

Dear Kristine

Apolonija Šušteršič

Dear Kristine,

How are you? What is the situation in Spain at this very moment? Is it getting worse again, like here? I hope you and your family are fine.

Thank you for your invitation. I would love to discuss with you in person seating in some café in Leon however that is not possible, so I decided to write and read this letter for you.

It is a challenge to say something different about the pandemic, and the pandemic affecting the future of our cities; as so much has been said already. However, maybe we just need to repeat again and again what we already said, to produce something new, to change the present into the future.

The cities appeared deserted during the lockdown, and where it was possible to go for a walk it definitely felt quieter, the air was cleaner, there was almost no traffic, most of the shops have been closed, people were avoiding passing each other. Strange behaviour habits got developed that created bizarre social situations. Not knowing how contagious the new virus is, many possibly unreasonable precautions were taken. After ten months of the pandemic, the COVID – 19 is still mysterious and unpredictable. Therefore, it is a risk to talk about the future, to make a forecast into the future, especially since we don't know much about the menacing virus infecting our present. We are facing every day, changing data and information about the pandemic, new rules and alterations that affect our habits are applied daily. It seems as we are not sure about anything anymore.

This reminds me of a discussion we opened up together with Maria Lind (an art curator) about a year and a half ago when working on a series of lectures and workshop addressing artistic research with the title *How Do You Know?*. It was a discursive project that dealt with epistemological challenges of our time, in the era of post-truth. *How do you know?* focused on current—and sometimes new—ways of thinking and generating signification across fields such as art, architecture, philosophy, science, and education.

During the pandemic, the question of false truth became more apparent than ever. Suddenly everybody started to think about the importance of communication, how we



produce information, how we scrutinise the process where the meaning is created, circulated, and manipulated. The question: *How Do You Know? or How do we all know?* became critical. We all got tons of information, cross-information, false and possibly true information, very well-made conspiracies, believable documentaries that have been circulating on our social media, and TV programs, trying to find answers about who, why, when, how long. Nobody knew. Nobody knows. We expected the scientists to know, to give us an answer, but it turns out they have been questioning and guessing more than anybody. They might have been knowing about the virus 20 years ago when they have been warning the world about the future pandemic to come, but nobody listened to them. Today the context has changed, the situation is different, and the effects of the virus becomes somehow unpredictable.

Governments around the world shamefully react to the situation in place and time, a lot is subscribed to improvisation. But can they really improvise? They are used to plan according to the data and parameters introduced ahead, they don't really understand improvisation. Everybody expects from them to know. And improvisation is declared as unprofessional unless you are a musician. They all feel uncomfortable with the idea of not knowing well in advance.

However, within artistic research, the not knowing developed into a method when working with the process, reacting to the specific context and situation became a way of developing new knowledge. Improvisation became a tool within a research process or a highly useful skill that artist master to its core.

My own practice is subscribed to not knowing, not knowing the place, not knowing the language, not knowing the culture, not knowing the people. Every new situation produces a new answer. There is no such thing as a universal or generic method of working that I would apply to a specific situation. There is no strict preliminary plan that would be followed. I have no idea what I will find on the way. I usually explore the existing context before I decide what it is that interests me in the place; what it is that the place is telling me. If one really listens to the place and observes the situation then I believe, it's possible to find a point where it starts to itch. Observing, seeing, and listening are, after all, the conventional methods of working within the arts. It is a process of producing a specific kind of knowledge through the relationship between "looking", "translating" and "making". Can we, therefore, understand the new normality as it is called nowadays in a different way? Can, therefore, knowledge produced within art and spatial practices contribute to the possible future that we are all trying to re-think?

How do we know what will be our pandemic future and consequentially the future not only of our cities but in general our living environment? I certainly hope that the urban planners and architects in power who are planning our cities, who are advising to the



political elites will focus not only at the formal questions like sizes and forms of spaces, shaped by new regulations of social distancing but rather to start "looking", "observing", and "listening" to people who are affected by the pandemic, who are really suffering the consequences of the new order, people who are homeless, who are being on the move already before the pandemic started, people who lost their jobs, who are without any social or health-security, old people, who are the most vulnerable in our society and all those who were most exposed to pandemic when taking action of care for the others.

The virus immobilisation of most of the world population exposed shameful inequality of social status, which has been dramatically rising the last ten years. The differences between the poor and the rich became even more exposed. This is what urban policymakers need to acknowledge and negotiate with the protagonists of the market economy when they are proposing the changes within our cities: to finally understand their own power and responsibility of making the future that is beneficial for all not only for the few.

During the last twenty years, I have been developing projects that would reflect upon the context and the situation found on various urban (or suburban) locations, involving and mobilising people who shared with me the ideas of the equality and spatial justice. I have been emphasising the active role of the individual within the society using our own power (as individuals and communities) to take care of the common good. I would be focusing on processes of participation to produce an awareness of our own responsibility to act and react together against the changes in the world caused by selfish and irresponsible neoliberal forces.

However, it is awkward to write about participation today in the time of isolation and social distancing, when individualism, or being on your own seems to be promoted as a cure. Physical togetherness is restricted all around the world, and it varies from government to government how many people are allowed to come together in a public space and how close we can be to each other. Our physical bodies must be in permanent quarantine, only shared with the close ones and even then we are risking getting infected or will infect others. However, our minds are all over the place, still rather uncontrollable, in action, thinking further and beyond restrictions. The same goes for our feelings, our emotional self which might be in trouble also because of the lack of practising social skills.

Participation, as understood within processes related to the change of the urban environment or other kinds of shared living spaces, usually demand gathering people in corporeality not only "online". Meetings in physical space shared the situation with emotional energy creates an intersubjective experience, necessary to establish the process of participation and working together towards a common goal. Therefore, it is even more important to re-think and re-examine participation within projects related to our living environment to create a possibility for practising direct democracy as a counter condition to the more and more individualistic and controlled society. Not to



break the rules of social distancing but invent the ways to use them constructively. It is much clearer now after experiencing the overall social isolation and societal lockdown that we need each other, we need to be together, think together and act together to create a change for the benefit of the majority. This is even more important when we discuss our common responsibility towards our living environment where we all should be able to participate in the discussion and final decision making.

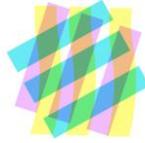
What has got named as *Constructive Institutional Critic* back in the nineties, I developed projects such as *Production of Space* (1995) and *Light Therapy* (Moderna Museet, 1998), among other projects, that extended further on questioning the interaction and participation of publics, emphasising the issues of spatial relations and politics of care not only within an art institution but also within urban space.

Taking care of Public Space is the title of shared writing developed together with Meike Schalk (an architect, and a theorist, 2009) when we discussed concerns that we worked within projects such as *Bonnie Dundee_A Meeting place in the Garden* (Dundee, 2005) and *Garden Service* (Edinburgh, 2006 - 2007). Through these and other projects, we developed further our understanding of the critical examination of spatial problematics, when taking care of participants and places' specific socio-political identities. Through those projects, we demonstrate the spatial actions which would form communities that share the concern and care of each other as well as over our own living environment. I think these all look from nowadays perspective as a necessary exercise for the state of emergency in the present time of the pandemic.

As Elke Krasny (a feminist theorist and a writer) would state in one of her recent writing, the rules for surviving the pandemic converge in the inseparability of taking care of oneself and taking care of others. We have to think the inseparability of care on all levels, from the level of the individual body to the level of the planet, from the level of the home to the level of the government, from the level of the community to the level of the global international relations.

We need to develop pandemic ethics when talking about the importance of taking care not only of oneself but mainly of others. Further on, she refers to the architecture having a role in the process of care; as a shelter or as empowering support for everyday living and social reproduction.

“Architecture needs care – dependent on maintenance, cleaning, and daily upkeep to sustain its existence. From its beginnings, architecture has been conceived of as a shelter for the protection of human life. Architecture protects us, and therefore we care for it. By understanding architecture and care in this manner, it is possible to connect it to the concepts of social reproduction and its everyday labour as well as to the deficiency of reproducible resources at an environmental scale. From this perspective, care *in* architecture is thus concerned with a *politics of reproduction* – a political critique of the current



struggles not only concerning the global labour force but also within the terrain of climate change.”

At the end of this letter, I would like to use the opportunity to inform you about the situation in Slovenia, where I come from—a small, almost invisible country squeezed in between Austria, Italy, Hungary and the Balkan peninsula.

Slovenia got a new government just when the COVID – 19 entered Europe. It is quite a disaster. We got a kind of government that used the moment of the crisis within the pandemic for their own benefits. This is a kind of government that has created rules and regulations not to protect their citizens but mainly to create restrictions and oppressions affecting mostly the most marginalised people in our society. It is a kind of government that used the excuse of a pandemic for establishing their own power, changing people on head positions in public institutions, dramatically cutting the budget for culture, social welfare and at the same time enlarging the budget for military and police force. They try to control freedom of speech by changing the Public Media Law. Changing the Environmental and Building Law to destroy the last bits of agricultural land. There is a whole list of measures that have been already excepted and implemented by the present government which are not in direct relation to the pandemic crisis.

Therefore, people started to protest—on the bikes, with the masks, every Friday! On Friday Demonstrations people demand the resignation of the present government and they will continue until this government resigns. Everybody hopes this will come soon, as the country is turning rapidly into a totalitarian state of the pandemic regime.

Dear Kristine, I hope I somehow answered your questions or at least presented my concerns and ideas for the post-pandemic future. I hope we will meet in Leon with a cup of coffee very, very soon.

Until then, take care of yourself and the others and keep in touch,

Apolonija