



Vorsicht
Kunst!

Still from movie by Art Collective UMETNIK* accompanying their project Alles
Klar; essay by Theresa Rodler.

Art or Waste? A Discussion with the Art Collective UMETNIK*

Theresa Rodler

The topic of this essay is the connection between art and waste. Art itself is a highly fascinating and changing part of the human life. From its early beginning during the Paleolithic (25,000 – 8,000 BCE) until now, a lot has changed. Judging by its history, it became clear that art is subjective, transformable and communitive in all its forms. Therefore, I want to take a closer look at how art can transform something considered as waste or garbage into something fascinating and meaningful. I am also going to look at the artists behind the art. The two very talented Artist's, Jelena and Žarko, with whom I worked, form an art collective called UMETNIK*. Both studied philosophy as well as art and are currently living in Vienna, even though they both come from Serbia. UMETNIK* did an art project about waste and exhibited that in a fascinating show in late 2016 to early 2017. Since Jelena and Žarko already made an exhibition on the topic of waste, they both decided to give us access to *Alles Klar*, their project. This art project was focused on the difference in art and waste from the point of view of a member of the cleaning staff at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Since there are a lot of students who experience and create art in different ways, who decides at the end of the day which part is still to be used and which is to be thrown away? In order to think differently about the question of value and what counts as art, Jelena and Žarko interviewed the female cleaning staff and tried to understand their perspectives as well as the social impact on the value of art.

UMETNIK* exhibited *Alles Klar* as a form of critique of institutions, hierarchies and precariousness in the art world. One segment of the installation *Alles Klar* on which we shall focus here was a video of interviews with the female cleaning staff. During that interview, UMETNIK* tried to find out, inspired by Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*, what differentiates art from waste. The main questions UMETNIK* asked the cleaning staff: How do you distinguish between waste and art? The interview with the cleaning staff began rather difficult since its members did not want to participate in the beginning. Their concern was that, while UMETNIK* cleared every detail with the Academy of Fine Arts, the cleaning staff were not sure if they can openly talk since they were afraid of the possible negative impact on their job. Because of this, the female cleaning staff is heard speaking in the interview but not seen. Instead, the video shows the footage of the trash bins, workspaces and notes on material in the academy. Those notes are declaring that the material is in use for artwork production or that it is already the very artwork. This kind of notification system is used by the students to help the cleaning staff separate art, the material used or soon to be used for art, from waste. The female staff explained that it is sometimes hard to distinguish art and waste, but since the student makes notes, it is easier for them to do their job. Jelena and Žarko also wanted to know what feminism means to these women. The cleaning staff said that it is important to them that they are able to earn their own money and buy things like a car. Therefore, this job was important in order to be independent.

I also interviewed Jelena and Žarko on the to understand their point of view. The first topic that came up was the art world under neoliberalism; we talked about how they see



the power of galleries, collectors, curators, museums and institutions. Museums are often used on the one hand as community builders, but also on the other as means of increasing the reputation of a certain city by acquiring cultural and symbolic status (Vivant 2011, 103). Further, we talked about precarity and being an artist, including the experience of lacking funding for their art, irregular income and possibilities of support. We also talked about status and prestige; I wanted to know how social networking could help in their life while reflecting on the question of self-commodification and artists becoming brands, which means not only selling your own artwork but also turning their selves into a saleable product. We also focused on the questions and definition of taste, or else what is a good artwork, what is rubbish, and more importantly, who has the authority and power to define good taste. I also wanted to know more about value and valorisation, in particular how an artwork is valued and an artwork changes in value over time. Does the reputation of an artist or an institution, museum or gallery play a role in the valuation of art? I also wanted to know about the highs and the lows of being an artist, the failures and successes of doing art. This question was especially tricky since I wanted to know how the two talented artists see their work and if they would say that there was at least the thought of failure. I also questioned whether or not they would admit a personal or work related failure. My last questions were focused on the artists' lifestyle and habits. I wanted to know how social networking works in the art world and if it is necessary to achieve popularity. Furthermore, I wanted to know if the two are going to openings of other exhibitions in order to network. I will reveal part of the interview since it makes an important point in regard to the experiences of Žarko and Jelena.

In order to better understand the artists, I asked the two young and great artists what happens in a classroom. Both are studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, so they have to present their art at a certain time and get a grade for it in order to finish their education. I wanted to know how a professor grades them or discusses grades with them. I assumed that it being a university, there is a grading system, or else, a system other than 'just passing'. Their answers were quite interesting. Žarko answered as followed: 'It is very complicated in our Academy as well as in the art world in general because my mentor would never say this is really bad so you need to throw it away. Maybe some other professor would do that.' Jelena said: 'I think that people who consider themselves artists, they have a problem to pick something that is not good enough to be an artwork. Because that is in a direct equation of their status as an artist'. Žarko added that if you are an artist, what you are producing is art. From the conceptual part of the story, artists' waste is like that of the artist who shitted in a can or rather put shit in a can and presented it as art. Jelena told me about the exhibition *Merda d'artista* of Piero Manzoni shown in Belvedere, where one can see the artist's cans with golden letters. Žarko further explained that in the art world, what is from the body is very important for the whole art history. Nail, hair and so on have been very significant. Many people work with hair for example; hair is not an object like any other objects, because it has belonged to one's body. For example, Hermann Nitsch works with hair, milk, blood, vinegar and more. 'We are acutely interested in the topic of waste, is waste that which is declared waste?', asked Jelena. The declared waste will become a real waste at that moment, much like something declared art just by virtue of that declaration, but it can be turned around again. What is art or waste appears to be both highly subjective and highly dependent on social, institutional and ideological context, the question not being easy to be

answered. They are both interested in the meaning or processes behind the point of defining waste. Wasting resources is a part of that question as well. Jelena also explained to me that UMETNIK*'s artwork is often inspired by a double meaning of things or similar looking things. The project that inspired their work Alles Klar was a diploma work where a cleaner cleaned the project because it was not labelled as art. Also, one student collected bottles for an artwork and after a few days, they were thrown away. They both think that social networking and relations between people influence art. It can happen that a curator decides on exhibiting someone they know, even if their work is for instance not superior to an artist they do not know personally. In addition, when it comes to value, money plays a role in it, and it is here where the curator has a certain power over the artwork and the artist. These institutional and networking pressures influence the artists a great deal, also forcing them to focus a great deal of their time on self-commodification and promotion, time that could have been better spent producing works of art. And yet, they are forced to consciously build their reputation in the contemporary art market; they cannot wait until being discovered. The more valued the reputation of an artist, the more a work can sell for. Therefore, the branding of an artist is as important in the art world as the art itself. Art seems to be as diverse and subjective as artists are. There would be a lot more to say or show from the work UMETNIK* did and the dialogues we had together, but I would like to invite everyone to see for themselves what amazing, fascinating and inspiring work Jelena and Žarko did so far.

Vivant, Elsa. 2011. 'Who brands whom? The role of local authorities in the branching of art museums' *TPR* 82(1): 99-115.