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## **The "Hamburg Project": A Farewell to Discipline**

### **Project History**

The exhibition project with the name of the "Hamburg Project" opened on January 21st 1994 at Moscow's Contemporary Art Centre on Bolshaya Yakimanka Street 6. You could read this on the invitation. There was, however, a significant nuance in the way the invitation was worded: the public was being invited to attend "the beginning of the Hamburg Project's expository phase". The preceding (non-expository) phase of the project began far earlier on and materialized outside of any exhibition venue.

The first phase of the Hamburg Project begins in the spring of 1993, when the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) was invited to contribute a non-commercial project to Hamburg's International Art Fair, which was dedicated to art from Eastern Europe in that year. The invitation by, Rudolf Zwirner, the director of the art fair, was answered by the author of these lines, who was the CAC's chief curator at the time. I must admit that this answer represented a task that fell beyond the scope of my traditional administrative routine. It wasn't so much that I was bewildered by the prospects of working on the international scene; the creation of exhibitions for Western institutions was something I had grown accustomed to by then; what was new in principle was the challenge of appearing on behalf of an institution and representing it through the means of an artistic exhibition. In fact, it seemed that the conditions for this kind of representation did not actually exist. It was all too obvious that the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) was an arbitrary institution. As a fragile organization, bereft of economic stability, it was losing its social function and its public support; by 1993, the general enthusiasm of the Perestroika, which never came to fruition completely, was already rapidly disintegrating. The only resource that the CAC had access to consisted of a small circle of internationally oriented artists, who saw the it as one of few, if not the only creative platforms in Moscow at the time.

This recognition served as the point of departure for the project's representative strategy. The exhibition did not want to represent the individual works of the artists that belonged to this circle; instead, it attempted to represent the circle as such, namely as a social community and a substantial basis for the institution itself.

At any rate, the pre-expository phase of the project began in the first weeks of May 1993 (the exact date is not documented), when I invited eight artists into my little office at the CAC. They included Dmitry Gutov, Vladimir Kupryanov, Yuri Leiderman, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Ilya Piganov, Guia Ruigvava, Alexei Shulgin and Vadim Fishkin. All of them were key figures in Moscow's artistic community at the time. Contrary to traditional curatorial practice, I suggested that we refrain from discussing their potential contributions to the exhibition in Hamburg, and focus on the entire complex of problems fundamental to any representative institutional act. In other words, the curator suggested that the artists share the responsibility, not for exhibition as much as for the construction of the institution itself.

At the time, the questions with which I addressed the artists were formulated as follows: how do you see the ideal artistic institution? How should the CAC develop in the future? And at the same time: can this ideal model of the institution materialize in an artistic project? Can this project be executed through collective effort, in dialogue, in peer-to-peer creativity? And finally: is it even possible to create any kind of collective project? Is the current situation only fraught with negative, deconstructive projections, or is it pregnant with positive, constructive projectivity?

As the discussion of these questions took on the rhythm of regular meetings, drawn out over the course of three months, it gave rise to a paradoxical inner dynamic. Not one position articulated by any one of the artists had any point of connection with those of the others. Yet it was this incompatibility that provided the conditions for producing the discussion's polemic intensity and creative passion.

The concrete result of this discussion consisted in a model of project-based exhibition practice, whose essence can be reduced as follows.. Each artist placed one small item with some personal symbolic meaning on the small glass table around which

we had debated for so many hours. In the operative terminology that arose spontaneously, the artists began to call these items "essential objects", just as they began to refer to the project as "the Hamburg Project". Having arisen in many hours of discussion, this working title was confirmed as the project's official name, when the glass-table with its "essential objects" was carried out into the middle of the CAC's exhibition-space and the Moscow art community was invited to attend the "beginning of the Hamburg Project's exhibition phase."

After the Hamburg Project was opened on January 21st, 1994, the artists were given keys for the exhibition space at the CAC, where they continually installed new objects and constructions as polemic responses to the objects and installation-constructions of the others. In other words, the discussion that was held verbally before now took on the form of work on a project.

Yet there are also other moments essential to this curatorial experiment. The artists were so engrossed in their internal dialogue that they became indifferent to any dialogue with the outer world. By avoiding any textual annotation and refusing to use exhibition-labels, the artists preserved their anonymity in the face of the exhibition's visitors. In the end, the exhibition was extended to all four rooms of the CAC, essentially taking on the character of a collective installation.

What was also extremely unusual was the role of the curator. Having initiated the project, I participated in the discussion as an equal among equals, until the artists asked me to moderate. By agreeing to the conditions of collective work during the expositional phase, I declined yet another set of functions and prerogatives. This is why the group *collectively* decided that the project had exhausted itself and was to be discontinued. This *collective decision* was made on April 21st 1994, that is, almost a year after the first meeting of artists and curators in the curatorial office on Yakimanka Street.

One might add that the art fair in Hamburg had long since taken place without us. The project was not shown there, even if it retained the name it had thus acquired.

### **The Crisis of Disciplinary Culture**

It is obviously a symptom for a deep identity crisis when the institution starts to invite subjects who are traditionally subordinate to its mechanisms to a discussion of its own legitimacy. This, in fact, comprised the strategic justification of the "Hamburg Project" and endowed it with its prophylactic positivity. The project declined to imitate traditional institutional work, which ignores inner contradictions in favor of outer appearances. But it also refused to end the routine, the process necessary for the survival of any institution. Thus, the project essentially came down to the collective discussion of the institution's crisis.

At the same time, the symptomatique of the problems faced by the project's initiators and participants was extremely broad. The identity crisis of the Contemporary Art Centre in particular and the Moscow art community at large was part of a broader social crisis, namely the crisis of Soviet disciplinary society on the whole. Thus, the first possible conclusion that the experience of the Hamburg Project suggests is that the project consisted in the attempt to develop a non-disciplinary mode of institutional praxis.

In disciplinary society, institutions are perceived as givens. They operate by predetermining action through dispositions (dispositives), to use Michel Foucault's term, defining public norms and practices, and their specifications, stratifications, and hierarchy. Since the project's participants engaged in a great deal of verbal discussion instead of making artifacts, the experiment of the "Hamburg Project" bears witness to the fact that discipline could no longer fulfill the function of bounding different practices and ascribing the status of independent professional activities. In the course of the project, its participants – both artists and curators – essentially declared a programmatic refusal of any subconscious reproduction of their professional function: by problematizing it through discussion, they moved beyond its predefined disciplinary boundaries. The fact that interaction is understood as a form of artistic practice is an obvious symptom of non-disciplinary presence in the artistic sphere. Within the bounds of disciplinary culture, the spheres of production and recreation or relaxation are clearly divided from one another; production needs to realize itself in a finished product, and not in the ephemeral throes of an interactive consideration of some potential result.

Yet another symptom of the "Hamburg Project's" non-disciplinary nature consisted in its programmatic refusal of hierarchy. Primarily, this refusal revealed itself in the position taken by the curator. As an equal among equals in a group of interlocutors, he refused the designated function of a moderator.. This refusal did not take place on the strength of his institutional position, defined a priori, but in the course of his development and on the basis of a collective decision made by the participants. In fact, all decisions – traditionally predetermined and managed by the curator's authority and power – were made in the course of the project's spontaneous self-organization. First and foremost, this concerned the distribution of exhibition-space among the artists.

It goes without saying that the curatorial choice was not completely foreign to the "Hamburg Project": in fact, the project began with the curator's choice of eight artists. Nevertheless, it is essential to realize that this choice was not subordinated to the logic of the disciplinary disposition: it was not managed by the curator's traditional goal of orders the invited artists into some artistic tendency, trend, or group. In other words, it did not pursue the goal of further developing or refining the given disciplinary order.

This is confirmed by yet another characteristic attribute of the "Hamburg Project", namely the name itself. As an arbitrary working title used by the project's participants, this name programmatically declared its preference for internal, confidential communication over outer communication. This name proclaims the project's freedom from conventional themes, from any connection to a broader intellectual discussion or problematique. To put it somewhat differently, the project does not serve any discourse created a priori. Quite on the contrary, its entire construction rests upon the assumption that the discourse is to take shape in the course of the project's development.

For this reason, the curator did not assume that his choice would add any new accent to the existing ideas on the phenomenon of (contemporary) art: he chose the artists that constituted the phenomenon itself by the very fact of their existence. Since this project was called into being by a crisis of disciplinary order, the only thing that was able to confirm the existence of art as a phenomenon was the presence of a number of individuals dedicated to artistic praxis, or to be more precise, individuals who claimed that whatever they were doing was, in fact, art. These individuals were the perfect participants in a discussion on the possibilities for a different institutional order, since it was the discussion of this potentiality that actually constituted the potential of its invention.

Finally, the last and most anti-disciplinary aspect of the "Hamburg Project" was that its curatorial choices did not pretend to be objective. It could hardly have been otherwise: after all, the pretense of objectivity is actually an attribute of disciplinary knowledge, which produces strict professional criteria. Under the conditions of the disciplinary order's crisis, the curatorial choice has no external arguments for proving its own objective and professional status: any choice is inevitably subjective. In forming a group whose communication is meant to constitute the professional community, the curator's choice is defined by non-professional criteria such as human sympathy, love or the mere inclination toward friendship.

### **Between Multitude and Bio-politics**

The main quality of friendship or sentiment is that its affinities are individual. The search for reason comes after an emotional impulse: one does not accept the other because of his-her adequacy in relation to some abstract category, but simply because the other exists. In stepping beyond the bounds of disciplinary forms of organization, curatorial praxis encounters the phenomena of plurality, multitude, and singularity. Once, phenomena that had not yet been integrated as objects of the disciplinary order were destined to remain detached and opaque to description. In other words, they were marginal. The curator's function consisted in integrating and describing these phenomena. Yet today, singularity and multiplicity stand at the very center of an order that is never actually fully organized or constructed, but constantly falling apart. This is precisely why the "Hamburg Project" brought together creative figures that were diametrically opposed to one another, lacking any common ground in terms of style, poetics, theme or ideology.

Incidentally, this also explains why the "Hamburg Project" found itself in

interactivity and processuality. Interaction is a form of bringing together things that are actually incompatible, while processuality is a means of temporarily holding together singular phenomena by setting them into mutual relation.. This, in turn, brings on the crisis of the traditional exhibition as the collocation of self-sufficient artifacts. Lacking any common symbolic horizon, rooted only in personal contexts, isolated art works become less and less accessible to any form of communication. This is why the Hamburg Project presupposed the physical presence of the artist in the exhibition-space. Rather than showing art works, it basically exhibited the process of their making as animate carriers of personal experience. For this reason, the individual context is supplemented by the context of the group, which was created in its collective efforts. In fact, not one single object made in the course of the "Hamburg Project" is self-sufficient: each of them is brought forth by the others and, in turn, supplies an impulse for the creation of something new. All of this shows that the project-efforts of the artists were not focused on the creation of objects as much as on the dramaturgy of their co-existence.

In this sense, the logic of analysis brings us to yet another conclusion: the experience of the Hamburg Project recognizes itself as a part of the problematique of what is now commonly known as bio-politics. By bio-politics we mean the formation of a new social order that tries to extend its control over the very existence of the individual, her-his body and her-his consciousness. Society's integrity is no longer simply maintained by systemic disciplinary rules, but by the "administration of life". As the "Hamburg Project" shows, this new administrative order can be rethought in terms of "self-administration", as the constituent co-existence of immanent singularities rather than as a function of the curator's homogenizing sovereignty.

### **Ontology and Labor**

Anticipating any further analysis, we might add yet another conclusion: firmly rooted in interaction and processuality, the experiment of the "Hamburg Project" proposes a new way of viewing the artist himself. This project is opposed to the extra-social notion of creativity: it is not oriented toward "self-discovery", toward the cult of the "studio's peace and quiet", the myth of the artist's "fatal destiny of creative solitude" etc. The Hamburg Project shows that the artist cannot exist without a community, that creativity cannot exist without sociality, and that individual authorship is impossible without the other.

Again, this idea rests upon the fundamental presupposition of the artist's immediate presence in the exhibition-space. Forced to appear here on a regular basis in order to set up, add to, and work on yet another amendment to the collective installation, he inevitably found himself in the potential spectator's field of vision. This is unprecedented: at a traditional exhibition, we only see the products of labor, while labor itself remains invisible. We have no idea of how much time was spent on making the art work or which efforts this making entailed. All of this information is kept exterior to the context of the exhibition and is shaped by two myths, namely the myth of "the torture of creativity" and the myth of the artist-virtuoso's uninhibited gesture. In this sense, the art work was always either a document of creative drama, or a carrier of the author's signature. But neither the one nor the other ever required the artist's physical presence. In the "Hamburg Project", however, it is this presence is overt and presents us with a de-romanticized image of labor. This image is actually the referent of the "poor" poetics chosen by the artists in making their collective installation. Make-shift constructions and materials such as ordinary plywood, newspaper clippings, everyday objects etc.

As a result, the practice of work itself actually becomes the project's central element: in fact, it is work that supplies it with its processuality, work that connects the autonomous authors to one another and supplies the conditions for their dialogue, work that equates physical effort and intellectual controversy to one another. If one can speak of the "Hamburg Project" as an experiment of creating an artistic community, it is actually work that supplies the foundation for mutual socialization. To put it differently, work is what the subject gains by venturing beyond the bounds of the disciplinary order; work takes on an ontological status.

At the same time, the emancipation from the disciplinary order means freedom from predefined norms and rigid boundaries. In this sense, the "Hamburg Project" was devoid of any outer limits, just as its work-dynamic could not be gauged or regulated by

any rigid measurement. In this, it was hardly similar to the disciplinary exhibition-project, which needs to conform to temporal limits and spatial parameters negotiated in advance, according to fixed institutional routines. The "Hamburg Project" did not stipulate pre-negotiated duration; the artists were able to choose any part of the exhibition space independently and could come in to work on the project at any time of day. Anti-disciplinary in essence, the "Hamburg Project" postulated freedom from any form of metaphysics.

What's more, the "Hamburg Project's work-dynamic refused to fix itself in any strict list of participants: as its process unfolded, others became involved, including the artists Vladimir Arkipov and Yuri Khorovsky, the critic Vitaly Patsiukov, among others. This programmatic openness is extremely significant: its readiness to recruit new participants could be understood as a metaphor for a new type of community. This community demanded no more of its potential members than their involvement in the operative process, which rested upon their physical presence as well as the presence of their work.

It is also significant that any new object that appeared in the exhibition and was plugged into its interactive exchange could not be withdrawn or replaced with any other piece without damaging the project as a whole. All components of the Hamburg Project's installation were interconnected. This represents yet another difference between this project and the traditional exhibition, where any piece can be replaced by an analogous art work, and any artist can be refused participation in favor of some other author. As a metaphor of a new type of community, the "Hamburg Project" postulated a common in which there are no substitutions.

It makes sense to clarify one thing: the Hamburg Project hardly negated the application of measurements as such: instead, it simply refused to apply pre-negotiated norms, but followed suit by constructing these norms from the inner patterns of the work-in-progress. Evidence of this fact can be found in the demands that the project's participants placed upon the quality of the objects that they made. In their makeshift plainness and their technological simplicity, these pieces clearly contradicted the outer criteria of quality applicable on the market or in museums, but turned out to be more than adequate to the project's inner purpose, namely to become carrier of the artists' messages in their internal dialogue. In the same way, the appearance of new objects in the exhibition venue did not follow any pre-defined time-schedule, but corresponded to the organic rhythm of the unfolding discussion. Finally, it was the project's participants who decided that the purpose of their discussion had exhausted itself and was in need of closure. All of this means that ontology is no longer exterior to experience: now, the practice of work defines the ontological through its becoming.

### **Constitutive Mediators – Constituent Mediators**

In considering the dialogue led by the artists in the exhibition venue of the Center for Contemporary Art, it is also significant that this dialogue was actually devoid of any mediator: the artists themselves decided upon whom they were addressing their messages, placing them in the exhibition space in a place, time and way of their choosing. Mediation is disciplinary culture's main metaphysical disposition; the distance between one subject and another inevitably requires the interposition of mediating instances. In the artistic field, the curator is supposed to be one of these instances. It is he who defines the exhibition's dramaturgy and constitutes its absolute center: at the traditional exhibition, the artists usually talk to the curator before talking to one another. Furthermore, the curator continually tends to create new sets of mediating instances; the exhibition-pieces are separated by the interposition of space and walls, the artists are separated by catalogue-texts and interpretations etc. In the Hamburg Project, bio-political communication took place directly, in immediate contact: here, everybody is everybody else's intermediary.

This final aspect is extremely important. It belies the fact that the mediator does not actually disappear with the collapse of disciplinary order. Quite on the contrary, mediation becomes the total condition of both the artistic community and society at large. Furthermore, since today's communities are constituted through communication, there will be a great demand for those who are able to set mutually opposed singularities into dialogue with one another, those who can become the mediators of new dialogic, self-replicating projects. However, this means that the significance and

the status of the curator have definitively changed: in the Hamburg Project, for an instance, it was already impossible to reduce his role to the production of a static object or a stationary exhibit. Instead, his role now consists in triggering processes that can create its own mediating connection in the course of its development. In other words, the contemporary curator is "constituting mediator" instead of a "constituent mediator". This means that he will need to constitute a regime for dialogue without disturbing the spontaneous becoming that follows; he needs to supply the process with its initial impetus without attempting keep this process under control. Today, the curator's mission presupposes that one of his goals will consist in leaving on time.