

Summary of the dissertation *Concrete abstractions. Affirmative strategies and tactics in contemporary art* written under the supervision of prof. dr hab. Ryszard Nycz

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The dissertation records an attempt to reflect on the constitutive ambivalence of socially engaged practices in contemporary art and curating. On the one hand, their initiators argue the positive contribution of art to social life, the value of prefigurative projects and tactical action. On the other hand, they use a wide repertoire of references to critical theory and emphasize the need to resist – to put it in the words of Theodor Adorno – the "affirmative pressures" within the modern society. Providing analyses of art and curating after the educational turn, participatory practices or art-and-science initiatives, the author shows how their authors strive to protect their affirmative projects against recuperation. The context for the main argument is set by contemporary concepts of modernization, debates conducted on the basis of institutional theory of art and media theory, as well as affirmative tendencies in contemporary philosophy and cultural studies.

In the first chapter of the work – preceded by a theoretical introduction – I analyze two landmark strategies for instituting art-based research within the contemporary academic landscape (on the one hand, I focus on the neo-constructivist undertakings in art and science; on the other – on the activities at the intersection of "ethnographic art" and academic cultural studies). The context for these considerations is provided by the discussions on the educational turn in the visual and performative arts. The case study presented in the next part of the dissertation complements the analyses and observations presented in the first chapter while providing more specific insights into the uneasy relationship of art and technoscience. In various artistic, didactic and organizational initiatives of György Kepes, to whom this case study is devoted, the horizon of institutional possibilities was determined by the military-scientific-industrial complex. The anti-modernist allegations against the founder of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT – accused of aestheticization of the 'corrupt' knowledge and engineering – shed light on the hegemonic critique of today's art-based research projects. At the same time, Kepes' influence on contemporary art and science initiatives remains indisputable, and it happens to be particularly pronounced in the context of politically informed, environmentally responsible, critical theory-practice.

In chapter three, I discuss the relationship between contemporary art and capitalism, focusing on the difficulties that artists experience within the system of project-based labor and possible benefits that they can derive from its 'flexible' constitution. The susceptibility to (and immunity from) the systemic overcoding of political and aesthetic contents of art is the key issue discussed in this argument. Significantly, I attempt to theorize 'the project' not only as a way of organizing and managing artistic work imposed "from the outside", but also as a scheme of ontology of praxis, recalling the romantic origin of the category in question. Within this framework, the problem of the heterogeneity of an individual work of art – key from the perspective of twentieth-century critical theory – is relegated to the background, giving way to a discussion of mediation (which I understand as linkage between the creative process, its distributed outcomes and the processes of their dissemination). In chapter four, I provide further reflection on these subjects, focusing on the points of contact in the development of postmodern museology, experimental institutionalism and participatory art.

In chapter five, I focus on artistic, curatorial and institutional ventures in the order of engaged art and experimental institutionalism, for which the starting point is a critical (and

creative) revision of the assumptions about the agency of art, which can be found in the new museology and in the tradition of participatory practice rooted in the 1960s' art. The aim is, above all, a realist, sociological articulation of the links between art and other areas of modern life. The last, sixth chapter is devoted to the issue of tactical action at the intersection of contemporary art and activism. The basic point of reference in this segment of the work are Adorno's critical remarks on the causal logic behind tactical practice and the fetishization of immediacy it entails. While confirming the legitimacy of Adorno's criticism, I try to indicate the political and intellectual value of the practices that fit into the scheme of "tactical reason".

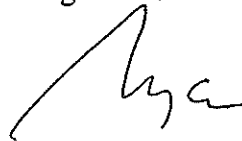
From the very outset of my research project, I wanted to present a wide-reaching research material. However, the work in its final form is certainly dominated by examples from several fields of creative practice – new media art (or technological art), art-based-research, as well as the 'liminal zone' between participatory art and curating. The reason for this particular selection is simple: it is in these practices that the clash of affirmative, "agoraphilic" tendencies in contemporary art with the unchanging fear of recuperation remains particularly visible.

9 October 2020

Author's signature:

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Supervisor's signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be a stylized 'A' followed by a flourish.