

**Opening Remarks**  
**Anton Vidokle**  
**Night School, January 31, 2008**

Good evening, welcome to Night School,

I am not very good at making introductions, so I thought I'd take this opportunity to clarify a couple of things about this project. As some of you may know, it began some years back as research towards Manifesta 6, European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which was sadly cancelled. Following the cancellation, together with my colleagues, I set up an independent project in Berlin, called unitednationsplaza – an exhibition as school. The night school is a continuation of all this activity, which started for me quite a long time ago, in the summer of 2004. At the center of all this are several questions which may not have a simple answer, but that seem to me increasingly more important to think about: questions about the role of a public art institutions, about the agency of art and the role of the artist.

Public exhibitions of art start during the time of the French Revolution. What actually happens is that the king of France is evicted from his home, The Louvre, and executed along with the queen. Shortly thereafter a part of the palace, Salon Carré, is used for a first fully public exhibition of painting and sculpture by contemporary artists of the time.

The public for this Salon show is in a sense the first real “public” – a group comprised of citizen-subjects who have just violently gained political power and instituted the First Republic. While the works in this exhibition did not contain any explicitly politically or socially engaged art work, but rather traditional paintings of landscapes, nudes, mythological and religious motifs, etc, I think that the actual experience of being able to enter this royal palace to view art was surely political and was intimately connected to the Revolution, which was taking place. Perhaps attending such an exhibition of art was no different from voting for the first time, going to a public hospital or visiting a state ministry – all a part of newly created citizens' political agency and engagement with how their community was structured and administered, and a new ability to change all this via political means.

What is of real importance here is that perhaps this situation simultaneously created new and unprecedented positions and opportunities both for artistic practice and for art institutions: this new presence of a public for the first time offers artists a potential of having a transformative effect on the way community is organized, through invoking a critical function of art for an engaged group of individuals (and influencing public opinion which, in turn, could result in tangible social and political changes). It is in no way accidental that only several decades later, we see emergence of such figures as Courbet, Manet and others, who help institute the paradigm of critically engaged art practice that we are still following today

For art institutions, the emergence of the art-viewing public implies a transition from mere private collections to a much more meaningful social function of shaping public opinion. In this way, both the artist and the art institution suddenly manage to obtain a very sovereign position. Interestingly, all this was possible within a process of mere spectatorship: looking at art objects and representations.

But there is a catch: by now the spectators of art have largely lost their political agency as such.

Already in early 1980's Martha Rosler observed that the public, in a sense of groups of engaged citizen-subjects, was being replaced by audiences. The difference between these two terms is easily imagined if you just think of a situation like an opera house or a movie theatre – where audiences passively sit passively in a darkened room, rather than situations where it is possible for people to participate in a more active way. In this sense, audiences are perhaps groups of consumers of leisure and spectacle; they have no political agency and no necessary means or particular interest in affecting social change. My feeling is that what Rosler started to observe in the 80's is now *fait accompli*: while the audiences for art became enormous, there is no public among them.

Consequently, while it is still possible to produce a critical art object, there seems to be no public out there that could complete its transformative function, possibly rendering the very premise behind contemporary art practice effectively futile.

Unitednationsplaza is exhibition as school. I realize that this sounds somewhat paradoxical, yet it's the only way to describe the project that started as biennial, scheduled to take place on Cyprus in Nicosia in the fall of 2006. Despite being an artist rather than curator, I was invited to join the curatorial team developing a concept for Manifesta. Our thinking at the time was: why do another biennial? The incredible proliferation and monotony of such events has largely rendered them meaningless. There were several reasons why we were interested in an art school model rather than an art exhibition. Schools are one of the few places left where experimentation is to some degree encouraged, where emphasis is supposedly on process and learning rather than product. Schools are also multidisciplinary institutions by nature, where discourse, practice and presentation can co-exist without privileging one over the other.

The structure of unitednationplaza and, now the Night School, is simple: an informal, free university type series of seminars, conferences, lectures, film screening and occasional performances with a focus on contemporary art, that continues for one year. Like a public exhibition it is open to all who come, aggressively solicits audiences locally and internationally through advertisement and projects it's content, yet unlike an art show virtually no art objects are presented. Unlike a normal artist's talk or a lecture, the seminars are lengthy: in Berlin they sometimes stretched for several weeks, assembling every night including weekends. In total there were six such seminars in Berlin and there will be 11 in New York, although shorter in duration. Their topics ranged from the role of religion in a post-communist situation, history of video art as a social medium, viability of discursive frame, possibilities of art in the context of war, production of images after enlightenment, and others. In Berlin, Unitednationsplaza also presented various film screenings and performances, and hosted Martha Rosler Library during the summer months. In the basement of the building was the Salon Aleman, a functioning bar put together by several artists involved in the project and open sporadically.

Naturally this asked (and will continue to ask) for a lot of time from the audience, and even more importantly it forced some of the audience to articulate a position in relationship to the project, but reciprocally, it offered all who attended a stake, a certain kind of ownership of the situation. I would argue that this possibility of having a stake enables the kind of productive engagement that is still possible, if spectatorship is bypassed and traditional roles of

institution/curator/artist/public are complicated. To me this means that the public can be resurrected and the modality of critical art practice can be preserved given some changes to how art experience is conceived and constructed.

Another thing that I would like to mention in passing is that it's very important to think of how to do things in such a way that one does not completely rely on institutions for audience or funding, so that the work can also exist and circulate on its own, framed by itself. For instance, *unitednationsplaza* is an artwork in its own setting, it does not need anyone to display it or promote and bring audiences to it – it does all that for itself. It can engage with an institution – as in this particular case with the New Museum through the Night School, yet it does not completely depend on institutions to manifest itself. Of course *Unitednaitonsplaza* is not a singular example in this respect: there is quite a long tradition of extra- institutional projects and practices from Tina Girouard, Caroline Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food*, to more recent examples such as the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut or The Land Foundation in Chiang Mai.

On a different note, I would like to deeply thank Eungie Joo, the Director Curator of education at the New Museum, for having the vision to bring this project to New York, and Rya Conrad-Bradshaw for organizing much of it. In anticipation of the Boris Groys lecture, entitled: *Religion after Communism*, I would also like to thank God for making all this possible...