

Christina Della Giustina: Like a Joker in a King's Court

The Studio of the Visiting Artist or the so called “Šaloun” exists at Academy of Fine Arts in Prague since 2007, so we'll soon celebrate its ten years anniversary. During this time, different significant international artists came to Prague to spend one semester with art students from diverse studios of the Academy, but also visiting students from abroad or other art schools in Czech Republic, while each professor brought something new and inspiring in the context of the Czech art scene and made beneficial and long-lasting contacts with the local art world. Moreover, the model of Šaloun inspired a launch of a new visiting professor studio program at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Brno which has started this autumn with Vladimír Špaček, an artist born in Prague but based in Mainz and Zürich. Šaloun at the Academy of Fine Arts has so far hosted artists such as Zbigniew Libera (PL), Marcus Geiger (AT), Silke Otto-Knapp (DE), Florian Pümhosl (AT), Artur Żmijewski (PL), Josef Dabernig (AT) or Ilona Németh (SK/HU). This semester, Anna Daučíková, the vice-rector for international matters of the Academy, has invited Swiss artist based in Amsterdam, Christina Della Giustina, who accepted the invitation with great enthusiasm: “I think that this project is amazing. It gives you the freedom to get in touch with great people, we connected immediately. I have just started, but I have a feeling that I'm experiencing something important here.” The following interview took place at the very beginning of Christina's involvement in the program, therefore we have not spoken much about the project she's developing with the students at the moment. We talked about her own artistic practice, about art as research and the sense of artistic PhD programs.

What was your motivation to accept Anna Daučíková's invitation and come to Prague as a visiting professor at the Academy of Fine Arts?

I accepted this invitation very gladly and I have several reasons for it. One reason is my own art practice in which I have been dealing more and more with people for the last 5 years. This kind of work raises a lot of questions about collaboration, authorship and communication in relation to the relative autonomy of the artist. Due to my position at the academy in Utrecht, where I work, it is very different for me to work and experiment together with my students, because of my role as lecturer at the Fine Art's new media department – there I fulfill a certain function and follow the curriculum and its schedule. Going to another country gives me the freedom to try out something that I maybe wouldn't try out at home. I'm interested in the process of working with the students here, developing the work together from the beginning to the end, dealing with all the problem that we will encounter on the way: who takes decisions, what hierarchies are playing role, what will be the result and how can we communicate it.

Another reason for me to come to Prague has to do with our academy in Utrecht. Lately I have been responsible for a new creative concept for internationalization. At this point, internationalization of our academy exists in the form of Erasmus exchange programs, but we are thinking about how to expand the notion of internationalization and make it more relevant and interesting for the students. Why do artists actually go to other countries? We started to think, how we could become international *at home*, instead of travelling to exotic countries, for instance. We're looking for other reasons for internationalization, the ones that are more intrinsic to the art making – what has art making to do with the *foreign* or *unknown*? An “international factor” might be hidden in the artistic practice itself. And so we could tackle this question totally differently. Now we are thinking of making a sort of residencies for

international guest teachers and building a more sustainable relationship between the students and the foreign artist. So, in a way, I sent myself as an agent, as a sort of guinea pig, here, to check out what that means.

I would also like to do a little bit of research into art history, to see where, when and why did artists build international groups. Under different circumstances, also political ones, artists look for a form of belonging on an international level. And this belonging is complicated and conflicting, but it is necessary for certain relationships that are not based on nationality or discipline. Internationalization is often understood only in economic terms and motivations. I would like to work with it on a level that is more intrinsic to art.

How do you want to collaborate with the students of Šaloun?

Until now I let myself lead by the format of Šaloun. At the beginning, I presented my work and I hope the students will be interested to develop it further together with me. But I don't want to prescribe anything. It may sound funny, but what I really try to do is not to do anything. I try not to come up with ideas too quickly, I'm interested in seeing what happens if nobody really directs this process, or just very slightly. I would like to explore what is the minimum needed to develop something, to become an organism and in what extent can this organism regulate itself.

For the past years, you've been working in a fundamentally cross-disciplinary way. You have been researching different ecosystems and the impact that the climate changes have had on them. You use different data that scientists collect in order to make them perceivable in installations, concerts, performances, readings and so on. However, you've been also working directly at a research unit of Federal Institute of Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL in Birmensdorf, Switzerland, side by side with the researchers. Is your primary goal to make the data perceivable to broader audiences, or do you also try to interfere with the scientific methods and with the process of scientific research?

You mentioned the term "climate change" which is of course a very hot topic, a highly political one and easily recognizable. For me, it is not so important to place myself in a certain context, what I try to do is to approach the problem from another angle. Not so much from the moral point of view, but more from an aesthetic one, in a very literal sense. I simply think we miss the contact with each other, with clouds, with the weather itself. So in my work I either try to point to this missing or to create conditions under which this contact could grow. I do address the big problems of the contemporary climate modifications, but from a rather different perspective, be means of aesthetics – literally by our senses, by our ability to perceive, experience and share.

As for my goal, my interest is to comment on this data. Because the scale on which this data are usually discussed is not a human scale and it's actually impossible to relate to it, it's totally abstract. My work touches and criticizes the difference between science and art. But it takes a long long time to understand the scientific language, to be taken serious by scientists, to have a serious, honest dialogue with them, to let them give you a feedback about your work and maybe even do something together in the future. This is a very long process and I'm not sure my life is long enough to breach this European scientific tradition.

Sometimes, this kind of work can be interpreted as a sort of illustration of scientific facts. And I know this is very boring, I'm not interested in illustration in that sense. But it's a challenge not to fall into this trap, because the contact with a scientist is very difficult, just as it is difficult to enter in contact with a tree or with another human being in this room. So my

work, be it a performance, a light installation or a data driven environment, is in fact an interface for this contact. The time spent together, with students or with scientists, is part of this work.

Have you ever experienced a situation, when you felt like intensively working *with* the people, not just side by side?

I think I'm lucky. I would say that in about 51% of cases it works, but it's a very slow and laborious process. I was at the research unit in Switzerland in 2011 and we still work together, so I think I can say it's sustainable. The five years long process looks good in a way, but it's also full of conflicts.

But you don't interfere in the process of how the data is collected...

No, I'm not entitled to do that, I don't have any education in biology, ecology, physics or chemistry. I'm a guest, a little bit like a joker in a king's court, the one who asks funny questions or plays the fool. For example right now I work with a group of eight scientists – biologists, geographers, physicists – on a research about daylight. I'm the only artist there, so you can imagine the languages are very very different from the language that we speak right now and I have a very very small part in it. The researchers are all benevolent people who invited me, so they are interested in my voice and my contribution. The role that I play in this is to ask questions, questions such as: What do you mean by "information"? What do you mean by "objective"? What do you mean by "fact"? What are "data" for *you*? These are the questions that I can ask and I can use their data differently. I don't try to change the way it's measured, I just try to show that there is more than one way of interpreting them. Using the same data I make something different, hoping that it will be at least possible to show that the aesthetic is also a valid interpretation, another perspective on the same problem.

Do you understand yourself as an activist?

Yes, I see myself as an activist, but in a sense of being active, but the scale that I operate on is very intimate. I don't want to belong to any party or movement and I don't believe in propaganda. It's also a question of when does activism become an ideology, like any other. And I try to be aware of this.

In this context, how do you perceive the notion of artistic research? It has become a kind of established category in contemporary art, but do you think it's a really relevant category or do you understand it rather as an ideology or simply a pragmatic notion connected to the involuntary transformation of art academies into institutions comparable to other, "regular", universities.

What interests me, obviously, is the sort of congruence or parallel between artistic research and scientific research. In the sense of considering artistic sensibility as a form of knowing, just like scientific findings, my practice fits very well in the art as research. But when I see what people mean by research, I'm often disappointed. I think that the peak of this rhetoric is already behind us and artists, including myself, just look for ways to make art and if it's necessary, they call it research – as long as it helps to get some funding. I don't think it's something bad, because there are not so many possibilities for an artist to work if you don't make art that is geared for the art market. And in the end the art market is also problematic. So I think that a certain type of conceptual work can simply find a shelter in

artistic research. But artistic research also makes me think of how an academic context can become a place where we can make art again, instead of having to avoid academies to be able to make art. To make art at the academy can also be seen as a way to escape the economic system, the neoliberal art market, which dictates many of the procedures that are highly incorporated in art making nowadays. So I think artistic research is another attempt to find an alternative context for art.

But at the same time, research is something that is evaluated very rigorously in the academic world. And as an academic, the results of your work are measured in a similar way as money is measured in the art market. So in a way you escape the system of, let's say, cultural industries, but in the end you also have to provide measurable results.

Well I'm not sure, I think it will take a very long time for things to actually change. Once they asked John Cage if he thinks something is ever going to get better in this world and he said: "Yes, it will, it will be better. The problem is that one life or even several generations is a period much too short to really see something changing". I think he was very right. I also think that artists doing a PhD, for example, could change what a PhD means. I don't think that the problem is the measuring or not measuring of outcomes, it is rather a whole scientific system and vocabulary behind this evidence. There is probably no escape for art from this system, as it is not a solution to hide from it. So in that sense I think it's just a temporary trend to call it artist research, but it doesn't guarantee that your work really is experimental, progressive and risk taking.

You're also involved in a PhD program in London. Could you explain, what is the main sense of PhD studies in arts, in your opinion?

Well, maybe it's different for someone else, but in my work I offer myself to give voice to something which is bigger than myself. That may sound spiritual, but that's what drives me to work. Otherwise I could live a very nice private life and not expose my perception and sensibilities. So in a broad way I think that a PhD may be an attempt to give value to art. The "PhD" is a title to which we give value. It's an academic status. I agree we should not do a PhD *for* the title and the value of the status. But society works this way. Now what if society agrees that an artist can become a doctor? Maybe it is worth it. I think we have to work on several levels simultaneously: we have to criticize this academic hierarchy, but at the same time also use it. Use it and turn it into something else. For instance, I'm a professor and students have to call me that way, but in direct social interactions it doesn't matter at all. However, I cannot change what it means to be a professor if I do not take on its responsibility. As long as you criticize something from the outside, you don't really know how it is from the inside.

Specifically speaking I had a personal reason to do a PhD and it had to do with my stay at the research institute in Switzerland. I was there for one year and I had a lot of conversations with scientists about my work. I had to think very hard about what I did as I had to formulate it for people who were not artists. As an artist a lot of things I take as a given, but other people ask "why?". I really appreciated the way the scientists stimulated the dialogue, also the dialogue with myself. I had to become conscious of things that I was not conscious of, things that I just did automatically. Then I met a group of PhD students in Zürich who heard about my residency at the scientific institute and came to visit me. It was the first time I realized a PhD in fine art exists and I thought that it could stimulate not only my intuition to make art, but also my own consciousness of why I do what I do. I'm now half way in my PhD studies and what I realized is that I make decisions intuitively. I don't make them based on

discussions I have with other people or on texts that I read. But the texts that I have to write, the discussions that I attend and the presentations that I have to give on a regular basis fuel my art making very much.

And there is another reason for me to do a PhD: I have a son and I want to be a very good example for him.

But these are my personal reasons to do a PhD; other people would of course answer different. In Britain, for example, people need a PhD to teach.

Yes, that is a personal perspective, but you also mentioned the bigger picture where the PhD takes art to the same level as other scientific disciplines...

You know, there is something nice about science: Scientists try to communicate their findings with each other in a language that they share with each other. Even if the idea of a universal language is a naïve idea and even if in reality it is not true that everybody can participate in the discussion, it is a nice idea I think. And if a PhD in Fine Art is a way to participate in science, it could introduce a different perspective on science itself: To let art add value to science.

P.S. We will add a small report of how things developed at Šaloun at the end of the semester.

Artist, writer, performer and teacher Christina Della Giustina is renowned new media and post-conceptual author showing her work internationally. Her work is dwelling in deep personal experience conveyed in images, sound, texts and narratives by the means of sophisticated data-translations, bringing in a fascinating poetical quality.

She is currently a lecturer in Fine Art at HKU University of the Arts Utrecht and enrolled in a practice-led PhD program at Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London. She studied Philosophy, Art History, and Linguistics at the University of Zurich; and Fine Art and Political Theory at the Jan van Eyck Academy Maastricht. Her trans-disciplinary artistic practice includes site-specific work with live and/or interactive audio-, video-, and light, performance, composition, drawing and writing. She focuses on translating the data from specific sites into artistic notations that are conceived to be interpreted and experienced in the form of a collective enactment of the site. The resulting performance re-creates the site as sensory event and calls for questions that cross disciplines about our ways of being with ourselves *and* the world or the perception of “the self” together with the site.

Her work has been shown on an international level at venues like The Woburn Research Centre, Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Soledad Senlle in Amsterdam, Montreux Jazz Festival, Academy Gallery, Utrecht, Netherlands Institute for Media Art NIMK, Shanghai Contemporary Art, the International Art Triennial in Lublin, Poland, Botanical Garden Zürich and Kunsthalle Zürich.

Christina Della Giustina lives and works in Amsterdam.

The Studio of Visiting Artist at Academy of Fine Arts Prague (AVU) enables students from art academies to spend a semester under the guidance of outstanding artist. The Studio was founded at AVU in 2007 and is located in former studio of important Czech sculptor Ladislav Šaloun of the Art Nouveau period.

More information: <http://www.facebook.com/SalounStudio> and <https://www.avu.cz/taxonomy/term/45>