

The (in)visibility in the space

Martha Rosler's exhibition project *If You Lived Here...* and the institutional history of the Dia Art Foundation

The three-part exhibition project *If You Lived Here...* of 1989 documented the crisis of American housing policy and showed how artists, in the context of neighborhood organizations, tackled the government's urban neglect, short-sighted housing policy and unchecked real estate speculation. The attempt to show a contemporary history of housing and homelessness in New York City and the entire United States was combined, with the involvement of alternative publics, with drafts of new, humane strategies for housing policy. [1]

Rosler's interdisciplinary and participatory approach of 1989 within the established *White Cube of the Dia Art Foundation* spanned wide artistic, art-theoretical, and (social) political arches between different people, institutions, and spaces, all of which were immediately integrated into a common discourse on living conditions and homelessness. These arches, concerning different spaces, were the product and actual result of Rosler's indirect authorship, on the one hand as concrete thematic connections and on the other as a meta-reflection on the delimited and excluding art space itself.

The fact that artworks need institutions, that they can change and shape them, even break them up, has meanwhile become nothing less than a commonplace in art history and institutional history and criticism, a fixed part of art-scientific methodology. The stability of reception of an institutionally critical work, i.e. the adoption and continuation of existing theses and interpretations over a long period of time, must then also be put in relation to the developments of the institution associated with the work of art. The starting position of the evaluation must be constantly re-located, taking into account studies of newly established knowledge, the overcome of stereotypes, the effectiveness of the designed utopias and the long-term break-up of the institutionally prescribed framework.

As soon as an artist chooses the paradox of the dissolution of her authorship as her artistic concept by creating the artistic absence present – entering the art space more as a director of meaning than as the direct creator – and transferring the execution of the concrete, artistic implementation of the works to other actors, the next paradox inevitably arises: the artist's simultaneous visibility and invisibility in the physical, institutional and social space of the exhibition. But what about the (in)visibility of socially included people in the final, completed exhibition project in the three spatial categories mentioned above, and how does an institution develop in the process?

Spatial presence

Rosler worked with homeless people, as well as with well-known artists and homeless initiatives who were invited to do activist work within and with the help of the art institution. [2] A first visualization of the invisible because underprivileged people, is this concrete physical one, because socially underprivileged, homeless people are temporarily removed from the urban space and included in the exhibition space, which is also Rosler's art production space. The human voids in the urban space and the art space as a place of presence emerge simultaneously and lead on the one hand to a lack and on the other to an existence in visibility, because visibility also arises through the irregular lack of certain actors, through a kind of contrast effect. The physical presence of space as direct presence and *indirect presence through absence* therefore leads to visibility in reverse. Visibility is prevented in the public-physical space, the usual habitat, and achieved in the unusual, privileged art space. What is exciting in this respect is that Rosler did not want to show images of residents of public space in the visual media of her exhibitions. [3]

If one regards the physical, public space according to Frederic Jameson as an *instrument of domination*, i.e. not in Habermas' ideal as a neutral place of opinion-forming for a general public, but as a contested good between hierarchized user groups with different interests [4], Rosler's inclusive, artistic activism for the socio-economically underprivileged is to be understood as a physical revaluation of this hierarchy. This leads to another strategy of visualization that affects institutional space on four levels, namely the institutional space of the Dia Art Foundation, the urban space of the art district SoHo, with its flourishing art market, the urban communal space and the overarching national space.

..

Dia Art Foundation

Two aspects of the strategy of the institution's break-up are of particular importance for the situation in the *Dia Art Foundation*: on the one hand, the opening of the elitist art space to socio-economically underprivileged people and, on the other hand, the opening to other activist institutions (e.g. initiatives for the homeless), which, among other things, continue the set goal of empowering the people they represent as institutions in the *art system*. In both cases, the role of the *Dia Art Foundation* should be considered before Rosler's three-part exhibition project. Thitherto the institution had supported costly, material-intensive large-scale projects by established and exclusively male, white artists and, in this case, reflected the politics of the US *system of art*. [5]

The *Dia Art Foundation* was conceived as a non-profit organization dedicated to initiating, supporting, exhibiting and preserving art projects and acting as a place for interdisciplinary works of art. [6] The word *dia* means in Greek *by* or *catalyst*. It was chosen by the founders Heiner Friedrich and Helen Winkler to suggest that the foundation would be a driving force for the realization of extraordinary artistic projects that would otherwise not be feasible. [7] Friedrich dreamt of a *company* as a whole that would operate outside the art business and the art market, in which it formed an alternative framework for the production of monumental site-specific works of art and projects. At the end of 1981, the Dia Foundation owned works of art worth 12 million dollars and more than 13.5 million dollars in real estate. The fall in oil prices in 1984 dried out the Foundation's source of finance.

The second era of the foundation began around 1986 under Charles Wright, the director of the Dia Art Foundation at the time, whose main task was to improve the public image of Dia and raise funds for its activities. The Dia Foundation was generally regarded as an elitist and exclusive institution, with the press reporting excessive spending and waste. [8] The Foundation's activities have been financed through the sale of art and real estate and through the support of various public and private foundations, and its financial resources have been continuously reviewed internally and externally. [9] The Dia Foundation still organized projects by providing the artists with the time they needed, accommodation, exhibition rooms and the sovereignty over their exhibitions, but under more restricted conditions. [10] Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here...* falls into this time.

The break-up of the institution

If, through Rosler's work and mediation, alternative publics found their way into this institutional space, then the change *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique* [11], so concisely described by Andrea Fraser, created another space for the visibility of invisible. The institutional space of the Dia Art Foundation, which could certainly be attributed to economic purposes and entrepreneurship, was thus changed for a moment to the extent that it no longer contributed to segregation, but made it possible for so-called marginalized sub-publics [12], such as homeless people and the unemployed, to participate in a specific art discourse and therefore explained it, in a previously elitist art space supported by the *Dia Art Foundation*, the SoHo art district, the city of New York, and national structures.

Martha Rosler perverted the functions of the *White Cube* as auratic, aesthetic, elitist and exclusive and created a social space of communication and information. [13] The transformation of an institutional space infiltrated by the ownership of private capital, fed by oil and real estate investments and control over potential user groups, into a *social space* inherent in the institution's loss of autonomy and determined by the possibility of "representation and articulation for weak, i.e. low-capital, sub-publics" [14] can be seen as Rosler's merit. A previously non-existent social space was created in an institutional space. The production of a social space that, according to Bourdieu, "is characterized by the mutual exclusion of the positions that constitute it, i.e. as a structure for the coexistence of social persons" [15], is therefore so well suited for the visualization of underprivileged groups of people, because firstly, the social hierarchies - as already described by Bourdieu himself - are leveled and secondly, the reproduction processes [16] of these hierarchies are prevented and a recoding of the prevailing, exclusive discourse into a "collaborative production of knowledge, i.e. the production of a polyphonic discourse" [17] becomes possible.

In the era following Rosler's project, the foundation set itself the goal of bringing back those who were alienated from their former management and to integrate art more into everyday life and less into exclusive activities. It should no longer be regarded as an elitist means of 'independent' American art, but as a center dedicated to the integrity of contemporary art and culture. [18]

The foundation slowly gained a new reputation as an institution that reaches the public and offers its audience the opportunity to participate in contemporary social debates. The exhibition space was mainly dedicated to large-format site-specific exhibitions of individual artists, many of which raised questions of site-specific practice and explored the relationship

between the place and socio-political demands. [19] The contradiction between Dia's exclusive collection of works by well-known artists and the unknown artists in the new program, which was largely devoted to exhibitions on socio-political topics, cannot, however, be overlooked. [20]

The 1990s were a time marked by internal conflicts, power struggles, and colliding personalities for the management of the Dia Art Foundation. Especially the situation around 1994 was very complicated, the conflict participants numerous and the heated discussions too much involved in clandestine money and real estate issues to present them here comprehensively. [21] From 2003-2014, the Foundation no longer had a private source of funding willing to pay around 30 million for a permanent location in New York and to finance extensive renovation work. Due to a lack of such a space in the center of New York City, the Dia Foundation disappeared from New York city space for almost a decade, until 2015, when the Foundation returned to New York City's urban space with the reopening of Dia: Chelsea.

Vistas

The big chance to see in projects like Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here...* has been succinctly summed up by Suzana Milevska: Such participatory art projects bring artists together with civil society activism and lead to collaborations in solidarity with already existing organizations of activists in order to overcome the paradox of democracy in neoliberal times and institutions. Participatory art faces problems such as the social inclusion of different communities and individuals - in terms of ethnicity, gender and class - in all social structures, above all through the criticism of privileges and exploitation as a means of overcoming inequality. [22] In our opinion, the various strategies of spatial visibility should also be mentioned here, since Milevska neglects spatial theoretical analysis. However, the observation of the category of space in the context of participatory art brings theoretical-structural illuminations that shed light on the process of inclusion, i.e. ultimately the possibilities of overcoming inequality, also within institutions.

If You Lived Here.... was and is a mentally and artistically consistent counter-project with undoubtedly important concepts for the art world. How the Dia Art Foundation will develop in the future remains open. That both earlier concepts of the early years with a focus on focal artists and newer, more discursive approaches from the second era are equally available can also be seen in the dualistic division of the exhibition spaces: The Dia:Beacon in the periphery of New York and the centrally located Dia:Chelsea. In view of the world around us today, of the still neoliberal proliferating economies of late capitalism, digital colonization of the physical, institutional and

social space or right-wing populist narratives of exclusion, Martha Rosler's project could certainly be profitably repeated with a different content orientation but in the same consistent form. And this possibility of repeating form seems to us to be the final artistic value of this work; a value to which the Dia Art Foundation could certainly refer in the future in order to participate in the project of dehierarchization art in the long term.

[1] cf. Möntmann, Nina: *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green (Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, hg. v. Christian Posthofen, Bd.18), Köln 2002, S. 80–82.

[2] Vide: Möntmann 2002, S. 78.

[3] Vide : Ibid.

[4] Lewitzky, Uwe: *Kunst für alle? Kunst im öffentlichem Raum zwischen Partizipation, Intervention und Neuer Urbanität*, Bielefeld 2005, S. 121.

[5] Vide: Möntmann 2002, S. 83.

[6] Banay 2014: Mira Banay, *The Making of a New „Differential Space“*. Permanent Site-Specific Art in America and The Dia Art Foundation (1974–2006), (Humboldt-Schriften zur Kunst- und Bildgeschichte Bd. 18), Berlin 2014, S. 54.

[7] Ibid., S. 55.

[8] Ibid., S. 65.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Vide: Fraser, Andrea: *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*, in: *Artforum*, Nr. 44, Sep. 2005, S. 278–285.

[12] cf. Lewitzky 2005, S. 123.

[13] cf. Möntmann 2002, S. 106.

[14] Lewitzky 2005, S. 66f.

[15] citation after ibid., S. 64.

[16] Vide: ibid., S. 65.

[17] Lang, Siglinde: *Kunst, Partizipation und kulturelle Produktion*, in: *NEUE kunstwissenschaftliche forschungen*, Nr. 1, 2014, S. 108.

[18] Banay 2014, S. 65

[19] Ibid., S. 71.

[20] Ibid., S. 65.

[21] Ibid., S. 71

[22] cf. Milevska, Suzana: *Auf der neoliberalen Bühne. Die uneingelösten Versprechen und Hoffnungen partizipatorischer Kunst für die Demokratisierung der Gesellschaft*, in: *Zeitschrift der IG Bildende Kunst*, Nr. 35, Frühjahr 2015, URL: <https://www.linksnet.de/artikel/32420> [Stand: 26.03.18].