

Ways to Spaces or How to Create a Personal Utopia

A Research to use Utopia
as Method to facilitate a
Situation

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Introduction

This thesis titled *Ways to Spaces or How to Create a Personal Utopia* is my attempt to sketch the sphere, the space or the utopia I want to work in. The title already gives a hint in different directions. Firstly *Ways to Space*, describing a space as a process that is very fragile and fugitive, a space created with someone's thoughts and presence. Secondly *How to Create a Personal Utopia* which consists of two terms - maybe very contrary to each other – *Personal*, being very self-centred, *Utopia* as a claim to change societal structures. The terms are connected with the verb *Create* which means “evolve from one's own thought or imagination, as a work of art or an invention”¹.

Thus this paper aims to look at the idea of a utopian space from different angles and to picture the search for my position as an artist, a designer², a weaver, a woman, a maker, a creator, a human.

To approach this personal subject I chose to interview people whose work I admire and, in addition, to review literature about people working in the field of socially engaged art, art as an experience, and art as utopian idea. In the following I will look at these different working methods and aims and also at my own work to become more conscious about my own position.

This paper touches the following subjects: value, pricing, use, exchange, ownership, funding, creativity as capital, power relations, bottom up approaches, real effect, status, sphere, utopia, life as Gesamtkunstwerk. I hope to offer an open structure for myself as well as for others with regard to the use of every small step towards a utopian direction.

Imagining a Space

I remember when I was a teenager, I was asked in which working situation I would see myself later, in terms of being my own boss, working in a team, being an employee, having flexible or fixed working times and so forth. I did not know how to answer this question.

I pictured myself rather in a certain space than in a profession. This space would have the features of a shop or a cafe, meaning it would be on the ground floor, with big windows and an inviting interior, but at the same time it would be a workshop where things were made. People come in and have a look, maybe have a cup of coffee or sit and read a book – it would be like my living room, yet open to the public.

- 1 Dictionary.com, 'The Definition Of Create', 2015 <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/create>> [accessed 23 March 2015].
- 2 In the following I will use the term artist and not designer because I refer to mental frameworks, which I place in the context of art. In fact it is about my position and not about a name for a profession.

I really
NEED...

The idea of a space also relates to a mental location. A friend of mine once mentioned, “maybe you are the space”. It is thus possible that it is only an immaterial space I search for, the space I create with my presence, acting and building up relationships, and my worldview. Probably the idea of a physical space serves to visualize the value of the immaterial space I want to work in.

Who am I to Make Things?

Some time ago my classmate from the Textile Department and friend Anastasia Starostenko and I decided to create things together as a duo called Bannanas. We were both enthusiastic about making new stuff, but critical at the same time: Who are we to make things? Which effect do we aim to achieve with the things we make? With today’s overproduction we are surrounded by an enormous amount of impersonal objects that carry no or very little personal value for their owners. What can we make in a world of plenty, which is really needed, which is not just a waste of resources? How to define the (exchange) value of what we make? This value is certainly always connected to a need.

The *I really need* Project

We only wanted to make something if someone asked for it – and needed it. These thoughts led us to the question: What do we actually really need? This is a philosophical question. It touches the reason of our existence and is one of the most personal questions one could ask. By asking this question, which sounds superficial at first glance, we ended up having quite deep conversations which led us into personal relations. Based on taste and interest we made unique objects for people we got to know. Instead of asking a price for our work we asked people to think of a reward, for example something they were good at or they thought would be valuable to us.

One of these projects was a curtain for Julien Haffmans, a professional cooperation advisor. I made this personal object for her, based on visual preferences and the process of getting to know each other. The work was not just the object but the whole process of building up a relationship with her, creating value by having meaningful conversations, exchanging knowledge, and skills. Haffmans is an advisor for self-organisation. She stimulates co-operations concerned with the transition to sustainability, community, and circular economy. In exchange for the curtain, we discussed starting initiatives which generate paid jobs in one’s field of interest, how freelancers can make their living, and how different economies work.



Through these talks I was able to reflect upon what bottom-up decision-making means and how everyone can be incorporated in formulating a common goal as a group. I realized everyone can contribute something to the working process; competition is a waste of manpower when 99 percent of the people who are ambitious to do something are sorted out. Furthermore I noticed a significant change in myself when realizing that my opinion was taken into account in the decision-making process.

As a result of our conversations a team of four people, Haffmans, Maarten van Schie, environmental philosopher, and Renee Kool, visual artist, and I, organized talks for the neighbourhood Nieuw Sloten in Amsterdam. We wanted to offer a platform to talk about things “that really matter” and for people to be heard.

The experience to make a work without asking a price but a personal reward from someone was enlightening to me. I created new values by upvaluing human relationships. I progressed in my process of discovering the field I wanted to work in as well as the role I see myself in. It is about thinking of alternative possibilities, which are not based on maximization of individual profits, but rather on human connections and cherishing the presence of people you are connected with. I can thus be seen as a facilitator for social interaction rather than a mere producer of monetary goods.

Social Economies and Rules

Due to my experience with service exchange based payment I dove into the subject of social, gift, and exchange economy and how we price things and with which parameters we look at supply and demand, time, trend, use value, etc. During this period I made a series of works titled *The World is not An Island* (2013) concerning different perceptions of value. One was a book about the value of making, telling two stores in drawings and text. It compares two pieces of textile: Pano, the traditional hand woven textile of Cap Verde, and a t-shirt which is made in mass production. Both textiles went through many hands and travelled around the world, yet their value is perceived very differently. The book questions how we give economical, social and personal value.

Furthermore I experimented with interfering in the process of giving value by connecting objects to relationships and memories. One example is my work *The Melancholic Blouse* (2013), a photograph which comes with the text: “An old silk blouse, bought in the 1970s by my mother, worn by me until I could not fit in it anymore, given to my dearest friend who is wearing it with honour.”

Due to my interference, the form of selling or giving value becomes part of the artwork, the relation between artist and artwork, artist and non-artist, art object and price, plays a big role. Creating circumstances or frames in which my work is seen and valued, I translated the capitalistic system into an alternative method that matches my ideals of a social reality. Through the creation of personal



connections that are based on mutual understanding and shared moments, I contribute to a society that evaluates human relations and personal experience before profit. Exploring different economies gives me the feeling of being able to change something and to implement my utopian ideas. Through constant interaction with other people, I pass on my ideas to let them become reality.

Art - Everyday Life

Researching art practices which are based on the idea of a moment being an artwork I read about the project *wasssa* by *dilettantin produktionsbüro*, an art collective from Bremen, Germany whose material is the “ordinary” of everyday life. *Dreijahre* was a restaurant and an artwork: Every person eating there, having conversations, asking for where the artwork was, became part of the work, no matter if one were conscious about it or not.³ People paid a price for their food which was regulated by the gastronomical free market, yet you experienced an artwork, a unique moment, a conversation. The perception of the artwork was not influenced by putting a price on the artwork. They were able to run *dreijahre* independently without asking for entrance fees or subsidies. *Dreijahre* reminded me of the vague picture I had of the space I wanted to work in – a space that could also exist outside of the art market. It fascinated me that the conversation visitors had become an artwork.

If a conversation or a moment is seen as an artwork, it is because the artist uses his authority to call it art, although it needs to be socially agreed what art is. If one single person asserts something is art, it has no social meaning. This process is comparable to Wittgenstein’s statement “The meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁴

Thus through social agreement the word art and its sense become meaningful, not through only one person claiming it. Hence something can only be art if it is verified by the majority and the authorities in the field.

However it has always been inherent in art to question the former meaning of art. Therefore to analyse and criticise the prevailing opinion about art being based on a top-down verification of what art is, can be seen as part of the process in art – and therefore art. To claim a conversation is an artwork means questioning who is defining what art is and calling upon the processuality and personal aspect of art and its transience.

3 Anneli Käsmayr and others, *No ART Around* (Berlin: The Green Box, 2012).

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p 20.



Criticism on Social Economy

Researching moment-based and participatory art, as well as talking to Julien Haffmans about bottom-up group work and forming initiatives, made me realize the relevance of the circumstances one works in, and that one has an influence on the circumstances.

I stopped making objects, and I created the perfect surrounding or working circumstances as the work itself. I made works by talking to people, making moments in which we together created a shift in our thoughts. Where, when, and for whom is something art? Art became a method of thinking, thinking thoughts that have not been thought before. I was especially interested in creating these moments outside of the “art frame”.

Being aware of my responsibility, setting up rules such as controlling the context in which my work would end up, turned into a crisis about making work. I was only dealing with the question of how to control the circumstances in which people would perceive my work. Incorporating Social Economy means I cannot realize a project if I know that it will be sponsored by an organization whose values I do not support. I came to a point where I was only setting up rules for myself and by doing so I blocked my creative process. If I restrict myself to the rule to only exchange my work without the inclusion of money, how can I pay my rent? If I am only allowed to make work if someone asks me, where is my creative freedom? How about the things I want to visualize for myself? What if I do not connect with the person who asks for a work? Thinking about rules and the role they play in my work, I realized I created the rules to protect myself from being just a small cogwheel in a huge machine; to be able to make my living without selling my dreams.

Socially Agreed Rituals

Turning the half-year crisis into something productive I experimented with the frameworks used to authorize art. I played with being “in-” and “outside” of the art frame in my work *The Wall Project* (2014), a research about my fascination of surfaces such as house walls, stones and pedestrian paths. I entered them on several levels and with different mediums: I took photographs of surfaces I found interesting, I reproduced the feeling they gave me in textile, I made prints of the walls and presented them to the inhabitants of the house as artworks and started conversations about the context in which something is perceived as art. The conversation with the person is the main part of the project. The introduction of the publication is worth being cited in the following:

What do we consider to be worth looking at? In art the socially constructed tradition is a key factor for the understanding of a work. When we enter



the so-called white cube or any other so declared art space we expect the things we find there to be art. If we are on the street, looking at the facade of a house or the pedestrian path we do not expect to see art, but could we have an “art experience” with a wall? What happens if these different social spheres get tangled? Is it possible to break through the habit of how we perceive and classify our surrounding? Does such an intervention change the way we look at our everyday surrounding? Can I declare someone’s wall an art piece? How can I transport this information? Is art about the context or about a way of thinking? By playing with the displacement of private space as well as art space, the socially constructed art world gets altered. Phenomenologically speaking art in private space is perceived differently than in a public art space.

I, declaring myself being an artist, thus what I am doing being an artwork, penetrate a private area, declaring it an artwork or an art space. I, as an actuality, a being, have an impact on the entity of the process of the socially constructed art world. An ontological process is taking place; the relation between thoughtful humans and constructed reality is changing.⁵

What I wanted to express in *The Wall Project* is that art is not (just) about man-made objects, it is about a socially agreed ritual. If we enter a museum, we have a certain expectation. We expect the things we find in the museum to enlighten us, to make our view broader – we expect to see art.

We were socialized into the notion that a visit in a museum is part of cultivated society.⁶ We look at paintings and sculptures which are presented in front of the white museum wall, with it comes a text that gives us a hint about its meaning, we take a step back, continue our walk, drink a coffee in the museum’s cafe before leaving. We create value. The presentation creates the value together with the viewer. Buying the ticket at the entrance, spending time in the museum, giving devotion to the work, all that creates a social and cultural value, but not necessarily understanding or relevance for the individual.

Frameworks to Communicate Value

Dealing with the representational frame in art I wanted to find out more about its development within the art world. Art historian and philosopher Hans Zitko discusses the extent to which framing is responsible for what we perceive as art. He says the perception plays a huge role in the art world and he compares it to the host in the Catholic Church which becomes the Eucharist through the collective belief.⁷

5 Hannah Kindler, *The Wall Project* (Amsterdam: private property Hannah Kindler, 2014).

6 John A. Clausen, *Socialization And Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968).

7 Hans Zitko, *Kunstwelt – Mediale und systemische Konstellationen* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2012) p. 10.



But there is another aspect he mentions which I did not consider in *The Wall Project*, the medium of exchange the art market is subjected to: money. It goes beyond being an object of exchange, as it seems to create a compatibility between objects⁸ and it starts to change the meaning of an artwork.

I expressed the relation between a monetary framework and the value it creates in the project *An Ode to Usage Surfaces – An Imprint of Value* (2012). Decorating expensive silk textiles by using everyday surfaces such as metal, wood and stone I gave value to these every day surfaces. This work is presented using the value system of different frameworks: as fashion item - as a scarf on a hanger - and as an artwork in front of a white wall. The project questions the relationship between the price and the way people perceive the work.

The content of the work deals with frameworks creating value; but in which framework should the work be presented? To play with the relationship between the price and the way people perceive the work, I labelled the work with two different price tags: as a scarf it costs 20 Euros, and as an artwork 20.000 Euros. The work deals with the conceptualisation of value on several levels: in the concept of the print and in the way it is presented.

Money, Politics and Facade Art

The relationship between money and art seems to be an inseparable one which dates back a very long time. It can be revealed if we look at the development of the art market in the Middle Ages, Zitko argues. In this period free trade of art or rather craft objects, grew simultaneously with a new perspective, a more reflective way of perceiving these objects.

Before, art objects were exclusively made for certain clients, mainly the church or royals. Zitko concludes that until today art is suffering from a heritage of aristocratic attitude to ignore monetary economy.⁹

Filmmaker and visual artist Hito Steyerl even states contemporary art is to be placed in “the neoliberal thicket of things”¹⁰. She talks about political art in a rather unusual way, she suggests to look at “the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does – not what it shows.”¹¹. She thus observes the politics the art world is using and calls it “the field for political art”. In my idea this is an enlightening way of looking at the art world, as political art mainly means the content of the work and not the political format. She furthermore claims “If contemporary art is the answer, the question is: How can capitalism be made more beautiful?”¹².

8 Zitko, p. 15.

9 Zitko, p. 43.

10 Hito Steyerl, ‘Politics Of Art: Contemporary Art And The Translation To Postdemocracy’, *e-flux journal. Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*, 2011, 30-39 (p. 31).

11 Steyerl, p. 31.

12 Steyerl, p. 31.

Another astonishing perspective on the role of art within the political field is expressed in an interview with Marcin Sliwa, published in *“Forget Fear”*, the accompanying book of the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. Sliwa is an extraordinary official, responsible for educational projects in the art and culture sector in Mazovia, a region in mid-north-eastern Poland. He claims most of the public incentives are used for what he calls façade culture, meaning most of the cultural programs are made according to the demands of high culture, mainly declared by the cultural capitals. This gets simply implemented in smaller cities without making any connection between the artworks and the local public. Sliwa concludes this method would lead us to a pseudo culture in which culture is used as a political façade.¹³ Sliwa furthermore suggests to work with subjects people are dealing with in their (sub)culture. He makes an example by describing a project where he worked with people who have a rich car tuning and racing tradition.¹⁴ By doing so he questions what culture or high culture is and what we can use it for.

Considering myself a “maker of culture” I want to be conscious about why, for which group and which sort of “culture” I produce.

To use the words of Steyerl again, there is a strong connection between “male-genius-artist behaviour” and politics: “the traditional conception of the artist’s role corresponds all too well with the self-image of *wannabe* autocrats, who see government potentially – and dangerously - as an art form.”¹⁵ It seems the political sector uses the art world for its reputation and to form its identity. How else could phenomena such as art biennales be explained, where artworks of an individual are used for nation branding. Furthermore, instead of being paid, artists often have to pay to exhibit their work.

Dealing with the complex topics of art and its intertwined connection to political structures I wondered if and how I, as an individual, could handle it. How to use my sphere of influence to translate capitalistic systems into an alternative way that matches my idea of a social reality?

Emancipate and Activate

Is it time to emancipate art from the frame of the art market and the relation to politics? Is that possible? In my opinion this question is closely connected to the role of art in society. My idea of the role of an artist – or rather of myself being an artist – is someone who raises relevant questions and takes on responsibility, thus realises what the consequences of a work are.

It is only plausible to present a work that questions the socially constructed meaning of value not just within an ordinary art frame but within a framework that

13 Artur Zmijewski and Joanna Warsza, *Forget Fear* (Köln: König, 2012), p. 27.

14 Zmijewski and Warsza, p. 26.

15 Steyerl, p. 32.

questions its own socially constructed value as well. In my opinion artists - and any other persons - must be held responsible for their actions and make use of their whole sphere of influence in a way they assume to be positive.

The Meaning of Labour

This behaviour is not connected to being an artist at all, as a matter of fact I feel more connected to people who have different professions but share the same visions for example a guerilla gardener or the *Fairphone* company. It is more about the conviction we share than about identical professions.

Nowadays being an artist is not necessarily connected to a certain activity anyways, as one can use different sorts of labour to make art – it is the idea one pursues behind the action that makes it an artwork. The more interesting question around the subject of labour and art is how the function and the production are connected in the meaning of an artwork. In the moment the artist is leaving her/his studio to become the facilitator of the artwork rather than the distant commander, the rules and the aesthetics in the assumption of art change. If improvisation and the inclusion of the input of all the participants is part of the developing process, the result will never be a Michelangelo sculpture – meaning a masterpiece created by one virtuoso. Dealing with a society of many, a different logic needs to be incorporated. Conclusiveness and control over the process no longer exists, as this is a feature of discipline outgoing from a single person leading the others.

A development in the direction of self-organisation of art processes would furthermore mean a constant change of the artist's position up to the point that s/he becomes obsolete.

Good examples for the connection between different professional domains are the earlier mentioned *dilettantin produktionsbüro*, or Riek Sijbring, who is an artist and also a nurse. In her artwork as well as in her work as a nurse, it is Sijbring's intention to meet her dialog partner on eye level. It is not about artist versus viewer or nurse versus patient, but about the meeting of two human beings. As artist she is part of the critical trio *De Geuzen*, making participatory, socially engaged and feminist works, such as *Living room lectures* about female icons¹⁶ or *The Temporary Archive of Shared Interests*¹⁷ reflecting the channelling of information and where people can copy books they like. Both artists are following an attitude or paradigm and they express it through different activities more or less obviously related to art. Another dimension of their working method I find inspiring is the interaction, the actual impact it has. It exists on two levels: an artistic and a “functional” one.

16 De Geuzen, 'Female Icons » Archived Lecture', Geuzen.org, 2015 <http://www.geuzen.org/female_icons/?cat=242> [accessed 2 February 2015].

17 De Geuzen, 'TEMPORARY ARCHIVE', Geuzen.org, 2015 <<http://www.geuzen.org/current/DIY/temparch.html>> [accessed 2 February 2015].

In- and Outside the Art Frame

To further clarify the two levels I talk about, I want to give another example: the *Fallen Fruit - Public Fruit Jam project* by artists David Burns, Mathias Viegner and Austin Young from 2006. They encouraged people from the neighbourhood to pick fruit from trees growing on land which did not have a clearly declared ownership and make it into jam. The project deals with “a reconsideration of public and private land use, as well as relations between those who have resources and those who do not”¹⁸, but at the same time they produce jam out of fruit which would otherwise rot. Neighbours who had not met before swapped jams and made contact.

The idea of a work existing at the same time in- and outside the art frame is appealing to me also in terms of the earlier mentioned question about the price of an artwork. If the work is two things at the same time (for example an artwork and a usage object) then an indication for a price can be sought outside of the immaterial and transcendental art value. Furthermore there is something pleasing about seeing a direct and materializing influence of my work. In that sense one could say my way of working is related to “activism”. Yet I do not mean it in the sense of simply relating to one specific problem for which a solution is asked. Activism is often very closely connected to one specific political agenda and thus becomes quickly ideological. Rather I refer to activism in the sense in which philosopher and art critic Boris Groys discusses it in his recently published article called *On Art Activism*. He describes a new phenomenon in the art world:

“Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art - not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself. (...) Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists.”¹⁹

I can identify with this definition as it is my intention to effectively change something but at the same time not to want to propagandise a political opinion. Groys further argues that

“In our society, art is traditionally seen as useless. So it seems that this quasi-ontological uselessness infects art activism and dooms it to failure. (...) The critique of art as useless and therefore morally and politically bad is not a new one. In the past, this critique compelled many artists to abandon art altogether—and to start to practice something more useful, something morally and politically correct. However, contemporary art activism does not rush to abandon art but, rather, tries to make art itself useful. This is a historically new position”²⁰

18 Nato Thompson, *Living As Form* (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012), p.150.

19 Boris Groys, *On Art Activism* | E-Flux, E-flux.com, 2014 <http://e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/#_ftn3> [accessed 26 January 2015].

20 Groys, <http://e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/#_ftn3> [accessed 26 January 2015].

I do not know whether I could count myself as part of this new movement or not but I seek use of my work also outside of the art frame. However, in contemporary art there seems to be a contradictory and insolvable dissent between art and practical use; use might take away the sublimeness of an artwork. Nevertheless or even for this very reason I do have the urge to combine them.

Art, Activism Politics Symbolism, Real Effect

Art historian and critic Claire Bishop also addresses the phenomenon of art activism or “social practise” as she calls it.²¹ To allude the existing vagueness around art related to this term, she sums up a row of words which could all be used in this context: Socially engaged art, community based art, experimental communities, dialogical art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art, and useful art. To identify these types of artworks she stresses that they are often closely related to an ongoing live activity, rather than production of objects. She mentions the slogan: “I don’t make things, I make things happen.”²²

Although I can relate to this statement and Groys definition, art activism still sounds general. It stays unclear what is made to happen, and how, and what kind of change is proclaimed. In the further course Bishop brings up this issue by pointing out that most of these “social practice” related artists stay “arty” and symbolic as their work is consciousness-raising, however, not effectively changing the circumstances. Artur Zmijewski presented a similar notion in the introduction of the earlier mentioned book *Forget Fear* by discussing art causing real change.²³

As I see parallels to my idea of *Creating a Personal Utopia*, I would like to look at the “symbolic factor” and “real change” using two works which both have a political implication, or a tendency to cause visible change. The first is *New World Summit* by artist Jonas Staal. He organises ‘alternative parliaments’ hosting organizations that currently find themselves excluded from democracy, for example by means of so-called internationally designated terrorist lists”.²⁴

21 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells - Participatory Art And Political Spectatorship*, 1st edn (London, New York: Verso, 2012), pp. <http://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/bishop-claire-artificial-hells-participatory-art-and-politics-spectatorship.pdf> <<http://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/bishop-claire-artificial-hells-participatory-art-and-politics-spectatorship.pdf>> [accessed 7 January 2015].

22 Claire Bishop, ‘Claire Bishop’s “Participation And Spectacle: Where Are We Now?,” Presented As Part Of Living As Form’, Creative Times via Vimeo, 2011 <<http://vimeo.com/24193060>> [accessed 26 March 2015].

23 Zmijewski and Warsza, p. 10.

24 New World Summit, ‘New World Summit - Leiden - New World Summit’, 2015 <<http://newworldsummit.eu/news/invitationleiden/>> [accessed 6 January 2015].



Using the art or theatre space to picture his artistic statement, he declares the whole political arena a sphere of staging. The people discussing or “performing” in his summits become objects of their own enactment. Staal questions the boundaries of democracy by operating with persons who are stateless and therefore without right. It is an appealing idea to use the “safe” field of art to talk about political taboo subjects yet it can quickly become a circus where all the speakers (mis)use the possibility to propagandise their extremist ideas. Staal situates a political discussion in the art world and by doing so one could argue it has no influence on existing political structures, it is rather building an alternative structure – and therefore symbolic. Politics within the field of art could be interpreted as harmless and one could even say such an artwork loses its political meaning. Yet real political summits take place and politically oppressed people talk in public. The caused change happens on a very subtle level, which involves awareness and rethinking of complex matters as democracy.

The second example is *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens. In his documentary film he stresses that one of the most beneficial export products of Africa are pictures about their poorness, and the people who benefit the most from it are western people documenting it. Therefore Martens went to Congo to teach people how to take professional pictures of their own misery which they can sell in order to profit from their poorness.²⁵ In contrast to Staal, Martens shows the Congolese people a direct change in how to make their living. Martens project works outside the framework of art whereas the *New World Summit* choses consciously not to cross the boarders of the exhibitional framework. But in both cases, it is rather a balancing act to not tap into the “developing aid project” for minority groups if one wants to make a socially engaged artwork. Generally speaking it is quite questionable how to measure the “real effect” of an artwork. Yet personally speaking I have the urge to create work which can exist outside of the art frame as well – on a level of understanding and on an economical level. Furthermore I want to measure some sort of “effect” which is why I intend to be personally involved in my work and its display.

Money and Funding

With regard to artworks which are moving in- and outside the framework of art, it becomes much more meaningful to the work itself to be conscious about its funding. This aspect relates to my aforementioned notion about questioning the framework in which a critical work is presented. Bishop points out, even though artists who move in- and outside the art frame find their work to be positioned outside of the conventional art world terminology and systems of valorisation, they nevertheless find for the main part reception and funding in the art world.²⁶

25 Renzo Martens, ‘IDFA 2008 | Interview | Renzo Martens’, YouTube, 2009 <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=yTTJHT-8nAc>> [accessed 26 March 2015].

26 Claire Bishop, ‘Claire Bishop’s “Participation And Spectacle: Where Are We Now?” Presented As Part Of Living As Form’, Creative Times via Vimeo, 2011 <<http://vimeo.com/24193060>> [accessed 26 March 2015].

Here as well, *New World Summit* could be an example as its major sponsors come from the arts and politics.²⁷ Staal once said in a lecture that he is aware of the fact that he is dependent on sponsors and their ideals, but he tries to have as many as possible in order to lessen their influence. But what if that is not enough? Can I make my living without being instrumentalised? Will my attempt to work outside of the art frame fail? Is it acceptable to use money from funds to create something that criticises the institution? Most of the money in the art sector is in some complex way connected to taxes, meaning artists themselves pay for it. Should they not make use of the money, which in a way is democratic money? On the other hand, it is not decided according to democratic processes who gets the money from these funds and as soon as one receives money from an agency it is always connected to a more or less obvious obligation. Do I have to use all these struggles in my work and make them visible? Is the explicit demonstration of the economical side (part of) the work?

Joseph Beuys and Economy

Talking about economy and socially engaged art it is necessary to mention Joseph Beuys the father of the “social sculpture” who started to mix up the social art space by declaring politics as being art, and everyone who takes part in forming society as being an artist.

“Our culture is not characterized by culture, our culture is entirely characterized by economic powers. This would be acceptable if one would apply the proper notion of economic activity. There needs to be a different understanding of economy. I have always tried to explain why life has to do with art: It is only through art that a new notion of economy can be created, in the sense of human needs, not in the sense of consumption, politics and property, but in the sense of the production of spiritual goods. The question of what should be produced and how one should produce, these are all cultural considerations if one thinks it through, therefore these are spiritual considerations; this means that culture pervades life in all its details and that the products (of these spiritual considerations) form the definite notion of CAPITAL.”²⁸

27 New World Summit, ‘Organization - New World Summit’, 2015 <<http://newworldsummit.eu/organization/>> [accessed 7 January 2015].

28 Klaus Staeck and Gerhard Steidl, *Joseph Beuys. Das Wirtschaftsprinzip* (Heidelberg: Edition Staeck, 1989), p. 5 (own translation, HK) „Unsere Kultur ist nicht geprägt von der Kultur, unsere Kultur ist ganz geprägt von den Wirtschaftskräften. Da wäre gar nichts gegen einzuwenden, wenn man den richtigen Begriff des Wirtschaftens ins Auge fassen würde. Man muß eine andere Vorstellung von Wirtschaft bekommen. Warum das Leben mit Kunst zu tun hat, habe ich immer versucht darzulegen: daß nur aus der Kunst heraus ein neuer Wirtschaftsbegriff sich formieren kann, im Sinne menschlichen Bedarfs, nicht im Sinne von Verzehr und Konsum, Politik und Eigentum, sondern vor allen Dingen im Sinne der Herstellung spiritueller Güter. Die Frage, was soll produziert werden, wie soll produziert werden, das sind alles kulturelle Überlegungen, wenn man es durchdenkt, also geistige Überlegungen, das heißt, die Kultur durchfließt das ganze Leben bis in jede Einzelheit und in ihre Produkte sind der konkrete Begriff von KAPITAL.“

Beuys is cited here not because his statement is explicitly and sharply formulated – there are a lot of economists who elaborated more precisely on this matter. His thoughts are not even up to date. It is because he addresses these questions as an icon moving within the art world. He is used here because he has status – and therefore “social capital”²⁹.

Beuys had a very conscious attitude towards the connection between his works and money: he once took part in a demonstration criticising the amount of the purchasing of his work to a museum. The question of economical value is central to his work as well. His installation *Wirtschaftswerte (Economic Values)* consists of ready-made's such as products from the former DDR³⁰ presented on shelves, elements from his own works, artworks and descriptions of the museum he exhibited in, and other conventions of the art world such as signatures, all arranged with a care and a certain implicitness. Hoet and De Baere describe in their article about Beuys exhibition *Wirtschaftswerte* his acting as “doing magic”³¹. The question of valuation is raised. The art space is no longer the white cube; the people themselves become the artwork. The mix of spheres opens up space for questions for instance about the tradition of art.³² It seems Beuys was able to use this artistic “magic” in everything he was touching:

“In his studio in Düsseldorf he prepared meals as naturally as he created works of art.”³³

“With the image of the male cook in the household kitchen Beuys creates what he himself calls a “social sculpture”. He sees the sculptural, creative but equally productive work of transforming natural forces into human resources of energy as an “anthropological” creativity, which turns every person active in this manner into a self-determined freely creating person with an elementary lifestyle.”³⁴

Beuys’ social sculpture includes all processes of life, even preparing food becomes part of his worldview.

Creativity and Education

Within his expanded concept of art (*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*) economy extends into the cultural sector, meaning also education becomes part of his viewpoint. According to Beuys schools and universities cannot be seen outside of the economics as they are the ones who create commodities of

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms Of Capital*, 1st edn (New York: Greenwood, 2015) <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>> [accessed 7 January 2015].

30 Deutsche Demokratische Republik in english German Democratic Republic, former East Germany, existed from 1949-1990.

31 Staeck and Steidl, p. 13.

32 Dieter Neubert, Stephan von Borstel and Irina Rosentreter, *Die Unsichtbare Skulptur. Zum Erweiterten Kunstbegriff Von Joseph Beuys (Stuttgart, 1989)*.

33 Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys* (Milano: Charta, 1999), p. 20.

34 Ralf Beil, *Künstlerküche* (Köln: DuMont, 2002), p.224.



cognition skills and knowledge which furthermore is used to manufacture goods.³⁵ Consequently in 1973 Beuys founded the *Free International School for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research* where everyone could develop their individual creative talents. This creativity is used to transform and solve social issues.³⁶ Creativity thus becomes the new capital. The idea of the *Free International School for Creativity* was a utopian idea, a new social order as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, yet it effectively existed and had students who shared the vision, thus it was a real existing utopia.³⁷

Conversation as Form

The above described attitude of Beuys reminds me of talks I had with Julien about the conversation as form of self-education, self-reflexion, engaging with each other, as a form of networking and forming initiatives, as a form of bottom-up movement and social process, as a form of art and above all as personal experiences in which one is seen and heard as part of a group. The conversation can be seen as a small-scale experiment for processes within society. Critical conversation or more precisely Socratic dialogue can work as a pedagogic utensil and as a devise for democratic discourse.

Also Professor of visual culture, writer and curator Irit Rogoff imagines free education as “(...)alternative organizational mode, not of information, of formal knowledges and their marketing, but as a form of coming together not predetermined by outcomes but by directions.” There is a great potential in “education”, not in the classical “top-down” sense but rather meaning a dialogue between peers. The conversation or interaction as a format was of big interest for me, yet it stayed abstract. Therefore I decided to interview some artists whose work was related to this matter.

Alienation and self-reflection

Beuys method of using conversation, preparing and eating food as an indispensable part of the work is one I can recognize from seeing *dilettantin produktionsbüro* at work. I visited them during their project *SLOE – Tu dir*

35 Werner Krüger, 'Joseph Beuys - Jeder Mensch Ist Ein Künstler (Portrait 1979)', *YouTube*, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjkHYQnxZTE&src_vid=wPDI50iDsd0&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_891354> [accessed 18 January 2015].

36 Joseph Beuys and Heinrich Böll, 'Manifesto On The Foundation Of The Free International School For Creativity And Interdisciplinary Research', *Sites.google.com*, 1973 <<https://sites.google.com/site/socialsculptureusa/freeinternationaluniversitymanifesto>> [accessed 18 January 2015].

37 Krüger, (Portrait 1979)*YouTube*.



Gutes, a food trailer which offers culinary experiences, a fashion edition and the consumption of art. “This created space between art and everyday life looks nothing like art. It is about perception, attention and sensuality; about communication, participation and enjoyment.”³⁸ In a personal interview *dilettantin produktionsbüro* emphasised the necessity of giving consciously provided clues for art. The sphere created by deliberately preparing food and thinking of every detail created a sphere which had a certain “magic”, as in a theatre play where all the props are attentively chosen, yet it does not seem to be staged. It is about acting with a particular carefulness, awareness and mindfulness. The difference is made because *dilettantin produktionsbüro* only plays the role of working in a field which is alien to them.

By doing so a constant modus of self-reflection is activated. This way of acting is comparable to British theatre and film director Peter Brook’s statement: “*I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.*”³⁹

I would like to add to this statement that this man watching can as well be the man walking himself if he is in a self-reflected state; as everyone is their own viewer at first. Furthermore I would say understanding an artwork means meeting, and reflecting upon oneself. Thus I wondered whether being at home sweeping my room would be considered to be an artwork if it is not for the purpose of cleaning but rather to view myself doing so.

Sphere or Magnet

A similar sphere as in the work of *dilettantin produktionsbüro* was tangible when I visited *Landhuis Oosterhouw* a semi exclusive public space hosted by artist Christiaan Klasema. The 19th century villa is still in its original state and is now used for different happenings around subjects such as gardening, cooking, literature and philosophy. Klasema says he finds the term artwork difficult because it is immediately linked to specific rules. He rather likes to leave it to the viewer to determine what it is. He himself describes his way of working as working towards an “ultimate design of living“. Over years he slowly approached different ways of living which were often closely connected to a conscious state of mind. “It is about going as far as possible in finding ultimacy.” he says. To give an example, Klasema dug a hole under a house but while digging he was not allowed to think or to have any intensions. When the hole was finished he lived in it for a while. Later in his life he also lived in a monastery where he learned a lot about liturgy, formal manners and rituals. These experiences have an influence on his work in *Landhuis Oosterhouw* where he among other subjects deals

38 Dilettantin.de, ‘Dilettantinproduktionsbüro’, 2015 <<http://www.dilettantin.de>> [accessed 5 February 2015]

39 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p 11.

with the 19th century etiquette, namely the idea of life as a contentious performance created by strictly set interior, clothes, and manners which form together one *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Other aspects of a monastery return, such as isolation and hospitality, focusing on receiving guests, yet in a precluding manner: one needs to be part of an unspoken “club of friends”, the guests are in some way preselected. Klasema’s (sub)conscious selection methods remind me of my friend’s comment that I, and the relations I have with people form the space – or sphere - I seek. Klasema told me the tense sphere of *Landhuis Oosterhouw* can be explained because it is for the main part an artificial or performed sphere – an invisible program the visitors follow. His work moves on the edge between living and performing. It is understandable on an art as well as on an everyday life level. Klasema creates a charismatic sphere, which works as a magnet for people.

Another magnet I experienced is *Wongema* established by Erik Wong, a graphic designer, connector, and my teacher. One could call it a project space for art and design, a hotel, a venue for meetings, a café and restaurant, a screening place and a lot more. Wong says he wants to create a platform for a diverse audience from the little village close to Groningen where it is situated as well as from further away. The interior of *Wongema* is very carefully composed, yet it has a relaxed nonchalant atmosphere. *Wongema* is a character, a role, not Wong himself, but part of him, he wants to develop this place into a very unique character. Asking Wong if he sees *Wongema* as artwork he answered it is rather a 3-D magazine and he is the editor.

All these space-related works succeed in creating a magnetic atmosphere. Without explaining to the visitor what the exact purpose or the “magic” of the locality is, one feels attracted to these places. They communicate a quality, sensibility, and openness for interaction. The consciences of movements, the objects, the interaction with others, in short, the way of living becomes a work, life becomes hyper real. The way I prepare coffee for my public, the energy I put into this action can become a greater gesture, to speak in terms of Josef Beuys, a social sculpture. There is a relationship between who I want to be as a human, as an artist, how I treat myself and others. and what values I have. In this sense life itself can work in a similar way as an artwork.

Art or Life

Can dealing with one’s life in a conscious and self-reflected way be defined as an artwork or to express it with the words of Klasema, as “ultimate design of living”? How do we perceive a work differently if it is declared as being art? If something is communicated as art, does it become less dangerous in case it has a political connotation, is the perception becoming more complex? Do people look closer and discover things they would not see if it

were not art? Are the demands for a project higher if it is art? Do I involve a different audience?

Personally, I play with this connotation and do not settle for one message but see how the perception and reaction changes. Is the space I want to create an artwork or a space for art, a space for an artist or rather a space for human interaction? This is probably an ongoing research I will undertake.

A Scale Model for Utopia

To me, more importantly than the terminology is rather that the space or sphere I create has a certain utopian character, meaning it can effectively shift something within my field of influence. Utopia in my idea does not necessarily have to be an absolute world view but can also be used in a scale model. Such an example is the online exhibition space *Probe*. It is a 1:4 scale model built of affordable material in the back of the studio of *Suze May Sho*, a collective which mainly organizes exhibitions. "It's a test lab"⁴⁰ yet with real impact: artworks of different artists are on display and thanks to funding, everyone working on *Probe* gets a wage which is, according to Jessica Helbach, member of *Suze May Sho* also scale 1:4. One of the reasons that *Suze May Sho* started *Probe* was the urge to have the complete decisive power of the place and to not be dealing with the technical and organizational conditions of a museum. To me *Probe* is a complex utopian idea acted out.

Utopian Projects

Following the idea of a small scale utopia, in collaboration with two fellow students Milena Naef and Jenella Kostova, I developed the project *Subject or Object Performance Research*. We were exploring how much we needed to do to make someone aware that he or she is part of something which is not the every day but something different - namely a performance act. Our goal was to connect with people in public circles who, without knowing beforehand, became the audience as well as the subject of observation. We started to follow people or looked at them very intensively to get them, as well as ourselves, into a conscious mode by breaking the comfort zone. It was our aim to experience the unpredictable reactions of the visitors. We intended to engage with people on an equal level. While discussing the repercussions of our performance we talked about the experience or the learning that we as performers go through, maybe more than the people we

40 Projectprobe.net, 'Probe', 2014 <<http://www.projectprobe.net/probe/about>> [accessed 9 December 2014].



perform for or with. We came across Berthold Brecht's *Lehrstück*⁴¹ in which he mainly insisted on the actors learning something, and the viewers only in a later stage.

In this project I experienced that a situation or a conversation can also have utopian aspects.

Another project following this line is a catalogue I made for an exhibition in the *Oude Kerk*, Amsterdam. The theme of this year's exhibition is "The Collection of the *Oude Kerk*" - which is actually only a bunch of old and broken objects the Church cannot discard because they belong to the old interior of the Church. I wondered: What are collections? Who is the collector? How do we communicate the value of the objects in the collection? How do we define the world we want to live in through objects? Collecting describes the systematic search, acquisition and storage of objects and information. Through the personality of the collector, the random objects become part of a story.

But in the case of the *Oude Kerk* it seems there is no collector in the classical sense, people working in the church collected objects which they found valuable from their personal point of view. The book I compiled is called *The Oude Kerk Catalogue* and displays these objects which are quite worthless in an historical sense yet I present them with descriptions as if they were unique items. I blend in true facts with invented stories for the description. Furthermore I will "perform value" by being present during the exhibition to sell the "official" *Oude Kerk Catalogue*. I will wear the official *Oude Kerk* employee outfit and I want to start conversations with the visitors about the objects and their value. It is my intention together with the visitors to discuss the way we perceive value and what its sociological meaning is. It is not about me, "the artist", knowing the answer - it is more about a shared search for a fleeting moment which, on a subtle level, maybe alters our perspective.

I see a utopian element in such a way of interacting with one another. In order to avoid ambiguities I want to explain the use of such a heavy term as utopia.

Utopia as a Method and a Temporary Conclusion

The word utopia originates in the Greek ou-topos which means non place and is a contradiction in itself. "Utopia is what it is by not-being." states art historian and curator Camilla Jalving in an article about the phenomenon of utopia in contemporary art.⁴² A place is something physical, it is the location

41 Reiner Steinweg and Ingrid D Koudela, *Lehrstück Und Episches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Brandes & Apsel, 1995).

42 Camilla Jalving: Utopia in the eye of the beholder. A Theoretical Perspective, in: *Utopia & Contemporary Art* (2012) S. 29-36, here 29.) Camilla Jalving, 'Utopia In The Eye Of The Beholder. A Theoretical Perspective', *Utopia & Contemporary Art*, 2012, p. 29-36, here 29.



of a spot in space. But if utopia is a spot that does not exist, why is it then a space? One non-physical space I experienced myself is an island I am on when I meditate. It exists in my imagination. The reason it exists is because I have a desire for this space to exist - a desire in the sense of philosopher Ernst Bloch - as a step towards concrete utopia. In his philosophical discourse *Spirit of Utopia*⁴³ he talks about the not-yet being, as if the pure imagination contains the future being of something. It is a pre-image for a place that will be real.

In many definitions of utopia words appear that are connected to imagination such as “castle in the air”, “dreamland” or “fairyland”. In other connotations it is a “paradise”, “*land of milk and honey*” or “pie in the sky”. These expressions refer to a perfect place where everything exists in abundance. Another well-known meaning is closely related to Thomas More’s book *Utopia*⁴⁴ from 1516.

The novel describes a society based on rational principles of equality with democratic fundamentals. In the Republic all property is communal and lawyers are unknown. It pictures the idea of the perfect society order which is constructed outside of any historical or cultural framework. This meaning is often closely related to an ideological cosmivision and has therefore a normative and absolute character.

One can thus distinguish between a negative, unreal, disparaging use of the word, which makes clear that the vision will fail and never become real, and a meaning that is more connected to imagination and a growing awareness of subconscious desires. I want to use the second meaning of the word utopia here. The synonym “castle-in-the-air” exemplifies in my idea quite well the qualities and advantages of utopian thoughts. One knows the form and the structure of this castle, yet it is made of clouds. But one can create a plan to build it. If the castle exists in the imagination it is only one more step to make it real. In this sense utopia is a way of thinking and then acting. It can become a constructive method rather than an unrealistic daydreaming. Utopia is a method.

In an attempt to draw a conclusion out of my search for the ways to my spaces and the creation of my personal utopia I can say that I experience it as a balancing act. A utopian space is a very subtle and fugitive moment. It is hard to grasp, it occurs in little steps and the process could be seen as the outcome. However this is the sphere I want to create and in which I desire to work.

43 Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit Of Utopia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

44 Thomas More, *Utopia* ([S.I.]: Cricket House Books, 2010).

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MY
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