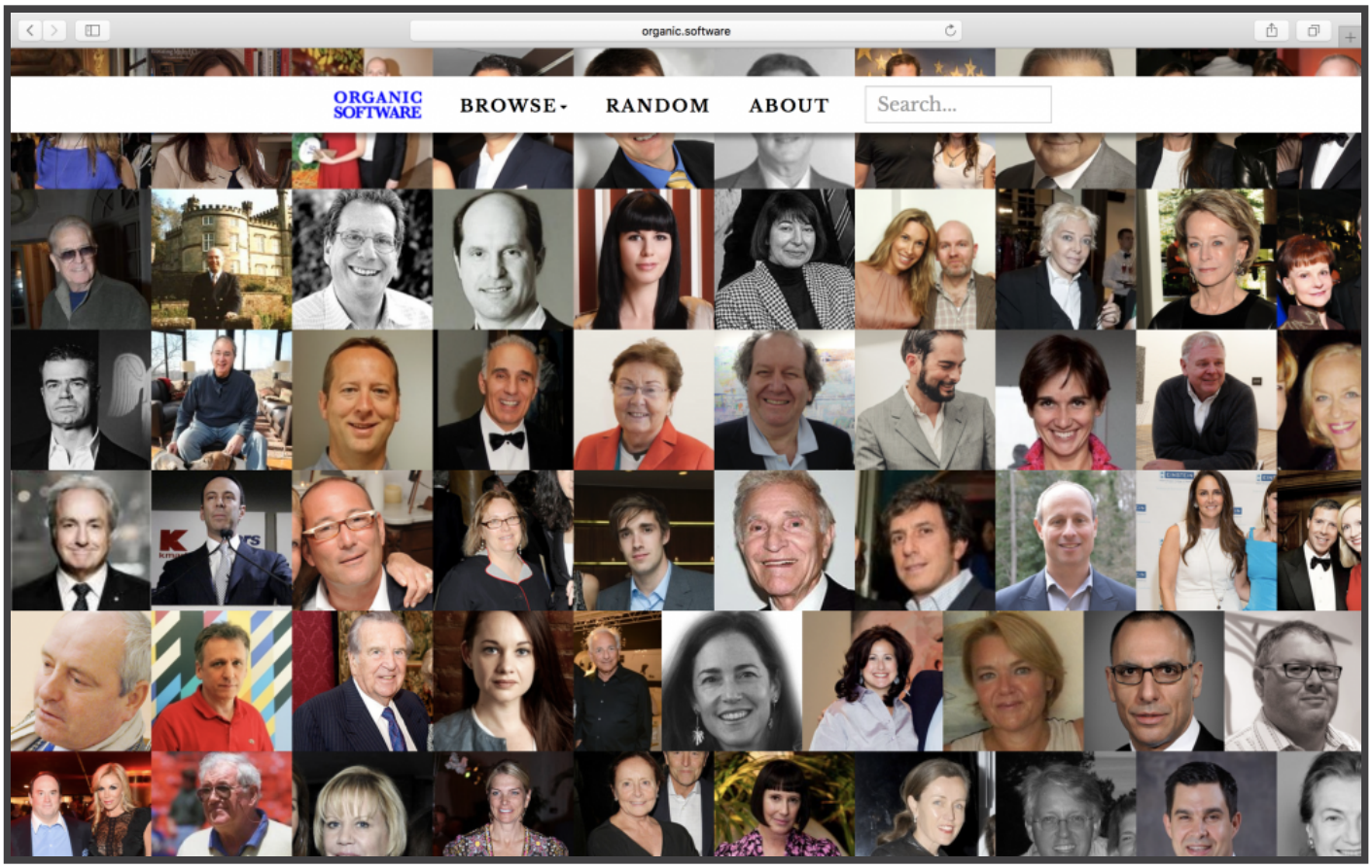
Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

A Sketchy Chronology of a Petition to Reinstall Beatrix Ruf

Regina Pfister

On February 13, an anonymous petition called for the reinstatement of Beatrix Ruf as director of the Stedelijk Museum. The petition comes at a time when further investigations into the affair have not yet yielded any results that could shed some light on the current level of autonomy of public institutions in general—an issue that, in fact, begs debate.



October 6, 2017
Free art that secretly costs 1.5 million [Gratis kunst die stiekem toch 1,5 miljoen kost]
[https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/10/06/gratis-kunst-die-stiekem-toch-15-miljoen-kost-13365402-a1576353?utm_source=NRC&utm_medium=related&utm_campaign=related2]

October 17, 2017
Stedelijk Museum Director Beatrix Ruf Steps Down Amid Controversy
[https://www.artforum.com/news/stedelijk-museum-director-beatrix-ruf-steps-down-amid-controversy-71701]

October 17, 2017
Director Beatrix Ruf resigns with immediate effect as director of the Stedelijk museum
[https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/news/director-beatrix-ruf-resigns-with-immediate-effect-as-director-of-the-stedelijk-museum-2]

October 25, 2017
Sturz ins Bodenlose [http://www.zeit.de/2017/44/beatrix-ruf-kuratorin-amsterdam]

November 7, 2017
Museum Leader Who Resigned Calls Controversy a ‹Misunderstanding›
[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/arts/amsterdam-beatrix-ruf-stedelijk.html]

December 7, 2017
Outrage Over Conflicts of Interest Misses the Mark [https://frieze.com/article/outrage-over-conflicts-interest-misses-mark]

February 13, 2018
Petition Get Beatrix Ruf back in the Stedelijk [https://petities.nl/petitions/get-beatrix-ruf-back-in-the-stedelijk?locale=nl]

February 17, 2018
Artworld call: get Beatrix Ruf back to Stedelijk [Oproep kunstwereld: Haal Beatrix Ruf terug naar Stedelijk] [https://www.parool.nl/kunst-en-media/oproep-kunstwereld-haal-beatrix-ruf-terug-naar-stedelijk~a4570169/]

February 20, 2018
Marina Abramovi?, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson Call for Stedelijk to Reinstate Beatrix Ruf
[https://frieze.com/article/marina-abramovic-philip-glass-laurie-anderson-call-stedelijk-reinstate-beatrix-ruf]

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To sum things up, Beatrix Ruf was accused by Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad for the way the business of her art advisory firm Currentmatters affected her work as director of the Stedelijk museum. It was also pointed out that a client of Ruf’s firm, Thomas Borgmann, donated 600 works from his collection to the museum—though as the newspaper writes, this wasn’t a donation after all, as it was part of a contract committing the museum to buy from Borgmann additional works by Michael Krebber and Matt Mullican worth 875.000 euros.[1] Furthermore, Ruf was alleged to almost exclusively feature artists with ties to the same galleries with whom Currentmatters regularly works.

Since February 13, a petition launched and signed anonymously by «friends of Beatrix Ruf» calls for her reinstatement as director of the Stedelijk Museum. The petition comes at a time when further investigations into the matter have not yet yielded any results. The only

argument the petition offers for reinstating Ruf is her «artistic vision».

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Artistic vision is not a given quality; it is a sign of knowing how to play the game. Nothing more and nothing less.

The art field is as opaque as its markets. However, it is more or less stable, held together by objective structures and the relative autonomy of its agents. That relative autonomy is twofold, as the decision making comes at the price of a lack of transparency. Deals are being made, loans are exchanged for future collaborations, gifts are being made. It is the lay of the land.

Wearing multiple hats may be conducive to making a living and help overcome a strict division of labor. There is a thin line between playing the game and extracting value for one's own benefit. Gallerists are invited to curate shows and display their own gallery program, critics write about their donors, curators are financially backed by collectors who see their collections featured in shows with international reach. In other fields this gift economy based on the politics of friendship and mutual support has a name: Nepotism.

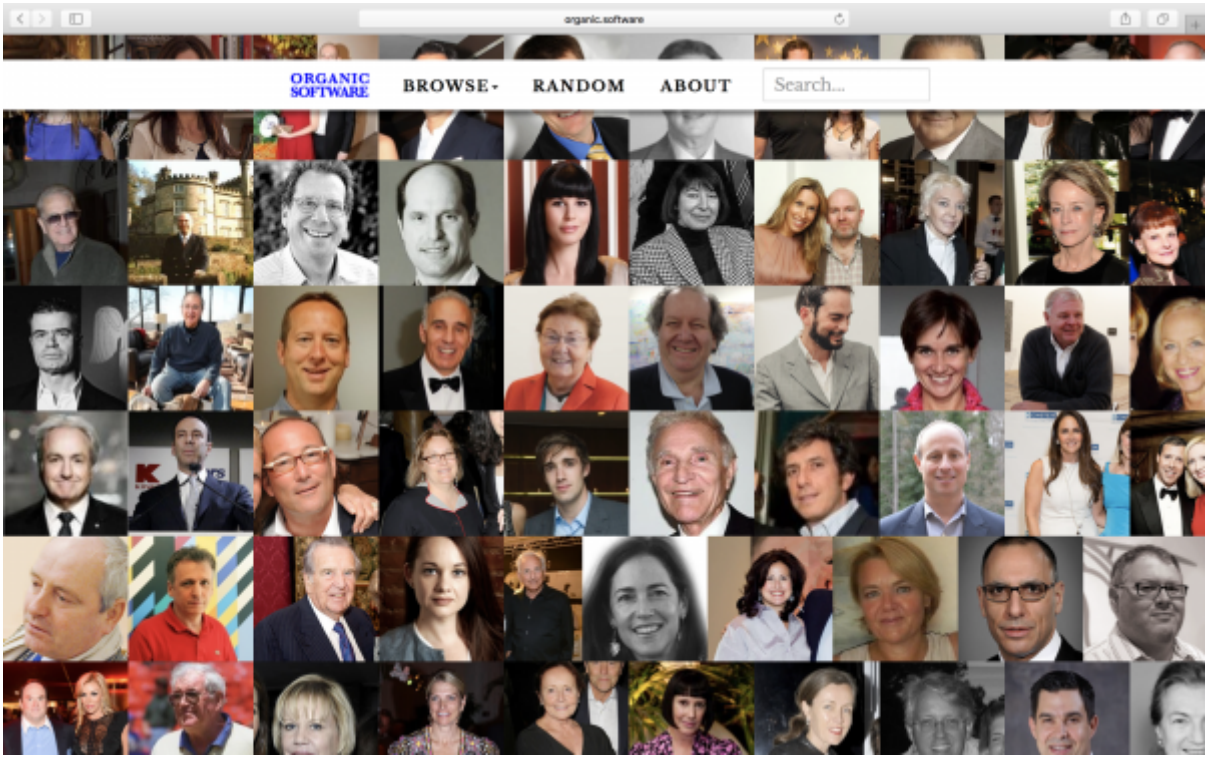
If there is a problem it is a structural one that occurs when the relative autonomy of the art field, in this case embodied by «artistic vision», is used to cover up the lack of transparency of other transactions taking place behind the scenes. The problem is not that money or «critical gifts» enter the art field, but the way this changes relations and influences decisions, creating a game within the game. And what happens when selective transparency is the only business ethic available?

Ethics might offer the possibility of distinguishing between the means and ends of certain procedures.[2] With them comes the obligation to study how the work of art, the exhibition, or the infrastructure under examination comes into being, is circulated and communicated, how they create particular conditions of reception, how they make their message perceptible and for whom. This applies to the actions of specific individuals as well as to the nowadays almost inevitable mix of public and private interests.

To quote an article recently published in Frieze: «Yet far more outrageous than the behaviour of specific individuals is the hypocrisy of a business that not only puts up with conflicts of interest but actively produces them—and finally instrumentalizes the results as kompromat.» [3]

Ruf herself is refraining from public comment until the investigations into the dealings at the Stedelijk ordered by the City of Amsterdam have been completed. Given that results have not yet been published, the petition to reinstall Beatrix Ruf is premature—and very much in line with the conflicted business sketched above: It doesn't change a thing.

In order to have a discussion about autonomy, dependencies, and artistic visions I think it is necessary to step back from personal benefits and the aforementioned politics of friendship. The petition has made this even more urgent. A blind call for the reinstatement of Beatrix Ruf actually undermines the possibility of a discussion on the relative autonomy of art institutions and the «right» amount of dependencies (on the art market, on networks, on friendships, on desires, and asking and purchase prices).



[http://organic.software/][http://organic.software/]

[1] Daan van Lent, Arjen Ribbens, «Gratis kunst die stiekem toch 1,5 miljoen kost», October 6, 2017.

[2] See Walead Beshty, «Introduction/Toward an Aesthetics of Ethics», in W. Beshty (ed.), Ethics (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), pp. 12–20, here p. 20.

[3] Stefan Kobel, «Outrage Over Conflicts of Interest Misses the Mark», December 7, 2017.

REGINA PFISTER

Regina Pfister is a pen name we offer to all our authors who prefer not to publish under their own name. In doing so, we reference the recently discontinued art blog «Donnerstag» that had been run by Annika Bender since 2012. All «Donnerstag» authors published under pen names.

Regina Pfister ist ein Pseudonym, das wir allen unseren Autor/innen anbieten, die nicht mit eigenem Namen auftreten möchten. Wir nehmen damit Bezug auf den kürzlich eingestellten Kunstblog Donnerstag, der seit 2012 unter der Leitung von Annika Bender stand. Alle Autor/innen des Donnerstag publizierten unter Pseudonymen.

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