TOWARDS A LOGIC OF ENCOUNTER
SOCIAL ART IN THE FRAMING OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVE

MARCEL BLEULER

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: MARCEL BLEULER, POSTDOC AT THE FOCUS AREA SCIENCE & ART (W&K), AN INTER-UNIVERSITY COOPERATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SALZBURG AND THE ART UNIVERSITY MOZARTEUM, LECTURER AT THE ART AND MEDIA DEPARTMENT OF THE ZURICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS. EMAIL: MARCEL.BL@GMAIL.COM

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ABSTRACT

SINCE THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY, THERE HAS BEEN A GROWING NUMBER OF ALLIANCES BETWEEN SOCIAL ART AND SO-CALLED INTERNATIONAL 'DEVELOPMENT' COOPERATION AND NGO WORK. SCHOLARS MOSTLY DISCUSS SUCH ALLIANCES FROM A PERSPECTIVE THAT EXPECTS ART PROJECTS TO RESULT IN CONCLUSIVE EFFECTS. THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT SUCH AN EFFECT-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE IS BASED ON A REDUCTIVE NOTION OF ART AND THAT IT FAILS TO NOTICE THE SELF-CRITICAL PRINCIPLES THAT SOCIAL ART CONTRIBUTES TO THE FIELD OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION. BASED ON A DETAILED DISCUSSION OF THE CONTINUING PROJECT OFF/LINE: WHAT CAN ART DO IN ZEMO NIKOZI? (SINCE 2016), WHICH INVITES ARTISTS TO WORK IN THE FRAMING OF A LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN THE SHIDA KARTLI REGION OF GEORGIA, THIS PAPER PRESENTS CONCRETE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL ART AND DIFFERENTIATES THEM ACCORDING TO HOW THEY RELATE TO THE IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT. ON THIS BASIS, THE PAPER CONCEPTUALIZES SOCIAL ART PRACTICES AS PROCESS-ORIENTED SPACES OF ENCOUNTER, AND DRAWS CONCLUSIONS ON A DISCURSIVE LOGIC THAT COMPLEMENTS THE EFFECT-ORIENTED DISCOURSE.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

MARCEL BLEULER (PHD) IS A PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCHER IN THE FIELDS OF SOCIAL ART, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION. HE HOLDS A POSTDOC POSITION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALZBURG, WHERE HE IS HEAD OF THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY ARTISTIC RESEARCH LAB (PROGRAM AREA CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION) TOGETHER WITH ELKE ZOBL AND ULRIKE HATZER. SINCE 2014 MARCEL HAS COLLABORATED WITH THE SWISS PEACE-BULDING ORGANIZATION ARTASFOUNDATION, AND MANAGED SEVERAL ART PROJECTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS. TOGETHER WITH ARTASFOUNDATION, HE ALSO DEVELOPED THE POSTGRADUATE PROGRAM ARTS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION WHICH HE IS CO-DIRECTING TOGETHER WITH DAGMAR REICHERT AT THE ZURICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS. MARCEL LIVES BETWEEN ZURICH AND SALZBURG.

Introduction

Since the early 21st century, there has been a growing number of alliances between the fields of social art and so-called international 'development' cooperation and NGO work. In art criticism and public discourses, such alliances are mostly discussed from a perspective that expects social art to result in conclusive effects (cf. Kester 2015). Art is thereby understood as a tool applied as part of efforts to achieve social change. This paper argues that such an effect-oriented perspective is based on a reductive notion of art and that it fails to notice the self-critical principles that social art contributes to the field of international cooperation, a field that is fundamentally based on asymmetries and inequality between 'outside' practitioners and the 'insiders' inhabiting an implementation context.

This paper discusses how social art practices develop from a focus on this sensitive constellation and calls for an adequate analytical approach beyond the effect-oriented perspective referred to above. It focuses on the continuing project off/line: what can art do in Zemo Nikozi? (since 2016), which invites artists to work in the framing of a long-term engagement for conflict transformation in the Shida Kartli region of Georgia.

The paper is structured in three parts: The first part clarifies the conceptual and historical background and the premises of the study. The second part consists of a discussion of the specific artistic practices that have taken place within the *off/line* project since 2016. This discussion is presented in four sections (A-D), each of which clusters social art practices according to how they shape the encounter with the village and its residents. On this basis, the paper draws conclusions, first, on an adequate notion of art beyond the reductive idea of art as a tool, and, second, on a discursive logic that complements the effect-oriented discourse.

Conceptual and historical background

First of all, this paper suggests an understanding of social art *not* in terms of media or method (e.g. participation or collaboration), but in terms of a specific sensitivity. Social art is defined as such by certain "ethics" (Bishop 2006: 96). Its emergence is bound to critical theories of the late 20th century, such as postmodern theories of democracy, postcolonial criticism, feminism and queer studies. Thus, it has evolved from a manifold critique of the constitution of (hegemonic) power structures and of social inequality in the lifeworld. This leads social artists to critically reflect on the elitist distinction of the field of art, as well as (their own) artistic agency and, not least, the legitimacy of representing others.

Secondly, this paper discusses social art practices in the framing of conflict transformation (CT), a field that it defines as follows: As a branch of international cooperation, CT is a strategic practice of relationship building. Practitioners in this field have professional backgrounds that range from mediation to more artistic disciplines, such as applied theatre or expressive arts therapy. Usually taking the role of facilitators and moderators, they engage in challenging social and political situations in order to transform negative (i.e. non-existent or hostile) relationships between individuals or communities into bonds that are intended to eventually increase mutuality or even lead to lived relationships across social divides.

Based on these definitions, an alliance between social art and conflict transformation appears productive, considering that the two fields share a particular interest in social bonds. However, this paper argues that the alliance also brings divergences to the surface. This becomes evident with regard to the discourse that represents concrete CT projects. The reports of governmental agencies, NGOs and private donor institutions focus on the transformation effects mentioned above. This can clearly be observed in the imagery they use, which typically shows, for instance, individuals from hostile social groups trading and shopping for food at a shared market, marginalized survivors of violence performing on a public stage or much-needed water resources flowing freely across armed borders. The common denominator of such imagery is that it focuses on the transformation of social spheres in regions of conflict and on the benefits to the individuals living there. Within this representing discourse, the outside practitioners are mostly obscured.

In this respect, social art practices challenge the existing discourse. This becomes particularly evident with regard to the controversial works by Dutch artist Renzo Martens in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2008) and by German artist Christoph Schlingensief in Western Africa (2008; 2010). In the first decade of the 21st century, both artists addressed the urgencies they encountered in their respective contexts. In contrast to the discourse, which tends to obscure the outside practition-

ers, their accounts dramatically emphasize the divide between themselves and the social spheres with which they interacted. Through their mere presence, both created a constellation that was highly charged with the risk of reproducing global hierarchies and patterns of colonialist exploitation. As both artists lay open, a fundamental reflection of their own position and of the (im)possibility to relate socially to their contexts became crucial for their working processes.

Such a self-critical stance can also be found in the research by practice-based CT scholars with a background in applied theatre. In the same period in which Martens and Schlingensief scrutinized the dynamics of international engagement, theatre-oriented peace scholar Hannah Reich (2006) published a paper that addressed the "power asymmetries" (3) between foreign parties and local social spheres in CT projects. Instead of "covering them up", she calls for an increased focus on the relationship between the 'outsiders' and the 'insiders'. Projects should give space to a processual negotiation of their differing perceptions, interpretations and social norms. Reich suggests integrating a specific framework for this negotiation in CT projects, which should allow "for the relationship to be at the core of all endeavours" (23).

Shortly after Reich's paper appeared, researcher and applied theatre practitioner James Thompson published his book *Performance Affects* (2009). Thompson not only referred to the crucial role of the outside practitioners and their relation to the locals (cf. 1-7), but also the limited possibility to ascertain the effects of their interventions (cf. 15-42). Through a full disclosure of his own experience, he argues that what seem to be secondary aspects often become crucial for the development and the impact of CT projects. On this basis, he fundamentally questions an effect-oriented focus. Instead, he suggests thinking about CT interventions not in terms of achieving effects, but in terms of creating and handling affects which arise from outsiders intervening in local social spheres. Thus, he moves the focus onto the interpersonal and contingent dimension of project work.

While such critical self-reflection has certainly left its traces on the policies of international cooperation and CT in particular, it hardly appears in the representing discourse. To a certain degree, this is due to the culture of reporting perpetuated by donor institutions. With their reporting categories and requirements, they clearly expect practitioners to focus on the effects on the implementation context. Especially in the case of state funding, international cooperation is legitimated through its benefits for the 'weak parties'. There is a legal responsibility that the money be spent for their (apparent) benefit. The focus on the effects is therefore mandatory, while the subjectivity of the outside practitioners and their experience of relating to the implementation context appears irrelevant.

This underlying logic leads to what can be called an 'obscuration rhetoric' in the discourse. This paper argues that such rhetoric is not compatible with the self-reflection characteristic of social art practices. Thus, it continues the work of authors such as Hannah Reich and James Thompson who used artistic experience as a source of a shift of perspective and a change in the way we think about the alliance between art and CT or international 'development' cooperation. This paper thereby addresses an intersection that has recently become relevant for art criticism and that calls for a reevaluation of its underlying logics and analytical approaches.

Image 00 *The participating artists of the off/line project in 2016 looking towards the de-facto border of South-Ossetia (photo: Sabine Schlatter).*

The overarching project *off/line: what can art do in Zemo Nikozi?* and the premises of this study

In line with the calls for a performative, self-reflective approach referenced above, this study is not written from a neutral position. I state clearly that it is based on my own involvement and experience with the project it focuses on. Together with Georgian curator Lali Pertenava, I have been managing *off/line: what can art do in Zemo Nikozi?* since 2016. The project was commissioned by the Swiss peace-building NGO artasfoundation as part of its long-term engagement in the frozen conflict region of Shida Kartli (GEO). It takes place in the village of Zemo Nikozi, which is situated next to the impassable and armed de facto border that resulted from the so-called Georgian-Ossetian war in 2008. This line separates Zemo Nikozi from the neighboring city of Tskhinval/i, which used to be of vital economic importance for the around 1,000 residents of the village. Within the framework of *off/line*, 24 artists from Georgia and Western Europe are invited annually to engage with the village and its residents over the course of a 15-day project phase. Each year, the project concludes with an event in which the artistic processes are presented.

Image 01 *Residents of Zemo Nikozi at the final presentation event of the off/line project in 2016 (photo: Olivia Jaques).*

These processes develop from the outside artists' encounters with the local residents and their stories. While artasfoundation's engagement is clearly associated with the goals of conflict transformation, the *off/line* project itself is conceptualized as a space for exploration. This means that we do not expect the artists to produce conclusive projects, nor do we ask them to necessarily create participatory events. By placing them with host families and introducing them to local stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, as well as to potential partners such as craftsmen and residents with a special interest in aesthetic practices, we create a basis for interaction. In addition, we organize daily group meetings in which the artists share their experiences and findings. From this setting, artistic practices emerge that tend to be much more self-reflective and at the same time intuitive than classical CT initiatives.

In my view, these practices are valuable in as much as they are highly focused on relationship-building and as they appear meaningful for the individuals involved. I expressly say that they *appear* meaningful, since it is very difficult to obtain the perspective of the locals, in terms of their understanding and perception of the artistic practices. I have only very rarely been convinced that I have heard genuine responses from their side; this impression was also shared by Georgian Tamar Nadiradze, who came from an adjacent village to evaluate the *off/line* project in 2017. The combination of the asymmetric relationship inherent to the project, the fact that the villagers can realize a financial gain from our stay and, not least, their culture of hospitality *might* lead to a covering up of whatever irritation they might feel.

For these reasons, I find it impossible to identify the specific effects and benefits of the artistic practices without resorting to speculation. However, in my position as a project manager, this is exactly what I am asked to do, especially when I report to donor agencies. As mentioned above, these agencies not only ask about the effects of our project and the artistic practices taking place in its framework, but their discursive logic also requires obscuring any subjectivity – mine or the artists – when reporting.

In contrast, it has been my experience that subjectivity is crucial for any understanding and discussion of what is happening within a project such as *off/line*. Similar to the perspective of the locals, which cannot be accessed or reconstructed in terms

of a secured reference point, I have often had the experience that the artists followed other interests than those I projected onto their practices. In line with the contingency paradigm, I do not see this divergence as a mistake. Rather, it corresponds to what art historian Amelia Jones calls an "interpretation as exchange" (Jones, Stephenson 1998: 9), according to which any interpretation depends just as much on the interests of the interpreter as on the artistic phenomenon in question. In this sense, the following account and discussion is conceptualized as a subjective reading, based on my observations, recordings and notes taken during the *off/line* editions in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

What social art does in Zemo Nikozi
A) Finding the grounds for mutuality in a constellation of inequality

The *off/line* project is explorative, but its CT framing is not absent for the participating artists. This framing is especially present in one fundamental challenge that the project faces: all participants stay, in pairs, with local families. These families are paid for hosting the guests, which means that 13 families of Zemo Nikozi profit financially from our stay, while others, who might need the money more urgently but whose houses may not be able to host guests, do not receive any direct financial gain from the project. By choosing 13 out of about 200 households, our project privileges a small fraction of the residents. Unwillingly, it thereby creates tension among the locals, which contradicts the conflict sensitivity policy (cf. CSC 2012) that is inscribed in the framework of *off/line*. It is crucial for artasfoundation to consider and, whenever possible, avert any negative side effects that its projects might have on the local social sphere, especially when it comes to privileging certain individuals and (re) creating inequality.

In 2016, we addressed this challenge with a 'village fund': a percentage of the money budgeted for the host families was put into a fund that was to be spent on something that might potentially benefit the whole village. Our plan was for the artists to decide how to spend the money. Thus, from the beginning, they were forced to examine the needs and priorities of the people of Zemo Nikozi.

Image 02 *Off/line* participants discussing ideas for the village fund in 2016 (photo: Marcel Bleuler).

Indeed, it seemed easy for the participants to brainstorm ideas, most of which revolved around the lack of public spaces (should we construct an inviting gathering place for people to meet in their free time?), the lack of infrastructure for children (should we simply buy toys for the local kindergarten?) or the living conditions of the town's elderly (should we buy new mattresses for everyone over 60?). However, our meetings always ended up in a discussion of the implications of such interventions. Some artists eventually voted for the creation of a board of locals to administer the fund, so that they could decide how to spend the money. This idea, however, led to another controversy, since the creation of a board would, again, lead to exclusion. Other artists took a more fundamental stand against the village fund task. For them, aid and charity recalled the patronizing approach of missionaries, who decide what would be good for people in a certain context, thereby enforcing their own beliefs and values. For instance, Sabine Schlatter, a Swiss artist who was very involved with the village fund at first, felt increasingly uncomfortable with the one-sidedness of the discussion. She made the point that our group also had to shed light on our own interests and priorities instead of turning a blind eye to them. She voted for finding a common place, a shared interest, that could be realized together with the residents.

Mutuality is certainly not a given in the social constellation of *off/line*. There is an obvious inequality between the locals who are mostly self-supporting and the outsiders who, while they might lead the precarious lives of artists, are nevertheless privileged in terms of mobility, education, access to resources, etc. Most importantly, they are in a position to be invited for a professional project by an international foundation. Against this background, simple interaction becomes one of the crucial challenges of *off/line*.

Georgian artist David Kukhalashvili, who participated in the same edition of the project as Sabine Schlatter, pointed out in one of the group discussions that his appearance as an artist in Zemo Nikozi could already lead to unexpected social dynamics. As he recounted, he felt that the locals were almost intimidated by the fact that he was an artist from the capital city with a university degree. He experienced a distance that his knowledge and his profession created.

Kukhalashvili therefore came to the conclusion that he could not create art in Zemo Nikozi. By doing so, he would emphasize an imbalance in relation to the locals, who often lacked any education or expertise in art. It became the main concern of his stay to create a personal basis for interaction, one in which professional identity would not be important at all. Thus, Kukhalashvili simply spent time with his hosts and with the other locals he met. He mostly followed their daily routines, sometimes helping with simple tasks such as harvesting grapes, and he had exchanges with people about their lives in Zemo Nikozi and his life in Tbilisi.

Image 03 *Georgian artist David Kukhalashvili helping with repair work during the off/line project in 2016 (photo: Sabine Schlatter).*

Whereas the social constellation lead Kukhalashvili to give up making art, Swiss artist Sabine Schlatter, whom I mentioned above, eventually secluded herself in a seemingly hermetic artistic practice. In contrast to the Georgian artist, Schlatter could only communicate with her host, an elderly war widow, through translators. Her frustration over this situation became one of the main concerns in her working process. Eventually, she concluded that her way to connect with the residents was through aesthetic expression. In the third group meeting, she observed that she could understand more about her host when she looked at the ways she decorated her living room and her terrace than when she tried to communicate verbally through translation. This observation led Schlatter to abandon all discussions about how to interact directly with the locals and how to administer the village fund. Instead, she set up a corner in our workshop building where she hung large papers to draw on.

The building, which is also the site of the local administration and the peace corps administration, is visited by numerous people each day. From the third day of our stay on, everyone who entered the building could see Schlatter working on her drawings.

Image 04 *Swiss artist Sabine Schlatter working on her "mappings" in the workshop building (photo: Marcel Bleuler).*

Schlatter did not address the locals directly, but she gave them a chance to trace her. Instead of explicit interaction, she focused on mutual perception. In the same way that she traced the aesthetic dimension of the personal lives of the residents in order to understand them, she allowed them to observe her and thereby get a sense of who she might be.

B) Negotiating public perceptions

Most artists experience uncertainties in their encounters with the residents of Zemo Nikozi. The obvious aspects of inequality and difference create an unease with regard to the question of how much the artists should keep themselves at a distance and

how close they can become. How directly, for instance, can one raise topics that are connected to the traumatizing experiences of the war? Do we merely *presume* that there are numerous taboos and actions that are off limits? And does considering such limits hinder an authentic interaction?

The working processes of many of the Georgian artists in particular have evolved around the experience of war. Every year, sooner or later the group discussions lead to accounts of their own experiences of the events in 2008 from a distance (in most cases, from the capital city, which lies about 60km away). By staying in Zemo Nikozi, they suddenly get much closer to the events and the personal stories connected to them. This leads to an ambivalent position: as Georgians, they are affected by the war, yet at the same time, they do not own the experience personally or directly. In this sense, they are just as much in the position of outsiders as we are. However, I have often observed a personal urge in the Georgian artists to address the war, which leads to the sensitive challenge to articulate their outsider's perspective instead of claiming to own the experience.

One phenomenon that has gained particular attention is the visible traces of the armed conflict in the village in the form of bullet holes in the walls and fences of several family houses. In the first edition of *off/line*, the working process of several artists evolved around this phenomenon. One of them, Tbilisi artist Nutsa Esebua, soon started to chart these traces. She went to the walls and fences and produced numerous frottage drawings and small castings. Her working process resembled the one of Sabine Schlatter, in as much as Esebua did not address the locals directly about the bullet holes, but, as her work took place in the open streets, her interest and the attention she paid to the bullet holes were certainly noticed.

I was unsure whether her public approach to the traces of war would be perceived as disrespectful. At the same time, I felt that she quite plainly expressed her own position. She publicly followed the urge to comprehend and trace the violence, but she did not bother the locals by inquiring about their personal experiences.

Image 05 *Nutsa Esebua's frottage drawings at the final presentation event of the off/line project in 2016 (photo: Marcel Bleuler).*

Georgian artist Tamar Botchorishvili chose a much more direct and at the same time pragmatic approach to the presence of the bullet holes. She began her working process by talking to the locals about why they had not fixed their walls and fences. After a couple of conversations, she uncovered the recurring argument: people told her that it would be too expensive and difficult to fix the holes properly. On this basis, Botchorishvili started to do material tests, with a goal of finding the cheapest and simplest way to fix the bullet holes.

Image 06 *Georgian artist Tamar Botchorishvili conducting material tests to repair the bullet holes in the wall of a house in Zemo Nikozi (photo: Sabine Schlatter).*

Botchorishvili's process resulted in a simple instruction sheet listing the materials needed to fix a wall (including prices) and describing the four working steps. Her pragmatic output thereby directly commented on the postwar situation. Behind its simplicity, it negotiated the public perception of Zemo Nikozi. Especially during my first stay, I tended to perceive the bullet holes as a sensitive reminder of traumatizing experiences. Botchorishvili's instruction sheet challenged this perception. It denoted the holes as something that people in Zemo Nikozi ignored, as it simply was an annoyance for them.

Image 07 Presentation of Tamar Botchorishvili's instruction sheet at the final event of the *off/line* project in 2016 (photo: Marcel Bleuler).

A third example of how artists approach the traumatizing past of the village is Mishiko Sulakauri's working process in the 2018 edition of *off/line*. Sulakauri, who often works with graffiti, was interested in a ruin he spotted in the village center. More than a ruin, it was the only remaining wall of a house that had otherwise been completely shattered. Like the bullet holes, it was one of the reminders of the war that the residents seemed to overlook. The owner of the land was quite confused by the artist's interest in the wall. In fact, he almost seemed embarrassed that an outside artist would even notice it. His immediate reaction was to explain that it would be demolished soon, and that he just had not gotten to it yet.

After he received permission, Sulakauri followed a linear working process. Aware that there was a farmer living in Zemo Nikozi who was also a poet, he started to inquire about her. Poet Tamar Metreveli has a rather marginal position in the village, even though she had already published a couple of books. In the fall of 2018, she was at a hospital, recovering from an operation. When Sulakauri found out where the hospital was, he paid a visit to her, during which time they wrote a poem together that was inspired by the wall in question. From this poem, they selected one phrase that Sulakauri eventually spray-painted on the ruin in the center of Zemo Nikozi. According to Lali Perteneva's translation, the sentence read: "I promise you your old dreams will come back again."

Image 08 *Graffiti on a wall in Zemo Nikozi, with a line from a poem written by Tamar Metreveli and Mishiko Sulakauri during the 2018 off/line project (photo: Nurith Wagner-Strauss).*

With his intervention, Mishiko Sulakauri transformed the formerly ignored wall of a shattered house into a space for reflection. He thereby went into the opposite direction as Tamar Botchorishvili. While Botchorishvili reoriented the perception of the bullet holes by denoting them as a pragmatic matter, Sulakauri turned the trace of violence into a memorial.

Through his simple intervention, he addressed a void in the village's public life. While the families cultivate the memory of the war in the private sphere – mostly in form of pictures of fallen soldiers – there is no official culture of remembrance. However, the question how the war could be remembered is at stake. In 2017, a local administrator showed our group the plans for an official memorial to be built at the entrance of the village. The plans showed several large crosses made of dark stone, connecting remembrance to religion and funeral aesthetics. In contrast, Sulakauri's graffiti bound it to a lifeworld perspective. The wall connects remembrance with personal history and the intimate dimension of dreams.

It remained unclear to me whether the locals would identify with this perspective, or how they perceived the wall at all. During Sulakauri's final presentation, at which about 30 locals were present, they simply looked at it and listened to the artist's account of his collaboration with the poet. All that can be said with certainty is that the locals learned about the outside artist's interest in a poet whose artistic production is normally little respected, and that they noticed a shattered wall that they usually ignored.

C) Noticing the formerly undervalued

While the Georgian artists who participate in the *off/line* project tend to search for a perspective on the experience of war, those coming from farther away instead often look for a perspective that goes beyond it. In this regard, a project by the Swiss artistic researcher Benjamin Egger drew a lot of attention from the locals. In the second edition in 2017, Egger came to the village with a concrete plan: he was interested in the many stray dogs living in Zemo Nikozi and wanted to study their social

structures. He brought quite a lot of equipment with him, including tools for tracking the dogs with GPS, night vision cameras, dog food, etc. From the first day on, he followed the dogs and traced the territories that were occupied by specific packs as well as the dynamics between these packs. Eventually, he focused on mapping individual dogs, their pack affiliations and families, and their habits, such as how far they move and how they find food.

During his research, Egger conducted interviews with some of the residents, who were quite amused by this outsider's interest in the dogs. For them, the presence of the animals was a given, something they usually did not think about. The dogs are just part of village life – of its infrastructure, so to speak. Now, through Egger's project, they had an opportunity to become aware of their relationships with the dogs and they could share their experiences.

Through his process, Egger gathered data and knowledge that was not exactly new for the locals, but that they had never understood in such terms. His presentation, in which he showed recordings and the final map, was a perspective on their village that was very close to their everyday lives and at the same time completely new. It suddenly drew attention to the ways the dogs coexist and survive. In this sense, Benjamin Egger's project gave importance to something that was not normally perceived as valuable.
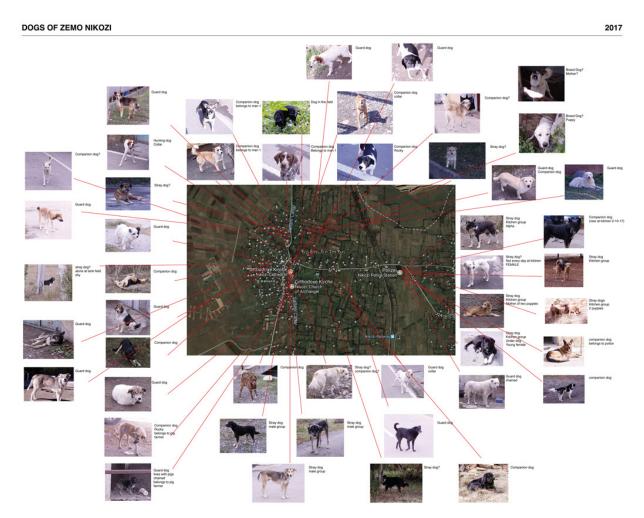

Image 09 *Mapping of the dogs of Zemo Nikozi by Swiss artist Benjamin Egger from the 2017 off/line project (© Benjamin Egger).*

A project by Evan Ruetsch in the most recent edition of *off/line* brought this interest one step further. The Swiss-Italian artist had worked in the Shida Kartli region before and was familiar with the frozen conflict area. In Zemo Nikozi, he became enamored with the people he met through his host family and by their everyday lives. In the daily group meeting, he mainly mentioned three observations: the many apples growing all over the village that people gave away to him so freely; the importance of

cooking in the daily routine of women and the attention people pay to eating in general; and the enthusiasm that arises from drinking homemade *chacha*, a strong schnapps.

During a feast with members of the local police corps, it was explained to the artist that the locals do not harvest their apples, since they cannot sell them anymore. They used to sell them at the market in the adjacent city of Tskinval/i, to which they no longer have access. Since the war, they simply have not been able to make any use of the masses of apples anymore. In this sense, the fruits hanging in the trees or rotting on the ground are a constant reminder of what they have lost due to the conflict.

Image 10-11 *Residents of Zemo Nikozi bringing apples for the big apple pie produced in the 2018 edition of off/line (photo: Evan Ruetsch).*

Against this background, Ruetsch made a bold plan: he decided to join forces with the locals to bake the biggest apple pie in all of Georgia. His plan was to start this project by going from house to house, asking people for some apples and informing them about the pie. He soon called my Georgian project partner to help him with the translation, by which time he had already mobilized quite a few people for his idea. They suggested ideas about how to bake the pie (would they have to build a special oven?) and about the best recipes (of course, every household had its own recipe). Some women were keen to bake test pies, and some men were willing to help with constructing the necessary implements.

Of course, Ruetsch and the people who joined his plan encountered many challenges, but they did not have time to stop – they just had to work around the problems. In this process, the original idea had to be rescaled: it would only become the biggest pie in Zemo Nikozi. Also, they did not build a special oven; instead, the local baker, who had just gone bankrupt, reopened his bakery, where Ruetsch and some of the locals spent several nights for test baking.

Image 12 *Evan Ruetsch and the baker family of Zemo Nikozi working on the production of the apple pie during the 2018 off/line project phase (photo: Marcel Bleuler).*

On the morning of the final presentations, an apple pie with a diameter of two meters was transported by tractor to the school building in the village center, where it was displayed on a big table. The cutting of the pie served as the opening ceremony for that year's final presentations. Before it was cut, a girl sang a song about apples – the omnipresent but seemingly useless fruit of the village – then everyone served themselves.

D) Opening a space for the unpredictable

With his project, Evan Ruetsch was able turn the surplus apples, which represent the loss of (economic) relations, into something productive. A temporary community emerged that was united by a goal, which at first everyone had just smiled at. Yet despite the obvious exaggeration, the locals could relate to the idea. Since the countdown was running, and since the artist was determined to try everything to make the idea happen, they were motivated to contribute to the production of the pie. They were, so to speak, fighting the real possibility that the idea could fail. This unpredictability had an immediate unifying effect, which, at the same time, left space for the many different motivations of the individuals involved. Ruetsch was joined by the bankrupt baker whose interest was to make use of his abandoned infrastructure and thereby also to earn some money, as well as the housewives who were probably just proud to suggest their own recipes for the giant pie. This led to the creation of a plural community, which enhanced the unpredictability of the apple pie project. The realization process soon developed its own dynamics, which no one could thoroughly master.

In my own experience, after four years of spending quite some time in Zemo Nikozi, the social inequality which is always

part of *off/line*, cannot entirely be overcome. Nevertheless, the artistic practices can lead to a kind of momentum – a sense of immediate unification, as in the apple pie project. In a much more ephemeral way, this also occurred in what was called an 'open stage' organized in 2017 by Austrian artist Jürgen Rendl and Georgian artist Inga Shalvashvili. The idea of the open stage was to invite locals and participating artists to perform on the evening of the final presentations in front of an audience. This project entailed assembling people who would be interested in performing, determining an order and decorating the stage – in this case, a simple wooden construction in the foyer of the community building that the locals never use.

At the actual event, Rendl and Shalvashvili served as moderators and technicians. The first slot was given to the local poet who read some of her poems, which almost no one in the village had heard before. Then a few Georgian and other songs were performed by a small group of locals and outside artists. Afterwards, the stage was taken over by children trained in traditional music and dance.

Image 13 *Children performing at the open stage event in 2017 (photo: Benjamin Egger);* **image 14** *Lecture by local poet Tamar Metreveli at the open stage in 2017 (photo: Benjamin Egger).*

In the course of the children's performances, one boy gave what he called a Michael Jackson show, dancing to music he played on a small stereo. His performance consisted of two or three moves that he constantly repeated. The audience first supported him with applause, but after five minutes, a certain cluelessness emerged among them. It became clear that the boy would just repeat his three moves without coming to an end. Everyone – the locals and the outside artists alike – hesitated to stop him, since no one wanted to hurt his feelings. Some tried to increase their applause in order to simulate the ending of the show. Others tried to distract him and encourage him nicely to stop. Everyone noticed these attempts except for the boy on stage. This led to quite a unifying experience. The individuals in the audience exchanged glances and smiled at each other, regardless of their position in the village or the *off/line* project. Thus, for a very short moment, it felt as though the social division softened.

I see this momentum as a valuable outcome of the 2017 edition of *off/line*, and appreciated the interpersonal dynamics that the open stage event created. Its unpredictability and open-endedness left a sense of satisfaction. What the open stage and the apple pie projects suggest is that people can experience an immediate temporary unification from the sense of uncertainty that these projects entail.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have emphasized an understanding of social art in terms of artistic practices with a specific sensitivity. I have therefore also included working processes that resulted in giving up on creating art (David Kukhalashvili) or that appear rather 'asocial' (Sabine Schlatter), for they do not apply any participatory method, nor do they try to redistribute (artistic) agency. However, these practices resulted from sensitive considerations regarding the social constellation of the *off/line* project – a constellation in which any action by outsiders can easily lead to a paternalistic gesture, to one-sidedness or to exploitation.

On some level, all of the practices discussed in this paper address the social premises of the project. The artists procedures can be differentiated as follows:

A) Upon entering the constellation of difference and inequality, some artists give priority to finding grounds for mutuality. They do so by involving themselves personally in the local social sphere.

B) Faced with a context affected by armed conflict, some artists address the history and the concrete traces of violence. By articulating their outsider's view, they suggest a negotiation of the public perception and remembrance of the war.

C) Some artists look for aspects beyond the conflict, or for new meaning that could be given to its presence in daily life. Their practices suggest paying greater attention to what has been ignored or undervalued in the local lifeworld.

D) Some artists initiate communal actions and let these actions develop their own dynamics. Their practices thereby give space for the unpredictable, a sensation that can potentially affect all individuals involved, insiders and outsiders alike.

Even though I have grouped these practices into clusters, they still represent diverse interests, methods and procedures. This observation is relevant with regard to the question raised in the introduction about a notion of art beyond the reductive idea of art as a tool. Based on my observations, I argue that social art practices are too singular and too open-ended to be considered in such terms.

The idea of art as a tool implies that a practice can be generalized into a strategy that can also be applied to other contexts. Furthermore, it implies that the utility of this strategy can clearly be identified. In the best case, according to this logic, we would eventually have a range of strategies at our disposal from which we can choose the one that has proven to be the most effective for a certain conflict or otherwise challenging situation.

The contingent dimension of the practices discussed in this paper undermines this logic. The outside artists work under the premise that the local's perspectives are virtually inaccessible to them. This premise requires their practices to be open to multiple perceptions. In fact, the consideration of how differing perceptions could get along side by side, and how difference and inequality can be handled, lie at the bottom of most of the practices discussed. Thus, rather than focusing on a specific effect to achieve, the artists pursued questions that accompanied their encounter with the village and its residents, such as:

A) How and on what level can we work towards mutuality?

B) How can we take a position with regard to the experiences of others? How can we articulate our perspective without claiming to own the experiences of others?

C) To what extent can our working processes reveal a new perspective on the local lifeworld and its formerly unnoticed or undervalued aspects?

D) How can our actions allow for the unpredictable and for shared experiences to emerge?

These questions indicate that the artistic practices are not developed in terms of tools, but much more in terms of spaces of encounter. These spaces are processual and open-ended, and they articulate certain principles. Three of these principles can be deduced from the examples given in this paper:

First, the discussed practices allow for encounters to develop their own dynamics. They might be guided by a certain interest (such as tracing the social lives of dogs), but since they are grounded in mutuality, the practices are very open to the development of dynamics which neither the outside artists nor the local individuals involved can fully control. This principle is the crucial contribution of social art to the field of international cooperation: the ability to appreciate, foster and, not least, bear the unpredictability of an encounter.

The second principle is closely intertwined: the practices discussed work *with* inequality and not against it. The spaces of encounter do not lead to assimilation or to idyllic togetherness. Rather, they are spaces in which a cluelessness about how to interact can arise, and which thereby foster a (direct or indirect) negotiation of difference.

Thirdly, to open up such spaces requires the artists to include and reflect upon their own perspectives and positions, rather than obscuring them and focusing solely on the local priorities. For these reasons, their practices are hardly compatible with a discourse that focuses on effects. While the reports and representations of CT projects and 'development' cooperation tend to deemphasize the outsider practitioners, envisioning a reality in which they are not needed, the artists referenced in this paper create shared realities that cease to exist after they are gone. With only a few exceptions, their social art practices are fundamentally relational and temporary.

This third principle conflicts most with the expectations of donor institutions. From the perspective of donors, who also bear responsibility for the benefits to the locals, a singular and ephemeral event, such as the open stage, remains questionable. Can the project have an effect that is more than just a positive experience or a spontaneous interaction? Can it have any impact in terms of, for instance, the transformation of social bonds or the enhancement of individual creativity?

As the manager of the *off/line* project, I am in the position to mediate such critical questions. The priority I give to finding a logic beyond the idea of art as a tool to effect change originates to a high degree in these conversations. On the one hand, I find it crucial to promote an understanding of social art practices in terms of a space for plural and contingent experience, and not based on specific, effect-oriented strategies that could be implemented in a certain context. On the other hand, I explicitly take a stand in favor of the idea that an artistic intervention remains a spontaneous and ephemeral interaction. I cannot help but sense a neoliberal logic in the effect-oriented discourse, according to which all actions need to result in some kind of productive effect. In contrast, I argue that the outcomes of a dialogue cannot be known beforehand; neither is it possible to determined what ongoing effects they will lead to. All the more, I find it important to enter into and foster dialogue and to explore its possibilities, even if it means that we risk ending up in a state of cluelessness. I maintain that fostering and appreciating such an open-endedness is what art can do best in an otherwise highly confined context such as Zemo Nikozi.

Endnotes

1   The author would like to underscore that his use of names and titles, particularly with regard to the conflict region, should not be construed as implying any form of recognition or non-recognition by the author or as having any other political connotation whatsoever.

2   It should be clarified that what the author is calling the "sensitivity" of social art was controversially debated at the beginning of the 21st century. While Claire Bishop (2006) took a rather skeptical stance with regard to what she called an "ethical turn" in contemporary art, Grant Kester (2011, 2013) made a case for it. From today's perspective, Kester's concept of a "dialogical aesthetics" (2013), which is based on the interest of social artists in giving up an elitist distinction of the field of art, in decreasing artistic agency and in entering a dialogue in terms of a transformative exchange, appears especially productive (cf. Kester 2013).

3   For an up-to-date definition of conflict transformation and civilian peace building, see Yüksek (2018: 3-5).

4   On the basis of these working processes, both artists founded humanitarian institutions that continue to exist to this day. See: www.humanactivities.org (initiated by Renzo Martens in DRC in 2010) and www.operndorf-afrika.com (founded by Christoph Schlingensief in Burkina Faso in 2010) (accessed: May 2, 2019).

5   Both Hannah Reich's and James Thompson's writing mirror what has been called a "performative turn" in the arts, a shift that also influenced postmodernist art history (Jones 1997; Ursprung 2008, 2013). In this context, the creation of meaning is seen as a plural, contingent process that is fundamentally dependent on the specific conditions and interests of the subjects involved. On this basis, a discourse emerged that focuses on the relational dimension and explicitly includes the subjectivity of its authors, instead of obscuring it.

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