

Triple A: Artist, Author, Amateur

Notes on Artistic Production and its Value

KATHI HOFER AND MARGIT NEUHOLD IN CONVERSATION

Margit Neuhold: In your latest exhibition “Craftivism” at the MAK¹ in Vienna your work, in various ways, unfolded structures that seem to determine production conditions of contemporary art practise. To me, your project succeeded in making these working conditions productive rather than lamenting about precarious late capitalist conditions. Together with Maurizio Lazzarato one could say that the artist today acts as a prototype of the immaterial worker: executing “activities, that are not normally recognised as ‘work’”. An observation that holds particularly true for your project—but let’s start with the framework and the show’s mode of operation.

Kathi Hofer: I was invited to “New Look“, an exhibition series in which four artists have been commissioned to work with the MAK Study Collection (which will close in autumn 2013 and reopen in 2014). Together with the collection’s custodians I discussed what type of objects would be of interest to me. I then had a closer look at particular items from different parts of the vast collections: glass, ceramics, metal, furniture and woodwork, textiles and carpets as well as the Asia collection. Hence the installation on display presented a segment of objects that were already pre-selected by the MAK custodians according to my preferences.

I would refer to these as well as to my own artwork as “material” and understand the installation as one piece—an approach that conflicted with the common

museum practice of dating and labelling objects. In order to reflect my specific interest in the objects’ production histories I instead took “group photos” of the collection pieces which were then printed as foldout posters with the corresponding inventory numbers. These posters appeared twice in the show: in the installation and in an accompanying publication placed in a reader’s corner. So, by following the numbers, the objects could be researched individually. I like the idea of offering two ways for reception: an immediate, visual one within the show, and a contextual one that is provided by the book.

MN: So as spectator one did not immediately know, who the author of a specific object was. Nor which object you made yourself or which was commissioned. Included in the installation were two shelves that you needed for your apartment and which were produced by the MAK. How did you get these?

KH: I actually commissioned two pieces of furniture that I needed: a small shelf and a TV-rack. I asked the museum’s in-house carpenter how he’d realise them, in order to be stable and beautiful. I was the author delivering sketches but decisions on size and form were made rather pragmatically, since they had to match the necessities of my apartment.

MN: Would you refer to those items as pieces of furniture or as pieces of art?

KH: I would say they are both. If a collector would want to buy these works I would sell them for a gal-

¹ “Craftivism” by Kathi Hofer was shown at the MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art from 19.12.2012 to 3.3.2013.

lery price. Currently they are at my home, and my telly sits on the TV-rack, yet I would exhibit them again. To me this gesture felt also somewhat roguish: In having two pieces of furniture produced by the MAK, I wanted to point out that the museum provides no artist fee, only a budget for production. So I thought, if the MAK grabs my resources and ideas—as I also work for their upcoming project, the reorganisation of the study collection—I want to use their infrastructure, working time, financial capacity as a way of producing items for my private space.

MN: Along with this notion of the ‘private’ is your investigation into domestic activities. It seems that the entanglement of the two might have the potential to withdraw from the art world’s predominant idea of value. Against the backdrop of the third wave of feminism and next to your scrutiny of today’s position of domestic work, what was your particular interest in domesticity?

KH: I wanted to implant different modes of domestic creativity into a highly professionalised and public setting. For my show, I worked exclusively in a decorative manner, e.g. painting glass balls or candles for an Advent wreath. The idea was to produce decorations and during this production process, art works emerged. For instance the gift boxes, cartons wrapped in Christmas paper are objects to me and I would exhibit them again. I used wrapping paper from the MAK Design Shop. For instance a black wrapping paper with a flower pattern developed by Dagobert Peche.

MN: I would assume that this pattern designed by Dagobert Peche had a different function before. Now that it’s been printed on wrapping paper it represents a common “commodification” process using popular artists and their work. However, each of the exhibited objects from the study collection in your installation opens a whole set of questions.

KH: Well, another gift box became the plinth for a very interesting object by Herbert Januj, who is a precision engineer by profession and works as a safety inspector at the MAK. In 2008 as part of a Christmas event an auction took place at the museum for which all in-house technicians produced artistic works. The

former MAK director Peter Noever bought Januj’s work, which was the only one in my show that was labelled: It had a golden plaque with title and name of the producer, “H. Januj /Arbeit ohne Wert” (“Work without value”). This title reveals a certain self-conception. How the craftsman seems to evaluate his own work is very interesting to me, as it gives an entirely different idea of the value such a piece has for one person and the value it might hold for another, or the art market. Perhaps this perception of value comes from a different system of payment. In working as a craftsman, one gets paid per hour. Possibly it does not occur to craftsmen working under the current conditions, that they produce something which can have a symbolic value beyond the material value.

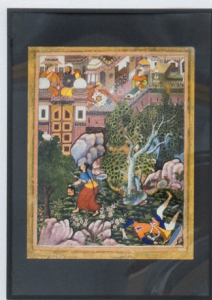
MN: I think you posed this question slightly differently in the publication that accompanied the show. There you gave two separate indexes: One naming and describing the authors and another one naming and describing the producers of the objects featured in the show. But is it really possible to make such a distinction and if so, what are the criteria?

KH: I don’t think one can draw a dividing line between the two, yet to me it is important to address the issue: To find out what is the work done by an author and where does immaterial labour come to an end. It is much easier to define an object by its material than by its immaterial parameters. Keeping this in mind, I looked at different objects and tried to discover the underlying type of labour that ‘produced’ them in the first place. Hence, in these indexes all contributors who added ideas, drafts or content (i.e. the curator Janina Falkner or the custodians who provided expertise) are listed as “authors”. On the other hand, the persons who contributed physically (i.e. carpenters, technicians etc) I categorised as “producers”. Of course you can’t draw a strict line but to me the attempt is important. In the publication’s index you’ll also find people listed in both categories, for instance Benvenuto Cellini was both author and executor of an exhibited work. The publication kicks off with these indexes in order to show the number of people working on a show or on a single work of art. In the case of the art work, it is only the artist who is named, but still there might be a frame maker, a printer etc. working behind the scene.



WI 249

Kathi Hofer /
BI 8770



GK 48

H 1340



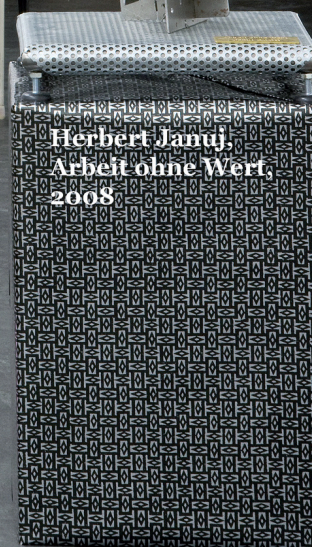
Kathi
Hofer /
H 2138

KH1



Herbert Januj,
Arbeit ohne Wert,
2008

KS 24



MN: You said once that for this project, two ideas were important to you: the emancipation of the amateur on the one hand and the questioning of creativity on the other.

KH: Let me start with the figure of the amateur. During my research I found that avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists have already been interested in the amateur for various reasons. Their practices and collaborations have been intensely discussed by John Roberts among others. Yet these ideas do not serve as my direct point of reference. My proposal is—even though I don't know if it will hold up—that Amateurism in a positive sense could act as an exit strategy, leading away from professionalised work which is, nowadays, unlimited and traverses all aspects of life. The notion of the amateur includes that one is occupied with a given practice in a deeply passionate but strictly non-professional manner and therefore doesn't identify with this practice a 100 percent but rather sees it as an extension of one's personality. I would say, that this way of working is somehow less exploitable. Preparing my show I performed practices that I usually don't exercise: For the first time I made an advent wreath myself, and even though I do not consider myself as a painter I painted glass balls. In this case the applied practices do not require major skills. Perhaps they came without pressure since I didn't claim to deliver perfectly handcrafted objects but rather to enact an alternative relationship to "work". To allow myself to conduct for a museum show these activities that I personally always found appealing but never felt the ambition to learn or master strangely gave me a feeling of sovereignty, a strong confidence that I won't fail.

MN: The meaning of "amateurish" might also include that in such manner no mass consumption goods are being produced. It is a rather socially and ecologically compatible production method and as you said I am also not sure, to what extent the capitalist system can benefit from it. So Amateurism may be a method of subversion, which reveals its potential in self-produced handcrafted works.

KH: The project is named Craftivism and the political notion of the term activism resonates in the title. Yet the project serves different fields, beyond conceived

stereotypes: I exhibited my handcrafted works, which have been allowed to be pretty. But I think that they have a political core: Their amateurish surface hints towards political and ecological consciousness since they re-use waste materials, or follow a certain mindset as knitting on public spaces ... actions in which cheap or easily available second-hand materials are used and processed. These handmade processes show a way to slow down, embrace the domestic, subvert producers of mass manufactured goods, or to support other communities through self-made items.

MN: But let's come to the other point of interest you mentioned, "Questioning creativity". The term creativity is quite ambiguous since it is strongly used within neoliberal ideology and terminology, and its adjective has been inflated to the point of its meaninglessness. Think of creative industries, creative cities, creative economies, creative therapies ...

KH: I agree it is a complex and overused term. That's why I tried to tackle it in an entirely applied manner. When I painted the candles for the Advent wreath, I tried to refrain from creative decisions and used colours and forms that were already there. So the black and white candles corresponded with the black and white chairs that, for their part, I painted along the lines of a famed design by the Italian designer Gio Ponti. I like the idea of spending time with creative activity that is ritualised to some degree and where there is no need to legitimise what you are doing or search for a deeper meaning. Yet, I see these as practices not devoid of meaning at all, but rather meaningful in a sense of being more vital or holistic. To put it in other words: Pleating the Advent wreath added a lot to the fun factor of the project.