Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

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

Is Nestlé money evil?

Chantal Kaufmann, Gioia Dal Molin, Jérôme Massard, Marc Hunziker, Pablo Müller

Money for the arts has to come from somewhere. But what are the implications of getting funding from a huge transnational corporation? Is public money really better than private money? We discussed these and other questions in a small roundtable with Gioia Dal Molin, Marc Hunziker, Chantal Kaufmann and Jérôme Massard. All of them are part of the independent art scene in Switzerland.





Photographed by Sarah Anne Ward for Bloomberg Businessweek, all other images: Courtesy Nestlé

Pablo Müller: Jérôme, at a roundtable [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngxu-RkmGXA] in Lucerne you made a point concerning Nestlé money. You said that you would never take money from the Fondation Nestlé pour l'art for your projects and that in your view this is what contributes to defining a self-organized art practice as ‹alternative›. Can you please elaborate on that?

Jérôme Massard: In fact, almost twenty years ago when I was a member of the art group Klat [http://www.klat.ch], we did — meaning, I, too, did — once accept Nestlé money. So it is not like I've never done it. The Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO) in Geneva received some money for our show from Nestlé and we did not refuse it.



Jérôme Massard takes a shower at Dakota's, 2e Biennale des espaces d'art indépendants, Genève, 2017, Photo: Laurence Favre Bulle

Pablo: But can you explain why you have problems with Nestlé money? The question of funding seems to be crucial for you to define what you see as alternative.

Jérôme: I can only speak for myself. I think it is part of being an artist to decide who you want to work with. The other evening in Lucerne I was saying that I personally do not understand how one can define oneself as independent while accepting money from a huge transnational corporation. Nestlé plays on the same level as Coca Cola. In Switzerland it still has a very positive image which is totally fake. Elsewhere in the world Nestlé is — I won't say evil because that is stupid — seen very differently. In accepting this money you have to accept the Nestlé brand in your space and in your CV. My personal point of view is that I can't accept that.

Pablo: Do you really think that a boycott of Nestlé by the art scene would have a big impact? Or to put it differently, do you think that art is really that important to Nestlé for building a positive corporate image in Switzerland?

Jérôme: Nestlé does privatize water in very aggressive ways to save the profit of their shareholders. For twenty years now they have been buying springs of water all over the world. I don't think, and this is, again, my ethics, that you can just sweep that under the carpet and say «Nestlé money is ok». It is the same with other transnational corporations like Sandoz or Bayer. All these huge companies buy themselves beautiful façades for very little money. That is artwashing. And to me artwashing is as much a problem as greenwashing.

Pablo: Gioia, you together with Anna Francke run the art space Le Foyer [http://lefoyer-lefoyer.blogspot.ch] in Zürich. Le Foyer had a partnership with Nestlé for three years, from 2014 until 2016. At the same time your project sees itself as part of a critical discourse and includes socio-political issues. How does this go together?

Gioia Dal Molin: I do not really think that Nestlé has a positive image here in Switzerland. Some people may still think that Nestlé is just a Swiss chocolate company. But I think we are

way beyond that. And in my opinion it is too simple to say «Nestlé is evil». It would be more interesting to talk about independence in general. Why should Nestlé money be different from money provided by the Migros Kulturprozent? Migros sells Nestlé products in their stores. Is money from the City of Zürich better than Migros money? Anyway, when we had the offer to get money from the Nestlé foundation we actually — and this is the reality of doing an off-space here in Zürich — had no choice. If we hadn't taken that money we would have had to close down our program. And for us the decision was that if we accept the money we will always pay artist fees, which was something we couldn't do before. At least in that sense we could make something good out of it by injecting money into a segment of the art world that needed it.



Gioia Dal Molin photographed at the former location of the art space Le Foyer at Müllerstrasse in Zürich, 2015, Photo: Jonas Schnyder

Jérôme: Migros is not Nestlé. Migros started out as an enterprise aiming to provide people with lower-cost consumer goods than the capitalist market.

Gioia: That was the idea in the 1920s.

Jérôme: There is always a choice. That doesn't mean that you can't do nice things with Nestlé money. My point is that by taking this money you accept that Nestlé will use your name to build its own image, no matter what you use the money for.

Pablo: But as I understand you, Gioia, you have a more pragmatic position on this issue. You see potential in transferring money from the private corporate sector into the independent art scene.

Gioia: I don't know if I would call it pragmatic. All I can say is that I'm well aware of these things. For me there are other strategies of political engagement. Still, I prefer taking money from Nestlé and doing a series of artist conversations about important topics to not taking the money.

Pablo: You two, Marc and Chantal, do the art space Up State [http://www.up-state.ch] together with Rafal Skoczek. On the website you claim that you do not take any money from private or public sources. You get the money to cover all your expenses by running a bar called POOL. About this bar project you write «POOL is a bar/music/party project whose

revenue is used exclusively to finance the program of UP STATE.» What is your approach? Why it is important for you to not work with funding institutions?

Marc Hunziker: Our space, which we consider a non-commercial, not-for-profit artist-run space, came about in an unplanned way. After enrolling in art school in Zürich we decided to open an art space. Up State is part of a squatted building in Zürich, the Koch Areal. When you look back at the history of squats in Zürich, they were never financed by any kind of public funding. It is part of the political logic of those projects. The context of the space led us toward this form of organization. It was not a dogmatic decision. It resulted from the way squats are organized.

Chantal Kaufmann: With the aim of running a non-commercial art space, we just started to be active together as a group, in our own logic. Marc converted his studio space at the art school into a bar. It was like a student bar, open every Thursday. Because it was an institutional context there was no rent; we also didn't pay ourselves a salary. All the revenue went straight into the new space. Of course, over time the issue of self-precarisation arose, but this goes beyond our scope here.

Marc: I guess there is no such thing as independence and in our case it was never our goal to be independent. On the contrary: from the beginning we were like parasites. We were in the school and reused the given infrastructure, turning the school studio which was intended for producing art into a bar and transferring the money it generated into a social space instead. It is important to point out that it is a very specific project. I don't see it being a formula for any other art space. The process-orientated work and precarious, loose form of organization was never an explicit thing. It was never an ideological decision.



Marc Hunziker (on the left) and Chantal Kaufmann (on the right) run the art space Up State together with Rafal Skoczek, 2017

Pablo: Then why is it important for you to put it so prominently on the website? That sounds like a statement to me.

Chantal: First of all, we want to keep the artistic practice separate from the party project. That's why we named the art space and the bar differently. Obviously, the POOL bar project involves circulation of money. The project is intended to raise money to allow Up State to develop a program without the priority of — or, indeed, dependency on — generating money through sales. It's a concept that has, in fact, been done before. We are not at all interested in making money from Up State's shows.

Pablo: Are there differences in pricing? Do you charge more for a drink at the POOL bar than at an Up State opening?

Chantal: No, there is really no difference. There have been exceptions, like charging a Euro more when we were at a very fancy place such as the Istituto Svizzero in Rome, where it felt like a service and it was really a different context. So it depends a bit on the location, but we mostly try to keep the pricing very low both at the POOL bar and the Up State openings.

Marc: We made this comment on our website to make transparent how we finance our projects. Over the years it became a statement of sorts.

Pablo: Returning to all of you, would you say that there is a difference between public and private money? We already touched on this question, but I would like to bring up again.

Gioia: For me, there is no big difference between public and private money. What is important is that you have certain priorities for your project, be it your independent art space or your artistic practice. Whether it is a prize you receive from the Bundesamt für Kultur (Swiss Federal Office of Culture) or money you get from the city, you always have certain priorities and that is something we really need to be aware of. When we take money from the city of Zürich, we are pulled into this effort of Zürich to be an important center of contemporary art with the Löwenbräu-Areal, the international galleries and a diverse independent scene. And the city is, in fact, getting a lot of value out of that effort: it gets huge returns on the little bit of money they fund us with, as the city is put on the map of Europe as a major cultural hub with a lively art scene.

Chantal: When you apply for money you are confronted with all kinds of requirements. In our case, I don't think we could do what we do, if we had to meet all those demands. Taking into account our artistic practice, both as a group and individually, it's hard for us to plan long-term. We need this freedom which at the same time somehow influences our program and our practice.

Gioia: I am not here to defend Nestlé, but Nestlé gave us the greatest freedom. They gave us the money for three years and never asked any questions. With the city, Pro Helvetia and Migros Kulturprozent we always have to justify why we made changes to the program and things like that. In that sense it was easy money and it gave us freedom.

Jérôme: Sure, it's easy money, that's why they give it so freely and people take it. But just think again about this equation. Nestlé steals water and people die from not having water. And here in Switzerland they are funding art and making a cultural scene interesting. Maybe that is a short-circuited equation, but it is part of the reality of where Nestlé's money comes from. And no other company in Switzerland is doing that. I mean Migros is not stealing water from people in India or Pakistan. Recently, an art space I am involved in refused money from Nestlé and I think its a good thing.

Gioia: I really think it is not that simple. I mean Migros is speculating with food.

Marc: Jérôme makes a point and the art community should get more sensitive about such things. We should think of drawing lines. In the case of Nestlé you work very directly on behalf of a brutal giant company. This is different from the various forms of public money. I am always happy to hear that there are spaces that refuse 40'000 Swiss francs from Nestlé. In a time when things are getting too blurred — neoliberal capitalism is something that is very hard to grasp — stances like that are much needed.

Pablo: In the United States, France and Great Britain there have been several attempts to get money from oil corporations out of art institutions. One famous example is the campaign [http://www.liberatetate.org.uk] against BP at Tate. If there were a campaign for a Nestlé-free art scene in Switzerland, would you get involved?

Chantal: Yes, I would be part of such a campaign. I think it is very important to participate in such discussions.

Marc: Questioning forms of action which open up the closed field of contemporary art and are emancipatory is part of my and our practice. I would definitely solidarize with such a campaign.

Pablo: What do you, Jérôme, think of participating in a Nestlé-free art campaign?

Jérôme: I would be part of it. Nestlé is giving a lot of money to the arts and as artists we can do something. So for sure, I would be part of it. But I will not transform my art into being a message. Art has to be art. But maybe art can change people’s minds.

GIOIA DAL MOLIN

Gioia Dal Molin is a Zürich-based art historian. She studied art history and history at the Universities of Zürich and Rome and finished her studies with a PhD on art funding in Switzerland. She works in art funding and as an independent curator runs Le Foyer, a platform for artist talks and exhibitions.

MARC HUNZIKER

Marc Hunziker finished his studies at the University of the Arts in Zürich in 2016. Current solo and collaborative exhibitions include *Lumpen Headache,* DIANA, Los Angeles (with Chantal Kaufmann, Rafal Skoczek, Matthias Ringgenberg); *Leisure Time Fantasy*, The Green River Project, Hillsdale, New York (with Chantal Kaufmann); *Do You Think Im Dressed? Because Im Not!*, Taylor Macklin, Zürich; *Let The Hand Grasp It*, SSZ Süd, Köln. Current group exhibitions include *Speak Lokal!*, Kunsthalle Zürich; *Is There Anything You Want Before We Go?*, Forde, Geneva; *A Form Is Social Gatherer*, Plymouth Rock, Zürich.

CHANTAL KAUFMANN

Chantal Kaufmann is an artist living and working in Vienna and Zürich. She holds a degree in Fine Arts from the University of the Arts in Zürich. Her work takes shape mainly in video, but also spans installation and writing, and is characterized by an interest in the field of socio-economics. Chantal is one of the three artists running the self-organized art space UP STATE (with Marc Hunziker and Rafal Skozcek). The space is located in the squatted area named Koch Areal in Zürich and run without external funds or financial aid. All of the three organizers pursue a distinct artistic practice, but also work and show together. Currently she is attending the master program in critical studies in Vienna.

JÉRÔME MASSARD

Jérôme Massard is an artist, graphic designer and cultural activist. He is a member of the artist group KLAT (founded in 1997 in Geneva). KLAT has been the curatorial team of the independent art space Forde from 1998-1999, initiated other projects like Shark (2006-2008) and Broom Social Club (2009-2012). He is member of the board of Forde and co-founder of the union of self-organized cultural spaces in Genève called (UECA - Union des espaces culturels autogérés). He is also co-founder of Ressources Urbaines, a cultural cooperative that aim to provide work spaces to artists in Geneva. One of the most recent projects in which he participated was the second Biennale of independent art spaces of Genève (BIG 2017) that he also co-founded in 2015.

PABLO MÜLLER

Pablo Müller is an art historian and art critic. His writings are published in Kunstbulletin,

Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung and Jungle World, among others. After having spent time in Berlin and New York, he has been working in research at the Lucerne School of Art and Design since 2014 and doing his PhD at the University of Zürich. He is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

Pablo Müller ist Kunsthistoriker und Kunstkritiker. Seine Artikel erschienen unter anderem in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung, Jungle World. Nach längeren Aufenthalten in Berlin und New York arbeitet er seit 2014 in der Forschung an der Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst und promoviert an der Universität Zürich. Er ist Mitherausgeber von Brand-New-Life.

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930313