

Laus alit artes

In the beginning, there was the word: how to name a seven-week workshop with twelve artists working on the sequel to a first exhibition? The artists are no longer students, and the Casino Luxembourg - Forum d'Art Contemporain is no university. Yet the *Re:Location Academy* did become reality for one summer, and the participants and their interlocutors needed suitable and inclusive terms to define themselves as a group. In short, after several days of discussion, and with the help of their mentors, the laureates initiated a creative process and began to produce what we have come to call "art". The term proved a functional one, and has found its way into the very title of this text, which refers to Seneca's Moral Letters: "Praise nourishes the arts", a phrase as much as a motto.

Seneca was a tutor of senators and politicians under the Roman Empire, which was, by its own standards, a global superpower. Its goal was to act "globally", particularly in economic terms, and judging by its proper perception of "the global", this was precisely what it did, and quite successfully. So if in Antiquity, praise was defined as a kind of warranty for an economy of the arts, the expression should also be applicable to current developments pertaining to economic and political globalisation. For on the one hand, contemporary artists do work globally, in terms of subject matter and production, and on the other, the global economy is now divided between an antique, European morality of interest-based economics going back to Christianity, and a culture that is marked by a (pre-) Islamic practice of interest-free offerings, even in a context of war, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in India and Pakistan. Art is thus endowed with an unexpected but ancient function, that of an intermediary between interest and offering.

Residing somewhere between ritual and object, art is always part of a far-reaching and not always transparent process of communication: art is a gift. As Jean Starobinski put it, in his magnificent work *Largesse* (Paris 1994), every social gesture holds a wealth of references, signs, significations and other elements going far beyond the actual process of giving and taking. In the context of art that apparently stems from a courtly cultural setting, the gift of the artist was always considered less important than the work itself, and was expected to constitute an oeuvre that would outlive the artist in question. This amounts to the very opposite of the pre-historical practice of offering small, specially prepared gifts to the dead to accompany them on their way to a new life in the Great Beyond. A secularised work of art does not give; it is autonomous and exists only for its own sake.

Within the frame of a global discourse, to perceive the work of art as a gift is, first and foremost, to relocate (cf. re:location) its responsibilities as well as its foundations. Presents and gifts are generally unexpected, and often unwelcome, so they do not always prompt the gratitude one might hope for. The same goes for art: from new forms of music, to sequences of moving images on a computer screen, to sculptural arrangements that can be rather repulsive, to performances that go under one's skin – both the audience's and the artist's – such is the range of possibilities for undermining any sort of distance between artist and recipient. The gift of art lies in the very act of outrunning and tearing down habitual patterns of seeing and perceiving. It is harder to accept this gesture than to reject it, and

for several decades now, the public debate on the arts has been defined by the difference between giving (or assigning) and taking (or accepting).

Since Antiquity, the relation between capital interest rates and the gift of art and knowledge has been cause for thought, and brings us closer to the subject of what an academy can and should be: a space for the exchange of science and creativity. This exchange offers a “non-quantifiable interest”, as the greatest bibliophile of the High Middle Ages, Emperor Maximilian of Austria, once put it when he was describing his own library. Since then, the stream of individuals arguing that art and artists hold a more or less direct influence on economic behaviour has been never-ending. The latest examples are perhaps figures such as Joseph Beuys and James Lee Byars, who, in many different ways, have attempted to correlate the value of art with the very act of exchange. But in Luxembourg, it was not the illustration of an art history that was at stake. The motto of the Casino Luxembourg, which Maurizio Nannucci has placed in front of the glass pavilion, says: “All Art Has Been Contemporary”. And the *Re:Location Academy* was no exception.

To found an academy means to create a space where thoughts, feelings, actions, modes of knowledge and, in the long run, processes of realisation and objectification are rehearsed and accomplished with the help of drafts and models. But an academy can offer many other things: first of all, on the face of it, those who are older and wiser can give to the young and restless. But the young can prove their independence, novelty and nerve to their instructors by learning how to share and partake in each other's wealth and creativity. This can be a gift in its own right, for it helps sustain the elders' contemporaneity, and enables constant adaptation to new questions and value judgments. An academy exists in the world as a location, and yet, it is detached from that world. An institution that is devoted to the contemporary arts is not necessarily the right place for an academy. The latter demands a committed team of administrators, curators, scientists, and technicians, with the latter enabling artistic actions, in the ancient Greek sense of the term. One of the merits of the Casino Luxembourg is that a team of this kind does indeed work there, and that one of the most important conditions for an academy is thus met, at the right place and time. So the very location of the *Re:Location Academy* is one of its most important gifts, and implies certain social gestures that do play a part in the oeuvre of the participating artists. On the other hand, the artworks created within the context of this academic discourse can be classified according to the question of how they give, and what they give. So in a very contemporary fashion, these works include a political dimension, a contribution to the prevalent global discourse that is perhaps still small, but in no way insignificant.

In this context, it is certainly the work of Mia Rosasco that offers the clearest link to the notion of the gift. She handed over her entire budget (after taking off her material expenses) to a family of migrants who documented their odyssey through Europe as they fled from destitution, violence and war. This work was the result of an agreement between Rosasco and people who normally have nothing to do with art. The agreement itself is not an artwork, no more than the contract between the artist and the Casino Luxembourg – both of these accords are, like the documentation itself, only part of the installation in the exhibition, which refers to more complex procedures. Through this artwork, in conjunction with a performance during which she ran a cafeteria in the academy, Mia Rosasco partakes in an artistic tradition of social strategies which developed out of the *Aktionskunst* movement during the 1970s.

As a gift, dance is an art form in its own right, and one of the oldest topics of art. In her dual installation *Casino Dance Night*, Irina Botea not only took the original function of the academy's exhibition space into consideration, but also deconstructed the political structure of the host country, where a waltz with the Grand Duke means acceptance in the upper guilds of society. It is no wonder that the artist was denied this waltz, in a manner that was friendly, but firm. So Irina Botea danced with those who were close to her during her time at the academy – in the Casino Luxembourg, on the streets and squares of the city of Luxembourg, in a small bar – wearing the ballroom dress that was purchased especially for the occasion, and which forms part of the installation, together with the letter of rejection on behalf of the Court Marshall. The screening of several video films in a cinema with old seating, formed the second part of her installation. Already in earlier works, Irina Botea had taken issue with the representations of power, for example through shots of Ceausescu's palace in her images and films. Impossible as it may be, the attempt to match the value of art in pure gold has been visualised time and again, and has even been the basis of many contracts between artists and commissioners. By various means, Veronika Šramatyová takes issue with the value of art, and takes into account the realm of everyday life, with all its specific demands and desires, but also questions the standing of whatever a society considers a work of art. As a onetime restorer, Šramatyová takes the museographic presentation of her actions and models to heart. During her time at the academy, she commissioned a local goldsmith to make a set of jewellery bearing the inscription *Casino* on the front side of each piece, and her signature and the year "2004" on the back or interior. The main piece of the set is a ring with a seal, of which Veronika Šramatyová wore a duplicate during the exhibition opening, in the sense of a performance – a gift to herself as well as the others.

The artworks of Hsia-Fei Chang are gifts that are equally benevolent in character. Over the past decades, Pop Music, from which she draws much of the inspiration and subject matter of her work, has established a subtle system of rituals that helps define the acts of giving and taking, particularly when it comes to erotic contact during and shortly after puberty. This is the point of departure of the artist, who pins artificial flowers to the wall, forming reliefs of the names of pop idols, or simply those of young contemporaries. She also made a video about a young Heavy Metal group, which resulted in the group's first video clip and a concert at the academy on the last night of the exhibition. Even the decoration of the largest hall of the Casino Luxembourg, a mural based on a drawing of the VW Microbus from the film *Alice's Restaurant*, with Arlo Guthrie, is a gift: a reference to peaceful cohabitation, at a specific place, during a limited span of time. Which is why the mural is flanked on both sides by photographs, either still images from the video clip of the young band "Breet", or pictures of the fireworks on Luxembourg's national holiday, which the members of the *Re:Location Academy* could see from the illustrious bay window of the Casino Luxembourg. But the work of Hsia-Fei Chang also refers to its origins in the media, without which no interaction is possible, nor any giving or taking, a fact that was very much emphasised by Gilles Deleuze.

For Charlotte Karlsson, giving is preferably situated in spaces that are interstitial in terms of both time and space. *17, Place de l'Étoile – a living room* is the address of a now completely demolished house that she visited and photographed almost every day during her stay in Luxembourg. Karlsson also collected quite a bit of rubble, keeping it in a room within the Casino; from it she distilled a second installation. The installation can be seen through two small peepholes, in the manner of someone who

is “spying” on visitors from within an apartment. The door to the second room of her installation also has a peephole, showing a row of photographs from the house at the Place de l'Étoile, and through which Charlotte Karlsson actually reverses the viewer's gaze: in front of a backdrop of wallpaper, the sleeves of suspended clothes stretch out like periscopes, and seem to be observing the onlookers themselves – the gift of a reciprocal gaze.

Naturally, gifts can also be offered in bad faith, and during the last few years, art history has had to learn a lesson that literature learned many centuries before: art can at times actually profit from war, and is in itself neither good nor bad. Georg Büchner once made the comparison between revolutions and Saturn, who devours his own children, and it is indeed the artists from post-socialist countries who are particularly sceptical with regard to statements on society at large. In his installations, Vlad Nancă takes political rituals, heralds and metaphors to an absurd end, offering more than a quick and provisional glimpse into the nature of the processes linking art to politics. Two of his installations at the Casino play a game with political and artistic symbols that is both sinister and sincere: two mannequins, equipped with rudimentary street-fighting gear available from any DIY store, are placed next to the legendary video tape of the G8 summit meeting in Genoa. And in the entrance to the Casino Luxembourg, Vlad Nancă has set up a money-box with a plea for a small donation for a poor Romanian artist. The behavioural patterns and expectations of the artists – “if I had more money, I'd be more creative” – as well as those of the Western-European audience – “all Romanians are beggars” – are thereby caricatured in equal measure. His gift does not go down easily, and this is largely due to its aesthetically convincing form.

In developed societies, the existence of social gestures of giving and taking can no longer be taken for granted, and must be accompanied and contextualised by language. Small linguistic minorities, increasingly marginalised within the context of a global market economy, are under more pressure in globalised societies than in nations in which they were merely tolerated, or actually outlawed. As a Basque artist, Iratxe Jaio has dedicated much of her oeuvre to the differences in language and gesticulation between, for example, Northern Ireland and her homeland. In the work on display in Luxembourg, committed to a strictly documentary aesthetic, she tackles the issue from two different perspectives. The first of these examined the celebrations of the Portuguese minority in Luxembourg during the European soccer championship, which were marked by joy as well as disappointment, since the Portuguese lost the final match. Secondly, Iratxe Jaio followed a Luxembourgian language course, which she documented through video recordings of a lesson, and interviews with three colleagues.

Needless to say, the recourse to an economic form of giving and receiving, which, in this case, is a hypothetical attempt to understand the work of art in the age of globalisation, does not mean that we reject the postulate of an autonomy of artistic practice, or the resulting artworks or manifestations that have secured the extraordinary social status of the arts over the last two centuries. In this context, our idea of a gift is closely linked to the arts in the sense of, say, a stock or supply of perceptions, a sensual prescription for proper experiences, or a model of a world view that one can either reject or appropriate as one's own. Be that as it may, in an exhibition, perception plays the role of a catalyst of personal as well as emotional communication. Which, surely, must be recognised as a gift of sorts. The latter has been exemplified by three works at the *Re:Location Academy*.

Janek Simon presents the model of a show that is actually his own retrospective, exhibited in the *beletage* of the Casino Luxembourg, where the model itself is exhibited. Replicating reality twice over, he contains his model within a model. But the artworks and objects on display, through which Simon grants himself this gift of an exhibition, are largely fictional in character, based on pieces that he has long destroyed, or on ideas he has never realised. The precision with which he has constructed the model, particularly the computer-based artworks, mirrors his own fascination with technical toys and their close connection to military operations, but also the atavistic idea that the more meticulously a projection reflects the future, the greater its chances of becoming reality.

The very reversal of an idea of this kind can be found in the installation by Aurelio Kopainig. *Empfänger [Receivers]* is the title of his work as well as an apt description of the main objects therein – case-like sculptures with holes and capillary extensions – which represent different processes of reception and consumption without offering a proper conclusion about the resulting output. The objects are stacked against the wall in an orderly manner, or in the middle of the room, or are combined with real TV sets, their images blending into plaster replicas and drawings on the wall. At first glance, the drawings represent a self-sufficient microcosm, but two small monitors on the wall interrupt the viewers' reception, and divert their attention to something rather more surreal: 8mm-films recorded in the rooms of the Casino Luxembourg, of touching simplicity both in content and in their Stop-Motion trick technique. Carpets roll themselves up, walls break open, and the floors bend of their own accord. These are small visual feasts, courtesy of the artist, for himself, and thus also for the viewer.

Isa Riedl goes a step further in matters of shrinking and concealing, for her artworks must actually be tracked down by the audience, somewhere in the transitional spaces between the installations of two other artists at the Academy. At first glance, her work resembles the travel drawings of the Romantic tradition, which were sometimes coloured, but the substance of her own drawings is a little more complex. On the one hand, the pictures are clearly based on photographs, while on the other, they are enriched with symbolic or metaphorical details that reveal themselves only to those who have reflected on the illustrated places with similar precision to the artist herself. In short texts displayed on distant architectural elements by means of cut-out letters, or inscribed on the walls through faint smudges, the references are further deepened, the places are named, meta-narrative strands of comprehension are evoked, and an overall common ground is defined, which lies somewhere between literature and the visual arts, one that is thoroughly contemporary despite its reference to the Romantics.

Twelve artists from ten countries in one Academy: what we have here is, among other things, a socio-psychological occurrence. Will these people get along with one another, will they be able to resist group pressure, will they succeed in using the dynamics of collectivity in a positive manner, and above all: will they be able to concentrate on their own work, and will they be active and inspired? It is hardly surprising, in a group of this kind, that there were artists who took issue with these processes in and of themselves, and let them flow into their work in a manner that was more obvious than in the case of other participants. Consequently, their artworks are a gift twice over, to themselves and the group, and, only then, to the audience of the exhibition.

For Esra Ersen, who has already enjoyed a significant career as an installation artist, the situation of being thrown back into a group context was a challenge in itself. She incessantly designed one project

after another that, for one reason or another, could not be realised; clearly a reaction to the prescriptions of the *Re:Location Academy* – which the other participants understood to be the binding limitations. In the end, there was an intervention and an installation, which, to a great extent, reflected the situation both within the workspace and within the group: in the local daily newspaper, an ad was published announcing that there would be “no demonstration in Disneyland” that day. In her installation, Esra Ersen reworked the group situation in a paradigmatic fashion, setting up a training camp with sandbags and markings on the floor, but without carrying them out completely, and adding two photographs showing the artist herself within this space. The space in question presents itself as autonomous, but also reflects the context, even for viewers who were not part of the *Re:Location Academy* themselves.

The Spanish video artist, Jon Mikel Euba, produced two installations clearly reflecting the group context, but also the spatial circumstances within the Casino Luxembourg. Whenever artists work in this building, they are at once fascinated by the cellar, which has an atmosphere of its own. Here, Jon Mikel Euba installed a video piece, together with other artists and the curator Fabienne Bernardini, representing the group dynamic at the *Re:Location Academy* in a slightly ironic manner. In the style of *tableaux vivants* – the party game of the eighteenth century that came to life with such pathos in the films of Peter Greenaway and the video works of Bill Viola – the artists sit or stand in the dark cellar, acting according to precise instructions on behalf of the director. The whole event was recorded by two cameras in far corners of the room and exhibited accordingly. The Casino was enlarged in the 1950s by a space based on a design by Jean Prouvé, which is widely referred to as the “Aquarium”. Here, Jon Mikel Euba painted a phrase on the glass walls that can be read from the interior: *My Right is Your Left*. From outside, the text is barely readable, resembling an advertising slogan by night, while during the day, it offers shelter to all those who find themselves within the glass structure, and a motto for the time they spend together.

Each academic year ends with a presentation that is as provisional as it is contemporary, and no one would expect an academic exercise to produce anything other than provisional results. As a matter of fact, these are often fresher and clearer in their conceptual make-up than artworks that are produced with an existence in some museum or archive in mind. This alone would justify the introduction of a working hypothesis defining the artwork as a gift, as is the case in the project at hand. The *Re:Location Academy* in the Casino Luxembourg is precisely the kind of munificent institution that is necessary for such acts of giving – even if, throughout its history, it has by no means been a wealthy institution (for their bigger celebrations, even the Sultans had to loan money from the unbelievers). And we all, laureates, mentors and recipients, must learn to give and take as a form of communication, and, most importantly, to do without the overall expectation of a profitable interest rate and a rise in value.

It is only then that a new responsibility can be bestowed on art and artists, a predisposition towards a different cultural and economic form of behaviour, one that is not as primitive as the shareholder values, global growth rates and democratic wars of liberation marking the political and economic circumstances of today. True globalisation can only be reached through the establishment of intercultural values – within a limited space and time – and by interiorising a new form of communication that is also a value judgment: praise. Praise can be spoken only on a personal basis, it

cannot hold longer than the days during which it is expressed, and cannot leave the space where it was uttered. For the arts, the *Re:Location Academy* at the Casino Luxembourg was, in this sense, an exercise both old and new in character.

Translated from German by Tirdad Zolghadr

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