eventually to a PhD scholarship. I've had to live in the city. I grew up. At this local public club I've learned informatics, neo models, chess, painting, karate. It was such a great opportunity, mostly for free if I recall correctly. Of course, it motivated me to go into the arts. Today, the middle-classes is definitely on the rise. Depends on the direction. I'm clearly part of that. Hope I would manage to keep some things under control. Obviously, the upper class is most privileged within the system. I'm still trying to find holes. More precise, I think all of my social surroundings is at least middle-middle class (with a few exceptions). I would like to believe in common sharing of resources and would like to teach the upper class to share. If we start from top to bottom everything would be perfect.

cultural worker (2)

We mostly have privileged middle-class backgrounds that we mostly inherit from our grand parents in the late 1980s, who are privileged to get we through the art world. We have a lot of money and we are privileged to get we have less and less access to this capital, determines that cultural workers are all upper-middle class. In case of a desired socialist organization of workers we must be prepared to renounce these privileges.

author, dramaturge, 40

I am a kid of "Bildungsburger" from the 68-movement. When I was young we never had much money. I have lived in working class neighbourhoods and also migrant neighbourhoods in Germany a lot. At the end of their lives my parents made some money and I profited from this right after my studies, they helped me out with parts of the rent for years. Our family is a leftist family and got especially radicalized in the Greek crisis since 2010. But as a leftist family they always tended to flirt with leftist intellectual and cultural heritage. So culture is also a part of political position was part of my childhood for years and was something very near to me. I could 'pass' as middle class even if we did not have money, always my life, because I had the cultural education needed to engage with the middle class circles.

artist, 37

I was raised in the financially well-off slighites in West-Germany by an alternative, environmentalist, leftist yet still conforming family, which taught values as social equality and justice, freedom of expression, ecology, and leftist political ideals.

Certainly I was convinced that society would reward idealism, cultural and political engagement. Because of the conditions I grew up in, I internalized I wouldn't need to realize that there are those so-called humanist lessons 'dirty' work to get by. Today I realize that these so-called humanist lessons carefully omitted who was expected to be doing the dirty work instead of me and why, and who indeed had to worry about money. Migrants and the so-called humanist encouragement for art, culture and political ideals were a source of implanting middle class consciousness and feelings of superiority.

artist, 40

I am almost always surrounded by middle class in my context. It took me ten years to catch up the 'know how'. The art world is sophisticated, to learn how to be sophisticated is a social training.

Can you sustain yourself or yourself and members of your family with your artistic work/knowledge? If yes, is it independent from support related to inherited social capital or material resources of your family?

cultural worker, 37

Given the fact that our family inherited two rooms' apartment and one family grave purchased by the parents during socialist period, our material resources now are directly linked with what was achieved before 1989. Also, for the past five years I had a secured monthly income from my work as coordinator. The future is uncertain though, but with respect for a stable position, I can continue to support my art work, but not in the way that I am teaching in art universities in life position, state museums or temporary solution such as PhDs).

cultural worker (1)

Realistically I can hardly sustain myself but I manage somehow. For example, this means that I don't have any possibility to put aside or to continuously save any money from what I earn. It would be even worse if I didn't inherit (half) of the fat of my parents, as well as all related social and cultural capital (capital which in fact didn't always work to my material benefit)

curator, cultural anthropologist, gender scholar, 39

Due to my job as a project manager of a feminist gallery, I can earn my livelihood for my daughter and myself. But my employment is depending on the continuing support of the gallery by the senate. Every two years we have to apply for a loan to receive a support in fact my work situation is mostly due to the inheritance of my parents.

How do you relate to concrete political and systemic changes, has in your opinion the transition in Central and East European countries generally moved to the actual political and economic system been negatively positive or negative? Has it proven positive or negative for your colleague artists, cultural workers or other social group you belong to and work with? How has it affected your family and class it belongs to? What in your opinion were the general effects on society as a whole? Can you otherwise express some of your standpoints on this matter in a few sentences?

author, dramaturge, 40

From the German unification to today's German hegemony in Europe I can assure you that my family, friends, colleagues and everyone whom I know in Germany are suffering from the effects of Germany's hegemony and economic strength in Europe. In Europe, Greece, Italy, Spain, depression but also of political and psychological nature. We are in the dead ends of neoliberal TINA (There is no alternative) and we have no project to put against it. We are demoralized, tired, disappointed and do not know how to continue with political work.

cultural worker (2)

Myself and many artists and curators we work with are part of the middle class that was the beneficiary of the destruction of the socialist state pre-1989. The change to the capitalist system was done by corrupting this part of the middle class in order to destroy the socialist state and to bring immense suffering and destruction to our society as a whole. The working classes were the ones that paid the costs of this transition.

artist, 44

This question requires love that a larger part of my and forthcoming generations would have had more opportunities to work within the system (building it, improving it, struggling for better applications of socialist ideas) than it is the case now. The previous system (at least as we know it in Yugoslavia) can't be seen as one monolithic period, there were different times and turns in its history, some for the better and some for worse. But it is important that there was a socialist base, oriented towards the benefit of the society as a whole, for which it was necessary to fight during all its periods. Nowadays on the contrary most part of society is put on the margins of political decisions, of political and economic power. So in this sense, I would say the situation is worse.

artist, 37

In Germany the internalized idea of superiority towards workers from eastern Europe has remained unchanged on a broad social bases. In Eastern Europe are hired to work in German households, this devalued work is left to migrants.

The economic maelstrom is so powerful, it reproduces divides and exploitation constantly. On an individual basis there seems no way to resist or challenge them, but to migrate, get high education, keep up. Probably artists escape that particular economic divide as an international elite in exchange for other dependencies, of funders, Austrian banks or German phone companies, the market.

cultural worker (1)

For most of the artists it has proven negative, though the ones that manage to appear in exhibitions or media are the ones that probably benefited or still hope to (individually) benefit. Depoliticization is omnipresent in spite of a number of examples of politically and policy-wise engaged art works, art events, about education and some of my colleagues and friends of the public health or the educational system if I can get nice residencies or participate in some international exhibition".

Putting irony aside, the number of benefits that artists had in socialism are simply, slowly but surely disappearing: the infrastructure for broad public access to cultural and wide-spread educational resources is being neglected and commercialized; there are almost no interested students for some of the art academies that were considered elitist. All together, the message is almost as blatant as: There is no need for cultural production in colonies, art and culture can be imported - as everything else.

While individual "success", "achievements", "advancement" is easily visible (and intensively promoted by privatized media sphere) the society as a whole sinks into atomization, alienation and omnipresent existential fear. It is a society where only a thin crust of computer bourgeois thrives, the layers of workers and guardians that serve the system (unintentionly) survive on the cost of profits and hegemony of the public health system. I wish to see a collapse and of capitalist hegemony, with only survival as one and only allowed and achievable goal. On top of this, one can see how the first intuitive reactions of deprived and declassad middle class layers is of course a full back to latent or blatant fascistist or even openly fascist theories and politics...

Do you have time for concrete political work next to your artistic practice? Are you satisfied with the political impact of your artistic work?

artist, 40

I know where to engage when I have the time. I go to demos, meetings but I cannot work collectively now due to health. I am satisfied with a few of my works. I think they have had some impact on the direct political. Question is what political arena. If talking about the not parliamentary, autonomous left, the party politics or culture politics. I also find it hard to sit and discuss meeting groups with 20 year old Marxists in a study circle when I am depending on the health care system under the state.

curator, cultural anthropologist, gender scholar, 39

As the time goes by, thinking that we are also doing political work with the gallery and artist issues and practices of (re)presentation. That way we are intervening into still ongoing sexist and racist structures of the art context as such. Of course I wish the interventions would become more powerful and more visible in the (local) art context.

performance artist, writer, curator, 34

Unfortunately, not much anymore. During my studies I had the time and was involved in diverse political groups at university, and I was quite active in local cultural politics for some years. But since having a money job political engagement – part from participating in some workshops and reading certain books - became difficult timewise as it needs regular and ideally mid-or long-term commitment.

author, dramaturge, 40

Today I do political work in my cultural work, as a journalist, public speaker, curator etc. Some of it has more and some of it has less impact. But this could be said also for political work altogether. (...) I think political impact will change in the future. (...) I can be affected politically in so many ways. Also in my work create some moments that help in preparing for success at some point. My hopes don't go beyond that at the moment. Because my problem has not only in the limits of the political impact of cultural work, but in the fact, that the progressive left in itself does not know it's project and does not know how to mobilize impact. I am disappointed also by my political work of the last years, it was defeated and I am disillusioned... So this is unfortunately bigger then me or my work and in my neoliberal everyday I did not find solutions to solve this yet.

artist, 44

One of the big struggles nowadays is to MAKE time for political activity. My artwork is not so separated from political. In very small scale I could say that sometimes I am satisfied with political impact of the work I am involved in. In bigger scale of course not.