



Ania Bas and Simone Mair preparing the trajectory for The Walking Reading Group on the 21th May 2013, London.

“Strategy is used by people who established their ground and tactic is a weapon of people who are trying to make a rupture in what is happening around them”

INTERVIEW WITH ANIA BAS AND SIMONE MAIR ABOUT THE WALKING READING GROUP ON PARTICIPATION

Ania Bas and Simone Mair have organised the first edition of reading groups on participation whilst walking through parts of London as a group and in pairs and



exploring questions of participation. These walks have been arranged in collaboration with two art organisations [Gasworks](#) and [The Showroom](#). Bas and Mair are preparing next editions for October 2013 and May 2014 in East London.

SAIOA OLMO ALONSO

Ania Bas (b.1981, Poland) is an artist and a developer of art projects. Her practice is dialogical and inspired by everyday life. Bas investigates connections with places and people and her work takes forms of events, performances, useful object, visual essays and publications. She practices in live environments rather than in a studio.
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Simone Mair (b.1981, Italy) is a cultural producer who operates between education and curatorial practice, based in London. She has recently completed her MFA Curating at Goldsmiths and has worked as art educator at public art institutions as Museion, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and as curatorial assistant at the Kunstverein ar/ge kunst Galerie Museum, Bolzano.

SAIOA OLMO: Why have you decided to organise a reading group on participation whilst walking?

SIMONE MAIR: Ania and me met a few months ago. Ania started a reading group in Cardiff and she sent me a newsletter. I would have liked to participate but I couldn't go to Cardiff so I suggested we should do something related to it in London. We met and after a few conversations we decided to work on it together.



ANIA BAS: The Reading Group on Participation in Cardiff commissioned by [Elbow Room](#), was a straightforward reading group that happened by the table, and what became clear for me was that people who had experience, and people who read all the texts were the people who talked by the table. We had quiet ones who were silent for a couple of hours, not producing a single sentence, so when I met with Simone we explored what would happen if we were to talk about read texts whilst walking.

SM: Following de Certeau's analogy of two everyday practices reading and walking we proposed The Walking Reading Group. The reader of a text walks through a constructed system, in the same way as a walker walks through the order of a city. Often it is a blind and superficial walk, in the same way as we walk through the city blindly, following the path constructed for us. As the street gets its meaning through the walker, it is the reader who attributes several meanings to the text.

AB: On the other hand, as summertime comes, it is hard work to get people to come to something indoors because you have already spent chunk of your day indoors. The idea was to take advantage of good weather so it would be easier for us to organize this exchange outdoors whilst walking.

SO: Where the places we were passing by important?

SM: Yes, for sure. The Showroom for example, In addition to the exhibition program with emerging artists, works with a strong focus on the neighbourhood. During the preparation weeks of The Walking Reading Group at The Showroom we met several times with the Communal Knowledge Program coordinator, Loiuise Shelley for getting a sense of the places they are operating with. We tried to plot the trajectory regarding those reference points. So it happens that you find yourself walking around Church Street having read excerpts from the *Church Street partner gazette*, a participatory project developed by the Turkish artist Chan Altay in the occasion of the 'Communal Knowledge Programme' at The Showroom.



AB: The same thing happened for us at Gasworks. But on the tour itself we do not point things out and say: “on the left now you will see this school”... It is to a degree invisible, but for example during one walk we stopped to exchange the conversation partners near a garden in front of a play shop at the back of South London Gallery. This location has been mentioned in one of the texts we read for that day and everyone clicked “that was the place” without us pointing or presenting it.



SO: “Socially Engaged Art”, “Community Art”, “Dialogical Art”, “Participatory Art”, “Collaborative Art”, “Contextual Art”... which ones do you feel close to, and which ones are far from your ways of working or tastes?

SM: As a category of practice, Socially Engaged Art, – I use this terminology because it acknowledges a direct connection to the practice of art –is still a



working construct. It's far from being a defined territory. This can be seen by the fact that the first attempt to represent an overview of SEA practice in an exhibition took place only in 2011 at *The Essex Market* in New York.

AB: I don't know if I feel closer or further from any of them, I use different terms depending on the context. I play with what to call what I do depending on whom I am having conversation with. In terms of uses I am interested in how terms change. For example, five years ago people would purely associate "Community Arts" with murals in a community centre and now it is gaining a different meaning, a more political one going back to the roots of community arts practice. So the terms you don't mind to stand close to today might not be the ones you might want to associate yourself with tomorrow.

SM: Further the use of terminologies differs also geographically, even within Europe. 'Community Art' has a completely different meaning in the UK than in Germany for example.

SO: Which is your personal interest towards participative practices?

AB: First of all, I have not been trained as a fine artist. I have been trained as a cultural animator. This is where I am coming from. My MA is not in fine arts it is in a different, more socially oriented field. This may be why my interest to start with was somewhere else, rather than in a studio based practice. But I also feel like I am not interested in my own ideas. I often act as an activator and in my opinion more interesting things can happen if I am working with somebody else. So, on the basic level, my interest comes from the fact that if I work with others interesting things happen. There is a dose of selfishness in it. I can achieve more if someone else is involved. I wouldn't necessarily always call it collaboration. For instance, last night informal conversations made me reflect on different parts of my practise, made me move tiny bit forward, whatever 'move forward' may mean. I don't get same boost from being on my own, doing something on my own.



SM: I have been trained as an artist but then I moved into the educational field. For three years I have been working as art educator at the Museion, Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art in Bolzano. I was struggling with the separation of the curatorial and educational department, where the later one is often seen as a service to the curatorial. A museum educator works under a protected role because it is the institution that authorized him or her to work in the museum, which in itself is an approved place by society. The point is that the museum has already established an inter-relational organized structure for the educator to work in. Whereas it is the agency, for many social art practitioners who operate in a specific situation to build a working system, which implies not only inter-subjective relations but is conditioned by objects, things, words, memories, dreams, and forces – basically all of the things that make up our social world. Socially engaged art practice is about working with a specific place with the intention of changing something there. In order to do that one has to understand the passions, activities and emotions of the subjects living in that specific place.

AB: In some contexts working with people is seen as a tool to achieve for example social change. And I call this approach “toolism”. So maybe you can add that name to a long list next to social practise and dialogical art and think how can we use that form to achieve something else.

SO: How do you link Michel de Certeau’s concepts of “Strategies & tactics” with collaborative art?

AB: That is a text that we were discussing quite a lot just on the latest edition of The Walking Reading group. What I gained from the text was that strategies are applicable to the institutions, and tactics to precarious situations of the people outside of them. Strategies would correspond to something that is more established. So then, are established artists using strategies or tactics? And what is gained and lost when this happens? De Certeau considers that tactic is the weapon



of the weak. So my understanding now is that strategy is for people who established their ground and tactic is a weapon of people that are just trying to get out, to make a rupture in what is happening around them.

SM: In our reading we included a text by Nato Thompson who speaks about the strategic turn. We move from a temporary to a long-term investment in space. More and more artists behave like organisations; collective working process, funding applications for long term projects.



SO: Do you consider that choosing to use participative methods implies a concrete ideological position?

AB: I think that a lot of participatory practices can start with good intentions but they can be abused by funding, the institutions and the agendas that have been imposed on them. Quite often artists are not aware of being used or of being agents



of a change that they may not necessarily want. I will give a 'typical' example: an art project with a group of young girls who live in a rough area. The project might be truly providing them with the opportunity to doing something exciting in their life, providing them with tools to look at wider world, explore their interests, maybe make them aware of their chances, maybe connect them with a feminist movement... But at the same time this art engagement is in place to act as a tool, to steer these young girls from idea of becoming teenage mum which is a problem for the state because they have to support teenage mums, provide support, housing. There is this hidden agenda, that through these project people who take part in them might become people who inspire to buy a house, inspire to buy a car and go on holidays twice a year. Little by little the idea of a grown up is developed, idea of someone who doesn't question the need to own all these things and who needs to work full time to pay for this lifestyle full of loans and mortgages.

Back to my point, I don't see many artists, and I am guilty of it too, being aware of how projects we develop affect people we work with.

SO: In the presentation of “The Walking Reading Group on Participation” you say you would like to “view beyond the binary logic of Socially Engaged Art practices, which often oppose participation to exclusion, nature to culture, subject to object.

AB: What we consider important in looking beyond the binaries is understanding that what is happening in society is more complex than the binary logic of one thing or the other and that what comes implies a mix of different elements. Going beyond binary positions allows to acknowledge the complexity of layers, different elements, that are overlapping and shaping what is happening. It is reductive and not productive to constantly see the world in two-way systems of us-them, powerful-powerless etc.



SO: But do binaries also have their function? Fixing oppositions could be a way to clarify with what do you want to align with, or what do you want to fight?

AB: There is Chantal Mouffe's take on agonism & antagonism. In a political area I am pro-agonistic, understanding that there is right and left political position and that we position ourselves somewhere in this political spectrum. Being aware of a different political view and at the same time representing opposite view is a healthy thing – this is agonism. If we are not allowed to express political view, if left and right options are blurred this is when antagonism starts. So it is useful in political area but I think these assumptions that for example you either participate or you are excluded work on a different level, so I don't see them as the same binary as the political one.

SM: On a practical level we decided for example to have one grounding (philosophical, sociological) text for every group, among those there was a text by Bruno Latour. In a nutshell, he defines the social not as a glue that fixes together everything, IT IS what is glued together by many other types of connectors. He invites us to look at situations through the 'middle voice' in order that the active and passive, object and subject, the made and the maker and the acted upon and the actor disappear.





SO: Do you think that art practices can promote alternative ways or models of living? Is that one of your aims when making or curating art?

SM: I don't like the idea that there exists a model that we have to follow or even that artists should propose a model. But I believe that art can show different ways of how to deal with the tension that exists in every individual's life, the tension between the freedom for self-creation and the equally strong desire for security. Read "The Art of Life" by Zygmunt Bauman!

AB: I do agree in this to a point because I also quite often think that artists, with our very presence in a space, promote certain lifestyle, which for some people is not always a life choice. I do feel that more and more artists are coming from privileged backgrounds: having a situation where your parents can support you



during your university time or living in a place where state funding is in place to allow you not to work and live on a dole whilst you are developing your practice. This is not available to everybody. Is becoming an artist a choice for people from not privileged backgrounds when they are not given opportunities or are exposed to art to start with? I would love to think so. I believe that there is a chance for everyone to shape their life, to be able to achieve in their life what they want but at the same time I think some of us are just in better position than others, just been luckier when and where we were born.

SO: So do you think that the artists have enviable lifestyles?

AB: I think in the UK, more and more artists will be from a privileged backgrounds, the art world that we see comes from art schools, and going to art schools costs loads of money. I am hoping that there will be still artists coming to the art world not through a higher education but through developing their practice in alternative ways. But because education is becoming here so expensive if your family is poor you often just cannot afford to go to university. And therefore how can you develop structure to have time to read, think, make mistakes, experiment, meet people and develop networks? How can that happen, if you are not in the position to even get to these places? You either produce your alternative or you are swallowed by life, whatever that might be.

SM: Again we could speak about tactics, how can the weak develop tactics for not being swallowed by the hegemonic system. De Certeau writes that practices of everyday life, and walking is certainly one of those, seem to correspond to the characteristics of the tactical: “clever tricks of the weak within the order established by the strong.” (de Certeau, the practice of everyday life, p. 40)

AB: Yes, I agree, but I wonder how the first seed comes to your head. Is it something that you can come to think by yourself or do you need something external to prompt you?



SM: No, you need time and you need exchange.

AB: And I always think that there is this element of someone just inserting something in your head, an idea. It may come from a book, from meeting someone, from a walk or whatever else. I think we can be just so caught up in trying to survive that we might not be in the position to get out of that framework, just trying to pay the bills, having enough money for food...

SO: So do you mean that it is not so much about what the artist does but about his/her own life which could be a model or not?

AB: I interlink these things.

SM: As I said before I would not the artist or the artist's life as a model. It is what Neoliberalism is doing: promoting flexibility, freelance, self-employment...an individualized society expecting to find individual solutions to socially created problems.

AB: If you are an artist, you probably sacrifice a lot for your life, including family, your wellbeing, health... And at the same time it is your hobby, that self-exploitation could be something that you just want to justify. So I think that if artists are models for how the world works in the twenty-first century, it is an unhealthy model. We shouldn't be working 50 hours a week. We shouldn't be in a precarious situation of micro-employment.

SO: How do you position yourselves towards the intention of provoking social changes through art?



AB: One thing that upsets me about what is happening with arts is “toolism”, quite often artists are used as a tool to replace services that were implemented to make changes, and artists are a cheap way, but a good way. You first provide a service for people and then you tell them: “you used to have all that services in place to keep you guys happy and to make sure to could move on with your life. Now we are going to give you artists...” I find it a ridiculous ‘replacement’. And what is the next step, nothing?

Aesthetics

SO: Which importance do you give to the aesthetic experience inside the participative projects?

SM: If we speak about aesthetic experience most people immediately connect it with the visual. The act of representing a socially engaged art project in an exhibition and here I speak about the traditional sense of an exhibition space - a place where ideas are clarified, crystallized, made coherent - is often considered as a failure, mostly because of its aesthetic poor quality. But doesn't the aesthetic also lie in the process itself? Sorting out things, arranging time and interconnect different agencies towards a goal - a system - that in itself has an ethic and aesthetic value. And it is this aesthetic, which should be mirrored in an exhibition that speaks about socially engaged art practices - a discursive exhibition that evolves over time and allows for open-ended processes of engagement.

AB: In the case of The Walking Reading Group this would not have happened if Simone wasn't around. Simone was the driving force behind the making on the little booklets. We made them so every person that comes for the walk get it as a way to refresh their mind, to generate ideas. Inside there are quotes from all the texts, divided by dates, but also present different points of view. So although they look like quotes from different texts, they have a critical conversation with each other. And of course, they are beautifully designed, they are printed on nice paper, the different colour paper inside is for notes, they are very tactile. Aesthetically



pleasing. I think the whole process was aesthetic. Every little bit that we were discussing: bringing the material together, having the mixture of texts, arranging them so there is always the perspective of a philosopher, a critic and points of view from practitioners... This was formal, conceptual and aesthetic, how they were brought together. I would hope to think that this is as important as the content.

(Nia Metcalfe, joins the interview. She is a curator based in Cardiff, part of curatorial group Elbow Room and her focus is on art in the public realm and cross-disciplinary practice. She curated the first "Reading group on Participation" organized by Ania Bas in February 2013 in Cardiff.)

NIA METCALFER: Dating the tasks that you said, is like curating these tasks together, and maybe that is your aesthetic contribution. Even though I feel that maybe going to walk later on can be more an aesthetic experience, being aesthetic not as something visual, as something not touchable.

SM: For instance the thing of walking in pairs brings to you the memories of school. Pairs, pairs, pairs. We may look like a school trip.

NM: Like a performance, rather than people. It is quite odd seeing a group of people walking around the city in pairs and talking.





SO: From a curatorial point of view which criteria would you privilege to value a collaborative artwork?

SM: I would say that time is a really relevant factor, as well as care and exchange among the curator, the artist and the other mediators of the place. These practices often happen in a certain place and it is really important to dedicate time to involve people who have very relevant knowledge from the local area. It is necessary that the artist has the sensibility to deal with local people and open-mindedness to alter the course of the project if needed.

NM: I agree with everything you said and I would add that the way in which it is commissioned or funded allows for that time, space and openness. I think you are asking how to judge success in a project like this and I think that the expertise of the people involved in the project allow that to happen that way.



AB: Among the texts for today's walk, there was this comment from Marijke Steedman from the Whitechapel Gallery. She says that she moved on in her curatorial decisions from curating projects that she develops from scratch, to becoming part of projects, which are already going on. The institution may come in as a part of the process, may allow for something bigger to happen but then once the institution leaves, the project still moves on. So the project that hasn't been generated by the institution is not going to as easily disappear as soon as the institution goes away. I think that this kind of duration comes with quite a lot of work, it is interesting how the life of it is determined by the moment when the funding goes away rather than when the interest goes away. This is of interests to me: what continues. And looking at what we are doing now, the reading group, the first element of it has been commissioned by Elbow Room. But what we are doing now is not funded, we are putting our time toward it because we both feel that we benefit from it and hopefully other people will get something from it too. So I hope we will run as long as we are interested in these questions.

NM: If a project keeps moving there is obviously something about it that is valuable.

AB: I think this valuable aspect in this particular case is who is this valuable to. For someone this can be the group that we brought together, mixture of artists and curators with wealth of experience in the field. So it is interesting to see who holds the value: is it the curator? is it the artist? Or maybe the people?





SO: It seems that for talking about participative art the examples are suspiciously always the same. Should artists empower and also question art critical practices?

SM: We were just talking yesterday about the difficulty to experience this type of practice, because ninety per cent of the projects we are talking about, we have not been part of. We have only read about them in books. But it is to consider that every text is built by an author, whose writing emerged out of many chains, shifts and histories. And as you were saying artists read, recite, and invoke the same theoretical sources as their critics. Often we walk blindly through these texts, in the same way as we walk through the city blindly, following the path constructed for us. But it is the reader who attributes a meaning to the text, it is not only important what we get to read but also HOW we read it, how we place it in context.

AB: These projects are invisible to a degree, and even when they get visibility through exhibition you can be disappointed by what the exhibition is about, what you are looking at. So I agree that maybe hearing so much about some artists can get repetitive. But sometimes art critics talk again about the same five artists because they are trying to look at the same piece of work from different perspectives. I definitely get this sense when Shannon Jackson in “Social Works” looks into examples, which Claire Bishop writes about. I think she is choosing same examples simply because she wants to lit them from different perspective. So same artists again, same projects but you see them from totally different points. So I see the strategy in that.

