

Change the art, change the institutions, change the world

Interview with John Hill

What made you accept the invitation to be the visiting professor at Šaloun at the Academy of Fine Arts? What was interesting for you about the opportunity to come here?

In 2015, the art collective I was working with in London, called LuckyPDF, made an artwork called *How to Leave London*. It was for an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery which was about London artists.¹ We spent over a couple of months travelling around Europe, interviewing artists to see how it was to be an artist in different places. So I've had this desire to move for quite a while now. Prague seems to have a perfect size – it's big enough to be exciting, but small enough that you feel you could have some impact on the city as well. As for Šaloun, the great opportunity it gives you is to have four months to work with a small group of students. It's such a luxury. My work has always been about collaboration – working with specific people in specific places and contexts – and this chance to spend some dedicated amount of time with a group of students from different countries and different art universities to explore, test and experiment is really exciting. Šaloun is an alternative to the standard art education system and that's very valuable.

A lot of work that LuckyPDF was doing was about creating small communities around our projects. And in reaction to the work I was doing previously online, but also very much an extension of that, I became very interested in the ideas of privacy. The Šaloun villa is a very interesting private space: it has this amazing light, but you can't really see in or out. It is a very closed-off, secluded place, but it was built in order to make a public artwork, the Jan Hus monument. With the students, we have this great, intense time to work privately, making work just for each other and speaking to each other, from which we can develop something that can become public, distributed online, in public space, through an exhibition or magazine publications.

Is there a topic the project you're working on with the students is focused on?

I've given the course the title *How to Build a Platform*. Recently, there has been a lot of discussion about platforms in terms of culture, but also in terms of economy or even of government. At the moment we're trying to think about what a platform in this contexts could mean, as a physical stage in which things can happen, but also as a system that allow us to share our ideas with each other and with other people as well.

How do you understand your own position in the studio and how do you deal with the hierarchies that the situation of a teacher implies in this context?

I'm definitely here to learn as well and I believe that the best way to learn is by doing things. I think it's important to allow the students to do things even if perhaps I feel they have been done before or I have done them before. It's important to have the first hand

¹ "MIRRORCITY shows recent work and new commissions by key emerging and established artists working in the capital today. These artists seek to address the challenges, conditions and consequences of living in a digital age." <http://mirrorcity.southbankcentre.co.uk/>

experiences and from doing things together we can build a shared understanding and decide what we want to do next. So I'm trying as hard as I can not to have this hierarchy, but at the same time, the students have certain expectations of me and I have responsibilities to them. So of course there is some steering that goes on to make sure that things happen, but mostly what I have been doing is introducing ideas, ways of thinking and working. I have a definite idea of what I'd like the project to be, but it only works if it has genuine input from the students.

Do you feel there is a strong difference between the art education systems in the Czech Republic and the UK?

The biggest difference is the length of the courses. In some ways, it's such a luxury to have six years to study for free, but on the other hand, sometimes you get a little bit more urgency in the work students are making in the UK – things move a lot more faster there. The kind of projects I'm trying to do here has to fit into a very short period of time in the UK. And it's mixed up with all the other commitments that the students have. Here there is time for us to try things, make mistakes, change our minds, go in different directions. But I think six years is a lot of time to get lost within your education. At the same time, there are students that are already really busy being artists, they've gotten to the stage where they know the work they want to make and they're showing it – in the Czech Republic and abroad. It's wonderful, but sometimes you have the feeling that they don't need the structure of the education anymore.

In your work, and also as part of the projects with LuckyPDF, you often try to rethink what and institution could be and could do – and if I understand it right, that is also a part of what you're doing with the students at Šaloun. Could you please introduce your recent thinking about institutions, presentation of artwork and your approach to audiences?

With LuckyPDF we almost always tried to use exhibition space as production space. We would exhibit the making of the work, whether that would be live film making or a TV show or a program of talks that was in the process of being made. In that way we're never really interested in having a final product – when an institution asks you for a finished artwork, there is usually the option of doing something else. I'm not anti-institutional, but I think you always need to ask the institutions what they can really offer to you. Artists and institutions often assume that what institutions offer is an audience for their work but I don't think that's true anymore. The kind of audience or engagement I'm looking for, that you really need as an artist, happens much more informally but also in different ways, because work can be so easily shown online. I'm not interested in that kind of audiences that institutions have to offer, it's more about how they can help you to achieve something that you couldn't do on your own. Institutions have great skills and resources, people as well as money and space, that you can use not just to display your work but that can be used to make it.

In Šaloun, we've been talking a lot about audience, whether and when audience is important and at what point something is ready to be shown in public. I think you can always bring the audience in the production of the work. So that they don't become just participants, but also co-authors in some way. Like this, what the audience gets is not a passive experience, but it's also not necessarily a pleasant experience. And once you're in that

position, when you're rather inside the work rather than just watching it, you have to give up some of your choices – you almost don't get to decide whether you like the work or not. You don't get to dismiss it, because you're implicated in it and you're just as much responsible as everyone else for the work.

Your collaborative projects often take place online – for example the School of Global Art, an online art school based on sharing experiences and knowledge among a group of people. What was the aim of the project?

For me the most important way how to learn to be an artist is from working with other artists. The School of Global Art was a way of bringing together people from all over the world who might share some interests. We described it as a semi-fictional art school: it was a fake art school but it did do real things. It was one of our experiments of building a platform and it was a platform for performance lectures mostly. But one of the things I realized when building the platform was that technology didn't solve the problems – and we were trying to demonstrate it. You could have a skype conversation between the UK, China and Australia, but it certainly didn't make everything doable and easy. You need more than just a live video stream in order to allow to communicate and to understand each other. So a part of what we did with the LuckyPDF was testing these technologies and showing that they had some limits. You need to get to know people in order to work with them.

The School of Global Art happened on a residency in Australia. Actually, just flying some artists around the world doesn't make something magical happen. Even putting people in a place for a short period of time doesn't create community. The work you need to do to build a community is a lot more complicated, it needs a lot of effort and energy. There is the idea in the art world that art can just be global. Not only that this idea doesn't respect local context, it also ignores the reality that artists are people, they need more than just an opportunity to show their work. Šaloun is a great opportunity to accelerate the process but I'm really hoping that the things that we have just started now won't end with the end of the course and that we will be able to build long term relationships between the people working together.

You mentioned the utopian aspect of technology. There is a strong sense of utopia in the concept of the School of Global Art and also in your online TV broadcastings – but this utopia is actually a very old one. In what sense do you re-imagine these utopias?

With the TV shows we were more interested how the feeling of having an audience changes the way you act and work. The show was aimed mainly at the live audience in the room and the performers themselves. The person holding the camera was the best audience – to some extent, you had to work on the project to be able to understand what was going on. By doing DIY TV we weren't trying to solve all those problems of access to media in the same way that cable access television, or even the privatization of state media, had tried and failed to do. By the time we started making TV in 2010 the question of media access had already been completely changed by the internet. For us it was more about playing with the emotional power of those old media.

Television is interesting for a specific kind of shared experience it offers: you could never know whom you were sharing it with but you knew it was shared. Now we have different media of different kinds of shared experience. They are much more fragmented and

we're interested in the kinds of communities and shared identities these technologies can foster. In fact, it's a really urgent political problem. It's very important to come to agreements about ways to see the world and it is all about distribution of responsibility and power. The platforms that we have at the moment — Facebook, Twitter or YouTube — are very good for letting people who don't agree with each other to shout at each other, but they are not very good at allowing them to discuss, or to agree. I think the idea of a filter bubble is nonsense, we actively seek people we disagree with online so we can disagree with them. Platforms make a huge amount of money from people having arguments with each other. We don't have platforms that allow us to have slower, longer, more positive or more productive conversations amongst people who disagree with each other.

Take the Ai Wei Wei show at the National Gallery, for instance. It could be argued that the institution's role is to allow conversations between people who disagree about how Europe should respond to the current refugee crisis. An emotional work that makes you feel guilty even before you enter that big room maybe works for the people who choose to go to the museum to think about these things, but it's not necessarily persuasive, it represents a viewpoint, but doesn't seem like it would change anyone's mind.

So you don't think this project could generate some positive conversation? That it only generates conflict?

I don't know, maybe not. But it doesn't create conversation about what we need to do, it just shows us that what is happening is really bad. But I think that art institutions should not only represent things, but also use their resources to actually finding agreement. Maybe I'm being unfair and there is a very active program around this exhibition that brings in people from multiple generations, refugees residing in this country, people from other parts of the Czech Republic, etc. but I don't think a big, blockbuster exhibition can really change attitudes.

When an exhibition gets reported on the evening news on TV, it's not enough to present the respectable, cultured way to think about the Europe's relationship to the refugee crisis. Because people who don't agree will just continue to not agree. And they might have real reasons and real problems. I think this battle of ideas is just a battle of ideas and it's not helpful. It's much more about connecting people's personal experiences – directly, rather than representing someone's personal experiences and hoping someone will connect to it. Technology might have this opportunity to connect different people's personal experiences, but I think you really need to meet people, speak to them and amplify their understanding.

Do you think it should be a role of an institution such as the National Gallery?

Yes, they have huge resources and so many staff. I think it's right that institutions take a political, or ethical, position but the institution's job is then to reach the people who have a different position. You have to work very hard to engage, rather than exclude, the people who disagree with you.

It's impossible for me not to ask: what impact does the Brexit have on your life as an artist and your work?

I think that Brexit is a reaction to the uneven distribution of the benefits of globalization. Take London and Tate Modern, for example. Tate Modern is an incredible

institution offering a lot of things for free – but only to the people living in or visiting London. If you live in a small town in Britain where libraries have been shut for example, you don't have the access. I think the places in Britain that want to leave the EU haven't felt the benefits of being a more open society and they are the places that are the most remote from power. In Scotland, for instance, the majority of people didn't vote to leave the EU because Scotland has a parliament that actually does things that affect people's lives. And if something is being run badly in Scotland, for example the health system, you can blame your local minister of health. Whereas in England they successfully managed to blame immigration for waiting times to see a doctor, even though it's a result of underfunding, and even though the health service has relied on foreign staff for more than 50 years. The referendum was the only opportunity many people had been given to express their opinion on whether they thought the country was getting better or was getting worse, framed by media and politicians as being about migration, as if that's the only thing that's changed in the UK for two generations. But the truth is that some people, including artists, have seen the benefits of a more open, connected society, of travel and migration, and some people haven't and haven't been able to. You can state facts: people working in this country pay taxes and those taxes help to fund the health service, but if people are working in a small town that only has one doctor's, and the government would rather cut business taxes than pay for doctors to meet the needs of a growing, aging population, then you can't tell people their experience is false. Brexit is going to be terrible for everybody, but I really think it will be especially bad for the people who have already been most negatively effected by globalization.

Where does that leave you as an artist?

The reason why I like to be an artist is because the community is so strong. People are very supportive of each other and there are different ways of funding projects. That means you have an opportunity to try stuff. It's not just a chance to create models that represent things, but to create models of how things could function. That's why I'm interested in the idea of organizing, or organizations, as artworks. If a museum wants to exhibit or buy an organizational artwork for its collection, it might have to agree with it to keep the organization running for the next 50 years. In an essay that we've been reading at Šaloun by Boris Groys, he talks about how the avant-garde wanted to destroy the museum, but then what happened wasn't just that artists eventually adapted to the existing institutional structure, the museums also had to change in order to be able to collect and exhibit the kind of work artists were making. They adapted in order to be able to buy film, performances or other non-traditional and immaterial art objects. I think that changing the kind of art we make, first in opposition to an institution that works in a specific way, can eventually change the existing structure so that it is able to accommodate your work. And the great thing about the art community and people that work in art institutions is that they want to change, even if this institutions themselves can be very conservative. But artists should lead the changes in these institutions, through changes to the art they make, rather than making art for museums as they exist at the moment, or assuming the institution will change by itself.

And do you think that the institutional change can lead to some bigger scale political change?

Yes, but it's not direct. It's not like the institution comes up with an idea and therefore the city council implements it immediately. Again you have to force the change. But to some extent,

the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona (MACBA) is a part of the Municipal Movement that led to the election of Ada Colau as the Mayor and the new city government in Barcelona. It is important for institutions to be open and connected to their local community. One of the problems is this very obvious institutional hierarchy – like in the UK: there are big exhibition spaces for big artists dealing with big scale issues, which you can see in Veletržní palác, then smaller exhibition spaces with smaller artists dealing with smaller scale issues. The really local issues are left to education departments, or are simply ignored by the big institutions. We can't ignore the refugee crisis, but to solve it we need it to be seen not just as an international issue, but one that's also local and connected to our everyday lives. For example G4S, who the National Gallery contracts to protect its artworks, also makes money from detaining and deporting refugees from the UK, and have been directly and indirectly responsible for people dying (<http://www.irr.org.uk/news/deaths-in-immigration-detention-1989-2017/>). I believe patterns structures and hierarchies reproduce themselves across different scales, but I think starting at the smallest scales is the best way to change those hierarchies.