

Fucking Good Art on their publication “Italian Conversations: Art in the age of Berlusconi” interviewed by Sheena Greene

The publication Italian Conversations: Art in the age of Berlusconi 2012 started with an invitation from the Nomas Foundation in Rome, who were interested in an outsider perspective into the complexity of the Italian contemporary art world, its spaces, people and models for culture vis a vis the current political and economic crisis. The funding came from a variety of public and private sources from Italy and the Netherlands. Rob Hamelijncx & Nienke Terpsma put themselves in the position of being outsiders in a local context, but they are insiders in the arts field and the art world.

From January to May 2011 the authors travelled to seven different cities and regions in Italy where they had local contacts and well-informed guides, in the book, who put together an itinerary loosely following the model of the Grand Tour with the aim to explore and research the contemporary artistic, social and political scene from the perspective of visual artists.

Sheena Greene: How do you work together as a duo, how are the tasks and roles performed? Do you maintain your own practice outside of your collaboration?

Rob Hamelijncx: Working together you learn by doing. Certainly we are equal partners in our FGA collective. We are both the artists and editors and Nienke is also a designer. She did her masters in Typography at the famous Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem with Karel Martens and Wigger Bierma. I do the internet stuff and sound editing, often writing applications for residencies etc. Together we transcribe and edit the conversations, and give feedback on the things we write. From the beginning Fucking Good Art was learning-by-doing. Sometimes we make jokes that we founded our own “master” or “PhD” degree program, and at the same time we are the director, editor-in-chief, assistant, coffee lady/man, and toilet cleaner in one.

We started publishing the Fucking Good Art zine in December 2003. The format was an A3 folded

to A5 sheet of pink paper – in between the magazines we still publish the zines – printed by our printer and friend De Boog in Rotterdam. The first years we did Fucking Good Art at the same time as our individual art practice: Nienke was a photographer, and I was making text-based video and computer works. After 2 years we were too busy with FGA; it took over and we let it happen. We went with the flow, and this felt quite good actually. Fucking Good Art worked, this was a happy experience, it has a dynamic, people are interested in reading our conversations, and we want to share what we find.

SG: What was your motivation to start the collective in the first place. Were you looking for a new creative direction when you started FGA?

RH: Yes we were, and still are. That’s why we playfully connected to Goethe who had embarked on his Grand Tour because he had lost faith and was looking or hoping for a rebirth. We sometimes also feel lost in this confused art world dominated by money, up to the point that we almost lost our belief

in art. So you could say that our travels are to bring back our belief in art.

Nienke Terpsma: The earlier editions were quite different. We started publishing the fanzines on paper and online, as pamphlets for art critique, to invite “makers” to write about art exhibitions and shows in project spaces but also in galleries and museums. There were so many small exhibitions nobody would write about. We are not academics but thought that maybe artists have other things to say about artwork than those with academic backgrounds. We are interested in going over these borders and seeing what differences occur in the different fields.

SG: *Italian Conversations: Art in the age of Berlusconi*, is an art travelogue of seven selected cities whose focus is an exploration of the alternative, fragmented and varied creative solutions to an art system surviving the pressures of political, social and economic crisis throughout Italy. Did the brief from Nomas differ from that of your previous publications? How did you decide on the format for the seven different cities?

NT/RH: The brief was interesting for us, as the situation in Italy seemed relevant for a wider audience in the arts. The decline of public institutions, a right wing populist government and the cultural policies that come with it, are things that are happening all over Europe. We thought that it would be interesting for people in other North European countries, who were starting to face similar issues in cultural policies that Italy had been dealing with for twenty years. It posed many curious questions, very much in line with our interests.

We liked the idea that the close collaboration would make it possible to create a dialogue of perspectives, between insiders and outsiders, rather than just presenting the perspective of outsiders, involving the ‘cicerones’ in each city in the editorial process.

Nomas wanted us to visit the seven cities because these cities have such different cultures. We did think that it would be too much, but we liked the idea. The structure was proposed by Nomas, but was discussed and refined with choices made together. Nomas is based in Rome so that is very different to an art space in Milan. Milan had to be included because it’s Milan and everybody throughout Italy thinks that is where everything in the art world happens. Puglia is interesting for different reasons, like

for the European grants for cultural projects, bringing people back to their region of origin, and so on.

In Italy there are well functioning local art worlds, or eco systems, with private initiatives, public initiatives, around 50 commercial galleries and 20 independent project spaces, so it is double edged. To get onto another platform you need to go to Milan, or something that many people do, is to study abroad. On other hand we were told that it is very possible to have a sustainable practice at a local level.

SG: Did the concept of the Eighteenth century “Grand Tour” for aristocratic tourists, accompanied by local “ciceroni” tour guides, help you develop your field trip and did you do much research into historical travel journeys?



NT/RH: Yes of course we were aware that the Grand Tour is a commonly used theme and although we played with that, it was quite tongue & cheek. The theme is so often used throughout the art world. In FGA#10, *The Interviews* Catherine David said to us ‘Art is not tourism.’ The Grand Tour is a very interesting history of course, and we read about it to some extent. However we didn’t have much time for the many historical treasures of Italy during this trip. We were quite busy going from basement gallery to white painted off space, to talk with people who are trying to formulate and actually experiment alternative ways of working in the arts.

SG: Why did you decide to produce this work as a book, did you consider producing an exhibition?

NT/RH: Interesting question, because we’re so happy with the magazine as an independent space, outside of the “white cube”. We like books, you can take them with you, open them when you feel like it, and their distribution is relatively simple and affordable. But we have been thinking for some time now

about alternative ways to develop our research other than through print publishing. We like publishing, so we will keep doing this, but expanding into space would be another experience and change the role of the publication. This could be interesting; in our case it will not be a “catalogue”, it will be an independent object.

We had a plan to, in addition to *Art in the Age of Berlusconi*; to make a huge structure built up of ‘an institute of contemporary art in Italy’. A large scale model of independent spaces and collectives, all pasted together into one building, to show that there is an other important structure of independent spaces. There are many art worlds, not just “the” art world.

This structure, or sub culture, is what we are very interested in: we talk about artist-run, curator-led, off-off, alternative, independent, no-budget, low-budget, high-budget, self-funded, non-profit, private foundation, discursive space, project space, art spaces, etc.

What all these spaces have in common is that they support experimentation, research, production and intellectual debate. Without these private initiatives (and some galleries belong to this group too) there would be no contemporary art scene in Italy.

The reason we want to repeatedly show the independent spaces is that they are a fundamental alternative to the growing dominance of the art market. The problem is that the (art) market has become the criterion by which works of art are judged. We are against that. The Venice Biennale should not be an art fair.

SG: Do you see your role as being like the curator, by researching various elements and practices and assembling them together?

NT/RH: Yes we see what you are aiming at. There is a resemblance with how curators work. It is not really important for us. As artists we have the freedom to occupy different fields. On the other hand artists have always been doing research in and through art. Not long ago a good friend asked us when we were going to curate our first show, because he had the impression that would be a natural step to make, and because after almost 9 years of collaborating with other artists our network is really big.

You could say our art practice is out in the “expanded field” of art. It is not always easy. There are still many people who have very conservative ideas about what art is and what it is not, and how it should look. Fucking Good Art could be understood with historical references to the 1970s, the tradition of text works and artists’ publications and magazines.

SG: I was struck by many of your interviewees’ comments on the poor quality of art education currently in Italy; yet some of these people who are lecturers, artists, curators and critics came across as having high levels of critical analysis and original points of view. Professor Concetto Pozzato, a retired Professor of art from Bologna Academy of Art states, “A great teacher teaches what he doesn’t know” What are your opinions of the art education in Italy and how does it compare to that of Holland?

NT/RH: We cannot have any judgment or claim any knowledge of art education in Italy, we can only tell you about the opinions of the people we spoke to from the art field regarding the art schools.

What we did find interesting is that we met a lot of artists that had other backgrounds; they studied sociology or medicine, or archaeology, or architecture, but never studied at an art academy. This is actually quite an interesting phenomenon. We know of two friends who are academics and recently decided to become artists because in their own field there is no work in the first place, and if they find work, they experience a lack of creative space in their fields. It’s interesting also that there are people who feel the need to start schools due to a perceived lack of good education. In Italy the lack they describe seems to be mainly about a connection to the art field. People say it is out-dated, unconnected and not realistic about the art world today.

In Italy there are also private institutions with a different approach to art education. One of the most well known is Cittadellarte Fondazione Pistoletto, but also Young Curators Residency Project at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Spinola Banna in Turin, and Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Como to name a few. People now start private art courses, like summer schools. Also in Berlin Auto-center has for the second year planned a summer course. The students, who might or might not have studied art, get a complementary education.

SG: Having just visited the Milan Art Fair (2013) do you think that a public institution for contemporary art in Milan would be able to compete, and to offer the same vibrancy, vitality and energy of what is currently on offer through the non-public sector?

NT/RH: Perhaps the fact you find this vitality and energy around the art fair rather than in the public institutions is just an indicator of where the power and the money are concentrated at the moment. In your question you differentiate between public and non-public. We noticed that in some countries people make a division between profit and non-profit, in others between institutions and independents, in Italy people differentiate between private and state, with the knowledge that the marriage between state and big business is quite clear. Talking about art spaces you could also divide between big budget and small budget. An art foundation of a fashion company for instance can be non-profit but with a huge budget.

Anthropologist David Graeber in his book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* argues that the dichotomy between state and market is a false one, and that states created markets. We also confuse the notions 'public' and 'state', but it's not so clear anymore if state institutions represent the public realm. In Italy it seems they are not perceived like that. In Italy many 'public' institutions have no budget; and we are told there is a big lack of cooperation and trust between the institutions, private initiatives and private individuals.

At our presentation at the ZHdK we showed a short video made in PAN – Palazzo Arti Napoli. PAN was set up about 5 years prior with a big budget and high expectations, but the money has been pulled out due to cutbacks and politics. Curator Olga Scotto di Vettimo was now running PAN with no funding because they were in between elections.¹

It's interesting that in Italy some people in the arts argue that they have to claim back the public institutions instead of working in their own private spaces. Others say to forget the institutions, but let's create a new structure to connect all these small private initiatives!

In our book there is a list, compiled together with all the partners, of approximately 135 initiatives or aesthetic zones in the 7 territories we visited, but there are certainly many more People do miracles

without a budget, exploring different ways of making and sharing art outside of the mainstream.

Notes

1 That was the case in Spring, 2011. Less is known about the current situation especially the increasing economic and political crisis.

Captions

1 Pile of transcripts, test-versions and dummies for 'Art in the Age of Berlusconi'.

2 Post-print handwork; a stamp on the side, the poster ("Genealogy of Damnatio Memoriae Italy 1947–1993", artist contribution by Roman artist duo Goldiechiari) folded and glued in, and the questionnaire for Napoli artist Ciro Vitale inserted.

3 'A note on the English', a contribution by translator and novelist Vincenzo Latronico

*Dutch artists, editors and non-academic free-style researchers Rob Hamelijnck and Nienke Terpsma are best known as editors of Fucking Good Art, founded in December 2003. They are based in the Metropolitan area Randstad (Rotterdam), and Berlin. **Fucking Good Art** is a travelling artists' magazine or editorial project for research in-and-through art, both on paper and online. The paper edition ranges from an A3 pamphlet to publications in book format. In addition, Fucking Good Art makes web radio broadcasts, and video works. We are interested in: oral history, ethnography, documentary film, new modes of investigative art and journalism, counter- and sub cultures, self-organisation and DIY strategies, art and resistance, and anarchism. We have a participatory strategy and are by nature highly sensitive to the context we are in.*

In the past, the artists settled for shorter or longer periods in, among other places, Munich, Berlin, Dresden, Copenhagen, Riga, Basel, Zurich, São Paulo, the Harbor of Rotterdam, Tbilisi, and recently in Geneva (Feb-May 2013) to make editions of Fucking Good Art on the basis of the local context and in a constantly changing collective of artists, curators, makers and thinkers.



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