

PLAYGROUND 
REVOLUTIONS

Playground Revolutions is a dialogical exhibition that investigates the possibilities and impossibilities of socially engaged art. The exhibition also inquires into whether there is a difference between the so-called political and the aesthetic. When does something become truly political? Through its immediacy or its mediation? The idea of reconstruction as an “unfinished” or re-enacted revolution is the quintessential element of both Fia-Stina Sandlund’s and Irina Botea’s work. Sandlund lives and works in a post-welfare Sweden while Botea is dealing with a post-communist Romania – countries that are in transition from one state to another. What are the possibilities of aesthetic or social engagement within these not-yet-defined systems? Claire Bishop believes that in socially engaged art, the aesthetic is being sacrificed on the altar of social change. Does this mean that all socially engaged art neglects its own aesthetics, or are there exceptions to the rule? And what about those that sacrifice their pathos for social change on the altar of aesthetics? Is that just as bad, or does it yield something else in return? A renewed belief in the autonomy of art? According to Rancière, all aesthetics are more or less political. The aesthetic doesn’t have to be sacrificed on the altar of social engagement, since it already contains this ameliorative process. If this is the case, what about Fia-Stina Sandlund and Irina Botea’s enacted politics? Is the mimicry of the political itself a political act or does it deconstruct the very mechanisms of the political? These are some of the questions that will be raised and discussed within the exhibition space, the artist discussions, and the catalogue text for Playground Revolutions, curated by Sinziana Ravini.

PLAYGROUND REVOLUTIONS

IRINA BOTEA ★ FIA-STINA SANDLUND

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The Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm has its head office in Bucharest and is one of 17 branches spread around the world. Our expressed goals are to offer a creative collaboration platform between Swedish and Romanian cultural promoters and to provide Swedes with a fresh view of developments in Romanian visual and performing arts, literature, and an insight into Romanian society.

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ART – AN AGENT PROVOCATEUR

What social role should intellectuals play in today's world? Should they feel compelled to be disgruntled with the existing social order or can they keep themselves aloof from it? There is no clear answer. Some claim that it is possible to retreat to an "ivory tower", to champion *L'art pour l'art* yet retain one's integrity. Others demand activism. The intellectual should be an agitator, a rebel, someone committed to a counter-cultural cause. Although literature and art have been used in the service of politics from time immemorial, some of the most famous artists and authors – among them Rafael, Shakespeare, Goethe and Racine – have actually made accommodations as intellectuals. Yet they are not lesser artists as a result. On the contrary!

Seldom has this disparity and incongruity been described more poignantly than in Jan Myrdal's autobiography. There, he won-

ders whether those intellectuals who take no part in the affairs of the world should be considered "the bearers of conscience and morality" or "the whores of reason". This controversy will probably continue as long we recognize that there is such a thing as an intellectual class, for whom the term "engagement" has special meaning. According to the 1961 edition of the *Grand Larousse encyclopédique*, the engagement of intellectuals is "more willed than that of other social categories". In other words, the basic definition of engagement is the action of intellectuals, especially in the political sphere.

Art in its truest form is generally regarded as not susceptible or responsive to political coercion. Yet art can both influence crucial political issues and help create a greater public awareness. By helping people to refuse to accept dogma uncritically, art undeniably energizes democracy. It excites minds and arouses feelings in a way that everyday experiences do not. For that reason alone art is an *agent provocateur*.

Dan Shafran

Director, Romanian Cultural Institute

ART AFTER SOCIAL CHANGE

We live in a time where resistance to the global market economy is as effective as a painkiller for a dead body. The utopian rebellion of modernist times, even in its most alienated manifestations of art for art's sake, was based on an ideological ground that no longer seems to exist. Some artists are still trying to negate the market, suffering from the ideological imperative of the leftist movement of the '60s. While others have taken a more ambivalent position, trying to negate and embrace it at the same time. This love-hate relationship with the enemy has been fundamental to artists of periods, whether the enemy has been the church, the state, or the market. But enemies are good to have. As Cioran said, you can be sure that you are getting old when you stop choosing your enemies, and settle down with the ones you have. We have to find and confront our enemies in order to find new ef-

fective strategies in our fight for survival within the neo-colonial culture industry.

Artists of today still have a lot to learn from the avant-garde artists who succeeded in bringing about a real symbolic revolution. They profoundly changed our world view, that is: our categories of perception and evaluation of the world, the definition of what is important and what isn't, of what deserves to be represented and what doesn't. Symbolic revolutions overturn mental structures and deeply upset people's minds. The artists of the '90s have, on the other hand, tried to work as social workers, with the aim of changing the community. The idea of community is a political fantasy that asserts a monolithic collectivity that negates difference. Only fascists and communistic leaders have had effects on the masses and the communities. Why should art co-opt their methods? Joyce and Kafka were no social activists. But still they changed the world through their art. They moved and still move people. Artists shouldn't try to change the community, but the individual.

The fetishization of ideologies oriented around Marxism has transformed the field of political action into a playground of staged revolutions. What is there to be done? Has revolution as such become impossible within the society of the spectacle? Can the enactment of a revolution lead to a real one or are these endeavors only the vain struggles of a slave mentality that needs to break its chains? I would like to suggest that the only possible revolution is within the realm of aesthetics, since all political revolutions follow aesthetic principles and all aesthetics can become revolutionary when set in the right context.

For this to happen, art should avoid being pedagogical and representational. A lot of artists of our age think that they need to do

political art in order to work politically. They use art as a tool or even as an excuse to do something else than art in the belief that they can deny the aesthetics of their own work. Their passion for the real finds its *jouissance* in the looking glass of documentary aesthetics. I am talking about artists like Isaac Julien, Simone Aaberg Kaern, Amar Kanwar, Lamia Joreige, Cecilia Parsberg and Mats Hjelm who seem to think that the documentary has direct access to the Real. But does it really? The simulation of the Real does nothing but reproduce fragmentation and alienation and reinforce the power structures between the depicter and the depicted. It can even end up overlooking the Real. Slavoj Žižek, inspired by Badiou, writes “The problem with the twentieth-century ‘passion for the Real’ was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real.”¹

Other artists try to flee reality. But our society of the spectacle, of simulacra and hyperreality is already an escape from reality. As Baudrillard suggests, since reality is nothing but a set of signs where signifiers no longer have access to reality but to other signifiers, the only real is terrorism. The thing that arrives without being invited. We are overwhelmed with traumatic images. Trauma is everywhere. That’s why we need to exchange our world with unreal worlds. But an escape from escapism isn’t possible in the long run. The Real hunts us down sooner or later. So what is there to be done?

Marcuse writes in *The Aesthetic Dimension*: “The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation

1 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002).

to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediating and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change. In this sense, there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the subversive didactic plays of Brecht.”²

Marcuse further notes: “While the abandonment of the aesthetic form may well provide the most immediate, most direct mirror of a society in which subjects and objects are shattered, atomized, robbed of their words and images, the rejection of the aesthetic sublimation turns such work into bits and pieces of the very society whose anti-art they want to be. Anti-art is self-defeating from the outset.”³ Marcuse is clearly attacking the idea that art can comment on the degeneration of the society by a too simple recreation and mirroring of that degeneration. The crisis of art resides in the bad conscience of politically engaged artists that makes them think they have to justify their artistic activity. They are more occupied with imposing a meaning from the outside in order to make art more political, scientific, transparent, moral and thus more legitimate. But art shouldn’t have to legitimate itself, shouldn’t have to have a purpose, or a use. Self-doubt can have corrosive affects. The important thing is to turn this self-doubt in a constructive ambivalence that strikes the right balance between despair and faith, seriousness and humor, engagement and disengagement.

The battle between cinematic and documentary aesthetics has been going on for too long now. There shouldn’t be any conflict

2 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. xii–xiii.

3 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 9.

between beauty and truth, between virtuality and reality. The only way to resolve this problem is through the combination of both. Artists like Gerard Byrne, Runa Islam, Magnus Bårtås and Hito Steyerl, who are blending the documentary and the fictional, as well as what Jean Luc Godard and Werner Herzog have done in the realm of film, are thus creating more sophisticated forms of virtual reality. Their fragmentary, non-linear, hybridized and fictionalized reconstructions of the past enable other narratives to emerge. The docufictional aesthetics that they produce not only mixes historical, mythical and contemporary periods, and thus escapes the tyranny of the present as well as the tyranny of the signifier, it also deconstructs the very notion of truth and fiction as separate entities. That's why the docufictional or re-enacted aesthetics are so challenging today: they are constantly connecting and disconnecting the viewer from its scopophilic pleasure.

It's not only documentary aesthetics that are mischievous, but also slogan aesthetics, where the message becomes the medium. This kind of self advertising art that is turning the legacy of Marshall McLuhan upside down is primarily alienating those audiences who may "get" the message but don't necessarily have to like the message they are getting. Artists that don't take themselves or the audience too seriously are in fact the ones that should be taken seriously. They know that revolutions are hard to bring about, so they play with the forms of revolution instead. They show that there is a *jouissance* in the simulation of revolution and not in the belief that revolution as such can be possible. In other words, they are combining the idea of the play with the idea of activism. Their played activism could be seen as a reaction to "actionism" – the term that Theodor W. Adorno used to

criticize the 1960s radicals and the student revolution of 1968. In his eyes actionism was an unreflective, collective, knee-jerk activity that sacrificed independent thinking for immediate goals, a thoughtless mirroring of the dominant culture that ended up being regressive, since it refused to reflect on its own impotence.⁴ What Adorno did was to identify the model that produced singularity – namely the ghostly spectacle of the repetition of the unrepeatable, the critical theatre.⁵ Adorno also promoted three forms of autonomy that are closely linked: (1) the internal and self-critical independence of the authentic work of art; (2) the relative independence of high culture from the political and economic system; and (3) the autonomy of the self as a moral agent.

But when it comes to the practical sides of artistic autonomy, let's face it – autonomy is a romantic vision. In order to be free, you have to be economically independent. That's the paradox of autonomy – In order to be economically independent you have to serve the market economy. In order to serve your own interests, you have to be rich. We will perhaps get to the point where we can compare our time with the Renaissance, where art ceased to serve the religious beliefs and became a spectacle for the upper middle class. Art needs money in order to be free.

An artist shouldn't have to be more engaged in the society than anyone else. The burden of history is there for everyone to carry and the belief in the future is a highly personal matter. The power of the artist lies firstly in the ability to envision that which still doesn't exist, and secondly in the act of giving this imaginary dimension a shape. The only aesthetics that has a political effect

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (Routledge Classics, 2001).

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. xi.

is the one that can change the codes of perception and thus lead to a mental revolution.

Artists can either attack the art system from within or from without. But abolishing it would mean altering the values that once motivated their striving. Unless revolt reaches the infrastructures of our desire – social change will remain self-misleading. The foremost task of the artist is thus the creation of a demand which can be fully satisfied only later. Only when the libidinal dimension of the aesthetico-political is been fully realized, are we able to go from social to mental change.

All forms are aesthetic but not all forms offer an aesthetically pleasing pursuit of enjoyment. Art frees both itself, its producers, and its consumers when it's capable of offering a playground where notions like autonomy, resistance and truth can be questioned and eventually deconstructed.

From social engagement to social enactment

The representation of the revolution can easily turn into propaganda. It's enough to look at *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David, who was the supreme painter of revolutionary subject matter. His theatric rhetoric combined with the purity of neoclassical aesthetics quickly became a vehicle for political propaganda. It is a long way from his depiction of a Christian-like Marat sacrificed for the revolutionary cause to the portraits of Napoleon as a Roman emperor on the top of the French Empire. But the step is nevertheless taken. Ever since then, the depictions of revolutions and shifts in power have been regarded as highly deceitful, since the painters usually depicted battles they had not seen, created heroes out of tyrants and national identity at the cost of alienation of other marginalized identities.

Art doesn't always come during or after a revolution. It can also lead to one. Jean Luc Godard's film *The Chinese* that came out 1967 just a year before the student revolution in Paris might very well have fueled the revolution plans of the students in Paris. The film is about a bunch of young intellectuals who, inspired by Mao's Little Red Book, plan an overthrow of Western governmental systems. What first only seems to be a playing with communist and Maoist ideas leads to the assassination of the Russian cultural attaché. Another artist whose work leads to a revolution on a small scale is the Danish artist Henrik Plenge Jacobsen, who made *Burn Out* (1994) with Jes Brinch. He set a bus on fire in Copenhagen that gave raise to a series of revolutionary actions.

There are also artists that are working with the end of politics and the nostalgia for lost revolutionary times. Johanna Billing's video film *Waiting for a Revolution* has become iconic since it depicts the generation of the '70s that didn't experience a revolution. Instead of starting one, they are waiting for it to happen. This generation is also looked upon as a decadent, apathetic one that has received everything served on a plate, without having to fight for it. But Billing overturns this idea of a lost generation into an aesthetics of lost time. Felix Gmelin also deals with the same problems in the epitomic *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II* showing how revolution has turned into fashion. What differentiates these mentioned artistic practices from the radical aesthetics of the '60s is the bittersweet cynics of post-modern times. There is a nostalgic touch to both Gmelin's and Billing's work. This abyss between possible revolutions and impossible revolutions can only be bridged by humor. Humor is as we know the best weapon against despair. The leftist movements of the '60s would have

been impotent if it weren't for Žižek and Groys' humoristic and aggressive philosophy.

Humor is perhaps the most important, truly subversive ingredient in the art world today. Fia-Stina Sandlund and Irina Botea are two artists who are working with humor both strategically and formally. Fia-Stina Sandlund planned an action against the Danish company Maersk, which is shipping weapons to conflict zones. When Ulla, Fia-Stina's collaborator, was imprisoned, she decided to turn the action into an opera in order to investigate its socio-political effects on the public space. She thus enacted the action: *Reconstruction of an action that never took place*, which is both a documentary of an action, an opera about social injustices, and a parody of social activism. The question that Sandlund indirectly raises is whether the action is more effective as pure activism or as an ingredient in a fine cultural context. The text based work, *The way of socialism*, is a Chinese socialist song in four different versions. Sandlund takes the song from its authentic version to its most contemporary version, showing the shifts in values and worldviews over the decades. *Mythos, Logos and Miss Understanding* is a documentary with the Bikini King Panos Emporio, where Sandlund asks Emporio to cancel the Miss Sweden Contest.

Irina Botea works with recent historical events. *Auditions for a revolution* re-enacts the televised Romanian Revolution of 1989 with the help of some young students from Chicago. The difference between "the real" and "the fake" revolution, between the immediate and the transmitted, is being renegotiated, as well as the very notion of what a revolution is. *Where do you play Monopoly* deals with the dreams as well as the lack of dreams of people that have stayed in, or returned to, their country. The core of the

film is a monopoly game, where everything becomes possible, at least for a while. The reconstruction is a playful enactment of a game imposed on some children that refuse to play the game by its rules. The playground as a scene of possible social change is here revealed in its barest form of life.

Fia-Stina Sandlund and Irina Botea are, through their re-enacted actions, playing with the idea of social engagement, revolutions, and political events. Through their imitation of hegemonic power structures and subversive activities, they are reducing macropolitical actions to micropolitical "re-enactions" so they can better control them. It's a pure force of negation of the given. Their scenic sensibility is never obscene (that is off scene), mimetic in a classical Winkelmannian way, or prosthetic – replacing a lost thing. It is rather making the impossible possible, and as a result, paving the way for future actions. This re-enaction or pro-action of activist practices can be called re-enactivism.

Problems and solutions to the problems

The global art scene is nowadays more or less described as a tremendous neo-colonialist monster that is eating up the margins of our world. We are all part of this cultural cannibalism, whether we like it or not. Is there a possibility of creating a space or a discourse that takes multiculturalism seriously, one that doesn't subscribe to the Western notion of art, and that deconstructs the idea of culture without having to fall into a universalistic cosmopolitanism that promulgates the survival of the fittest ideas?

According to Hegel the universe was not created by an anthropomorphic god, but by a divine energy that undergoes a process of achieving its own self-realization. Hegel, at least on one interpretation, believed that perfection could be realized in the dialectic

tically self-correcting process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Jürgen Habermas applied this model to human relations.⁶ According to Habermas, the bringing of a heterogeneous group together is more or less a thesis. The discussion can become antithetical and aggressive, but not for very long. The second antithetical step is for this heterogeneous group of people to come to a conclusion based on consensus. The conclusion of any topic implements a sacrifice. Everyone has to sacrifice some aspect of his or her position. The satisfaction of belonging to a group is usually more important than the satisfaction of not belonging. People usually prefer sacrificing their beliefs in order to get along with the group. This blending of ideas that is usually seen as the final form of synthesis follows a process that Hegel calls “evolutionary”. The participants contribute to this evolutionary process, by interacting in never ending cycles of discussion in which everyone must continually compromise for the sake of the well being of the group.

The cooperation becomes away of life, and democracy becomes a pragmatic solution to our fears of not belonging. Habermas’s “ideal speech situation”, the provisional understanding and the cross-cultural dialogue have not challenged the faith in the very possibility of rational dialogue, according to Grant Kester, that inquires the ethics of dialogical aesthetics in his famous *Conversation Pieces – The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art*.⁷ Kester rejects any art that might offend its audience, and tries to reinscribe the discursive practice of dialogical aesthetics within the historical avant-garde tradition.

6 David Ingram, “Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (Sept, 1988), pp. 411–415.

7 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2004).

A great deal of the participatory and socially engaged art practices has been functioning as an all-encompassing feel good art that brings people together rather than separating them. Lately, Claire Bishop has denounced Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics for not being sufficiently antagonistic, taking examples like Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn.⁸ But one has to remember that neither Hirschhorn nor Sierra worked the way they do today, when Bourriaud wrote his *Relational Aesthetics*. Back then, he was more interested in art as a counter-merchandise, than as a counter-action. In the catalogue text to the Traffic exhibition from 1996 he writes:

“So it is the artist’s practice which constructs the link that will be maintained with his work. In other words, what he produces in the first instance are relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects. Of course, some artists don’t give a damn, and reproduce, as such, the relations of alienations, thus fuelling their petty trade signs. But present-day art is also striving to produce situations of exchange, and relational space-times. It is the counter-merchandise. Unlike merchandise, it conceals neither the work process, nor the use value, nor the social relations which allowed its production. It does not reproduce the world that it has been taught. It tries to invent new worlds, taking human relations as its material.”⁹

In the essay “The social turn: collaboration and its contents” Bishop further opposes Sierra and Hirschhorn to artists like Oda

8 Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October*, Volume 110, Number 1, MIT Press, 2004, pp. 51–80. See also “The social turn: collaboration and its discontents.” <http://www.thefreeibrary.com/The+social+turn:+collaboration+and+its+discontents-a0142338795>.

9 Nicolas Bourriaud, “Introduction to Relational Aesthetics,” Catalogue text for Traffic, 1996.

Projesi and Superflex who are working in a socially ameliorative tradition, claiming that Sierra and Hirschhorn do not reproduce the Christian self-sacrificing artistic model that lets the other speak through the artist, but are keeping the contradiction between autonomy and social intervention, aesthetics and ethics, intact.

Andrea Fraser has claimed in an interview that relational aesthetics as a model is idealized and not sufficiently political, and Jacques Rancière has suggested that relational practices may confuse art and politics, mixing them up with ethics¹⁰. But the words “ethics” and “politics” are not mentioned one single time in Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*. The theory as such is descriptive and not normative. It gives a name to an already existing practice that brings about an aesthetic revolution and not an ethical imperative of how artists should work in all times to come. Such a theory would be highly abusive. And if some aspects of relational aesthetics seem to reflect what Jacques Rancière has called “post-democracy” – that is, a condition where antagonism and disruption has been eliminated – it only does so in order to escape the easy cockfight spectacles of “creative dissent” and other easily institutionalized artistic practices.

If we look closer at the Hegelian dialectic, we realize that it doesn’t deal with cooperation, but with individualization. It is rebellion in its purest form. It is based on an occultism that reminds one of Babylonian mysticism and Gnosticism. “The dialectic” is just a new name for an old occult technique designed to manipulate the way people think over a long period of time. Marx

10 Jacques Rancière, “On the Aesthetic Revolution,” *New Left Review*, 14 Mar/Apr 2002, p. 133.

tried to incorporate his agenda within a slow natural dialectical process. Lenin on the other hand, didn’t like Hegel’s dialectic or Marx’s modified version of it. He tried to implement communism by using force. The dialectic was too time-consuming; the process could take half a life time, which was much too slow for Lenin’s taste. His method of changing people’s mentality was to eliminate anyone who thought differently. The fear of antagonism is what lead communism towards terrorism. Antagonism for its own sake is on the other hand pathetic and useless. Chantal Mouffe takes Hegel’s dialectics further while pleading for a radical realization of the democratic ideal.¹¹ She denounces antagonistic politics that are based on struggles between enemies in favor of agonistic politics that are conducted by struggles between adversaries.

Mouffe’s agonistic model and the accusations of Bishop on relational aesthetics and other socially engaged practices miss an important aspect of artistic practices – namely the drive to play. Friedrich Schiller writes in *Letter on the Aesthetic Education of Man*: “Man is only human when at play.¹² The “play drive” – Spieltrieb – will completely reconstruct both the edifice of art and the edifice of life. The re-enactivism within the artistic field is determined by this very play drive. It is the art that comes after social change. It doesn’t have any imperatives other than its own perpetuation.

Rancière’s three regimes of art: the ethical, the representational and the aesthetic are supposed to reveal the relative autonomy

11 Chantal Mouffe, “For an Agonistic Public Sphere”, *Democracy Unrealized: Documenta 11 Platform 1*, 2002, Osfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002, pp.87–88.

12 J. C. Friedrich Von Schiller, *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* (Kila, Montana: Kessinger, 2004).

of art.¹³ In the ethical regime, the works of art don't have any autonomy according to Rancière. "They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community." In the representational regime, works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, form imposed on matter. The final aesthetic regime overthrows the relationship between form and matter presenting an immediate adequation of thought and sensible materiality. Rancière claims that relational aesthetics is in danger of collapsing art back into the ethical regime, but what if these three regimes were compatible, in other words, only facets of the same artistic playground? What if a piece of art could work on all these three levels? If it could have both ethical, representational, and aesthetic endeavors? A truly subversive piece of art can transform life into art, as well as art into life. It can be autonomous as well as heteronymous, agreeing as well as disagreeing. Those that prefer negation to affirmation are choosing the easy way out. It is much more difficult to say yes than no.

The "play drive" of re-enactivism can permit artists to say both yes and no to what surrounds them and constantly swap the roles they are playing. If reality is nothing but a game, then artists have nothing to lose when making their choices. They don't even have to demonstrate which choices they have made, they don't have to stick by their choices or even be aware of their choices, since nobody is completely transparent to oneself. As Nietzsche writes in *Genealogy*: "The sad truth is that we remain necessarily

strangers to ourselves".¹⁴ The happy truth is that we can follow our "play drive" and enact or re-enact the world we would like to live in, or the one we would like to avoid having in the future.

Sinziana Ravini

Independent curator and art critic. She received her Ph.D. in literature from the University of Heidelberg and is currently working on a book about ethics in contemporary art practices.

13 Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes", *New Left Review*, 14 March 2002, p. 150.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 25.

IRINA BOTEA ✦ FIA-STINA SANDLUND

Irina Botea is a Romanian artist born in 1970, based in Bucharest, working with documentary and staged aesthetics. In “Auditions for a Revolution” (2006), she re-enacts the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, that was broadcast on television, letting young people from Chicago audition for the restaged revolution. She has also made several documentaries about people living in Romania, or Romanians living in America, always investigating the way cultural identity constructs and deconstructs itself. She has also worked with photography, interacting with various power symbols like stuffed bears, small models of Ceausescu’s Palace, bathtubs where she has put herself in the same position as a dying Marat, but within an orientalist setting where the bath is more or less a symbol of self-indulgence and forgetting than a scene of political actions.

In “Cow Session” (2002) a bunch of Swiss cows are licking a small model made of salt of Ceausescu’s Palace, as a symbol of Swiss sinwashing. “Where do you play Monopoly” (2005) is a staged documentary where four real estate businessmen are playing Monopoly.

The idea of the game qua social interaction illuminating existing power structures is also evident in the staged documentary “Re-enaction” (2006) where a group of playing children are asked to play another game. Their resistance to the superimposed game is actually a revolution on a small scale. When Irina Botea travels to new places she is always staging a private space, a home or a playground for social interaction. Botea is, in her art practice, not only deconstructing the theatricality of political events but also the power structures within intercultural encounters and participatory art practices.

Fia-Stina Sandlund is a Swedish artist born in 1973, based in Stockholm and New York, working at the intersection of journalism, social activism and “re-enaction” as a form of history writing. Her humorous dismantling of different forms of oppression constitutes the very core of her artistic practice.

As a member of the art group “unfucked pussy”, she made an intervention at the Miss Sweden contest where she held up a banderole with the text “male (saliva)slime”. She has also done several interviews, and has worked in many other capacities with people within the art and media sector, always trying to change the system, or at least showing what can not be changed. As a member of the “YES! Association” she succeeded in bringing about a structural redistribution of time, place and money in some Swedish art institutions, offering them the opportunity of entering into an Equality Agreement.

One action that never ended up happening was the one against Maersk, the Danish transport company, that is shipping war materiel to different corners of the world. Her collaborator, Ulla, was imprisoned just before the planned action. Instead of giving up, she decided to re-enact the action instead with a group of Danish opera singers. “Reconstruction of an action that never took place” (2007) is an investigation of the political effects of art and the aesthetics of a political gesture. She has also created several monuments. One was a monument to her deceased, handicapped brother that was commissioned by the Swedish state council, and another was a monument recently shown in Brussels, with the inscription: “In Honour Of The Future Victims Of Swedish Made Weapons”.



Irina Botea: "Auditions for a Revolution", still from video (2006)



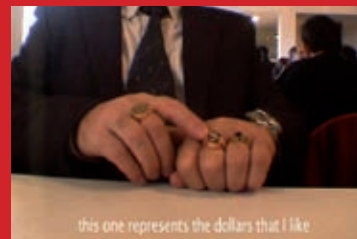
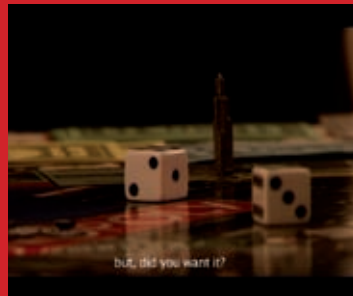
Irina Botea: "Batuta lui Oprica", still from video (2003)



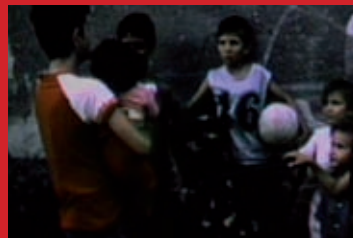
Irina Botea in collaboration with Razvan Botea: "Cow Session", still from video (2003)



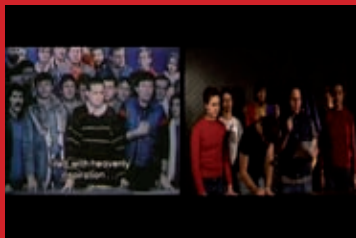
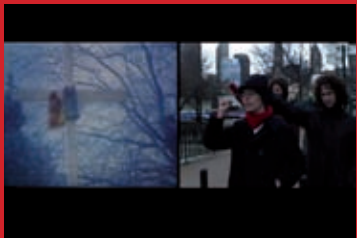
Irina Botea in collaboration with Razvan Botea: "House of People", photography (2003)



Irina Botea: "Where do you Play Monopoly", stills from video (2005)



Irina Botea: "Re-enactment", stills from video (2006)



Irina Botea: "Auditions for a Revolution", stills from video (2006)



Irina Botea in collaboration with Razvan Botea: "Out of the Bear", photography (2006)

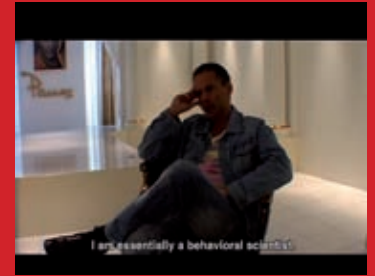
SOCIALISMENS VÄG / 我们走在大路上

ORIGINALSÄNGROPPEN FRÅN KINA (MANDARIN, 1972)	VÄSTRA SÖDERS SÅNGROPPS COVER FRÅN SKIVAN "UPP TRÄLLAR" (SVEANSKA, 1972)	SPRÅKVEKTARNA MING YU AN OCH HÅKAN FRIDBERG S UPPRÄTTELSE AV VÄSTRA SÖDERS SÅNGROPPS VERSION (SVEANSKA, 2004)	SPRÅKVEKTARNA MING YU AN OCH HÅKAN FRIDBERG S KINESISKA ÖVERSÄTTNING AV DEN UPPRÄTTEADE VERSIONEN (MANDARIN, 2004)	MOMU TRÄNINGS TÖLKNING AV SPRÅKVEKTARNA MING YU ANS OCH HÅKAN FRIDBERG S MODERNISERADE TEXT (MANDARIN, 2004)	MIMA NETING TÖLKNING AV MOMU TRÄNINGS VERSION (PINYIN, 2007)
<p>我们走在大路上 意气风发斗志昂扬 毛主席领导革命队伍 披荆斩棘向前方 向前进！向前进！ 革命气势不可阻挡 向前进！向前进！ 朝着胜利的方向 三面红旗迎风飘扬¹ 六亿人民发奋图强 勤恳建设锦绣河山 誓把祖国变成天堂 向前进！向前进！ 革命气势不可阻挡 向前进！向前进！ 朝着胜利的方向 我们的朋友遍天下 我们的歌声传四方 革命风暴席卷全球 牛鬼蛇神一片惊慌² 向前进！向前进！ 革命气势不可阻挡 向前进！向前进！ 朝着胜利的方向 我们的道路多么宽广 我们的前程无比辉煌 我们献身这壮丽的事业 无限幸福无限荣光 向前进！向前进！ 革命气势不可阻挡 向前进！向前进！ 朝着胜利的方向</p>	<p>Vi marscherar vår väg fram Vi ska kämpa tills vi når vårt mål Mao Tse Tung ger oss ledning i kampen när socialismens väg vi går Röda fanor bär vi högt folkets massor reser sig till strid Med våra händer och hjärtan vi strävar byggå upp ett folkets paradys Framåt marsch, vi går fram För vårt folk och vår revolution Vi går fram, alltid fram på den väg som segern ger Vi har vänner överallt Våra sånger hörs all världen kring Revolutionen sprids som en löpeld och ska krossa all imperialism Ja, vår väg är folkets väg och framför oss vägen ligger ljus Därför är det mod glädje och ära som vi kämpar hårt för denna sak Framåt marsch vi går fram För vårt folk och vår revolution Vi går fram, alltid fram på den väg som segern ger</p>	<p>Jag går min väg fram. Jag arbetar flitigt för att nå mitt mål. Mao Zedong visar mig vägen fram. När jag går den kinesiska socialismens väg. Jag lyfter högt mitt lands fana och arbetar flitigt. Med mina båda händer och mitt huvud Bygger jag flitigt på mitt eget paradys. Jag går flitigt framåt För min fru och min sons skull. Jag går alltid framåt. Mina vänner fyller världen. Min sång hörs runt hela klotet. Mitt land blir allt rikare. Jag skall slå ned alla utländska mobbare. Ja, min väg är Kinas väg. Och framför mig ligger vägen ljus. Därför är det med stor glädje Som jag arbetar för min familj. Jag går flitigt framåt För min fru och min sons skull. Jag går alltid framåt.</p>	<p>在我的道路上向前走。 为我的目的努力工作。 毛泽东领导我向前走。 我走在中国社会主义的大道上。 我高举国旗努力工作。 用我的双手和头脑。 我将努力的建立自己的天堂。 我努力的向前走。 为了我的老婆和儿子。 我将永远向前走。 我的朋友遍天下。 我的歌全球能听到。 我的国家越来越有钱。 我要打败所有霸权主义。 我的大道是中国的大道。 我的前面是金光大道。 我高兴地 努力工作为我的家。 我努力的向前走。 为了我的老婆和儿子。 我将永远向前走。</p>	<p>我们走在大路上 好像道路多么的宽广 我们走在大路上 Yeah 好像前程无比的辉煌 我们走在大路上 意气风发斗志昂扬 我们走在大路上 Yeah 披荆斩棘奔向前方 向前进 向前进 向前进 我们走在大路上 我们的道路多么宽广 我们走在大路上 Yeah 我们的前程无比辉煌 我们走在大路上 意气风发斗志昂扬 我们走在大路上 Yeah 披荆斩棘奔向前方 向前进 向前进 向前进 我们走在大路上 我们走在大路上 Yeah 意气风发斗志昂扬 毛主席领导革命队伍 披荆斩棘奔向前方</p>	<p>Wo men zou zai da lu shang Wo men de dao lu duo me de kuan gang Wo men zou zai da lu shang Yeah Wo men de qian chen wu bi hui huang Wo men zou zai da lu shang Yi qi feng fa dou zhi ang yang Wo men zou zai da lu shang Yeah Pi jin zhan ji ben xiang qian fang Xiang qianjin Xiang qianjin Xiang qianjin Xiang qianjin Xiang qianjin Xiang qianjin Wo men zou zai da lu shang Yi qi feng fa dou zhi ang yang Mao zhu yi ling dao ge ming dai wu Pi jin zhan ji ben xiang qian fang</p>
<p>¹ The three red flags (the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Republic) were the symbols of the Chinese Revolution. ² The Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party were the main forces of the Chinese Revolution.</p>	<p>¹ De tre röda flaggarna (Kommunistpartiet, Folkets befrielsearmé och Folkrepubliken) var symbolerna för den kinesiska revolutionen. ² Det kinesiska folket och Folkets befrielsearmé var de huvudsakliga krafterna i den kinesiska revolutionen.</p>	<p>¹ De tre röda flaggorna (Kommunistpartiet, Folkets befrielsearmé och Folkrepubliken) var symbolerna för den kinesiska revolutionen. ² Det kinesiska folket och Folkets befrielsearmé var de huvudsakliga krafterna i den kinesiska revolutionen.</p>	<p>¹ The three red flags (the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Republic) were the symbols of the Chinese Revolution. ² The Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party were the main forces of the Chinese Revolution.</p>	<p>¹ The three red flags (the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Republic) were the symbols of the Chinese Revolution. ² The Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party were the main forces of the Chinese Revolution.</p>	<p>¹ The three red flags (the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Republic) were the symbols of the Chinese Revolution. ² The Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party were the main forces of the Chinese Revolution.</p>

Fia-Stina Sandlund: "The Way of Socialism", wall text and light (2004)



Fia-Stina Sandlund: "The Way of Socialism", stills from video (2004)



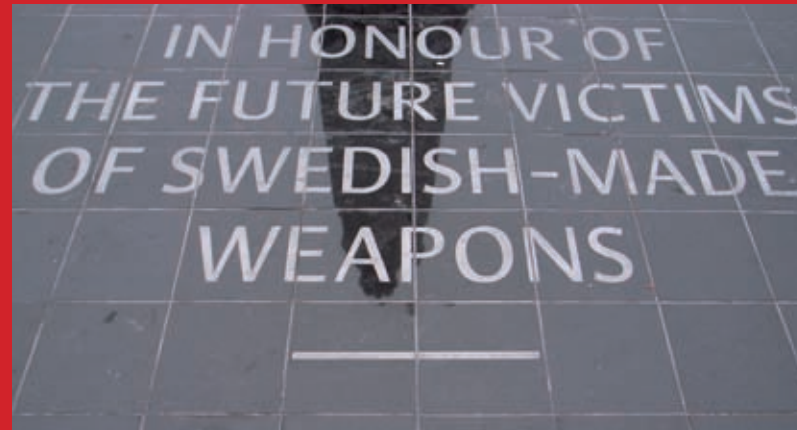
Fia-Stina Sandlund: "Mythos, Logos and Miss Understanding", stills from video (2006)

ACT 1.
An idealistic attempt

ACT 2.
Reconstruction of an action
that never took place



Fia-Stina Sandlund: "Reconstruction of an action that never took place", stills from video (2007)



Fia-Stina Sandlund: "One More Monument", installation view, Place Poelaert, Bruxelles (2007)

ARTISTS INTERVIEW

The following artists interview have been conducted by Sinziana Ravini by email.

SINZIANA RAVINI: What do you want to achieve through your art? Should art have a purpose, be used for something other than art, or is that too much to ask of art in general?

IRINA BOTEA: Achievement for me implies a very precise ending, which doesn't suit my working process. I usually start by proposing a set of rules – that I neither can, nor wish to, predict – that lead to a different reaction (on the set) and a different interpretation once the editing is somehow finished. I am the first viewer of the work.

Therefore I would rather talk about motivations, which are: collective or personal trauma and ways in which they can be dealt with, people's behavior and needs, and human interaction.

“Art for art's sake” is something we can accept simply as a declaration of independence (the way it was initially used) or as a protection from any practical purpose or any forced justification, but not as something that supports any aesthetic dogma. Art for art's sake, as Benjamin writes, has been consumed by fascism.

The function of art comes from its functionlessness (as Adorno says). Art has gained a privileged position of independence. In addition, political art is increasingly acceptable at museums. It is time to take advantage of this state of affairs.

FIA-STINA SANDLUND: Art in itself *is* a purpose. I don't believe in, and I'm not interested in, separating art from the rest of “society”.

SR: Is revolution as such still possible? If not, are aesthetic revolutions possible? Which political/aesthetic revolutions have inspired you through the years?

IB: Yes, to a degree. I believe in the possibility of change, as well as personal solutions and raising awareness. But the “amount of change” is debatable. The quantitative principle constantly switches places, morphs with the qualitative principle.

The possibility of change, on a greater scale, of such a revolutionary dimension is what I am trying to call into question in my piece *Auditions for a Revolution*, where young people participate in the futile gesture of auditioning for a past event the was “named” as the Romanian Revolution, which was in fact much closer to a coup d'état. The new performers try to assume the “identity” of a revolutionary in this particular historical event where people had very little time to redefine themselves as such, and where they were constantly confronted with the spectacle of television. Being revolutionary for the other was one aspect of

the experience. Gelu Voican Voiculescu says that from the TV station blue room, we have to show the entire world that we are responsible, etc., etc.

F-SS: Yes, revolution is still possible, but the aesthetic development is always a step ahead. Contemporary revolutions are, therefore, hard to identify sometimes.

SR: What do you think the difference is between art and activism (politicized art and non-politicized art)? Which one is most effective? What do you think about Rancière's discussion about the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics?

IB: There doesn't have to be a difference. I don't believe in the existence of non-politicized art. All art is political.

F-SS: Again, I don't want to separate art from politics.

SR: Do you think that art can lead to social change? If so, what kind of social change would you like to contribute to via your art?

IB: I believe art creates the perfect dialectical bond between the possibility of change, and failure to change.

It is the same condition of failure that appears during any "revolution". Art is social according to Adorno not only because of its mode of production or of the social derivation of its thematic material, but more importantly by its opposition to society. Can this opposition create a change? Yes, to a certain degree. Theoretically (since I wonder whether it ever really will be possible) I would like to change the way people think or act through my works, which hopefully can induce self-reflection and create the need for dialogue about urgent issues.

F-SS: I have two main goals with my work: 1) to redefine the idea of what art is or can be; 2) to overthrow the ruling system of patriarchal, racist and capitalist power structures.

SR: Is criticality as such possible within the globalized market economy and culture industry? Is revolution as such in the society of the spectacle possible, or is it just another spectacle?

IB: Žižek describes how it is impossible for us to conceive the end of the capitalism. I think there are ways almost to escape the spectacle. A student of mine did a hidden museum of found objects, he build it in a huge pipe somewhere in Skokie, Chicago (I am announcing the place with the hope that somebody would look for it). He showed the class photos, and told us the story of his pursuit. He worked for months, he told the class. At the end of his description of the project, he nearly cried, saying that he hopes somebody will find it before it gets destroyed. He didn't tell anybody the location, he believed that once the work is out there it is enough to put that kind of energy in the world to produce change.

I believe in this kind of gesture or personal solution as well as works that encompass the futility of a gesture, reflexive works that don't just reveal the spectacle but also make you reflect on it and take a position.

F-SS: One can always try to create a revolution, but the most interesting revolutions happen when you least expect them. I guess that most "events" can be classified as a revolution and a spectacle at the same time.

SR: Do you believe in artistic freedom? If so, how do you preserve your own artistic freedom? Can you give examples of instances where you have felt oppressed in your artistic practice? How have you resisted that oppression?

IB: Yes, I do believe in artistic freedom, even today, in light of cases like Steven Kurtz's.

I don't know whether I ever felt oppressed in my artistic practice – even though my work comes from a history of oppression – though perhaps I have been slightly restricted. I was lucky so far, I cannot compare myself with other artists who were really oppressed. But there are more and more restrictions involving places where one can film. The police came once when we were trying to shoot near Metra Railways, and one of our colleagues from Columbia, with the surname Escobar, was isolated from us and put in the police car.

F-SS: I feel oppressed when I'm being labeled a "feminist-artist" or a "political artist". I resist that oppression by making self-documented interventions that I present as art. It's a matter of taking control of the retelling, which I find as interesting and important as the actual act.

SR: What is at stake in your art? What kind of risks do you take or avoid taking?

IB: I hate manipulating people, and presenting them in an unfavorable light. I think people are beautiful, but I am not sure they appear like that in my works. I want every person that participates in the making of the work to have a good meaningful experience.

F-SS: I try to avoid taking risks that would put my job as an artist at stake.

SR: How do you deal with the fictional/documentary aesthetics in your art? Where does the truth as such lie? Or is truth, or authenticity, just another fiction?

IB: Both Kieslowski and Alain Resnais have given up making documentary films for fiction, because of the impossibility of documenting something, of ever "showing the truth" without objectifying it and invading people's personal space. Chris Marker has chosen the documentary after fiction (after working together with Alain Resnais on *Night and Fog*). My choice is to somehow mix the two by assuming the failure of rendering the "truth". But the documentary weighs more.

F-SS: Telling the truth is not my aim when making art. One of the greatest things about art is that you, as an artist, are allowed to mix statements with questions.

SR: What aesthetic or moral judgments might be made about your art? What would constitute a complete misunderstanding of your art? Or, how would you like to be misunderstood?

IB: I am trying to keep myself open to interpretations. My own interpretation of the work changes after completion (which in my mind never occurs; I would re-work most of them). I discover new aspects of the work all the time. People's interpretations also define themselves (they certainly define themselves, their own egos). But I have to say there were two critiques that made me hold my breath, one was related to *Auditions*, that my intentions were

ironic in relation to the Romanian Revolution for the sake of spectacle, and the other one, was related to another short video *Cow Session*, where cows are licking the House of people. A young person wrote that this was blasphemy, which did shocked me since for me that meant that The House of people had some sort of a sacred dimension which I can not understand since people suffered a lot for that construction, hoses and churches were demolished, we starved and we were kept in houses without heat, etc, etc.

F-SS: 9a) That I don't care about aesthetics or appearance at all, that I'm being mean to people when recording them without their knowing it, for example. 9b) That my work is one-dimensional or propagandistic. 9c) Sometimes I enjoy it when people are confused about whether my art is art or something else.

SR: In which direction is the art world going? In which direction are you going?

IB: The art world is following the footsteps of capitalist society. But maybe it is evolving into something with a higher social implication. I am oscillating between East and West (because of my travel schedule), between the personal and the general, the possible and the failed.

F-SS: I think that art in general is becoming more cynical. Soon, someone will have to review the gap between contemporary art as subculture and its actual forms of expression.

Myself, I'm moving towards feature film.

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