

# Lulu-journal

Nr.7

“Realist activity”

Nov 2020



Detail from *The Orchestra*, 2020, Susanna Jablonski.

“The intention of art”, James Baldwin wrote, “is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.” Fjodor Dostojevskij wrote that “we have all the answers. It is the questions we do not know.” Willy Kyrklund wrote “I seek the question to which an answer is life itself”. And so art happens?

In February 2019, during the final weekend of the reawakened Luleå Biennial the antifascist conference *Art in Dark Times: on the Conditions of gathering, thought and action* took place. The theme of the conference referred to the theme of the 2018 Luleå Biennial – curated by Emily Fahlén, Asrin Haidari and Thomas Hämen- which brought forth darkness as a reality and a metaphor in art. The gathering examined what is contained in the assertion that “we are living in dark times”. The first day of the conference had an activist angle, the second testing ways and limits of aesthetics, while the third day was more historically reflective. Presentations by the newly

formed study group The Aesthetics of the Popular Fronts were held at Folkets bio [The People’s Cinema] on Nygatan 1 in Luleå. The ambiance in the room was rather merry and somewhat hung over. At this point, most people in the room had become acquainted with one another. Soft brown arm-chairs in 70’s upholstery, instant coffee and hummus in the foyer, a receding storm in the distance.

The study group had presented their work. They spoke of the Popular Fronts: the political coalitions of left and liberal parties that had emerged during the late 30’s as a means to create a unified bloc against the burgeoning fascism. The study group emphasized that their goal was not to find simple analogies, confirmations that now is just like it was then, that “the 30’s is repeating itself”. Rather, their work aimed to position two historical moments against one another, as to discern differences as well as similarities. And by those means -comparing the present with the past- perhaps gain a clearer image of the distinctive character of the present. Further, they asked the question “Is there a tradition of antifascist unity with whom we can still identify?” The seminar presented speculations derived from the group’s ongoing and fluid research.

This lasted for two-three hours and then the audience, sitting in the cinema chairs, engaged in



Art in Dark Times: On the Conditions for Gathering, Thought and Action at *Blackis People’s house* in Svartöstad, February 2019.



*Collective reading from Sabotagemanualerna with Ida Börjel, Blackis People's house in Svartöstad, February 2019.*

a discussion. One person (Stefan Jonsson) asked the question (in relation to the final presentation held by Jörgen Gassilewski on the so called realism debate in the German literary world, sparked by the theoretician Georg Lukács in 1934): *What could realism mean today?*

Right here at this moment we can press pause and zoom in. The question lingered in our minds and triggered a beginning of something continued: what would it mean if we collectively put this question into practice? Together with artists, playwrights and authors we commonly let it echo on into 2020, and into this year's biennial that we have chosen to name *Time on Earth*.

However, a collective effort has indeed been greatly tested during this year of the pandemic, as we have not been able to gather in one physical space and create opportunities for community. Little did we know, in February 2019, that a public gathering in 2020 would be regarded as something obsolete.



*Audience Art in Dark Times: On the Conditions for Gathering, Thought and Action at People's Cinema in Luleå, February 2019.*

For this initial issue of the Lulu-Journal, we decided to let Stefan Jonsson, researcher and author, develop his thoughts stemming from the question he posed on February the 17th 2019 in the dim light of the cinema. We have also invited the poet Ida Börjel -she too a participant in the Conference of Dark Times- to contribute an excerpt of the work she performed at Blackis Folkets hus in Svartöstad: *The Sabotage Manuals*. This issue can be regarded as a bridge between two points in time and a liaison between the two biennials led by Emily Fahlén and Asrin Haidair, this year co-curated with Karin Bähler Lavér.

By way of conclusion and by way of introduction, we would like to assert something: Do not accept the tiresome answer "it is not realistic." This statement is nothing but an attempt to block up our imagination. It is the answer that refuses to lay bare our questions. Which, neither politically nor artistically, is a passable route, during our time on earth.

*Karin Bähler Lavér, Emily Fahlén and Asrin Haidari, editors and curators of the Luleå Biennial 2020*

This issue of the Lulu-Journal is dedicated to the artist Marion von Osten (1963-2020), for her tireless clarity, wisdom and solidarity.

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→ *Real Art:*  
*Realist activity yesterday,*  
*today and tomorrow*  
Stefan Jonsson

1.

As an essayist and critic I have learned that there are at least two ways of addressing an artwork. One is normative: based on an idea of what art is and should do, you discuss to what degree the artwork has achieved its aesthetic goal, and you pass judgment. The other approach is investigative: you examine how the artwork even has come to exist and what it seeks to tell about the world and the human condition. In front of each work of art you ask: why this work, why here, why now, why in this historical situation?

Over time I have become convinced that the latter is the more reasonable approach to art. We should not evaluate art in regard to a separate, aesthetic sphere. Rather, we regard it as a means to represent, comment on or change the human and social whole. Only when art stands out as relevant it becomes thoroughly interesting.

During at least a couple of decades the cultural situation in many countries and many places has been vitalized by a vast number of critical and investigative art projects and oeuvres. Art institutions have put themselves at disposal to artists who address global political issues, from borders and migration to capitalism and environmental destruction to racism and genocide, and who often embed such issues in local and deeply existential contexts. Sometimes, these artists initiate democratic processes that prompt the audience to take a stance. They place society at centre stage so that we catch sight of it.

Usually we do not really see society, despite that we live amidst it. We also trust society's resilience, even though we know that the current order is not sustainable in the long run. When art of the investigative kind puts society on display, we begin to understand its internal mechanisms, fathom its shortcomings, are upset by its injustices, and grow irritated by its self-assurance. Didn't we want something more, didn't we wish for something else in life, than this societal apparatus that cuts back our freedom, restrains our desires and destroys the future of our children?

And suddenly: what previously appeared as sober, realistic confidence in the state of affairs

turns out to be grounded in fantasy, credulity and bad faith, whereas the so-called fantasies and exaggerations of the arts actually guide us toward realistic alternatives to the false world we uphold.

Socially engaged art of today therefore fulfills a need, and this is especially so because our political systems and journalism lack the ability to properly deal with the issues that are decisive of our future. When today's artists, like here in the Luleå Biennial, explore the hidden, make the abstract concrete, expand the real and give voice to the concealed they break down established world views, make truths appear as lies, bring unseen possibilities to the fore and promote people who resist and movements that change society. In all of this, they continue along modern art's perhaps most fascinating and seminal trajectory: Realism.

At least, this is the way it appears if we look at substance and method. By contrast, if we look at the self-understanding of contemporary artists and the critical discourse in which they are embedded, realism is conspicuously absent. In a cultural climate marked by art that openly owns to its political and critical mission, it is rather strange that neither the artists nor the critics show much interest in the idea of realism.

2.

Contemporary art has at least two good reasons to remain at distance from realism. As to the first one, we associate the word realism with an artistic style that seems obsolete. When the idea of aesthetic realism emerged, most likely at the end of the 18th century with the German writer and thinker Friedrich Schiller, it represented an outlook on art that emphasized the unmediated or "naive" depiction of the raw and prosaic aspects of life and society.<sup>1</sup> The second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th was the era of realism. It was first born by the intellectuals of the progressive bourgeoisie. Thereafter came the artists of the working class who gave the concept a sharper political tooth, as in social realism or socialist realism. Painting made visible the working people, the infrastructure of industrialism, the shapes of urban life, the rupture between farming and factory; it took a stance in the struggle between rich and poor and gave prominence to the collective over the individual. Interwoven with a bourgeois and a proletarian realism was a feminist realism – represented by a vanguard of female artists whom history has neglected but in recent years have been reintroduced by scholars like Griselda Pollock and other

advocates of a feminist art history – which in similar ways explored the female-sphere of reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

In these contexts, realism appears as a style and an epoch. It was subversive for its time. The arts caused scandal and ignited debate by showing up society for what it was, without make-up or idealisation. In its critique against the current order, realism also pointed toward better conditions for living together. It was driven by a vision of a different future state of things, a utopia. But from the horizon of our own time, the style of realism is not subversive but rather a closed chapter. Contemporary artists who would profess themselves to realism would run the risk of being misunderstood as wanting to paint as Gustave Courbet or Albin Amelin. And we could not have that, could we.

### 3.

The second reason as to why today's engaged art avoids realism is that it is regarded as a European tradition. As a style and an epoch realism contributed in the creation of the modern European nation-states. Courbet depicted the burgeoning French society, Amelin the Swedish. Both viewed the historical transformation of their nations, with all their injustices, from below. However, works of art that portrayed similar conflicts in the imperialist world were scarce. Those who could have made such portrayals, that is, non-Europeans with experience of the raw and prosaic sides of colonialism, were never given the chance. If they at all were recognized as artists they were regarded as inherently inferior. When European realists set out outside of Europe, their point of view from below was lost. On home ground they were critical realists. When they approached the colonized world they unavoidably slipped into the position of the oppressor. The result of this was exoticism, orientalism, primitivism, or other art-historical expressions of racism.

Colonial relations still mark the art world. Most large art institutions are governed by Western money, and hence by Western norms. Practicing artists have to a greater extent come to terms with colonialism. They often process questions related to colonial legacies: global poverty, the exploitation of natural resources, climate change, migration and armed conflict – subject matter of a similar kind to what realism once unearthed. But if these artists admitted kinship to realism, they would be at risk of buying into a Eurocentric legacy. Why would they want that? Especially since many of these artists have their

roots in non-European societies and, for very good reasons, wish to tear down an art-historical paradigm that has elevated the various epochs and styles of European art history to an imperative model. From their perspective, realism is not even a historical phenomenon, but an irrelevant one.

### 4.

Yet, notwithstanding these qualifications, I submit that present-day socially engaged art is deeply connected to realism, not in terms of its style but in terms of its practices, or what I would like to call its *realist activity*. The benefit of bringing in realism into the discussion on contemporary art is that it provides a better understanding of what this art can achieve, and why it is important.

Realism is an indispensable concept because it forces us to pair two things that in our culture and discourse are often seen as each other's opposites: art and truth. The founding premise of realism is that these two are related, or even that they presuppose one another. Art is not real art if it does not illuminate the truth about human society. Vice versa: the truth about human reality is at its most profound only accessible through art.

Realism therefore has a double loyalty. On the one hand, it claims to be art. On the other hand, it maintains that it is truthful to reality, that it is "true". The work of art is both an *aesthetic presentation* and a *cognitive tool*. What makes realism fascinating and significant are these grand claims. It sees art as an instrument of knowledge in its own right, with a particular capacity to give shape to society.

These claims also imply a choice of paths. The term realism is a call to arms, wrote the literary scholar Kurt Aspelin at the end of the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who does not accept that the aesthetic and the political are separate spheres, or that art is marginalised to a matter of feelings, entertainment, private life or business will sooner or later take a stance for realism. Why? The literary historian Georg Levine offers an explanation, as he states that realism as a term compels us to wrestle with some of the *central problems* of art and criticism.<sup>4</sup> Each time somebody uses the term realism, to define the term or to apply it to something, to form an opinion of an artwork or to demonstrate an artist's distinctiveness, a door between art and society is opened. The central problem of realism has always concerned the artistic process' contribution to a deeper understanding of society and to radical social change.

A present-day artist who literally took position for realism was Allan Sekula. At the beginning of the 1990s he wrote: “The key choice I made in the seventies was for documentary social realism, founded in the intuition that this supposedly exhausted genre contained submerged possibilities. At least one of these possibilities, it seems to me, is a broad democratic legibility, ...”<sup>5</sup>

In Sekula’s work we are able to find some crucial points of departure. What does realism mean? To establish contact, put in connection, play off one thing against the other, to insert each event and each detail in its correct place in the totality of the world. What is realist activity? An activation of the inherent cognitive power of art. A continuous artistic investigation into determining forces of the forces, conflicts and powers that determines our historical moment. Why is such an investigation of the dominating powers necessary? In order to defeat them and create another order.

## 5.

Realist activity enjoins the aesthetic and the cognitive sides of art so that they can no longer be separated. Aesthetic effect will here become one with a true image of reality. In turn, a true image of reality will provide the feeling of intense meaning as is transmitted through artistic effect. When Georg Lukács, perhaps the strongest theorist of realist art, writes about a culture “where beauty is the meaning of the world made visible”, he is speaking of a culture permeated by realist activity.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that we today regard realism as passé or irrelevant is probably because aesthetic and cognitive practices have drifted apart and developed into isolated or even opposing spheres of activity. We no longer expect art to provide knowledge. Today, we detect symptoms of this split in the phenomena of “artistic research”, which in its attempt to bridge this division only confirms a sad depreciation of art’s inherent cognitive powers.

In one of his essays, the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson advocates what he calls *cognitive mapping*.<sup>7</sup> He begins by describing a time at the dawn of capitalism when a person’s experience and senses could still grasp the societal and economic forces that conditioned her life. From then on, the development has moved toward evermore complex relations between humans and the system in which they live. The phenomenological experience of the individual subject, the raw material for each artistic practice, can no longer provide knowledge of the actual state of things.

According to Jameson, this process explains the decline of realist art and the rise of modernism. Modernism is a symptom of our loss of orientation within structures that are so intricate that they become incomprehensible. At the same time, the modernist movements pursue an intensive cognitive mapping of their own, a search for forms which make it possible to comprehend the mechanisms that master us. We can define this kind of modernism as a kind of realist activity. Its aim is to reveal historical connections and to “make the images take position” as the French theoretician Georges Didi-Huberman writes in his book on the modernist and realist Bertold Brecht.<sup>8</sup>

In a dense paragraph Jameson encircles the starting point of the aesthetics of cognitive mapping: “There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience. It is evident that this new situation poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art”.

Yet, only art can close this gap, Jameson argues. Step by step, stroke by stroke it fills in the void between man’s experience of society and the powers that govern it. In the completed artwork the viewer can understand her place in the system, her situation. In this way, the artwork puts her in a state ready to change her situation.

## 6.

How does realist activity work, in practice? If one looks to substance it manifests itself in a great deal of what today passes as political, investigative and documentary-based art. This practice results in artworks of many different kinds in a number of artistic genres, styles and media. It is a common misunderstanding that realist activity aims to directly reproduce or mirror reality, that it is mimetic and has to render or represent something that already exists. On the contrary, realist activity often makes use of an abstract, absurd or idealistic imagery. Realist activity’s main question is the artist’s interpretation of historic traces and testimonies. The main question, moreover, is the artist’s capacity to synthesize these traces and testimonies with such an aesthetic intensity that the artwork illuminates otherwise invisible historical situations or political conflicts so as to encourage the viewers to take a stance and transform reality along with all the accompanying constraints on human freedom. In this way, Brecht, according

to Didi-Huberman, elucidated the imperialist order with his ingenious montage of news clippings and political laconism. In this way, Harun Farocki depicted both the history of capitalism and humankind by examining a brick – while also pointing to the ways in which people have employed hundreds of different methods to construct their houses as well as their societies more generally. In this way, too, Carrie Mae Weems makes visible racial oppression in the United States, as well as resistance to it, through a series of arranged photographs of Black families and individuals in the US.

Strictly speaking, realist activity is less interested in the immediate reality than in still unrealized possibilities. Realist activity is therefore not only guided by its fascination for and horror of the present-day society in all its detail and plurality, but also, to an even higher degree, by its desire for social justice, equality and freedom. In this way, realist activity is fundamental to the realization of the possibilities of democracy.

Our perception of reality is to great extent determined by those images of reality we are faced with, in the same manner as our perception of art is largely determined by which parts of the world are displayed in the arts. The decisive factor is the framing: What is allowed to be visible in the images that we meet, what ends up outside the frame? What is regarded as significant enough to beget artistic form, what is regarded as irrelevant? Realist activity expands the frame for both our perception of reality and our perception of art. In this way, images of possible and alternative realities are produced.

The Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar illustrates what is at stake. He declares that he has never come to terms with the art world's priorities: "For what reason is a subject like the tree in eighteenth-century landscape painting seen as more worthy of research and resources than the genocide in Rwanda?"<sup>9</sup> Such a question is in itself an example of realist activity. At once, it becomes possible to imagine the genocide in Rwanda as obvious material for artistic practices and interpretations, or at least as obvious as the tree in European landscape painting. This expansion of the concept of art also entails an expansion of democracy: an egalitarianism of the image, out of which new solidarities can grow.

Jaar's remark alludes to yet another dimension of realist activity. In its aspiration to a more truthful view of the world it often puts focus on human types that have been "ex-framed", or situated at the margins of our social as well as

cultural institutions. Present-day artists who search for figures that embody or typify the world order often point toward people who are exposed to exploitation or political violence. As cognitive mapping in this way assumes the position of the victim and the oppressed, it inevitably elicits a politico-ethical reflection that invokes ideas of resistance and even, perhaps, of a world order not founded on oppression and violence. In this sense realist activity gives direction for utopian thinking: How to construct a world in which genocide is unthinkable? A world without racism? In which nobody goes hungry? In which we do not destroy the planet for coming generations?

Such questions are elementary. Yet, since present-day politics so rarely address them, it falls upon the arts to respond by way of realist activity. Art offers to its viewers and audience an exercise in cognitive mapping. Only a careful, detailed mapping of the powers that surround and oppress us will enable us to discover openings toward real alternatives. Put differently, the realist is not a person who has all her senses disposed toward the reality at hand – the façades of houses, corridors of bureaucracy, the objects on the table, or the documents from the latest political crises – but she is rather a person who wishes to realize a different society, and who understands that the first step toward such a society is a careful investigation and ideological unmasking of existing society, or perhaps even an absurdist or satirical assault on it. Realist activity identifies the gaps in the system, the possibilities of a different order, paths toward freedom.

## 7.

One of the strongest attempts at realist activity during the post-war era is Peter Weiss' novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Toward the end of the first part, the narrator of the novel sits with his friend Ayschmann in an orange grove outside of Valencia. The year is 1938. The two young German workers have joined as volunteers on the republican side in the Spanish civil war.

In the midst of the war they are at the same time intensely occupied with art. On the grass slope before them they spread a large reproduction of Picasso's painting *Guernica*, a late cubist montage of invented and broken forms and constellations – an image that provides the two communists with a mirror in which they can read their own situation in the night of fascism.<sup>10</sup>

In the conversation on Picasso between the two friends, Peter Weiss presents a definition of realist activity in three dimensions. First: a

subjective depiction of the suffering, violence or death through which the ruling powers strike down common people. Second: a detailed and piercing mapping of these ruling powers. And finally, as a third dimension generated by the relationship between those in power and their victims: a flash-like apparition of the resistance that those repressed, shipwrecked, and defeated ones are capable of, captured at the very moment in which it reaches, as Weiss puts it, its “highest degree of emotional intensity”.<sup>11</sup>

If such a realist action succeeds, the artwork becomes a condensation – Weiss speaks of crystallisations – of all the previous collective struggles for a just world. This explains why the history of realism cannot be restricted to an epoch or a definable style. Rather, it consists of a series of artworks from the beginning to the present and into the future. Each crystal in the string is a result of realist activity, a piece of condensed reality, discovered and cut through the artist’s investigation of reality, and at the same time a condensed possibility, testifying to the ways in which the artist resisted the dominant current order, uttered their No, and created alternatives.

*Stefan Jonsson (b. 1961) is an author, critic and professor at Linköping University.*

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→ *The Lion and the Monkey*  
Ida Börjel

Extract from "Miximum Ca Canny Sabotagemanualema  
– you cutta da pay we cutta da shob" H//O//F, Moss,  
2013. Translation by Jennifer Hayashida – published by  
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*The Lion and the Monkey and the Tree*

It was when all the animals lived together  
the Monkey took a loan from the Lion and  
the Lion was always asking for the money back  
time and again the Monkey answered you will  
get your money

one day the Lion turned to the Boss the Fox  
mister Fox the Monkey has taken my money  
even now he has not repaid me

all the animals were summoned to The Frequency  
the Cow the Sheep the Goat the Rat the Hyena  
the Buffalo and everybody else sat silent beneath  
the tree and heard the proceedings  
if the Monkey did not pay he would be eaten  
by the Lion so read the verdict  
it was the only way no one can  
beat the Lion's strength  
the animals all knew to be afraid of the lion  
and fear spread in The Frequency fear  
sentenced the Monkey

if you do not pay all the animals spoke with one  
voice the Monkey would be eaten everyone  
was afraid

when the Fox the Boss saw the convicted Monkey  
he did not like it that the Monkey would be eaten  
he was not interested in this he said

you Monkey are sentenced to be eaten by the Lion  
but you see the tree here at the center of The Frequency  
I the Fox sentence you like everyone else so there is  
consensus about that but you cannot eat  
something with the tree in mind

and the Monkey understood the Fox and he climbed  
the tree in The Frequency and all the animals  
left The Frequency and scattered in the wind

and the Lion could not eat the Monkey up there

then even a child understands what it means  
to borrow money another thing is that the Fox was not  
so democratic in his view of the weak but that the Monkey  
would suffer all his days in his refuge.

*The Lion is king of everything. But in the crown of the tree  
sits the Monkey. And so the Lion became the hungry one.*





*The Lion and the Monkey Who Pulled the Strings*

Vladislav Surkov First Deputy Chief of  
the Presidential Administration seated before the Lion  
on TV your assessments are obviously correct  
I would never dare to question them

the Lion sat down in the royal seat and counted  
the dinner guests one he said and pointed with his  
lion claw that's me the Lion two that's  
the Wolf there who makes three with the Bear and  
then the Monkey that's four

the Lion an apparently perfect mix of  
propaganda and showbiz the Lion  
the central image at the heart of the show the Lion

an action figure on a tiger hunt the cool kid who  
straddles a Harley but also  
the housewives' mouthpiece in the lament over  
the cost of milk

the highlight of the program is when the Lion in a  
televised ritual pillorying sits  
eye to eye with his ministers how they  
sweat and tremble with fear and shame for you  
have betrayed me and your country says the Lion

the Lion thereafter divided the prey in four equal  
parts I am King of the Lions so naturally I  
get the first piece the next one is mine since I am  
stronger and the third is mine since I am  
braver than any of you as for the  
fourth piece it is mine because it is  
the last I need a proper meal

*The Lion thinks he is always on the savannah,  
even though he is cage-fed.*

*Ida Börjel (b. 1975) is a poet and translator  
based in Malmö.*

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# Lulu-journal

Lulu is how Luleå first appeared in writing in **1327**, a name of Sami origin that can be translated as “Eastern Water”. This is the title of the Luleå Biennial’s journal, first published in conjunction with the Luleå Biennial **2018**. For this years edition of the biennial readers are offered different points of entry to the biennial’s overall theme: realism today. The Lulu journal is made by the biennial’s artistic and invited guest editors. It is published here on the biennial’s website and can be downloaded for printing.

# Kolofon

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