

INTERFACE ART(IV)ISTS

An e-mail interview between Šimon Chovan, Open Studio Bratislava
<http://www.openstudio.sk/> **and Susanne Bosch, visiting artists at the Open Studio**
programme at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Bratislava, May 2018

1. Susanne, could you briefly introduce yourself?

My name is Susanne Bosch and I like to call myself an Interface Ar/ctivist. As an artist and human being, I deliberately work between different sectors and I define the artistic field as a field of imagination and visions, but also of negotiation, communication and making people aware of their interdependencies. I practice internationally in public art projects asking questions about long-term issues, and building creative arguments around the ideas of democracy and sustainable futures. I work mainly in co-production with others. I love the term 'radical friendship' by John Jordan when it comes to talk about why I do what I do. Artist and activist John Jordan argues that "at the root of what we do is radical friendship. We create these tools, these actions and these moments, but because we work horizontally, we try to work with a collective spirit. The key is creating friendships. We think the basics of any politics is the trust, the friendship and the love that is created through these intense moments of working together in disobedience." [1]

[1] John Jordan on Creative Activism, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPQ2MyLwiJI> [accessed 11th April 2018]

2. Where are you based at the moment? Do you have a studio?

I live in Berlin, I work in a co-working space and from basically everywhere, as I have a very nomadic international reality since a couple of years. It means for now I practice in places I get invited to be. I often return to places and become the 'friend of the family', meaning I am close enough to the people and situation that I know where to start right away. I know where the vacuum cleaner is and how to turn on the cattle.

3. What are the advantages and consequences of this lifestyle?

I love about this nomadic international reality that I have friends in many places and realities and I have knowledge about a location beyond the touristic gaze. I can often connect people or projects and I can pass on knowledge, methodologies etc. from one place to the other. Because I have been there to witness how it works on the ground. The downside of this nomadism is my transient existence where my connection to people are often strong when we physically meet, but need to survive on a virtual level once I move on. It has a very problematic side to it as in a neo-liberal sense, it makes the individual very vulnerable. I am very aware of that.

4. The one week workshop you that just finished here within Open Studio had a very specific dramaturgy and methodology. Could you talk a little bit about the concept? What are the main themes that we explored?

In my artistic research and as facilitator, I am using formats such as seminars and workshops. I find it utterly important that artistic and creative practitioners are aware of their attitude to the world. It needs to be done with intention. As a friend of mine said: It is not a professional methodology, it is a live attitude and practice how we approach the world. So the concept of the 5-day workshop addressed the spirit of reciprocal art-making in an age of fragmentation. There is a massive longing for new models of togetherness and

interdependence and therefore, such art practices are being looked at for their potentials. It was a hands-on workshop, where we explored the topic of conviviality (the art of living together well) through art practices. The workshop explored the responsibilities of the artist hosting others in an artistic process, of the gesture and performativity of attitude that the artist makes. And we explored the narrative dimension of the creation. Meaning: How do you share with others what you do, what stories do you tell through your documentation, artist talks, etc. We did all of this through a constant flow between content, exploring formats and the reflection of this embodied experiences.

5. At the first day you mentioned that one of the outputs will be a specific toolbox for us to use later on, even in our practice if we feel like it. What kind of tools are inside?

On the last day of the workshop, together we compiled a booklet with all the exercises we did. We made a description and added some images if we had some. This way, everyone has free access to the formats we tried and practices. One can divide these into 3 kind of tools: Artistic methods (interventions, embodied practices), communication methods (agreeing on joint rules, forms of introduction, conversations in pairs, small groups and circles) and reflective methods such as power and conflict mapping.

6. What are your feelings after the workshop? Can you share some observations?

I must say I enjoyed the week in Bratislava very much. As I was the stranger, it is always about how I am being welcomed by a group of students and teachers/colleagues. As I did not know anyone, it was like a blind date. And similar to that situation, there is this uncertainty, if characters match, if you hit the right tone, if temperaments fit. As seminars and workshops are about real people and not only content. My content is an offer to you that you might accept or reject. So, my observations were that you set up a rule on the first day saying "Please talk". Not to me, but everyone. That gave me an indication that it might be not so easy for all of you to either speak in English or to express yourselves openly, to ask questions, to brainstorm, to wonder, ... I was wondering if this has to do with the atmosphere in the group – maybe you do not trust each other or you think you are in competition with the others – or with a general mentality. I learned that you are all very careful, considerate, attentive and totally thoughtful before jumping with your comments into the group. You have trust and camaraderie amongst yourselves, it seems. I have been in Slovakia 26 years ago and I remember a very restrictive atmosphere. This seems long gone, today Bratislava is a vibrant, contemporary city. Still, I am wondering how much of the past bridges into the presence?

7. Many of the exercises that we did seemed to be focused on basic concepts of democracy. Defining the rules of togetherness, discussing, negotiating etc. What do you think about the current state of democracy? Can art practices / exercises like this help to increase our democratic literacy?

Definitely art practices / exercises like this increase democratic literacy. I think this is one of the strength and purposes of socially engaged or participatory or context-specific artworks. Where do we ever have a chance to experience new and different forms of togetherness where we are invited to jointly develop a process in a creation way or to set up joint rules or to reject current rules in order to negotiate new ones instead? Usually in daily life, if there is such citizen activity, it contains massive political agendas from the beginning. People hold roles/positions and these come with power hierarchies and privilege. It is culturally not easy for us to question these. Of course in an art context you also have huge hierarchical power set-ups, but these types of work provoke to shake them up. That always comes with

the realisation that with heterogeneous opinions - and not only the voice of the most powerful – comes messiness, multitude, also conflict and the need to deal with conflict. John Jordan says: “Conflict is a necessary and natural part of every society, not only because interests and opinions constantly differ, but also because every human being aspires to have their uniqueness recognized and this results in an element of rivalry as powerful and primordial as the aspiration, also common to all, to harmony and co-operation. In short, we have to make conflict a force for life rather than a force for death. And we have to turn rivalry into a means of co-operation, a weapon with which to ward off violence and the destruction it entrains.” [2] In the current global climate, I see a huge need and chance to offer the opposite experience to the current political leadership experience performed by popular heroes or tycoon-type characters who base their legitimation on radical self-empowerment. As a democratic culture that is based on acknowledging human interconnectedness on a local, regional and international scale seems to slowly vanish.

[2] John Jordan on Creative Activism, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPQ2MyLwiJI> [accessed 11th April 2018]

8. This kind of brings me to one of the questions, which I am quite curious about. I have a graphic design background where the dominance of function and functionality of outputs is quite strong. Does art fulfil certain functions? If yes, what are your favourite ones? Or desired ones.

I think art is always a medium of communication, no matter if you practice 'art pour l'art' or any other form. And as such, it is always sociable. This is what the Austrian artgroup Wochenklausur said: 'Art can take on many tasks. The various functions can be listed page by page, like styles: art can represent its clients and producers, it can create and maintain identities, it can satisfy the snobbish hunger for knowledge and possession. Art can feed the leisure time of bored masses, it can serve as a financial object of speculation, it can transmit feelings and make the heart vibrate in the body. In addition, many functions interlock. Abstract Expressionism served the Americans in the Cold War as a political instrument of culturalization as well as the spiritual need for expression of the young painters who created it.

One of the functions of art has always been to change living conditions. The questioning of irrational taboos and traditional standards of value and the correction of social conditions have also gained ground in art with modernity and its adoption of religiously based authorities. For the first time, this function has also found practical representatives in the Russian Constructivists. At the same time as the change of power in Russia in 1917, an art was presented that wanted to have a direct influence on the consciousness and living conditions of the people through agitation and activism. This opened a new chapter in art history.“ [3] Cuban artist Tania Brugueras revived the term useful art: “Arte Útil roughly translates into English as 'useful art' but it goes further suggesting art as a tool or device. Arte Útil draws on artistic thinking to imagine, create and implement tactics that change how we act in society.“ [4]

Now, my favourite and desired functions of art would be: I think there is a huge difference between artistic ways of thinking the world and lets say applied art ways of thinking. Artistic ways of thinking for me allow for being in the field of 'Everything can, nothing must happen!' In other words, there is the greatest possible freedom to respond from an artistic perspective, which never needs to make any sense, explain itself and justify itself, ... but function aesthetically. So the desired function for me is an artwork that aesthetically touches upon something that makes me shift and turn.

[3] Wochenklausur, <http://www.wochenklausur.at/kunst.php?lang=de> _ [accessed 11th April 2018]

[4] <http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/> <http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/> [accessed 11th April 2018]

9. In your lecture you used the term "acupuncture" in relationship to your practice. How exactly does this concept work?

"Urban Acupuncture" is a term that I picked up from a colleague of mine, Jeanne van Heeswijk. In a medical sense, the common mechanism of stimulation of acupuncture points employs penetration of the skin by thin metal needles, which are manipulated manually or electrically. This stimulation of energy points creates a flow or pain relief, a noticeable change when successful. Acupuncture serves as a metaphor. Jeanne says: "I often refer to forms of urban acupuncture (hit and run tactics) that will allow the sensitive places in our society to emerge and blocked relational energies to flow again. Developing instruments that enable people to fill in this place and deepen, sharpen or question that narrative. So they can face their world in progress (not as consumers but as creators) and become actors in their own surrounding, being able to act up, to be an active citizen." [5] It works like this: An artistic offer is made to people to experience their being in a place in a new way and to eventually benefit from the experience in a way that they become active agents of their lives. [5] Quote from a talk: Art and Social Change: learning collectively to take responsibility 22 September 2011,

http://www.jeanetworks.net/essays/art_and_social_change%3A_learning_collectively_to_take_responsibility/ "

[accessed 11th April 2018]

10. Can you maybe think of an example where the artwork's impact changed a situation within community, living conditions, standards of value, etc. in an interesting way?

There are numerous, wonderful projects and they are far too complex and too interesting to describe them on half a page. I highly recommend you to learn about a number of these projects by visiting their webpages, watching films and reading about them. Or even better: Visit them!

1. Jeanne von Heeswijk, Freehouse - Radicalizing the Local Afrikaanderwijk, Rotterdam South, since 2008, HYPERLINK

http://www.jeanetworks.net/essays/art_and_social_change%3A_learning_collectively_to_take_responsibility/#/projects/freehouse_-_radicalizing_the_local/ [accessed 4th May 2018]

2. Suzanne Lacy, The roof is on fire, <http://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects/> <http://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects/> [accessed 4th May 2018]

3. Park Fiction, <http://park-fiction.net/> <http://park-fiction.net/> , since the 1990s in Hamburg, Germany [accessed 4th May 2018]

4. Jeanne von Heeswijk, <http://www.2up2down.org.uk/> , Liverpool, since 2010 [accessed 4th May 2018]

5. Fiona Whelan, What's the Story? Collective led a four-year project (2007-11) exploring power and policing in Dublin. <http://www.fionawhelan.com/projects/whats-the-story/> [accessed 4th May 2018]

6. Theaster Gates , Chicago, <https://rebuild-foundation.org/sites/> <https://rebuildfoundation.org/sites/> and https://www.ted.com/speakers/theaster_gates https://www.ted.com/speakers/theaster_gates [accessed 4th May 2018]

11. You call yourself an "Interface artist". What's your definition on an interface? What kind of interfaces do you choose to inhabit? Do you also design new ones?

Interface, as it has many also technical definitions, for me is the shared field or space on

which two or more separate components exchange information. It serves communication. The exchange can be between devices, humans, combinations of these. What happens with the exchange of communication is open. Inter-face means ‚between faces/forms`. Working mainly in public space, I see myself sitting within institutions, political, social, cultural elements, but also I am always faced with power questions and questions of empowerment. My artist role is to harness a complex set of skills and functions such as maker, organizer, facilitator, negotiator, and performer. The projects all demand that I have a flexible but embodied presence. I want to highlight here the importance of key elements of a safe space, providing a platform for others, and for issues to emerge, whilst any notion of spectacle is dismissed. I wrote in my PhD [6] in depth about this. But here some further thoughts: Shifts in my work were mostly triggered by cross-sector learning and a maturing process that I underwent, which allowed for more constructive reflexivity. As the conceptual driver of my art projects, the reciprocal flow of skills and knowledge take place through me as a person. As such, my individual expertise and accountability play a key role in the success of projects. I stand for a list of legitimate tools and materials of the work leading to negotiated (forms) yet unpredictable (content) outcomes. Mutual interest in others, an openness and trust in less controlled and collective developments, as well as conceptual thinking to deal with complex variables in such a process: these are all essential. From experience, I found that the conceptual setting of ‘not-knowing, not being an expert’ as a form of paradoxical expertise is the key in engaging in productive activities with others. My artistic practice bridges into wider fields, such as education and conflict transformation. Performative presentations and the embodied presence of an artist is suitable for sharing certain knowledge with a wider audience; verbal and written communication of thinking elementally for the validation of work by those in wider fields is crucial as well.

[6] <http://www.susannebosch.de/133.0.html> <http://www.susannebosch.de/133.0.html> [accessed 4th May 2018]

12. Some months ago documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis said he explicitly wants to distantiate from being - or being called - an artist. - although a lot of people would call him an artist. The notion of ‘the artist’, he says, is an identity mainly involved with personal expression, exploring one’s subjectivity or the Self - very often as a critique to our overindividualised society. Do you agree with his definition? Is this tendency so dangerous?

I know many people in my field who distantiate themselves from the image of the artist circulating around his/her own EGO. I know many artists who find that not interesting and a waste of resources. I know many artists that focus more on the commons than on themselves. Although people might argue the private is the most political. Or the reverse: Everything has to do with us. Also the issues on a more meta level. But I think Adam Curtis meant not the private, but the genius status that the artist has been given by society for centuries now and that is hard to break as a stereotype. As the wish behind this is: ‘I am normal, I belong to you, I want to share something that most of you have not had the chance to learn. But it is easy to pass on and everyone is entitled to learn this.’

In my field of work, I would more distinguish between two artistic strategies for opening up or creating the space for others. The art historian Claire Bishop opened up these differentiations: One is an artistic practice that offers an alternative to social injustice through artistic actions that influence society. The second is an artistic approach that primarily confronts the situation with its own rules of the game. My practice undoubtedly belongs in the first category, and I very much respect the powerful influence of the second approach.

Dangerous would be to try and get rid of the traditional artist role or the provocateur or the

visionary. I think they all belong into that field.

13. All over Europe we see many powerful extremist parties with huge popularity and support. In Slovakia we also have one in parliament with strong neofascist roots. It is often said that it is impossible to democratically negotiate or even discuss with these groups. How is this problem addressed in Germany? Can you, as skilled trained in conflict transformation, maybe think of some strategies of communication and possible conflict transformation?

From the conflict transformation point of view, I can clearly say, if communication between the conflicted parties stop, the next step is violent outbreaks. To keep in contact, to keep inviting people into conversations is key. Never stop the approach to try and sit around the table. I had the most amazing experience in a train from Hamburg to Berlin last year when the train was full of football fans going home and somehow a conversation began. Alcohol was involved, we could not escape the two hour train ride, the train was packed, so we were all physically close. The conversation started around: Why are you a football fan and what do you do as football fan? And it turned out the some people are very right wing, others just liberal fans. Anyway, after two hours of sometimes heated discussions between all of us (I am not a football fan but curious), everyone said how nice this was. I realized, I never get to talk and exchange thoughts with people e.g. with a more right-wing attitude. And the others seemed to have the same realisation: we always seems to talk only to our own kind.

14. You did one of your acupunctures in Jericho. How long have you been there and was the purpose of your stay?

The Jericho work “changemakers” developed out of an open call in the internet ‘Jericho – beyond the celestial and terrestrial’ that I responded to. Founded by Vera Tamari, the original idea behind Cities Exhibition/ Jericho – beyond the celestial and terrestrial was to draw attention to a variety of relationships between people, place and time, highlighting the cadences and uniqueness of each Palestinian city through the narrative of time. Cities Exhibition, which took place at Birzeit University Museum, tried to look beyond the typical representations of nostalgia and folklore in Palestine, juxtaposing past and contemporary visual and cultural evidence, not only to affirm the uniqueness of cities such as Jericho, but also to challenge issues of memory, identity and change. Yazid Anani, the curator of Jericho – beyond the celestial and terrestrial, re-explored this concept in the city of Jericho by using an unconventional curatorial approach: in his call for entries, the curator invited artists from all over the world to explore Jericho via a series of 'trails' in an attempt to re-establish the lost connection between man and the cosmos through interventions, research and art practice, with exploration as a key theme. Anani suggested in his proposal three designated phases: research and site investigation; public intervention in Jericho and its landscape; and exhibition as a documentation of the whole experience. Five artists were selected from 57 entries: Iyad Issa explored 'contemporaneity', Shuruq Harb 'cosmos', Samah Hijawi 'land', Susanne Bosch 'humanity' and Sarah Beddington 'wildlife'. I proposed something very extreme to them: Examining Jericho's landscape together with a 'geomancer', someone who analyses the so-called 'earth energies' that ebb and flow throughout a landscape, influencing health and wealth, home, garden and office alike. Geomancy (a New Age practice of earthbased divination) aims to work with these energies to enhance our relationship with spirit and place. Together with the geomancer, I wanted to traverse the landscape, covering themes of migration and escape, water, political activism and spirituality in relation to this location. It all developed into one direction when I discovered the “Arab Development Society” in the Jordanian desert and started to research on this very visionary project by

Musa Alami, set up in 1949.

For this work, I have been there between 2011-2013 about 6 times, and out of the research visit developed a publication and a public intervention. From there onwards I worked on a multimedia museum installation. Examining the concept of humanity in Jericho, I undertook in October 2012 a three-hour silent walk with 75 participants that brought them to a socialist agricultural project from 1949, the Arab Development Society, funded by Musa Alami. The project had a goal of establishing a self-sufficient modern Palestinian society that could sustain itself and be resilient to the outside world. [7]

[7] <http://www.susannebosch.de/135.0.html> Between Politics and Aesthetics. Publisher: Art&Thought, Fikrun wa Fann "Participating, Sharing, Exchanging" by Stefan Weidner (editor). <http://www.goethe.de/fikrun> [accessed 4th May 2018]

15. Has Jericho changed you?

Jericho is a really important moment in my life. To keep it short: I had a very open idea what to do and it depended on meeting the right people. It worked with co-incidence. And that happened on the semi last day of my second research visit, when I randomly met Siham Fayad who invited me after a conversation on the street to see where she grew up, on the next morning at 6 am. Siham really touched my heart in many ways through her wisdom, her experience, her open sharing with me and her hospitality. Her family invited me to stay with them for the next visits and I did. So I became part of a Bedouin family in Jericho. I learned so much informally about the local society, history, culture, about the private and the public, it was just wonderful, also to become part of a neighbourhood. It allowed me to really dive into this landscape which I utterly love, this deepest piece of earth on the planet with minus 400 meter below sea level. Then I started this really interesting research around the place that Siham introduced me to and it was like finding a treasure. I am still working on this until today. I read the biography of the founder of the ADS, Musa Alami. I found audio and super 8 footage in cupboards of his former house, which I was allowed to access and I felt at times, I am accessing the soul of a very charismatic man and his visions. Making artwork about his lifework allowed me to ask new questions, to understand the entire region differently, to hear new answers and get new perspectives. Palestine and the former Arab League seems far from Europe, but it is actually not and historically never was. I dared to invite people into my findings that excite me so much and I received so many existential responses from Palestinian people. Currently a film producer invited me to work further on that, so this is also an opportunity to work in a completely new medium and reach a completely new audience.