

I'm Acting in an
Equivocal Context

Livia Tarsia in Curia

I'm acting in an equivocal context:

First, I am an unpaid intern in the cultural administration of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien for three months.

Second, I'm a paid intern enacting my administrative duties within the framework of an artist in resident's exhibition, authored by Joshua Schwebel.

I undertook both parts at once and at the same time. One part accepted an internship in a cultural institution without being paid, which I pursued for professional interests in the cultural milieu. A second part agreed to go against a social and economic situation that manifests stronger and stronger contradictions today.

The trainee despite himself adheres to values within which he participates but does not agree. By uniting artist and trainee, two statuses that are generally precarious, he demonstrates how it is possible to counteract the values that act as norms.

By putting us into the exhibition Joshua gave us a critical relation to our own role: the possibility to think about how and what we were doing, how we are working everyday – to see what we do from another perspective. As part of this installation I take – I think – in just measure what it means to be an intern.

The status of the intern is to be seemingly insignificant, but also to assume that insignificance. However, this position achieves another significance as a subject-object, by means of being shown as art. Are we not in the *Société du Spectacle*? This installation recalls what was starting to be criticized forty years ago. “The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: ... The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him.”¹

In expressing how people can be blind to their own condition, Henri Maldiney adds, by way of the following aphorism, “The real is always what we didn’t expect, and what, in the instant of appearing, is as though it had always been there.”² He speaks about the sudden proximity of the inexpressible that exceeds the everyday, a presence to which we hurry to attach known representations. People who are entering the room where I’m actually working see an image they recognize – someone who is working. But it is not what they expect to see when they go to see art.

The nature of cultural institutions is that they should not be defined exclusively by mercantile logic. If the institution accepts a mercantile logic, then it contradicts its non-commercial mandate and reproduces the irrationality that affects the world of commercial art. The Künstlerhaus Bethanien becomes symbolic of a widespread situation in the world of cultural institutions. In the particular situation of Joshua’s project however, the Künstlerhaus Bethanien no longer pursues its identity as a separate authority, but shows an exceptional desire towards self-criticism that is at the same time an intention to reflect on the current problems collecting around us (the interns).

The question that is reflected in this work and can be raised is, why are we talking about art in this installation? The art form that this work takes cannot be judged as an isolated object apart from the spectator. The relational artwork, defined by Nicolas Bourriaud, proposes a form that is “relational, its starting point being theoretical and linked to all human relations and their social contexts, rather than independent and private space.”³ This installation leads to a construction of space-time that points out alienation and aims to deconstruct the economic and social system in which we live.

2 Thierry Delcourt, *Créer Pour Vivre Vivre Pour Créer*, Lausanne: L’Âge d’Homme, 2013. p. 63.

3 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002.

In the perception of the installation Joshua gives us the opportunity to reflect on the subject that concerns an unstable position in this artwork. In my dual status as an intern and at the same time as an involved performer, I am situated at the confluence between objectivity and subjectivity.

Spontaneous reactions manifest at each new entrance into the space of the installation. Some people express intrigue, others express doubt, astonishment, surprise and even incomprehension. It demonstrates that individuals do not necessarily want to inform themselves in advance of visiting an exhibition, and as a matter of fact they appreciate being surprised.

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Question of a visitor:

“The office is the same as the one upstairs?” “Yes it is.”

“Can I touch the furniture?” “Yes you can.”

This installation is a context, and as a context it gives keys to help visitors, and me, to achieve comprehension. It allows us to see how far people will seek to have playful and experimental experiences through contemporary art.

For me, as for the visitors, a fiction is formulated from the moment that they cross the threshold of the room. The layout of the intern’s office in the closed (exhibition) room was configured identically to the one that exists in the administration offices: the original. This unexpected situation constructs the condition that anything on the work table in the exhibition is inherently symbolic; simple objects in front of the visitor’s eyes are characterized beyond banality. All the items of this office take on a sculpture-object value by way of their location.

The viewers imagine themselves entering a fiction (if they know the exhibition space) and automatically want to touch what they see. While art is often inaccessible because of its sacralization, this working context is instead about a real environment, another reality.

This installation proposes disorientation even for those who know the exhibition space, indeed, this closed space intrigues and at the same time invites the deconstruction of the division between what is shown in an exhibition and the concealed space that administers, prepares and determines what is to be exhibited.