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Magazin für Kunstkritik

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Parrhesiastic Acts

Georgia Sagri, Sofia Bempeza

Georgia Sagri in conversation about her participation in Manifesta 11 with Sofia Bempeza.



Sofia Bempeza (S): I would like to start our conversation by talking about the act of ‹truth telling› or ‹parrhesia›. Taking this specific speech activity of the parrhesiastes as our starting point, we can discuss parrhesia, or truth-telling, as practiced vis-à-vis institutional power and, more specifically, as practiced in the art field. Of course, we first need to define what ‹truth› means in this context. It is the truth of an individual practicing parrhesia within hegemonic institutional structures or relationships, yet it is also the Truth of the Institutional Power itself. So what is the ‹truth› of the parrhesiastes?

Georgia Sagri (G): In my practice I suggest that, firstly, one needs to consider the impossibility of speaking the truth. The truth is always changing depending on the addressor and the addressed. The one who speaks the truth in front of power speaks her own truth. Power has defined truth with a capital T as total truth. There is no general act of speaking the truth; parrhesia, in my opinion, is an action that always changes depending on the setting. Who is the one who is speaking and under which conditions is she criticizing power? When we are talking about institutional critique, we need to see the exact ways in which an artist is using it to debunk the way an institution operates. Institutional critique tends to give more attention to the institution and the issue of the structure of the capital T as an institution, its mechanisms, its status and intellect. What I try to do, moreover, is to expose the subject in dialog as well as in conflict with the institution.

S: Michel Foucault deals with parrhesia as an activity in ancient Athens and Rome in his lectures on Discourse and Truth.[1] In short, parrhesia means to speak the truth in front of the tyrant. The parrhesiastes must take a risk in speaking the truth, a risk that the king or tyrant generally cannot take. The parrhesiastes speaks her truth in front of the tyrant in public. Now, if we address institutional power and its state of Truth, we should also consider that an institution is not a monolith. That is to say, power relationships and mechanisms are always in a state of flux. Rather than being concentrated in a single individual or even a couple of persons, institutional power is diffused.

G: So the state of Truth represented by the institution is always cultivated by different subjects and mechanisms that produce it. The one who speaks the truth already needs to exercise a sense of self, who is speaking the truth. There is a certain distance when the self is separated from power. There must be a tactic, an exercise of separation from this state of Truth. This happens to a) subjects that are excluded from power socially or physically in the first place, and b) subjects that immediately distance themselves from the state of Truth of power because of a moment and a particular issue that strongly affects them. The latter need to make a decision, take a prominent ontological stand. This moment of distance is absolutely essential for parrhesia.

S: The parrhesiastes doesn’t just speak her own truth, but articulates this truth in public as well. Moreover, the parrhesiastes, according to Foucault, not only speaks her individual truth but also articulates the Truth because she knows it is really true. This is also why the parrhesiastes avoids rhetorical forms and uses the most direct words and forms of expression. Besides, practicing parrhesia involves a risk. It is the risk of criticizing power in public. For artists or art practitioners, speaking the truth means to address power mechanisms within the art field. Power manifests itself in professional relationships, in negotiations with the art institution, in the conditions of the art production context itself. More specifically, I would like to pose the question: which structural conditions/actualities block critique as parrhesia within art institutions?

G: So there is truth with a capital T and there is the creation of a distance from it. The ones who practice this distance are those who are already excluded and who are not in power to speak any truth, as well as those who, at a crucial moment, distance themselves from power

and the total Truth. There are two parameters of parrhesia, a spatial one and a time-based one. For example, in *Antigone*, the tragedy written by Sophocles, Antigone represents power, she is privileged and protected in the palace, yet in spite of this she acts parrhesiastic the moment she makes a crucial ontological decision for herself regarding the burying of her brother. Her law is the law of the gods and not the law of the palace. She refuses the State of Truth in the palace by defending her own law. This act distances her from power and at the same time makes her parrhesiastic. This act is not a reaction but her position, her own truth.

S: In regard to Antigone we are talking about disobedience of the law. But this disobedience creates another value or another law according to which she is acting.

G: Yes, this is very interesting. Always when we speak the truth we speak the truth of the position we defend. Antigone is not just acting for own sake, she is addressing a tradition that is related to the law of gods, a law that transcends human laws and human power. If we see this truth exclusively as disobedience, we fail to understand the implications of the object of her obedience. She is so confident regarding her truth that, even though she is confronted with many obstacles and humiliations, she still speaks her truth. Her empowerment doesn't derive from the intention of disobedience, but from the very truth of her position.

S: This is a good moment to talk about the tactics of the parrhesiastic subject. What is this self that speaks the truth?

G: Firstly, there is a constant testing of the ground of power, because to speak the truth one needs to test one's position, that is, to test one's actual true intentions, to make sure that they are actually true. If there are no facts, no actual reasons or issues with a certain weight, then there is no need for anything to be articulated, no reason for parrhesia to take place. This is what happens for example, with so-called experts in political philosophy partaking in social struggles. If an expert supports a factory struggle, this doesn't automatically mean that he is holding the context of the struggle. In fact, because he is assuming that he has the content (the Truth with a capital T) of the struggle, he becomes a barrier for the context of the specific struggle and the issues of the specific subjects involved into it. One should reflect about the conditions, the self in these conditions and its actions within a certain context. This is what I mean by testing the ground, which always involves the acting subject. The subject who is influenced by specific conditions can either follow power influences or realize how this form of power contradicts her own production, condition and herself. If she doesn't analyze the terrain and the way it influences her then it is difficult to act.

S: It is an essential practice to detect the parameters of the terrain within which you are operating.

G: To detect, to reflect but also to subject your actions in the terrain to self-criticism.

S: Let's look at a particular example. Your piece *Documentary of Behavioral Currencies* in the Manifesta 11 exhibition addressed the issue of work and the role of the artist within different institutional frames.

G: I was invited to participate in an exhibition titled *What people do for money*. In this exhibition all the artists, regardless of their economic and class status, are addressed as privileged. There is no real interest in the different cases of individual artists, as all artists are addressed as one, unified, social class that should be exposed to another social class, that of the professionals, the ‹real workers›. For the curatorial premise there are two social classes, the artists' class and the workers' class. This separation is simply based on the banal assumption that artists only make art to make money. But this is only true for a particular art production model. It is, in my opinion, a populist, modernist and western idea of what an

artist is supposed to do, as well as what a worker does in a twentieth-century global economy.

S: The curatorial team of Manifesta 11 dodges the unpleasant discourse of symbolic values, monetary relationships and precariousness. It also blurs the artist's approach to production and wage labor. In my view, work and wage labor would have been very tempting issues to examine, if the curatorial approach hadn't been so reactionary. Besides, Manifesta 11 and the curator refused to address specific professions and forms of wage labor within the cultural field as part of the exhibition topic.

G: From the beginning I decided not to provide additional time and effort for the institution and I didn't do extra fundraising to produce my piece, because I wanted to participate in this exhibition as an equal to all other invited artists. This production (in one of the most expensive cities in the world) cost 10.000 CHF. This included general production costs as well as my artist's fee (1.000 CHF), per diems for the days of research, material costs and transportation expenses and money I paid to the people who helped me install the piece. When it was communicated to me that an inherent part of the concept of this exhibition was filming my meetings with the professionals, I proposed a contract, asking the curator and, by extension, Manifesta to pay me for this filming on an hourly basis, as an actress.



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioral currencies | Agreement 1*, inkjet print on paper, 44 x 29cm, installation view at UP STATE, 2016

Since I did not receive a response, I sent a second contract, asking for full control over my presentation and for the copyright for all of the film material. I did not receive a response to either one of the contracts. At the same time I needed to see to it that my opinion would be included in the exhibition catalog and that my meetings with the curatorial team would be filmed. My host (banker Josephin Varnholt) was very interested in participating, but the production team had to be convinced that what I do is actually an art practice. The skepticism of the Manifesta team was stronger than that of the bank representatives. In my opinion, what kind of work an artist decides to make, how she decides to make her money, how she circulates her work and what she decides to call her piece is, in the end, up to her: it is her

practice. The piece is part of a wide range of practices she pursues. For my participation in Manifesta I wanted to make the production chain visible. My piece is titled *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies*.



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioral currencies | Agreement 2*, inkjet print on paper, 44 x 29cm, installation view at UP STATE, 2016

S: How did you perceive your role regarding the filming with your host?

G: If I am supposed to play a role—that of the artist—for the parameters of this particular exhibition, it is the institution and the concept that compel me to play this role. It is a way for the institution to create a structure where the artist is addressed in her role in order to connect with other professionals. This is simply a tactic to legitimize institutional power. The role of the artist is so important for the institution, because it pins down and makes the curatorial parameters so specific without any space for reflection and criticality. For me it was important to deconstruct this parameter by mimicking the legal language of the institution and changing it. I also used the existing means that the institution was providing in order to shift the discussion.

If Jankowski is paid to play the role of the curator, I need to be paid for playing the role of the artist. In my view, before doing art, it is important to be aware of my condition as a person. I am not playing the role of being an artist when I do art. If I were paid to play the role of the artist, I would be an actress. I would do rehearsals etc. to play this role the best I can. I wasn't paid to play this role. I was given a budget to produce my piece. The artistic practice represents a very unique symbolic capital that can claim autonomy in terms of production but not in terms of how global capitalism functions. At the moment, global markets are more and more lowering wages. The worker of 2016 is paid less than the one of 2010. This is also the case for artists, although the art market profits from financial capital. Even if there is still output that continues to have a stable market, art production in general is affected. Through my practice I am trying to suggest an alternative way of producing—a different way to display and circulate my work. I try. This doesn't mean I succeed. But I continue to try.

S: The spectrum of professions addressed by Manifesta 11 seems quite traditional and stereotypical. For artist/curator Jankowski professions are considered to be gender-specific, timeless professions such as watchmaker, mortician, dentist, fireman, sex worker (the curator uses the term «prostitute»), policeman, psychotherapist and artist. ‹Because we have 2016›, one could also consider other types of working realities, which do not fit into this old-school schema. Moreover, the central curatorial idea of combining different professions with an archetype of the ‹artist profession› (the male genius art master of previous centuries) is in itself problematic, because it offers just a display of professions.

G: I find it problematic that the concept perceives the artist separate from the rest of the society. My piece is critical in regard to profession as the center of identity production. I think that profession, wage labor and the transformations these categories entail for human behavior are the barriers to finding oneself and becoming who one wants to be. Of course, when we perceive work as the primary way to access basic needs (food, water and housing), then we also perceive identity formation as a product of wage labor. As a result, we fail to imagine how those basic needs can be accessed without wage labor. In my opinion it is possible to create identity that is not a product but, rather, a cultivation of the self through other means: knowledge, pleasure, desire, access to emotions and connectivity etc. The two identical sculptures (which I call modular) hold this possibility. With my work as a whole in Manifesta I wanted to create a place for two women to meet that is not informed by wage labor and social separation.



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies*, installation view, Manifesta 11, Luma Foundation, 2016

S: When critique gets to the heart of structural conditions within the institution, a conflictive situation arises. A conflict involving different sides or positions can be expressed in different ways. Very often art institutions (through their representatives) develop specific tactics directed against the critique of the parrhesiastes. For example, one is expected to have a disciplined attitude toward the institution. Or institutional power tends to perceive the conflict as a personal issue.

G: Exactly. In the case of Manifesta 11, the representative of the institution stops being a representative and becomes the artist Jankowski. Power can easily address you personally, with threats, anger, violence etc. If you are aware that this is a trick or a strategy, you continue even stronger. I wouldn't be able to continue, if I were to take threats and comments personally while doing my work. I would feel so violated that the only place to gain trust and strength would be my truth. I also had to look around and see the support I had around me, and the strength that is cultivated by other means, not through the institution that invited me, but through other relationships.

My strategy was to leave or retreat when I was addressed personally. So I immediately created distance and space for myself to reflect. This gives you time to not get too stuck in institutional dialectics. The moment I stopped asking for acceptance from the representatives of power, I realized that other kinds of support do exist. I found solidarity. Thus, solidarity is created when you slowly realize that they are so many other people, structures, forms, ways and relationships that can support your position, which is also their position. If you continue trying to convince, then you are losing your language. And to forget your language, means that you forget how to articulate your argument that brought you to this position in the first place.

S: It is interesting to see the point when parrhesia turns out to create conflict. What happens when the parrhesiastes addresses problematic situations in terms of the structures of an art institution? The parrhesiastic individual who addresses problematic situations becomes the ‹nasty child› who destroys the nice atmosphere of the family or the ‹nasty pupil›, who disagrees with his/her master. The actual disagreement becomes a personal issue. This conflict has to be managed: the representatives of the institution attempt to discipline the parrhesiastic subject. The institutional Truth (power dispositive) calls for understanding, devotion and collaboration. How did you proceed?

G: The piece runs in two parallel parts. One was to create a ground for the sculptures, with a sense of non-stereotypical perception and as a space that allowed the meetings with my host to be in private. Then the second part was to present the meetings with the institution in public. All of this work had to be made with the means provided by the institution. The film crew that produced the videos in the Pavilion of Reflections worked on both of my video pieces as well. The only way to own the means is to actually use the means provided by the institution in my own way and to retain the authorship of the video material.

When the video *Georgia Sagri as Georgia Sagri (still without being paid as an actress)* was edited, I sent Christian the first footage, which was immediately censored. After that there was a series of discussions on how the team thought they had to be represented in this video. The only reason to proceed was that I realized that the people who work for Manifesta don't have the possibility to be parrhesiastic, as I was trying to be. I respected the opinion of the filmed individuals and did everything they asked me to do. I embraced all the changes they asked me to make. While I was editing the video according to the curatorial demands, I had no idea that the video would be presented at all, so I had to make a very quick decision. In the end the video shows two Manifesta employees with blurred faces and voices, while I dub what I was saying during the real meeting we had at the Manifesta offices. If I was to follow only the curatorial guideline, Manifesta would have decide whether to present my work or not.



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies* | *Sofas*, 2016, inkjet print of tyvek paper



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies* | *Georgia Sagri as Georgia Sagri (still without being paid as an actress)*, 2016, HD video, 12'26"

So I contacted UPSTATE, an artist-run space in Zurich, and they were extremely happy to present my work as a solo exhibition with the same title, *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies*. The exhibition included the video, the contracts I sent to Christian and a sign

piece, which was the agreement I signed with Manifesta. After the UPSTATE opening, Manifesta presented the video at the Pavilion of Reflections. I was, of course, never informed about this.



Georgia Sagri, *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies*, installation view, UP STATE, 2016;

G: Anyhow, this doesn't change the piece, how it was made, and the very fact that it exists. If the video is now presented at the Pavilion of Reflections, this is a co-option, but the critique already happened.

S: For me the critique within the institution can be active, but also inactive. The crucial point is what happens when the critique is activated, when it goes against the institutional structures. Surely there are lots of critical positions within art institutions (artists, curators, theorists), which are visible. But the moment the critique is activated from within (a critique that does not only address common socio-political problems outside of the institution), then you have a conflict in the house, **in the kitchen of the art institution**.

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, Six lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, Oct-Nov. 1983

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930398