

**SAID TO CONTAIN: *Thinking Public Session* at ifa Gallery Stuttgart,
September 2016
A Joint Record by Memory**

Situation 1 – Coming In

We all enter the space. Guests, participants, friends, all in all around 20 people. It feels like a party is about to start. We are in the front area of the gallery, right by the entrance. We, the hosts Maja, Christopher, Miriam from Neue Dringlichkeit and Elke, the curator of the exhibition, welcome everyone personally.

Situation 2 – Filling in the Declaration Forms

After about ten minutes we hand out the declaration forms. Everyone is invited to answer the following questions: "Are you carrying goods of value? Are you carrying goods without value? Are you carrying goods that have not been traded? Have you ever seen 100g of pure gold? What comes after capitalism?" We sit in groups or alone and fill in the forms. There is an atmosphere of concentration and openness. Everyone answers the questions by themselves, but I still felt connected to the others. I was sitting at the round table. There was some exchange happening with the others, often not verbally, yet somewhat connected through answering the same questions.

Situation 3 - Welcome

After a certain time the guests are officially welcomed to the Thinking Public Session – addressed as a collective in a little welcoming speech by Elke. She invites the guests to actively take part and to feel at home. Subsequently she asks us to sit together in groups on chairs that have been set up towards the back of the gallery.

Situation 4 – World Café

Smoothly we move on to the next setting. We sit in five groups of four or five and discuss the answers we wrote on the declaration forms. There is neither a moderator nor a specific task. There is no visible distinction between audience and hosts. Within the small groups there is a sense of open and trustful dialogue. The World Café has given rise to a desire – to explore the issues raised collectively. Teaming up was a great gift. We immediately grew closer and showed honest interest in each other. Conversations evolved on topics such as value and the production of goods; on how we each relate to material goods and about our individual concepts of value. Curiously we entered the sphere of global trading together. The questionnaires lead to more questions. What does value mean for us? Is it possible for anything to be without value? What do we mean by

'valuable' anyway? How does our abstract qualitative concept of value relate to a more concrete, quantifiable financial value?

The question came up if there is such a things as 'freedom of thought' at all. How free can we really be, in making up a new vocabulary, shaping new ideas, generating new visions? I noticed that it is crucial to stop judging each other when we talk. In our group one person picked up on something someone said, saw things differently and then formulated their own perspective as 'valid' and 'true'. I think of us as collective bodies, we have to learn not to speak from our egos, but with a sense of community. Because it happens so often that the urge to speak is driven by the ego ("I'm right and you are wrong"). In this context it could be helpful to point out the neutrality of active listening with an attitude of radical respect.

A discussion in our group: the simple exchange of goods is not a solution. Exchanging things is based on debt (I owe you, you owe me), even making a present creates a feeling of debt. Further, the exchanging of goods relies on the concept of individual property: you can exchange goods you possess or your own body, your possible labour power or skills. Sharing economies based on the exchange of goods and services are not a solution, because they don't take the means of production into account. How can a factory that is producing chips for mobile phones (or the people working there) get into a meaningful and non-exploitative exchange with a school (or the teachers)? And in this model human relations are still determined by commodities, coded by goods.

Miriam is taking pictures discreetly, without actively interrupting the Session. We agreed on this form of documentation, because we believe that people allow themselves to speak more freely when their conversations are not being recorded.

After about ten minutes, the groups are asked if it would be ok to slowly bring their conversations to an end and to gather at the round table nearby.

Situation 5 - Information

I felt that the transition to the next situation interrupted the flow, even though it was well done. I was expecting to use the input from before – like bringing the knowledge of each individual together into the collective. But the interruption was pretty bearable, as we were back in a circle and as a collective body. From this point on we formed a collective with single bodies, a feeling that increased as we moved around the space together. We sit in a big circle around the table and Maja tells the story how two years ago Bojan, Laura and she came up with the idea to investigate global trading by looking at container shipping. "We thought the only way to pierce the opacity of global trading was to ship ourselves on a container ship". Pictures of the trip from Hamburg to Argentina are passed around the table and looked at closely. This part takes about 20 minutes and it does not feel like a formal presentation, but rather as if someone

Kommentiert [GB1]: Wollen Sie doppelte oder einfache Anführungszeichen?

Kommentiert [ML2]: einfache, danke

Gelöscht: ,

Gelöscht: the

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Kommentiert [GB3]: Möchten Sie nach einem Doppelpunkt mit Großbuchsablen anfangen?

Kommentiert [ML4]: klein

Kommentiert [GB5]: Siehe letztes Kommentar

Kommentiert [ML6]: s.o.

Kommentiert [ML8]: how about labour power as in Marxist writing?

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is telling friends about a holiday. Questions arise spontaneously and are answered. Maybe this happens so naturally because there were the conversations in small groups before. Often a logical block explaining an aspect of the trip and the project is followed by a short moment of questions and answers. Even though there is so much information in this part, it is the part of the evening that I remember least of all. My body was not involved and my voice did not count. Still I wouldn't have wanted to miss it, because you shared your physical experiences with me. A very strong picture was the grilled pig, a trace of a collective moment in contrast to the strict separation on board that you talked about.

Gelöscht: raise

Towards the end Christopher talks about a picture that shows the "placing" of slaves in slave-trading ships in an absolutely inhumane rational manner, and we talk about the painful connection between colonialism and shipping.

Gelöscht:,

After a while we go quiet and the journey of our evening moves on.

Situation 6 – Cinema

Together we sit down in front of a white wall, like in a cinema. Christopher introduces the practice of *Nomadic Thinking Public Sessions*, where the group of artists get into exchange with different protagonists in global trading. He explains how they aim to leave their comfort zones and the filter bubble of the theatre and art scene. Videos and stories give us an insight into different nomadic sessions and we talk about what we can get out of them. In this way, we share our insights and discussions from other sessions with the audience in Stuttgart. Here too, the guests often ask questions, whenever one sequence is finished.

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Gelöscht: Like

First we show interviews that we shot with a class from a school in the multinational 4th district of Zurich. Schoolchildren talk about the exploitation of factory workers in China and about the strange feeling that something is wrong in how global trading is organised nowadays.

After that we talk about the discussion we had with economic students in Zurich: They saw a strong link between politics and the world of finance. They suggested decentralising economic power by questioning the strong position of the 'intermediaries' – the middlemen (who are mostly male indeed). Their strategy: to fight the asymmetrical access to power and knowledge and to democratise resources. Someone comes up with the idea to weaken the position of intermediaries (brokers) at the stock markets in order to democratise the access to financial markets.

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Interestingly enough, there is a conceptual overlap between the neoliberal notion of deregulation and the anarchist idea of unregulated systems. In reality however, neoliberal deregulation often equals the "natural" victory of the fittest (or those with the most resources), whereas reducing power monopolies would be an act of strong control, and hence in opposition to the anarchist claim for the loss of control.

Gelöscht: of

Schematically speaking, the basic idea is to strengthen networks and to counteract the monopolisation of decision-making power. For the example of currencies: network-supported crypto-currencies (using Blockchain, Ethereum etc.) instead of currencies protected by central banks.

Gelöscht: On

Then there is a video where a student talks about the democratisation of companies. He thinks of it as a visionary solution for contemporary problems in global capitalism (such as unjust remuneration systems and the exploitation of our natural environment). Someone objects that the idea is not new, because employees today may own shares in their companies, which gives them participatory rights. We insist on a more radical form of democratisation. When we talk about the democratisation of companies/production (somehow here it feels right to speak as a collective "we", from the position of a group that has exchanged opinions and spoken about this and not from an isolated "I" perspective) then we mean workers' participation in the company that goes beyond financial ownership (shares). What can democratic participation in companies, cooperatives and collective production look like? How is it organised? How can decisions be made quickly, when necessary? Fast democracy? Can smaller organisational units be a solution?

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After that we show excerpts from our conversation with logistics workers at Migros Zurich, Switzerland's largest supermarket and a cooperative. At Migros, not only the employees can participate in strategic and organisational questions, but (thanks to the cooperative form) also the customers to whom the cooperative officially belongs. The Migros cooperative is a good starting point for a discussion of a more radical form of democratisation. It is also a good example of supply chains and how global trade can be organised more fairly. Migros is presently setting up sustainable value added chains, by creating and implementing their own Migros standard. Also in this sequence of the session the inputs are reflected on together and discussed constructively.

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Situation 7 – Karaoke and Gold Performance

Suddenly a rather tacky but pleasant melody is heard, pleasantly loud. We all move towards the sound via an angular corridor into a hidden-away rear corner of the gallery. Christopher is waiting for us, and in his deep and calm voice he sings a karaoke song about the complexities and absurdities of global trade, the economy and cashew nuts. This is accompanied by a video of the voyage. It is nice to let our thoughts wander for a bit and to take in the atmosphere. There are too many people for such a small room and the situation gets an intimate touch. I am excited as I sing. I had already felt the fact that we all stood in this small space as a proof of our collective body, everyone was tightly packed together and respected the others.

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Once the song was over, everyone felt happy and entertained. Christopher talks about the difficult attempt to organise a *Nomadic Thinking Public Session* with bankers. When for various reasons – above all the need for confidentiality – this

did not work out as planned, Christopher came to the conclusion that there is only one way to find out more about the world of finance: to pretend to be a potential investment customer. He tells us how he went to a "banker's bar" that he knows and genuinely asked a colleague what he thought would be clever to invest in. Christopher re-enacts this dialogue – real estate, structured financial products, investment bankers who bet on the oil price against their clients, the great casino feeling, the risk of winning or losing everything – yes, the absurdity of this business enters our minds and bodies through this performance. I tell the story of how I spoke with an investment banker about what I should invest in if I wanted to bet my salary I got for this project. In the end Christopher decided that all this speculation was too much for him and as a result of this he bought 100g of real gold. I tell the story how I bought 100g of real gold and how Brexit resulted in massive fluctuations in both the price of my piece of gold and my feelings. Everyone present listens attentively. At the end of the story Christopher takes this little piece of gold out of his pocket. A guest asks if she can touch it. I say, "no, rather not", and put it back in my pocket and feel a bit like Golum in "The Lord of the Rings". Why didn't Christopher pass the piece of gold around? It would have been a physical experience that would have made the story more real. I keep coming back to the thought that our bodies play a very important role. Christopher asks the guests to follow him. When we lead the people out of the karaoke cabin into the open space, I sense both sympathy and irritation. There is a sense of positivity and excitement to what comes next. It feels good to come into a more open space, but I am also sorry to leave the cosiness of the intimate space.

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Situation 8 – Evolutionary Dialogue

At this moment Elke takes over the moderation – she guides us into the largest space in the gallery. Surrounded by art works in the exhibition "Politics of Sharing", we sit on chairs in a circle that was arranged previously. Elke briefly introduces the method of "evolutionary dialogue" to the audience. How can we facilitate a moment of collective thought that is not per se dominated by our intellect? In order to be able to draw on another kind of knowledge, Elke asks us to first turn silent. No must, just an invitation. We remain quiet for about three minutes. The circle of chairs worked well, it was accepted by the audience. The moment of silence was not as intensive as I had experienced it in Christchurch (there this was preceded by a walk by the sea, and hence everything was experienced completely differently). My feeling was that we were not quite prepared to welcome the silence and our inner selves. After some time, Elke asks us to open our eyes again and invites us to speak from the silence. She offers the following question:

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What comes after capitalism?

There is a sense of open public thinking. Everyone seems to be finding it hard to speak. There is a long silence. Yet I was surprised that two people shared something from the meditation. That is precious and stuck with me. There were short statements like "you can't see those in the dark". After this concentrated

Gelöscht: icked to

mode of speaking from the silence, a discussion in the group followed. I only remember the intensity of the statements – with eyes open – and the emotions. I wouldn't be able to repeat the content today. It fades away immediately. Did anyone take notes?

Being curious about what comes after capitalism.
An invitation to the self to let go and to be happy – not to know what comes next.

A new thought from the circle that stuck in my mind is to understand 'letting go' as a critical practice. The idea of a revolution of letting go. Creating space for something new to emerge.

Within the circle we also thought more precisely about ways out of the present situation – like other currencies or a more radical understanding of cooperatives. Different positions were brought forward. But it was more as if individual speakers were holding short speeches. The speakers stayed more within themselves, spoke from the inside. And yet it was important that all statements were present and standing next to each other so this created a space in between.

We leave the circle.

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Situation 9 – Informal Conversations while We Eat

Drinks and snacks are waiting for us at the front of the gallery. Over wine, sardines, pickles and cashew nuts we continue to think publicly and collectively and to exchange in small groups. To me this informal exchange was intense and super interesting. The discussion circle on issues of global capitalism. We realise that many of the guests are politically and culturally active in different fields and are looking for solutions. New alliances are formed.

Situation 10 – First Quick Internal Evaluation

After the guests have left, we talk to Elke and Martina (Theater Rampe) about the evening and how the format might be developed further.

All in all I felt irritated. But happy and in high spirits. Everyone was happy to be here together.

It is still hard to talk and keep the ego out at the same time. This is something that we will only learn collectively.

Together with the others we are planning future events, where we can continue to experiment with the format.

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Work in Progress.