

# **W**HAT FORMS THE PRESENT? Flutgraben Edit

At one of the events of the Flutgraben Performance series in Feb 2020 Sandra Man invited the philosopher Marita Tatari for a lecture. The text that was read at this occasion is an excerpt of an ongoing talk between the two.

***SM, Intro:***

During the course of this year of Flutgraben Performances we did not only do events and stage performances but we also started giving each other insights into our artistic universe.

We want to open up wider contexts of what we are doing and ask where we are today – as artists, we as audience, art in general. Here at the Flutgraben Performances series we are looking for ways to respond to our desire for getting a broader and deeper sense of what it means to make art today, for a clearer idea of the world in which it is being made.

There was for example Arantxa Martínez at the June edition inviting three choreographers who inspire her work and change how she thinks of contemporary dance. We called this talk thinking the practice.

In a loose relation to this I would like to call the format of today practice the thinking.

I invited for tonight Marita Tatari. She is a philosopher, her focus is contemporary art and aesthetics. Marita was trained first in Greece, then in France, where she did her PhD with Jean-Luc Nancy. She just spent two years researching at Berkeley, California.

She came to Berlin and to Freie Universität some 10 years ago and that's also when and where we met. Since then we are closely following each other's work. In Germany Marita edited a book on the question of the infinite in contemporary art and culture – *Orte des Unermesslichen* – with contributions by Nancy, Joseph Vogl, Ulrike Hass and others. And she wrote a book called *Kunstwerk als Handlung*, it is about Hegel and his notion of action. She is reading this term in a very specific way and shaping an understanding of art as action in itself. That means before and beyond serving anything, be it social critique, political battles or historical progress.

I invited Marita because I am very intrigued by the way she thinks. Her ideas about art and its transformations in our current time, about art in its relation to history as well as to the present, to us and to who we are is outstanding.

Fascinated and inspired by her for quite some time now, at the end of last year I asked Marita to do with me a kind of inverted artist talk. Instead of me being asked I send questions to her and she is answering to them.

We will read excerpts from what we wrote to each other. It is mostly a lecture by Marita. The main topic is the „we“ we are today. Who are we when we are being addressed by an art work, as its public? What kind of „we“ are we now?

The first question I sent to Marita some weeks ago was this one:

**SM:**

In a recent talk that you gave at the conference in Munich in November 2019 you spoke about the becoming irrelevant of tradition, of history as a frame and source for the new in contemporary art. You said something like: Not that today's art forms would not refer at all to their history but – in contrast to strategies of breaking up, overcoming, deconstructing etc. – the progressive relation to the past is no longer the reference or the source for the new.

The contemporary change in the relation between art forms and a certain understanding of history, between art and its past, actually has been the core of your thinking for some years now. Let's start from here: Could you describe today's shift in relating to the past? Why and how is it no longer out of a "post" to the past that art forms emerge? What is it that is changing so radically today that you even headline it in your talk as "the change of change" itself?

**MT:**

If we take the term „contemporary art“ beyond the restrained meaning of the art-period coming after modern art, the idea that artforms respond in a very particular way to their present time, was shaped in modernity: the idea that they respond to their present time by giving to it a form, opening it up as such, all by opening up in it something new, a possible (or impossible) future. The change of artforms has been related to historical change both as a result and as anticipation. Modernity projected this idea of art retrospectively into the past as well

as into other, non-western cultures. In the core of this idea lies a precise understanding of relationality at stake in all artforms.

We could even say that the word and the thing of “art” were invented in modernity to designate a relationality that on the one hand is concrete and singular, let’s say, a touching, an affective relation in the present moment (affecting not only for instance visually or acoustically, but also a sensuous feeling even of ideas or reflections). But at the same time “art” designates this relationality as bringing at play or opening up in each one of its addressees, in each one that is affected by it a non-defined relation: this is its public, its addressees is a non-defined “we” - the common, namely when the common is not conceived as a given order, when it is not defined or definable in a hierarchy. It is from this non-given common, this universal activated in the public addressed by art, that comes all the trouble with art.

**SM:**

Let me interrupt you shortly, I would like to insert a question: How does the public, relate to what we usually call an “audience”? I am asking because I think there is a relation to it but however what you mean by public is not simply spectators as opposed to performers, makers, authors etc. (they are also affected and addressed by the work). Is and how is the public you are talking about an audience?

**MT:**

Well it is first of all a change of perspective, a way to think of an artform/artpiece/artwork/artprocess, that means, it concerns everyone implied in it. But if we think of it in these terms, then we can’t take audience as a ready-made concept, applied to each artform. We have to think of the audience out of the way this special kind of relation takes place (it is actually an emanation of relation). So, if the central question concerning the arts is where lies the extreme limit, that enables relation under different cultural conditions not to be relation between given things, but emanation, then we have to think of the audience and its

transformations out of this question too. There is a whole field of artistic research that can be opened up by this change of perspective.

**MT:**

By common as non-given order I mean here the extreme limit that allows for anything to come to the foreground and relate, to appear not as defined by something else (as in an order). The common in this sense is mortality and natality together, the extreme limit on the one hand, and the emanation of relation on the other, the extreme limit as emanation of relation. This emanation of relation has also been called *techne* and technique, because it does not belong in a pre-given natural order. If art has been touching to these extremities, if it has been touching to the common as non-given, that is to say to relation as emanation, it has been opening up a non-given, an excess of the given, in the punctuality of its form, or of its taking place.

This non-given, this emanation may be felt as intensity, and intensity is an emanation of a “more”, a surplus. But at the same time art opens up in us, in each one touched, a distance – the limit or nothingness, that allows to address all “me” as other than “me”, namely „we” as emanation of relation. This emanation exposed as such in a form interrupts the flow of time and opens up a non-time into historical time, an infinite. Christianity understood this infinite as a moment or a pretaste of eternity.

In contrast to this understanding, the modern designation of art in singular, the modern invention of art, distinguishes art from cult and ritual. While the latter addresses the “we” in its distinction from gods (as in non-western or pre-western cult-practices) or, in Christianity, in its relation to God opening up an eternity as an outside of the historical time, art in singular – this modern invention - deals with the surplus interrupting and exceeding the given, the surplus exposed as such, as newness arriving into historical time.

That is to say as change projected into historical time. “We” as exceeding any given, is then being translated in terms of the demand

for equality, for inclusion of alterity, inclusion of a non-given order, of everybody in a non-given and non-hierarchical “we”, a demand opening up a future. The new in art, the change of artforms has been related to this demand and has been interpreted as progress.

All forms of “post”-art: postmodern, postdramatic, posthuman, some tried even to speak recently of postcontemporary art, they all neither just designate a new artform, nor just an artform that gives form to their present time, but also they relate overcoming the older forms to a better realization of the demand for equality into historical time. In other words, emanating relationality was still until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century perceived as in modernity, perceived as a non-hierarchical and all inclusive “we” to come – be it in Derrida and Agamben’ terms as always to come, suspended in the present, never given, open to its non-giveness; be it as disillusionment from and denouncement of the utopias in which the 20<sup>th</sup> century still hoped (as in Lyotard’s “sublime”, vertiginous, postmodern art); be it by permanently subverting given orders and hierarchies – for instance between spectators and actors, beholders and art objects, keeping open the non-given common (as in many positions ranging from Ranciere to Judith Butler and theories of performativity); or be it as non-anthropocentric, subverting the established hierarchies between humans and non-humans (as in new materialisms, in technocologies and OOO)... The variations of the modern scheme conceiving art, history and the evolution of artforms in their relation to history as progress, history as a project of a better realization of the demand for equality and art as progressively contributing to this goal - even as a goal impossible to achieve, or as an open horizon - all these variations are still inscribed into the modern understanding of relationality at stake in artforms. The address exceeding any given as common or universal is being translated into the demand for equality exceeding the present into historical time.

Despite all kind of critique of the concept of art, of its singular, despite the critique of the bourgeois beauty, the bourgeois ideal of state, later

on the critique of the political utopias, the emergence of participating artistic forms, etc., etc., the progressive understanding of the evolution of artforms remained untouched until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Anthropocentric critique, non-anthropocentric art-forms, as well as postcolonial-art, colonial-criticism are in this sense extensions of western enlightenment: they serve an always greater demand for equality. From a posterior point of view (im Nachhinein), the public each time at play in an artform, is restricted. Forms to come have to address otherness again and as progress, better, more, they have to bring at play a greater openness to otherness.

Today it is said that the oneness implied in the modern invention of “art”, its public (the conception of public in which the concept of art was based) and the universality implied in it have been founded on racist and anthropocentric presuppositions. We are thus seemingly confronted with the paradox on the one hand to stand for the western demand for equality (which cannot and did not exist in societies not dealing with the non-giveness of the common, that is to say in societies not dealing with the autonomy of the common), and on the other hand to denounce this same western demand for not being enough at its own height. I say seemingly because actually this paradox obeys the scheme of western logic itself, it is projecting into historical future an improvement of the previous conceptions of the common and of the public implied in art, so to include non-western realities or non-humans.

Saying that all these critiques of the enlightenment’s conception of art are still inscribed in it, sounds today almost as an insult; yet this is not how I mean it. Why does art have to be new, why do forms have to be new? Newness was not a request for “artistic” practices in ritual communities. Art, this modern invention projected, I repeat, retrospectively into other cultures, has to be each time new because it addresses a non-determinable “we”. Or this can only be addressed

each time under the conditions of its time. It has to bring at play a „we” escaping the given.

Nevertheless, there is currently in my view a shift of this same western scheme. While the demand for equality, enabled by the autonomy or the non-giveness of a “we” persists, as well as the need to address “us” (in other words the need to address the absolute in us, extreme limitation as emanation of relating), oneness has lost its hold over the contemporary world. Under current technological (and actually techoeconomic) conditions there is no one horizon to project change, and no one history to understand the present. Maybe this is why currently the new in arts, “contemporary” art does not appear in the form of a “post”: not a new artform defined by overcoming the older. The demand for equality, the denouncement of colonial or anthropocentric blindness do not help us understand what is happening currently in terms of art, because they are inscribed in the scheme they denounce as its improvement and continuation. Hence it is this very scheme that shifts: it is not in terms of a new artform, it is not in form of a “post”, that the demand for equality in art persists. So how can we grasp what is happening in terms of art, in terms of form, of artmaking?

When we say that the new in art is not conceived in terms of form as an overcoming of older forms, we say that the surplus of relationality at stake in it, the excess of the given in it is not projected into a horizon. But also, that the given is not the oneness of a history. We could then say that it is rather the framing of what is a form that shifts and with it the very notion of public, the space of appearance, the space in which relation accesses an extreme limit able to address its free course, its emanation. For instance, I find interesting in the case of the so called decolonialization of aesthetics or of postcolonial art, that the demand for equality – the confrontation with the pain and violence caused by colonial blindness in western-global culture, is paired with an



experience of limit that is completely strange to western culture: an experience that cannot project the excess of the given into future, an experience of alterity that cannot be motor for historical change.

**SM:**

This reminds me of something I experience today in my own work but also in that of some others: the appearance of dynamics, of movement that is neither linear, progressive nor circular, repetitive as being funny, absurd, vain, related to non-sense and/or exhaustion. A movement or rather a way of moving that allows dynamics that do not lead anywhere but leading nowhere is not their aim. It sounds easier than it is, it is extremely difficult to work on it and it is also not so easy to watch it: the idea is persistent that once something moves it should go somewhere or nowhere. The movement I mean is not doing any of it. It is just moving...

**MT:**

It is a strange moment we are experiencing today, because the need for autonomy, in other words, the need to address a non-given, undefinable “we”, the need to feel in the nowness of an artform a common that is not the given of any community, is paired with experiences that do not fit in the demand for greater inclusion of alterity into historical time. The same goes also for the so-called non-anthropocentric artforms, I mean for art sensitive to ecologies without nature, to the intermeshing of nature and technology, i.e. for the dissolution of their difference, for floating transforming processes with no departure point and no destination. Where is the limit that allows for something – a form, a process, a happening - to be addressed as such, to be related to others, to a public, and to address this very relation instead of disappearing transformed in it? It is not about limit as allowing newness into history to arrive...

Concretely this is obvious in the case of theater: no deconstruction of the dramatic form can have today the effect it had one or two decades ago. No overcoming of the supposed dualities in performance neither. Also the immediate demand for political relevance that indeed dominates the current art-landscape does not help us to understand what happens, for the simple reason that it can no longer be grasped in terms of an opposition between autonomous and politically engaged art. The framework of this opposition has no hold in the contemporary world. So, we rather have to redefine the way we ask and reflect on what is taking place. The change of change addresses this: the fact that newness or excess of the given in the tangible reality of a now, is not being inscribed in a history and projected into a future.

## **SM:**

If the orientation on the past loses its relevance, the understanding of what is contemporary, what is present changes, too. I guess that the relation between past and present transforms itself as soon as that which is present is no longer a product of a certain relation to the past. What else is it then? How does the present become present if not and no longer out of dealing with the past? What is new about the way we experience the present today? And how does the new come into presence if it is not the effect of a filiation or of a break-up with the past?

## **MT:**

“New” means here new in a world (in shared reality, according to Hannah Arendt), new as world and for a world: it means the taking place of a non-given and non-determinable “we”. The question how does the new come into presence, is connected to or presupposes an experience of extreme limit, that instead of being limited, finds in this limit the possibility of address as such, that is to say the emanation of relation as such. The extreme limit touches onto nothing, there has to be a touching onto nothing for address (or relation) to be addressed as such: for a non-given and non-determinable “we” to take place. As

long as one horizon was being projected onto one history, this experience meant the death of the older forms. But I would say that even in the past this was less driven by an “against” (a fighting the older forms), than by the drive of this touching of nothing as touching relating itself: reality, a common world – if we take again Hannah Arendt’s use of this term, reality as shared world. There had to be a touching of nothing given for the action of offering a shared place (the emanation of relation) to occur as such. I would see fighting the older forms rather as an effect than as a cause for the new. Today the given is not simply the given of one past, we do not ascribe one past neither one future to the present. Touching the non-given, bringing up new is thus not as some decades ago ascribed in a linear history, the past is not determinant for what makes the present become present.

Addressing “us” when “us” is nothing given and nothing determinable, means addressing alterity (excess of the given, other than the given) in “us”. This alterity is today no longer “ours”: it cannot form our horizon and does not originate in our provenance. This might be something that the urge for decolonialization of arts and aesthetics feels, when it denounces the oneness of western-global horizon for its blindness, as well as something that techno- and affect ecologies feel, when denouncing anthropocentrism. Becoming present, addressing the present, giving to it a form, means less overcoming the past or anticipating a future, than being reality and relating – we could even say in that sense love, the praxis of relating as such – and being reality and relating as an excess, an emanation, a floating, that strangely is now streaming out of a complete indifference for “us”: not our provenance and not our destination.

**MT:**

The deeper question in all this, the question that is more difficult to deal with, is what is happening to what past authorities and past overcoming of authorities had been serving: the principle of equality,

which was nothing else than the projection of excessive relating or excessive alterity into future. We kept and keep understanding all kind of criticism of enlightenment still according to the logic of enlightenment: either we do so in the name of excluded “blackness”, in the name of a fluid redistribution of power, of desire, of non-human ecologies – we still keep bringing what excesses the given in the service of future. Hence maybe this persistence of the principle of equality under conditions of dissolution of the oneness of the common (oneness as colonial violence, as anthropocentrism, as ....) requires to revise our thinking categories in order to respond to the present, it requires to revise its understanding as an excess in the service of future. Coming back to your question, maybe the forms of the past do not disappear, maybe they are reaching up to us in different ways. And maybe it is the space of appearance, the space of appearance of this excessive relating called new in art, that is primarily affected by the current shift: maybe it is the public, the shared reality that is to be thought of anew.

**SM:**

The same talk I was referring to above, the Change of Change talk you gave at a conference in Munich finishes with a very strong and inspiring sentence: “Denn das nimmt uns in Anspruch. Dass wir nicht wissen, wohin.” It says that we are challenged by the fact that we do not know where to go.

It makes me think of something like: The openness and uncertainty of the „where to“ is linked to the becoming irrelevant of the „where from“ and leaves us today in a vast, trembling, uncertain, fragile „where?“, probably even a plurality of “where?” (very contemporary images of bubbles, clouds etc. come up). It seems to me – and this is rather a feeling – that we are drifting on an endless „where?“ that has absorbed every possible „where from“ and maybe also every possible „where to“. The „where?“ is an infinite ungrounded desert. To me it feels like a

precarious „where?“ without orientation and even without disorientation, beyond that; – rather it could be a being at home in being lost; or at least being lost is nothing special or exciting any more. It feels to me that this very open, very vast, very infinite „where?“ has expanded and probably continues to expand. Could this endless „where?“ be a name for today’s present?

**MT:**

Thank you, yes, precisely this seems to me to be the point. But we should first remind that the non-givenness of a destination has been the very primary definition of art in modernity, even before Aesthetics, it has been Kant’s definition of beauty as a purposiveness with no purpose. “Wozu”, “what for” as unanswered, has been bringing art to life and keeping it alive, in motion: the fact that art deals substantially with this non-givenness, not as sheer irrelevance of a purpose, but on the contrary as a purposiveness, as what enables addressing “us”, addressing a world, enabling relating, enabling a shared place in suspense, exceeding any given (given place, given “we”, given world). “Challenged” as you say, by this not knowing of a destination, “in Anspruch genommen” is also somehow to be held or requested, called by this absence of a where: addressed. However, I do think we are facing a shift today, I think we are not facing today just a not knowing where. It is rather that this not knowing is not ascribed in a horizon and a provenance, and in that sense that it is not the not-knowing of a destination or of a purpose. If the thing of art, what is at stake in it, is the “we” as non-given, brought at play or taking place affectively in a present time, it is now a “we” that is not primarily ours. Which also means that we are facing its non-givenness not as a future, not as a demand for increased future equality. It is maybe rather reality that is challenged by excessive relating brought at play affectively in arts. “Where” as question, reality, the shared word, the space of appearance or the public, is maybe now what is challenged, addressed in and by the arts, when “we” is brought at play as not “ours”.

## **SM:**

It is tempting to think that from a linear, vertical structure of time – past, present, future – we are shifting to a more plane, horizontal organisation of space (globalisation, technologically enabled simultaneity, elimination of distances etc.). At the same time this feels too simple and too stable, as if space had no time...?

## **MT:**

Or as if space is time, yet not linear time, as if it is its own coming-up, multiplied, transformed, opening-up in different constellations, horizontally. But I agree, it is not that simple, and it is not that simple for the simple reason that what is at stake in all we are discussing about is a shared world, a “we” – a common reality. It is not enough to talk about infinite virtual spaces, because we are still asking about a common world under conditions that might be, among other things, conditions of infinite virtuality; we are still talking about the common, under conditions of dissolution of what the western-globalized culture thought as the common, and that mainly resulted in the supposed use of excess (alterity) in the service of future.

And also it is not that simple, because on the other hand, even if there is a dissolution of the linear conception of history taking place today - a dissolution due mainly to the technological transformation of the world, technology is allied with capitalism, and this alliance still inscribes the dislocation of time and space into the linearity of an empty purposiveness: nothingness, enabling newness, is felt as an imperative for transformation projected to future, an empty purposiveness commanding everything, dissolving former structures of the common, former conceptions of politics, producing even more violent inequalities, and thus appealing for concrete resistance. But resistance (as well as another word used often in art-contexts: „strategy”, artistic „strategies”) is dominated by purposiveness. So maybe we could or should rather ask: do arts today, appealed as they

are to respond and address presently a “we”, take charge of a shift of this whole scheme of purposiveness? Are they to be thought of differently than in the terms of how they will most adequately respond to the demand for equality under current conditions?

**MT:**

It might be true that aesthetics and art have lost their hold in the contemporary world, and this is partly due to technocapitalism, I mean it might be true that it doesn't make so much sense anymore to speak about the sensuous autonomy of art. Art has not an ascribed place in this technoeconomic reality, and definitely there is no space free of economy. Yet infinitely more is happening than the infinite capitalist technoeconomic commandment, even if it happens in it. We do have to reflect on the transformations that dissolve the frame in which “art” had its own place, we cannot just juxtapose sensuous reality or freedom to capitalism. Let's nevertheless not ask instead how will art be able to effectively resist, but rather, in what ways do arts take charge of “us” today? In what ways are they challenged by this address? Let's think about it all in terms that are not dominated by the logic of purposiveness and its resistance, let's try to understand how does this demand, purposiveness, that still has its grasp on “us”, changes.