

Constellations Assemblies: What is the value of attention?

Transcript

0:08 Elisabeth Del Prete

Hello, everyone. Good afternoon and welcome to *What is the value of attention?*, which is the first of our *Constellations ° Assemblies 2023* curated by UP Projects in partnership with Flat Time House and in association with Liverpool Biennial. I am Elisabeth Del Prete, the Senior Curator (Learning & Live Research) at UP Projects. I'm a white woman with long curly brown hair and wearing a black top and silver earrings and a necklace. My pronouns are she/her. I'm very excited that today's event will be moderated by Neelika Jayawardane who is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego. And also, Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Arts and Design at the University of Johannesburg. Neelika will be joined by Ahmet Ögüt, an artist based and working in Amsterdam, Istanbul and Berlin. And by Magdalena Malm, curator and advisor in organisational development based in Sweden. All the biographies of our speakers are available on the link, which we will shortly post in the chat. So, before I hand over to them, I would like to very quickly run through some virtual housekeeping. So, if you experience any technical issues, please use the chat button at the bottom of your screen to chat privately with our dedicated tech support. Also, if you would like to ask our speakers any questions during the event, you can submit your questions via the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen and they will get answered. And then just to note that the speakers will only be picking up questions from the Q&A and not from the chat. And finally, if you'd like to access closed captions, please select the CC button at the bottom of your screen to read along. We will be recording the event today. And I really hope you enjoy the discussion. Now I'm very pleased to hand over to Neelika to kick off the conversation. Thank you.

2:34 Neelika Jayawardane

Thanks so much, Elisabeth. And thank you for inviting me. And I'm thrilled to learn about UP Projects and about the work you do. And today I'm going to start with showing you some works by another artist and I'll share the screen so that hopefully you'll be able to see it. Are you able to see my screen?

3:04 Elisabeth Del Prete

Yes.

3:05 Neelika Jayawardane

Okay, great. Let's see. Okay. So recently I've been engaging with the work of the South African artist Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi. Nkosi's practice often focuses on exploring, quote "the limits and capabilities of our human bodies". Her new works also questioned the ways in which quote, "structures of power use athletes and sports events like the Commonwealth Games that Olympics or even the local competition to legitimise and consolidate themselves". She helps us question what are the ways in which the public spectacle of the Commonwealth Games in particular, in creating a romantic notion of family of nations - of a family of nations tied together not by blood relations, but by - but through being former colonies of Britain reinforce violent extractive relations through symbolic and ceremonial repetition, restatement and refrain. So one of the things that she does is show audiences as well. And in considering that relationship of the spectators to the spectacle, she reveals the ways in which acts of collective witnessing, audiences support of particular athletes teams or the nations they represent, become absorbed into the spectacle. Thereby, much like the athletes they are corralled, if unconsciously into furthering the political and economic agendas that are part of sport and sporting events. A year before the 2022 Commonwealth Games Nkosi was invited by Eastside Projects, a Birmingham-based public art organisation to contribute artwork to the festival. Watching archival footage of the Commonwealth Games, particularly from the mid-20th century, Nkosi realised that she wanted to create it - what she wanted to create would rely on select clips of footage from the Commonwealth Games: the athletes, the spectators the administrators. She would cut these clips together with images of economic and promotional activity in various British colonies and Commonwealth states. Here archival footage isn't used as a means of representation, but as an intervention in history, in perspective, and as a way of revealing quote "the structure of the Commonwealth and of the games and how they both work to uphold the structures of British imperialism". As the footage unspools complex threads of narrative, it reveals methodologies used to maintain those unequal relations, even as these methodologies are veiled by ceremony, pomp and spectacle. And because these structures are purposefully conceal through the spectacle of sport, the drama of competition wherein athletes are the tool used by the condors sleight of hand, she decided to remove the athletes from the visual field, in order to quote "lay bare the economic and political relationships as well as the imbalances in power between the formerly colonised and the former coloniser, which Britain continues to engineer to its advantage". What appears once the film footage of the runners on the track are digitally removed, are fleeting traces of empire repeating and replicating its practices. So I'm going to show you a very short clip of the film. Are you able to see the screen now?

6:48 Elisabeth Del Prete

Yes.

6:49 Neelika Jayawardane

Great okay ah.

6:55 [video noise]

7:39 Neelika Jayawardane

So, I'd encourage you all to try to watch it some time. In any case, it's then when one realises drawing attention to something can be part of the sleight of hand, that powerful structures use to draw attention away from less palatable things. Structural violence of nation states, internal violence of the art institutions themselves, etc. Without the sleight of hand created by ceremony, pomp celebration, the violent processes will be laid bare, they may not be able to continue in the same way. So, as you might guess, I'm not a fan of attention, or the use of drawing attention or raising awareness through artwork, to draw audience eyeballs towards issues, not as a solution. Rather, I'm thinking about the following questions. What is the value of creating or directing attention towards something or an issue? Is, quote, "raising awareness" enough to open up processes of meaningful engagement from artists, art practitioners and audiences? How might we go from being quote, "aware" of something to activating that attention and awareness, rather than remain as passive viewers who sit stultified in short and shamed by their relative freedoms and privileges? How might we move away from extracted processes that mine the pain of others, who rarely benefit from such work and rarely attend such events or engage with artworks claiming to draw attention to their plight or their challenges? So yes, the conversation does not have to stop at quote, "we've drawn attention to X". Rather, we might try to imagine a more responsible way of engaging with the world, with others, with ourselves. As our speakers suggest, through their work, there may be more productive ways that artists art workers and institutions may engage fully in a way that activates attention. So we will move on to speaking with our two speakers for today.

9:53 Magdalena Malm

Yes, I guess that's me. I'm Magdalena Malm, can you hear me?

9:58 Elisabeth Del Prete

Yes.

10:00 Magdalena Malm

Good. My background is as a curator, and I started working in the Swedish exchange programme with studios IASPIS where I watched very closely how artists were working. And that kind of informed my practice. In 2007, I started a project called *MAP - Mobile Art Production*, where I wanted to rethink how an art institution is built in order to do other kinds of works that are usually really hard for either a theatre institution or an art platform or gallery to harbour. So, I'm going to show quickly one of those projects. So this was *MAP*, and this project is *Chopins Heart* by the performance collective Poste Restante. This was probably in 2011, or something like that. It was co-produced with Poland. So it was first shown in Warsaw, and then in Stockholm, and *Chopins Heart* is a place for melancholy, melancholia, which is - you can't be cured, but it can be soothed or eased. So this is Danuta and she can tuck you in with a with an electric blanket in one of those beds to give you a rest. Or, here you can write a letter that you always wanted to write. In another place, you could there is a glory hole, where you could anonymously hold someone's hand for comfort, you could also have a sangria in the sunset, and have a dance cheek to cheek with a person in there. So there was a very, very intimate experience. And the interaction with actors was also very, very one to one personal, improvised based on your own needs and wants. And, I mean, you can you can see in the aesthetics, there's a play here with self-care and so on. But it's also pointing out there is something political in that we are not allowed to feel melancholia or that how what where is the space of our imaginations, not only as a consumer products - so how do we take care of that? So there is this enormous attention to each year in this piece. And as a curator, I think suddenly you realise what, what you're doing or what things drives you. And I think when I made this project, I also realised that what I value as a curator, which I was of value as a viewer, is presence - this feeling of heightened presence in every day where you become in contact with yourself, but also with others. So, this is something that I was investigating in a lot of projects, and then often ending up in in between performance and art. Also, because here, you can't have a theatre stage. And you can't also have a gallery space, because those are impossible places to show this work. So we always found a specific space for each work. And this aspect of care attention is something that I've brought with me with working in public space, and now more even in urban planning processes. Thank you.

13:44 Neelika Jayawardane

Ahmet?

13:52 Ahmet Ögüt

Hello, everybody. Hi. My name is Ahmet Ögüt. Very honoured to be part of this panel discussion today and to do a very short presentation today. My pronouns are he/him. And I'm an artist based in Amsterdam, Berlin and Istanbul; I do a lot of site-specific projects/commissioned projects. I've been travelling quite many years now and a lot of projects pretty much around the world, but some of them are different than others. So today, I'm going to present you two examples that are key to my practice as well. And also at this the first platform I will show you is the long term engagement example which I would like to give because I also have projects that are/last short term. This fits in the exhibition frameworks and residency frameworks and short-term frameworks within the art institutional structures and practices. But there are also things that I engage like the school I will be introducing now that go beyond preexisting institutional structure within the artistic and educational practices, institutional practices, instituting practices. I'm going to screenshare, one second. All right. You see the slides?

15:42 Elisabeth Del Prete

Yes.

15:43 Ahmet Ögüt

Yes. Alright. So I would like to start with my time when the standard presentations is very hard to explain a platform, which was initiated first in 2012. And now it's more than indicate. But I will give you a little bit highlights about this platform. And maybe one more example just to have diversity within my presentation. *The Silent University* has been a platform for undocumented display, its displays migrants academic with academic backgrounds. Here, you can see our principles translated in multiple languages and principles, since the beginning or the at the core of the idea. So we had practical principles and ideological principles. And or the idea was not only to work with art institutions, art museums, but also combined with academics but also NGOs and other types of organisations, and kind of bring every institution's limited capacity together to create unlimited options of you know, that for a parasitic organisation and platform like *Silent University*. Here you can see some images of our latest events. In Istanbul, we have had branches in multiple cities that first started in London, in collaboration with Tate Modern and Delfina Foundation, and later with Showroom. And then that lasted a few years as an active branch in London. And here you can see the coordinators who, later - a few years later after the first initiation, took over the programming and also running the entire branch in Mülheim area in Germany. So the idea is that not to have participants or academics as lecturers or coordinators, but also take care of the whole branch an organisation after a few years of preparation, together with in collaboration with the institutions we work with at first. Here, another image from

the Mülheim branch. And here you can see images from this Stockholm branch, which Fahima is the main coordinator have been running the branch since also 2013. Over educate, here are some of the lectures, for instance, which has most recently got engaged in upstate New York - Zeinab and Jafar, they are actually academics from Afghanistan, and they started in Iran their own alternative school over eight years ago and now there they are, in upstate New York. Within the academic structure, we were able to organise events with them recently using and activating the concept of *Silent University*. So, our idea is that no matter where or lectures are coming from, they can lecture in any language they prefer - in their native languages or they preferred languages without you know, language limitations, but also legal imitation. So, the legal imitation such as not having the necessary documents, in order to involve in everyday life, basic human rights, but also within an artistic or academic or creative environment. These are usually requirements that are put ahead before any action can be taken, any activation can be happening within even culture and arts context. Here, you can see another image of Bridget or Abimbola. These are all lectures and consultants in multiple cities from Hamburg. Also in addition, branch we had, we also made a publication in 2016, which included reports from Athens, from Amman, from multiple branches, that, you know, not only portraying this as a kind of like a utopian platform, but rather with all these practical, practical difficulties, you know, like in terms of like, from security to racism, and you know, other issues, even within the camps, and the cities and institutional structures that have to create such an institutional organisation, you know, in this preexisting structures, but still independent, and they limited principles with our own principles. So, this has been very important for *Silent University*, that whoever engaged with *Silent University*, no matter if they don't have the documents, no matter if they don't speak to me in language, they're able to be paid. And institutions, rather, institutions have to become creative, rather than people themselves. Instead of seeing this a kind of individual issue, all these obstacles, rather, it's an institutional limitation. And those institutions they need to overcome who are collaborating with *Silent University*, overcome their own limitations have to work with academician work with knowledge that has all these diverse bases.

21:22 Elisabeth Del Prete.

Sorry, I met, I think we might need to wrap up.

21:25 Ahmet Ögüt

So I'm about to finish. As I said, it's not easy to put together in few minutes, the ten year adventure of *Silent University* in multiple cities, where there are multiple stories, I'm trying to give you some structural information, but with the questions, we will go forward that have this is rather than you know, just bringing some

awareness, but something very big beyond that kind of approach. And we can just continue with that. And we're going to skip the next example and save it for the questions as well. Thank you.

22:02 Neelika Jayawardane

So - I'm, we're going to head to questions to the artists and the speakers. And so I think I wanted to begin by kind of paying attention to and honouring the host's thesis for this event. Where I think, basically the description for our conversation states, quote, "in a society where distraction is the norm, public art may offer a channel for directing attention". By drawing attention, as we talked about, buy, buy through artworks to something or current and splashy will often end up drawing attention to the artists garner arts funding and support from arts institutions. However, you know, my question has always been that does attention actually create meaningful political change, or change bureaucratically, like in visa regimes, for instance? And how we might activate that attention towards meaningful action? So as I've been listening to the two projects that you've spoken about, and which will probably speak, I hope, we'll speak about some more. I wanted to ask both of you, as two practitioners who work with these very public platforms. And how you thinking about the value of directing attention towards something? Or is it that you are really doing this work, not necessarily about drawing attention, but to create an engagement that's beyond just bringing attention to something?

23:44 Magdalena Malm

It's a complicated question, I think, because I think sometimes you won't, sometimes you want a lot of attention for something. For instance, when after I did this project, I was the head of the Public Health Agency Sweden, and there my mission was really to, to liberate the public art from a very traditional way of looking at art and make it - opening it up for relevant artistic practice. And then I wanted to create a lot of attention in the media in everybody's mind to re-reimagine what public art is, and how it can be used and so on. But then in the product I showed, it's so much more about like, attention and being attentive to and listening to the people who are there. So I think there are so many layers, that's just two of very many examples of attention.

24:33 Neelika Jayawardane

Yeah, Ahmet. What about you?

I want to give a controversial example working with institutions. For instance, something like *Silent University* is, you know, visibly on the paper also, or at the end of the year when the institutions give, you know, a report in link to their fundings and everything like that. It's very, very good for the institution to have engagement for *Silent University*, but not necessarily when it comes to mainstream attention or the main audience profile attention. So usually there are hierarchies between educational departments and exhibition departments of the institutions and exhibition departments gets the audience and maybe linked rather being to the popular culture. And an education departments actually doing heavy heavyweight work, they don't get the actual attention in terms of from the eyes of the general public. So they get the attention only, but at the end of in between the end of year report, not from the main media, and even certain media is only directed to the attention of those. So it could show the institution even rather active. So there are all these makeup projects. You know, we can we say education washing projects, or you know, community washing projects of a lot of institutions, that there is no sincerity. And the only way to collaborate with *Silent University*, there should be trust and sincerity, there is no other way that is collaboration. Because this is part of the principles of *Silent University*. If the institution didn't have the those principles before engaging with *Silent University* as a parasitic independent organisation, not as a workshop, not as a project, but you know, see it like a serious organisation, like a collaborator, same level collaborator, they can even temporarily adapt our principles that doesn't guarantee that they will continue with our principles as their own principles, but there is no way they can collaborate with *Silent University* unless they adapt our principles. So it is not just a makeup project, it's not a fake, fake under layer, visibility project, but it is actually systematic, changing, leading towards systematic change internally within the institution, or at least show that during that collaboration, at least that institution can do that performance that, you know, treat everyone on equal basis. And, you know, pay everyone on an equal basis, have the equal visibility for everyone behind the doors of the institutions and also within the public accessible, publicly accessible parts of the institution. So there are a lot of questionable institutional attitudes, especially even within the arts and culture institutions, we really need to make this distinction. Otherwise, everything looks good. So good intention since the beginning, we say for *Silent University*, for instance, everybody, like in the beginning, also still now like they love the concept and everything. But this is not enough for the *Silent University* in order to see that institution as a comrade or a collaborator, you know, it's very important that institutions are ready to and willing to change, if not collaborations not possible. They can always find other projects just for the that first layer on it, but we are not there for the first layer. That's why attention is even if it looks like something only to do with general public. It's also highly political. You know, it's not just basic attention economy. It's highly political. And it is there all surplus values for the institution's in order to get next year's funding or you know,

anything like that. But then they have to do it ethically, and principally based on these ethical principles.

28:36 Neelika Jayawardane

I have so many follow up questions for both of you. One - Magdalena I wanted to ask like when you say I wanted to liberate public art. I think I know what you mean. But I really wanted to speak more about what does that involve? What...

28:55 Magdalena Malm

Yeah, so I will be happy to talk about that. I think attentiveness as a curator is also always being attentive to what artists do, and, and to what is relevant and has agency. And I think so what I wanted to do, I saw that, that there was a lot of how can we say, in public art, it's funded by the 1% rule. So it needs or historically it needed to be permanent. So it fell out of that whole development of contemporary art just by that. And that limited what it was we would think about a mural or a sculpture in the middle of a roundabout or something like that. And then we would see what public what artists actually did in the public space, like Ahmet's work, like a lot of artists. And in that field, there was no funding whatsoever for those projects. And they weren't always taken seriously. They were taking a kind of side projects, or if are not funded at all, just done by heart by the artists. So I was like, how can we combine because there's the one true historical tradition of publicly funded- well-funded possibilities of making art but producing rather boring art at that time. And one other tradition which is artists run initiatives, doing it amazing artworks with almost no funding. So what I tried to do was to intersect those traditions and see what happens if we unlock the formats and the possibilities and invite artists to do totally different projects, not something that we are forcing them to, but looking at their practices and allowing a space for that in the institution. And I think that's how institutions need to work much more in relationship to what you said Ahmet. How, how do we understand when we are obsolete, when our structures look what's possible to do for an artist? Or what's possible for do for an institution in terms of curatorial desires or interventions?

30:44 Neelika Jayawardane

Wow, thank you. I love that response. And I love learning about how public art was funded and how that kind of creates a hierarchy that disappears our artwork that's really relevant and, and wonderful, engaging work that just doesn't have a funding stream. That's bureaucratic and kind of legal problem, because that's how things have always been done. And you have to reconceptualise in your legislator's mind, what it means to do public art. And that's a huge project. And so I'm, yeah, we, we could talk more about how that even happened. And Ahmet, I wanted to follow up

by asking, in fact, a bureaucratic question, how is it that, you know, like, when my university tries to pay people, even if they are from another country, and they have, you know, papers that are documented in another country, but trying to pay them is a huge bureaucratic nightmare, and it takes hours of work to try to get somebody paid. So, unless you're giving away a private, you know, thing, an agreement that you make with those institutions about payment, I'm wondering how you got them to agree to pay people equally for work to recognise them as, as intellectual people who whose work deserves to be compensated?

32:20 Ahmet Ögüt

Yeah, payment is a taboo in the arts, you know, it's not a topic to talk at first, you know, in the first email, or at the first beginning of the conversation, which is opposite to what we do. Just to make a connection with what Magdalena was brilliant saying about public art, you know, it's not a coincidence that for instance, I'm an artist who is very often nominated for public sculptures. But so far, I don't have in full public space permanent sculpture or sculpture, or project realised yet. So why artists like me end up in shortlist, because there are a lot of limitations that therefore maybe it looks like health and safety, security limitations, but also actually like, is there how much intention to engage with the community because I don't like the concept of static monuments, you know, that are dictating inhabitants without even asking their opinions or involvement. You know, there was at times myself I cancelled the project because of the inhabitants. We're not seeing it relevant, you know, so for me, these dimensions are very important, and also how far an artist can go. So often, whenever work stays longer, there is more limitations. Now, going back to the diplomatic, so bureaucratically limitations. For instance, the images that I showed of Zeinab and Jafar did a presentation in May in upstate in May, and my payment has not received yet. So I heard the institution's pay eight, eight weeks and plus so you wait that long, right? But if you think even my own payment, someone who can write nowadays and invoice and you know, have all this necessary numbers and documents that could be provided, how can you make someone who actually don't have a mailbox, address or bank account to be paid? It's easy actually because from the beginning that is sorted from the beginning institution knows that is part of the concept when it's part of the concept, it is not just a taboo, it is a creative struggle that we all go through together and be creative together. It's not like institution inviting artists to fault solve this problem. Or another problem and this problem never even discussed and later it becomes a problem because you know, the payment never arrives or never made because of these bureaucratic obstacles. But we talk to the even sometimes we even Skype or Zoom call with the accountants of the institutions we don't only talk to the curators in how we talk to everyone involved in the institution. To understand we need to talk to the head of security, we need to talk to the accountants - we need to talk to everyone to understand the members of this organisation are not just like, they cannot pull out their wallet and show you an ID card to enter the space, you know,

they need to be treated kindly, because they don't have those basic everyday privileges, you know, in order to access even state institutions or an art institutions, you know, so when they know it's coming, it's actually easier to be prepared than rather, postponing and never talking about it, you know, in all precarious art world environments on this new, you do lots of you make lots of money in a more commercial direction. I think the problem is not something that is easier to commercialise, but rather, you know, what we can discuss to what extent in terms of ethics and principles, you know, so as I said, we go back to the beginning, if institutions are sincere, is are no problem at all, you know, workers there, sometimes they panic, they don't know, you know, that's an unusual situation, but you just have to take them also serious and talk to them, you know, if they're not also taking serious, they just demands, unrealistic bureaucratic papers and things without even knowing why and for whom, you know, they just think, creative time apart, creative part is not or concern, creativity or culture part, we just do the here, you know, accounting and all this bureaucratic stuff. So it's very important that also to break the hierarchies between administration, bureaucracy, within the institutions and the creative departments and education departments. I'm talking about, like, really fully breaking the hierarchies, the institution can only function, if there is no hierarchy between its own departments.

36:58 Neelika Jayawardane

Yes, I mean, you know, I think that academic institutions and art institutions often are very resisting towards such kind of challenges being expected to kind of up turn their understanding of what's quite legal, and what is what they think of what many bureaucrats think of as what's impossible. And so, then it's a no go. So, um, I would love to kind of learn more about how that process works, especially since you're in upstate New York when working at you, there's a branch that or a group that is doing work in upstate New York, and that's where my institution is too. And Magdalena as a way of kind of jumping off of that. You're the Director of a public arts agency in Sweden. And you've mentioned that you had to, quote, "totally rebuild the organisation, in order to go from a traditional public art making projects which engaged in civic society and long-term urban development", and that you created a or you organised a conference about one of these projects that shows the importance of institutional structures and attention paid by those institutional structures. So I wanted to ask you to speak about your role as the Director and how you kind of changed the head to kind of work to change the organisational structure, and about how this symposium addressed some of those common challenges and notions about who has the right to interpret things, and whose agendas and interests and perspectives are important. It seems really important to thinking about whose attention is being paid to what right? Yeah.

Yeah, it's interesting. I heard, I think, I think exactly that was I mean, if we talk about attention, attention to details and bureaucratic possibilities, I think that the person who needed to be most creative in the public art agency was the controller. When I could get her to find the right solutions for things, then we had a creative organisation. Those people are key, and you have to give them the trust and the inspiration to understand why they want to be creative and make them want to be creative. And that's by absolutely taking away the hierarchies and saying, we're a team here and we have to do this together and without you nothing works. So I think that was a really, really key thing to make this total change. But it was also you know, like we had procured curators and the artists I never saw the artist when we started so I turned in organisation inside out, created an artistic team invited an architect and said the main process in this organisation is the artistic process. We are a state government agency, state agency, we have to follow the rules, but that's always secondary. We have/we will follow the rules, but that's not why we're here. We're here to do art, so this was like, something that we kind of carried together in the end, took a while. But what in the end, we did that. And then we did a project where, which was actually a government mission where we worked with civic society organisations, in what's called a *Million Homes Programme*, but poor neighbourhoods in Sweden basically. And as a state agency, you come in, you're called the public state agency, it's very difficult. There is a distrust, there is a feeling of you, I mean, total power imbalance. So we and also like, who is deciding on what, how do we get really interesting off project and involve those people? How do we combine that? So we had to work with a very, very meticulous methodology, where we made a very easy open call, we went up there, we interview them, and we decided for a couple of projects, or eight or ten projects, and it wasn't like, what kind of art do you want? There was like, what are your desires? What do you wish for? What are you lacking? So it was more emotional fabric, if you if you like in those projects, and then we would select an artist that would actually be able to speak to those needs. And there was never this question, why is this art because it was their needs. And we had selected that totally, mostly, exactly the right person for them. And we also needed people who could maybe also be a mother or something else. So it wasn't just artistic identity, but and we all used all our personal capacities as well. And we all I also made the team which was had multiple backgrounds, so that we could kind of meet up those people as close as possible. But when we started a project, I found this amazing quote by the philosopher, Marina Garcés and she says, "when you enter the scene in public art, you change the scene. And when you do that, you have to be ready to change yourself". So this was our entry point in this whole project. So we understood that we, we will not know exactly how to do this, we have to change our procedures, our bureaucratic structures, our way of speaking, we have to be adaptable, because we are asking these people to change their situation. So I think that kind of humble learning position was, we wouldn't have been able to do the project. Without it, it would have failed.

42:32 **Neelika Jayawardane**

Can you speak a bit about the project itself?

42:38 **Magdalena Malm**

Yes, it was - well, I mean, the whole idea was, it was I mean, it's so complicated, because it was politically asked for. And in the beginning, it was like special neighbourhoods, and then they feel they were pointing those out. So they said neighbourhoods with low voter turnout. And then we said, but art is not going to help the voter turnout, it can do other things. So in the end, we said it's in those architectural neighbourhoods from the 60s because they are in a space of renovation. So we kind of made it more concrete rather than having this this pointed out this field places or we said that it's an architectural kind of era that we're looking into. And the whole idea was to - I mean, we had already worked in those areas so it wasn't a new thing. And it was based on this expanded curatorial practice or artistic practice. I think also and creating a possibility for artists to work in new ways with a very, very high degree of engagement in the projects.

43:47 **Neelika Jayawardane**

Wow!

43:49 **Magdalena Malm**

This could be an association of parents wanting a better place for their kids to play or it could be it could be anything like that.

43:54 **Neelika Jayawardane**

Okay. So that's not like, in any way, traditional kinds of forms of what we think of as art, or what an institution will do? But play can be part of like an essential part of how kids get involved in, in art practice. So and a lot of those kinds of voices...

44:20 **Magdalena Malm**

...but it wasn't a pedagogical, it wasn't like telling people about what art is - it was doing projects, but then then with the people who were there, depending on which groups we worked with, so it was it was tackling real, real issues in those societies. What is this place? It's filled with drug dealing in the backyard, how can we make a safe place for the kids where we create some kind of hope? So it was I think it was maybe more using artistic methodologies and that of course, a lot of artists are

used to working like that. So it was, but I think if we have attempted to only do sculpture, sometimes there was a need to do a sculpture because it manifested something. But a lot of the time it was typically other projects.

45:07 Neelika Jayawardane

Okay, so both of you have talked about, you know, on the one hand, the limitations of institutions. And on the other hand, the power that institutions have and wield, and the and the creativity, of many people who work in the institutions and would love to kind of employ their creativity to approach challenges and issues, such as what you've just talked about, can you both speak about the kind of both the understanding of an institution as a very powerful, having a very powerful position, as well as kind of what are the limits that you've kind of, you know, run into and bumped your head against?

45:50 Ahmet Ögüt

Yeah, it's important that we don't only just like sit there criticising institutions, but institutions actually need to come to awareness that they have so much power. So art institutions, especially their, for their for the first place like their, this is the reason they exist, that they are not replicas of slowly functioning other governmental state institutions. They're actually locomotive, they're like, you know, they could be inspiration for the other bureaucratic institutions to come more forward, more open minded more, you know, future thinking, and so on. And bringing change also, like, if we cannot bring the change through the art and culture institutions, why do we even have them? You know, like, where else we do is, do we start, you know, so where else should we start, of course, a lot of people choose to create their own marginal small groups, but then the power is not there. You know, there's a lot of other power of people getting together. And there's a lot of power in that, of course, too. But it's very important to transform the large-scale institutions, and especially if they're art and culture institutions. For me, I always believed in that, but I've always also often heard that institutions, they start the conversation by saying, they're limited to symbolical representation and you know, this kind of like, only awareness, only symbolical gesture, and they verbalise that over and over again, under estimating is actually the power is the individuals power who is happened to be temporarily in the power position. But it's not institutions power, institutions, power, especially cultural institutions, power come from culture/cultural heritage, and culture/cultural heritage, is commonly owned, you don't have to work in that institution, if your any cultural worker happened to be there part of the cultural scene from the past, from the future, from the present, you have something to say you're part of the institutional structure, you know, I'm just thinking of the most traditional versions, which are museums, right? And nowadays, I see a lot of biennials they start with the conception of, you know, going

beyond the slow functioning museum, especially Western Museum contexts. But now they're becoming themselves in heavier bureaucratic structures, which was not the idea developed first place when those biennials started you know into reading the format. Okay, is this a liberating format? Or is this actually becoming even slower machine? Like sometimes I think contemporary art became so slow that maybe some other art from the history is actually more like future thinking, you know, more, no more inspiring something about future so it's very interesting that how we turn contemporary into something super, like scared of its own shadow. And we need to, we need to realise because there's really truly a lot of power in art and culture to change the society and I even myself through my microscale, you know, projects, he ran there with very limited fundings and things the miracles have been happening through those over the years. I can imagine what other things can happen when actually people change to conception, especially when they choose to involve with cultural institutions, they should not see that as their own power, individual power, and they are temporarily this is this is delusional, but really celebrate collectively the power of the institution, you know, and teach other institutional and specialist state institutional structures, how it could be done better.

49:40 Neelika Jayawardane

Yeah. Magdalena, do you have anything to add?

49:44 Magdalena Malm

Yeah, I agree. And I think it's also very interesting to think of it as a as an institution with power. It's interesting to think about how you can lend power to others, because that's a very efficient thing that you can do. You can give a voice to other people or other organisations. You can also facilitate for them that this is really interesting because I think I think it's connected to the building architecture, someone said, always has a purpose. So you built the house for a reason. So you have an art gallery, and it's the reason to be an art gallery. And I think very often we think that the operation or what we do is the same as the building, the museum is the building. This means that performative works can't be shown, or complex installations can't maybe be shown, or also socially engaged work can't be shown in the museum rooms. So they are not shown there, then they are not collected, and they are not researched. So we have a wrong writing of history, especially national institutions have this huge problem, which totally affects the writing of art history. If they instead thought they are an organisation, working with whatever contemporary art might be, whatever form it might have, whatever place it might need, whatever, whatever. And then thinking that the building is one of the resources they have, then we would have totally changed attitude. And I think also, when you have a building, it is very interesting, because I haven't, I've worked

mainly without a building. But sometimes with a building. When you, when you have a building that tension, you are talking about the tension, you want everybody to come to you, everybody has to come here to us to do this. But when you work without a building, it's very much about facilitating for others, how can we make this possible for other people in other places all over the country? How can we understand them? How can we engage with them? How can we create dialogue with them? And so it's, it's, I would say that the foundation attitude of an organisation with a building tends to by itself, create a very egocentric structure. And I think that's why it's hard to be humble. That's why it's hard to be aware of your own power. And that's why it's hard to think that you would facilitate for others. So this is there might be a lot of other problems. But I think the building is a huge problem. Because it says you need to have an audience that can come between nine and five, five days a week, you can't have something that continues, you can't play with the audience, the role of the audiences. So you can't create all the things that artists are experiencing, or trying testing, they don't fit. It's like you have a machine creating round things, when really, you need all different kinds of forms. Sometimes it's really problematic.

52:36 Neelika Jayawardane

I was, as you were speaking, I was reminded of the South Indian writer Arundhati Roy, who's a novelist and also a political writer. And she had said something that has always stayed that we know of course, there's no such thing as the voiceless, there are only the deliberately silenced or the preference, preferably unheard. And so, I'm thinking about that, as we're thinking about who gets to be heard and who doesn't get to be heard, and why and whether we were the ones with the power to kind of, quote, "give a voice". It's not that they don't have a voice, it's that people are deliberately not given a space to speak and pushed out of the way. And so that that puts the problem squarely, I'm not with them as the voiceless, but with those who prevent that speech from happening. And so, before we go to audience questions, I want to quickly get to an Ask Ahmet about *Bakunin's Barricade* because we, you know, you mentioned you want to speak about it, I'm fascinated by this project, you, you might have some images that you want to show. And I'd love for you to kind of speak about that, because it isn't one of the projects that is very esoteric, it is something that changes all the time. And it may exist or not, depending on which institution it doesn't even have to be with an institution, and it has a very practical, real use. And maybe one day it will come to pass. I do know of other places in places where liberals have been put in front of roads in order to prevent, you know, the police from coming in, etc. or the tanks from coming in. So that's happened in South Africa, I'm doing student protests. So, I know that's actually happened without you know, ever even planning it. So, I'd love for you to speak about this. And then when we can go on to audience questions after that.

Sure, I can keep that very brief. Because I want to have time also for the audience questions as well. Important to have maybe show this side of my practice as well and you know, of again, it was how I can transfer the responsibility from myself to the institution, in order to creatively and politically think about the future. And this idea comes from the past, you know, the idea comes from I'm going to screen share some images comes from 1849, from Mikhail Bakunin, you know, so according to, according to the story, Bakunin proposes his friends when they are installing barricades in Dresden and maybe they can take some of the original artworks from the National Museum and put in front of the barricades. So, crews in army when they approached, they might not they might hesitate to destroy the barricade. And then his activist friends find this idea silly. It's actually way too contemporary for its time, his times. And, and it's interesting thing that barricades were installed at the time by the artists, opera singers, musicians, interesting back then. And he was a journalist in a local newspaper. So thinking about this idea of like, imagining original artworks in times of crisis, you know, an uprising and so on, even in times of war, which is not so far-fetched idea, you know, so it is actually real, and it's also from very nearby. And so museums do change functions in those moments. You know, we have examples. Also, if you think of, you know, Egypt, in Cairo, what happened during the Arab uprising, and in many different examples, or very simply, you know, even in Europe, because always, whenever I talk about this concept, it's imagined that it is in the safe museum space in Europe, but Europe was the place people were trying to refuge from, you know, not so long ago, during the second world war, they were escaping from Europe, this wasn't the safe place. So, the safe place is changing. And now we can see it with the war in, you know, war against Ukraine, that you can see that it's time it can happen also in that part of the world that the museum suddenly need to turn into shelters, and either hide the original artworks in caves or secret places or use them as a shields, you know, so I come up with this proposal imagining, okay, at that moment, it felt very safe. And I did it in Holland, in the Netherlands. For instance, this is the latest addition, it was in Ohio, when we installed this is very, very left his university at Oberlin College, which is very much next to mostly right wing cities, you know, towns in us. And in Acron, just like one hour away from this installation, there was upside down burning police cars that summer, last summer, basically, because of Polish shootings. So you can imagine that these things are not just like in some fantasy of an artist coming from fictional worlds, you know, it's so real. And it this was understood when I was doing different versions of it in different museums, finally, at Stedelijk Museum in in Amsterdam, this version that became part of the institution's collection, suddenly, of course, it took us time to talk to everyone working in the institution to understand what is distinct about it is not just visual celebration of this kind of spirit of violence and so on. But actually like if this work becomes part of the museum collection, which is now at Stedelijk Museum, so no one can blame this work to be just a proposal anymore. After the fifth edition, it became an artwork as part of the collection. When there is an uprising in the future, the museum had to sign up this conceptual

contract, which says, under specific conditions, specific kind of uprisings that we defined together with the museum lawyers, this work needs to belong back to the streets, and they need to also discuss the need to negotiate to loan back to original works with it. So and this is already a signed contract. So I'm happy to answer questions about it. I'm trying to explain very fast. But my whole idea in the beginning and a lot of people thought I was just fantasising was to arrive to that moment that actually responsible is transferred to the museum. It's not just my exceptional unusual idea that is not going to be real, but this work is dynamic it's any moment to be performed on this on the streets. And it can happen any moment you know, so it is as real as it can get. And also, it creates a lot of like bureaucratic discussion. You know, a lot of other discussions within you know, the limits of the artist traditional practices or artistic practices between public space and institutional space white cube space.

1:00:04 Neelika Jayawardane

Super! So, I'm hearing that it's time for us to go to audience questions. So let's move on. And please ask your questions.

1:00:19 Elisabeth Del Prete

Neelika, I believe they are available on the Q&A. So, you can see them at the bottom of your screen?

1:00:28 Neelika Jayawardane

Yes, I do. So many, many wonderful compliments to, to the both of you. So one of the questions, have you ever encountered - Nico asks - could you recommend works that encourage audiences to become aware of the importance of their attention or distraction, and not the economies that rely on them, like the attention economy? I think there's been a lot of conversation among my students, my housemates about that term economy, attention economy, especially because of social media. And so do either of you have projects that kind of focus on about attention and distraction?

1:01:21 Ahmet Ögüt

Well, I had the little project focusing on that, but it's not, it doesn't happen yet. So I will not explain that one, it's really playing with the idea of like immaterial labour of the audience, and material labour happening in the museum by the museum stuff. But I would like to explain that when the project actually happens after that, example, the attention economy, I see some of the institutions now they go to, you

know, almost like they see, maybe a person and maybe younger artists or young cultural worker, who is very active are very visible in social media, and they start inviting those to their institutions, because most institutions don't know how to use their own social media. So by getting involved, you know, lesser known or younger artists who have bigger social, bigger audience online, and then the museums, they try to attract those to, to their own institutional social media space, which is for me, kind of like little bit revolutionary reverse situation, but it's not deep, you know, it's still based on the attention economy, it's still based on this default mode. I mean, the institution is being polite. It became so obvious after COVID, you know, when everything became online, suddenly, all the exhibitions, they realise, okay, these tools needs to be developed, you know, there needs to be better organised, and they need to have like, hire better people, or who knows actually what they are doing in order to represent institutions in those spaces. For me, it's very important that hybrid practices, hybrid practices are not excluding one another, you know, it's very important to see what kind of audiences could be reached, and they know they're aware of, you know, we don't think about like, for instance, influencers, they're aware of every post they do everything they do they capitalise that already long time since long time, but that is not still about the context. And it is similar to different versions of the art worlds, you know, context should be relevant in terms of you know, as to be considered as cultural value beyond attention economies, you know, online or offline. So, this cultural, very cultural heritage is collectively on. So any member of audience is taking part in that and every time you step in a museum or going into an art institution, even paying for it, everyone should be aware of the contribution they are doing, it is not to be underestimated.

1:03:51 Magdalena Malm

I can't really think of an example of that, but something relating to it, there is a landscape architect called Robin Winogrand, a woman who works mainly in Switzerland. And she talks about embodiment, creating embodied experiences for the people in a park. And she also talks about how landscape or the space between houses don't have a specific purpose. So, they are good spaces for imagination. But she talks about the resistance. So, if you create stepping stones, for instance, you have to pay attention to your steps and you get grounded and then she plays with a size of them so on. And I think there are a lot of artists and architects and landscapes, maybe specifically our landscape architects, who create experiences also in urban spaces or in landscapes, that kind of our response to the media situation, but they are not a political comment on that attention economy, but they counter it and they create alternative spaces of shifting your focus and, and I like this idea of resistance. How by creating you need to be attentive have something else to your body, to the nature, to whatever is around you. So that's another strategy that's not like spot on facing exactly what you're doing but creating an alternative to kind of attention taking you away from the distraction.

1:05:20 **Neelika Jayawardane**

Yeah, even the project that you spoke about, *Chopins Heart*, is one way to redirect your attention to, to your very being that you are and your presence and your needs. And suddenly, you realise you would like to sit and have a sangria you would like to be tucked in, and it returned you to an attentiveness that you probably were very distracted from. Actually, I'm not thinking of a lot of artwork like that, that brings you to a mindfulness. That's very beautiful. I think that's what drew me to art in the first place was that it created a sense of presencing in myself first, that allowed me to attend to the world, as well. Because without being present in myself, I wasn't really able to attend to anything else in a way that was like fully recognisant of another person's being. So I'm one of the person - another person asked another question is that, whose attention do you most seek through - to pursue through your work for both of you? Is it policymakers, communities or institutions? I would add, like, it's really all of them, isn't it?

1:06:39 **Magdalena Malm**

It depends on the context, I think. So sometimes I really, and also thinking about attention and how to redirect attention. I think that's a super, super interesting question, especially when you work with politicians, which I do much more now than I used to. So it's like, you have a project in the city, or you have resources in politics in decision-making, and how can you how can you redirect their attention? So they want to do something and it's not such a good project, and it's not going to create a better environment in the city? So how can you kind of understand what they what they're looking for and what they want, and then shift their attention and show them something that would work much better. So I'm super in, I mean, I'm very, very now interested in renegotiating and redirecting attention. And that would be on a political level, or for someone also had a question about funding and how you how you create better funding. And then we started an organisation to advocate for visual arts organisations, basically, for better conditions, which never existed in Sweden. So the visual arts, being a very individualistic field is way behind the performing arts, for instance. So here we talk about how institutions need to have the budgets to pay artists and so on. And there, of course, it's really the attention of, of, of policymakers, and bureaucrats and politicians, to, to make them understand why art is important. I think that's the key issue. And then it's, it's your, then you really, and this is, this is almost like working with an artist as a curator, because you have to be super interested in what their driving forces are. And you have to really, really listen attentively, because then you might understand where there is a crack or where an argument would fit within their world. But so, I mean, for me, it's going to go on for being very attentive with the audience and the artists working very, very closely, to now working much more on structural, big scale levels of renegotiating with the political. And then sometimes you want to do tension, or

sometimes you want to work very secretly or to have that second step of creating attention if it's not reached. So it's a lot of different stages. I think, when you negotiate in what do you want to be public and when and in which order? What is the synchronisation of that in order to achieve those negotiations that you want?

1:09:09 Ahmet Ögüt

Thank you, Magdalena. And I tried to summarise some perspective, from the way I work, you know, I paid attention to people who expect my attention, the least. So I don't, for instance, as part of my practice, I never took it as ethical to only talk to people who are useful to me, you know, that kind of like networking approaches and things like that. I think that's very short-term thinking, you know, although it's some part of working in the art world, I always told myself how can if I'm talking about the artwork in from the instituting practice way critically like this, how can I be not like behave like the artwork, you know, the way it operates? So, I started with my friend's circles, you know, my immediate circles, like, is it diverse enough is it mixed enough in terms of background, you know, all kinds of things? And this is one thing so it's very simple. To start with your own micro environment, and also paying attention to the people who don't even expect you will have time for them, you know, then this really returns much bigger way in the long run. So, it's not a short way or short term thinking. And this is this is one important, important thing. Yeah. I have one more point. But I will come back to that later.

1:10:33 Neelika Jayawardane

We are being asked to wrap up a bit and close up. But I do know that many, many, several questions did focus on, you know, have you gone to this institution and try to speak to them and about funding? And so, I'm glad you addressed it, because somebody did ask like, did you go to the Tate and other partners with the idea of the *Silent University*? Or did it come from responding to a brief or an invitation? Can you talk about that...

1:11:05 Ahmet Ögüt

It was an invitation yeah, it was an invitation for a residency programme that was limited to one year residency. And, and but when I had this idea, I told them, this is beyond the residency programme, this is beyond me being the artist during the programme, so we have one year contract, but it will go beyond and now it's more than 10 years, you know, so they try to figure out the way to stay with and collaborate with idea, you know, beyond that one year, and they tried, you know, they tried to figure out ways and some other institutions manage, you know, Delfina Foundation managed, so they continue to at least three, four years further, even later, we collaborated. You know, some institutions were able to transform

themselves, even that very first moment. So, with *Silent University*, actually, the funding was never going to be enough to apply even to the crowd funding, things like everything will be only one time, and any one-time thing wouldn't have anything lasts for 10 years educate and still be ongoing, you know. So every branch had to figure out a way from the very beginning how it can survive beyond its Directors, creators, were the first people beyond me, you know, so it doesn't continue, because I have so much like energy to try to keep it up and all this thing, there's always more and more motivated people. And they now come, they come with a shared responsibility. They know that they have to figure out a way that have, you know, it doesn't have to grey grow in scale. We don't look for architecture, buildings, like Magdalena says, you know, these are how institutions institutionalise themselves, but also as an as a name as a concept, you can be very strong, you know, so this concept became strong enough internationally for each branch to collaborate, time to time, but also locally, find a way to, you know, exist beyond the very first graders and institutions, because institutions may stay there but might also disappear. But people change all the time. So, they don't always stay there. If the concept is not strong enough, it wouldn't stay this long, you know. So, I'm happy to see that at least partly in collaboration with our institutions, this is possible. So, it is a kind of proof that there are many other things can be done this way.

1:13:22 Neelika Jayawardane

Thanks so much, unless you have anything to add, we're going to conclude our conversation. And I let Elisabeth take us out.

1:13:35 Elisabeth Del Prete

Yeah, thank you so much Neelika, Magdalena and Ahmet for the comments and the questions that you raised: Is raising awareness through art enough? How do we activate that awareness? How can institutions lend power or attention to others? And also, how do we celebrate collectively the power of institutions, I'm sure there's a lot for us to continue to reflect on. I also wanted to thank Lizzie Wharton our BSL interpreter for this event. And thank you so much to our audience for attending and asking pertinent and interesting questions. We really want to build - listen and build on your feedback for future events. So, my colleague Jack has just added a link in the chat. So, once you exit your Zoom, you will automatically be redirected to a survey. And we would be really grateful if you could take a few minutes to complete. We will also upload a recording of today's event on YouTube that will also include captions and BSL interpretation. So, head over to our website or to YouTube to find it in the coming days. And also, as you saw in the slides at the beginning of the event, we are endeavouring to keep the *Constellations* programme free for participants and event attendees. So, if you're able, we would really appreciate a donation to ensure we can continue to keep the programme free. You should be

able to see a link to donate in the Zoom chat very briefly, and you can scan the QR code on the screen. Thank you. And finally, another huge thank you to our amazing speakers, to the Arts Council England, Barrington Hibbert Associates, our Constellations Patrons and UP Supporters for supporting this programme. To our partners Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial and to everyone at UP Project who has worked on this event and on the programme as a whole. Thank you so much.