

Governance and ignorance

— A conversation
between Charles Esche
& Nikos Papastergiadis

RUPC #6

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This text is based upon a conversation and discussion that took place at an event titled ‘Artistic freedom and cultural critique in the context of corporatism in the art world’, 6:30–8:00pm, Friday 22 May 2015, at the Greek Centre for Contemporary Culture, Melbourne.

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Charles Esche & Nikos Papastergiadis
Introduced by Charlotte Day

CHARLOTTE DAY: Before we commence, I would like to acknowledge the people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we are gathered this evening. I pay respect to their elders and families and acknowledge as well the ancient and continuing culture of art practice by the Indigenous people of Australia.

Charles first came to Australia in the mid-1990s on a reconnaissance trip with some fellow curators, it led to a program of exchanges, one of the first of its kind, I think, between artists and organisations here and with Melbourne and Glasgow and Edinburgh in 98/99. On this occasion, Charles' visit is timely in relation to bigger and perhaps even more pressing discussions in Australia on our art ecology and its relationship to economics and politics. Charles is well placed to consider recent political decisions to cut funding and place these within the context of situations internationally.

For almost two decades, Charles has been a protagonist in reshaping the cultural landscape. His work as a director of important European institutions, curator of major biennials and both writer and publisher of critical texts has sought to investigate the role of art as a catalyst for social change and the societal and political context in which art comes to be made public. His commitment to different forms of teaching and experimental institutional models has profoundly influenced exhibition practices today.

Charles works between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where he has been director of the highly regarded experimental program at the Van Abbemuseum since 2004. In 1998, he cofounded Afterall Publishing in London — and he remains a director of that — known for its sharp focus on contemporary art's relationship to wider artistic, theoretical and social contexts through its journal,

critical readers and its One Work series. Charles is also a co-founder of L'Internationale, a confederation of six European art museums, founded in 2010. Charles previously served as director of Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö, Sweden, between 2000 and 2004.

He has curated or co-curated numerous international exhibits, including the 9th Muslim Mulliqi Prize Exhibition, 'It Doesn't Always Have to Be Beautiful Unless It Is Beautiful', at the National Gallery of Kosovo in 2012, the 6th U3 Triennial for Contemporary Art in Slovenia, 'An Idea for Living', in 2011, the 9th International Istanbul Biennial in 2005, the 4th Gwangju Biennale in 2002, and 'Intelligence', the Tate Triennial, at Tate Britain, London, in 2000. Most recently, he was co-curator of the 2014 São Paulo Biennial, 'How to (...) Things That Don't Exist'. In 2014, he was awarded the Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence from Bard College. Charles has come here and met with a number of artists and organisations. He's actually on his way to Jakarta, where he's going to be mentoring some young curators in advance of the Jakarta Biennale.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Given your extensive career as a curator of exhibitions and a director of numerous biennales and also museums, I would like to begin this conversation by asking you to make some comments about politics, which I believe has been at the centre of your curatorial vision as well. Have you seen any changes in the relationship between art and politics in the two decades that you've been working in this field?

CHARLES ESCHE: For sure, and I think we could spend the whole of the evening unpacking it, but maybe I can start by being relatively autobiographical. One of the important reasons that I got involved in art in the first place was because I became disillusioned with the representational democratic system that was the possibility I was offered to engage in

politics in the 1980s. I basically came to adult consciousness under Margaret Thatcher, when the neoliberal transition that is now coming to its end first takes shape. One event above all others embodied that transition for me, and that was the 1984–85 miners’ strike in the United Kingdom. I could say a lot about this but one fundamental lesson was the way the political system closed rank to avoid destabilising its own interests. It was clear from that moment on that, as Thatcher said later on, her greatest victory was changing the Labour Party in the UK into a version her own ideology. The miners’ strike also showed the extent of the alliance between politics and police, something I naively didn’t see before.

But it was not only the defeat of organised labour acting in solidarity — the neoliberal transition profoundly questioned and basically trashed the idea of collectivity in general and what a society might mean, or might hold in common, including its common heritage and common life together. In the process, the idea of a representative democracy that could speak collectively for a group within society, or even society as a whole, was basically put on the ash heap of history. The state was no longer a partner against capital, but the enabler of capital as a force for spreading inequality and despair. Party politics has become about selfish and sometimes sectional interest since that time, yet that sectional interest is expressed usually as a temporary alliance that assembles for one cause but doesn’t translate to a general solidarity because that would endanger the holy grail of individual choice that the neoliberal system uses to keep people from acting together.

At the same time, the left to which I was attached seemed to have so little meaningful to say about the changes that were being imposed. Instead, there was rote learning of antique ideology, party lines, what I would now call patriarchal and aggressive disciplining of dissent. One example could be the division between Polish and English miners when Polish coal was being sent over at a time of post-Solidarność oppression.

Miners were angry at people in an even worse state than them and there didn't seem any way to imagine a different form of those international relationships. Looking back, I think I perceived at some level that this approach wasn't able to answer to my experience or own thoughts about the world anymore — though I left in disillusionment at the time without a clear idea where to go or why it seemed so pointless.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: During this period, a lot of artists stopped being artists in order to start being political in a more direct manner, such as joining the union movement, etc. But I'm just wondering whether the relationship between art and politics has changed now, whether you think the way in which you are political as a curator is different to what it was in those early days of Thatcherism?

CHARLES ESCHE: I started looking into the art field because I left politics in disgust. Thatcher made me a curator in that sense, so I guess I did the opposite to the artists you mention. At the time, I saw in art the potential to imagine the world otherwise — imagination as deliberate self-deception, as Spinoza characterises it. When the political imaginary seemed to be impossible, it was to the artistic imaginary that I turned. Today, I don't think there is much that art can do within the current representative democratic system, because it is broken and already over. We need to think the political in different terms — asking questions about how we live together. How do we build agreements and make common decisions? How do we institute the common? How do we create institutions which can occupy this space of the common and yet be plural and multiple?

My politics now are certainly very different from those days but I retain a mistrust of political forms of discussion and decision making. If we look at how the intersections between art and politics have changed in the intervening period, then I guess we can only be quite gloomy if we support justice,

equality and emancipation. The mainstream art world has largely become the handmaiden of neoliberal inequality, the majority of successful artists serve the needs of the superrich. Critique, which at the time I would have seen as the essential license and capacity of art, has been normalised and contained. So, art and politics are very different bedfellows now. At the same time, there is a minority art world that persists in wanting to extend the capacity of art into the realm of the political — I am thinking about Tania Bruguera, Jonas Staal or Richard Bell here in Australia.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: So how did that kind of art-politics emerge?

CHARLES ESCHE: Well, I think new strategies emerged but there is still a common desire for more justice and an ethical way of being in the world. That is also completely remade in the context of post-colonial and now decolonial ideas, in the context of a global economic order that laughs at national emancipation movements, and, of course, in the context of climate change.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Thatcher famously said: ‘There is no alternative’. This was meant to be a triumphalist statement of the success of capitalism and the free market over socialism. However, in a deeper way it also meant that social and cultural conformity was tightened, and it implied that there is no critical role for art. If the role of art is imagining an alternative, is there not an inextricable relationship between art and politics?

CHARLES ESCHE: At the time when Thatcher said that, it was hard to deny her, but it has had a very pernicious effect on the political and artistic world. Once there is no alternative, there’s also no role for politics because there’s no role for ideology and antagonism or agonism or even discussion.

That phrase sums up the effectiveness of neoliberalism in that it provides a solution without complexity to the necessarily complex problem of human values and relations. So, I would be more or less with you if you say that at the height of neoliberal hegemony there was no room for art except being basically luxury decoration for oligarchs. But those days are now behind us. I think the political, as we understand it in the dumbest terms, is all about this creation of expectation and then satisfying of expectation. At the most everyday level, many people in Western Europe still expect politicians to provide a better life where modernist forms of progress and material improvement are maintained — and the politicians keep saying they will. Yet, their experience is already very different, thirty years of lower wages, climate disasters and increasing warfare were not part of the political discourse. That gap between expectation and experience is the space of the next transition, though I don't know how bumpy it will be. And this is also the space where art can perform because it often concerns the mismatch between intimate life and the rhetoric of the big media and internet corporations, which is something to which art can speak. This seems to me a different kind of space for art and politics than in the 1980s.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Well, that's partly because our social horizons, our cultural expectations and our everyday experiences have become much more complex. This complexity has presented an enormous challenge to the state. How can it manage all these new expectations? One response is that it seems to be moving towards providing more of a regulative framework rather than extending the mechanisms for service delivery. It is increasingly outsourcing the handling of complexity. The state has also adopted a privatisation discourse: 'We don't need to do that, because you need to manage that on your own.' So, in that sense, is the state evacuating from the ground or moving away from those kinds of responsibilities that you're now talking about?

CHARLES ESCHE: The contemporary left has done very little to look at a role for the state in a new, socialist configuration. Perhaps the last time it effectively did so was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and *State and Revolution*, written around 1915. Since then, the idea of claiming state power and then instituting justice and equality through the state has been more or less unchanged.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Well, there was Nicos Poulantzas and others, who theorised the state.

CHARLES ESCHE: True, and I am simplifying here, but that fact is the social democratic and socialist left of today seems wedded to a old version of what the state can be. A paternalistic, omniscient state apparatus is not something to be welcomed as far as I am concerned. Nor is the handing over of power to private interests that the third-way centrists have advocated. If there is to be a necessary redistribution of wealth, how can that be managed without state appointees making judgements of worth, and so on? I think a Universal Basic Income is a very welcome idea here that could involve simple legislation rather than a huge state apparatus.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: While there is higher level of state discourse that instrumentalises the value and function of art, there is also at the same time a change in the social condition, which has become more complex, where the delivery of resources and assets can't be regulated in the way it was under a logical machine. This change has also been made visible if we trace the shift in the artistic engagement with politics. I am thinking of the argument that art is being political not only when it enters into the institutional arena of politics, but also when it contests the symbolic frameworks for representing the political. In shifting from the survey or the representation of something that's external, to the instigation of a scenario or creation of a situation in which there's

an encounter, then we see how the register of this complexity also produces new kinds of feedback process. Are there examples that speak to this shift in the engagement of the political in the context of art?

CHARLES ESCHE: Yes. What you are talking about is also a shift away from the representational as an effective method of governance and representation also governs art. We could understand this shift in terms of a move towards what we could call the ‘presentational’ as something that is no longer a representation at all. By moving to the presentational, you embody experience (as opposed to expectation) and what happens inside the space of art or the artwork itself. This is certainly in line with some ideas about relational aesthetics. At Afterall, we are now looking at the Chang Mai Social Installation from 1993–98 as the form that shaped relational aesthetics in Europe, even if it remains largely unacknowledged. But it also goes further back to 1970s community art and to many of those artists who you say later left the art world and became more activist. Perhaps then we can see politics as returning through the presentational, though we must be careful. Relational aesthetics discourse became elitist very quickly as it excluded the uninformed and uneducated from its interactions. That’s precisely what art mustn’t do in the future, if it is to be more than an oligarch’s plaything.

For me, it becomes more and more urgent as the representational fails to account for exactly the kind of heterogeneity that you’re talking about in society within art, and it is generally not good at that. Look at the whiteness of museums, including the Van Abbemuseum. The same goes for curatorial and art courses. That’s a big problem if we want to talk about art and politics. The representational order and the state requires a kind of homogeneity in society and the art world is good at reflecting that. Once you have the complexities of migration, of different human desires, representative democracy seems not to function, even though it might do in

theory. The stretch is too wide, perhaps, and it results in enmity and attempts to absolutely exclude the other — whether ISIS or Guantanamo Bay. That opposition is not agonistic or struggling over the same representational field but rather antagonistic and wanting to eliminate the opposition.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Let's go further into this challenging context through the practice of art, and consider how it also presents new curatorial challenges.

CHARLES ESCHE: In terms of the project of the São Paulo Biennial, we were concerned with this idea of presentation through an invitation to some people who organised 'Saraus' — basically open mic events — in the informal communities around the city. They came to the Bienal, which is a bulwark of a very corrupt Brazilian elite — and took over the downstairs spaces on Wednesday and Saturday. This was meant to be a moment of relational experience and it partly worked but it was also clear to me that our hopes for reframing the Bienal were much too ambitious. Instead, the Bienal and the elite framed the singers and dancers of the Sarau, it became a representation of a Sarau.

More interestingly in these terms, we were caught up in a series of conflicts with the board that did touch on what the Bienal is for. This began with a protest at Israeli state funding by artists and us as curators but extended to a more generalised disagreement with the board that was never resolved. The Bienal was then something which embodied conflict through the artists, the curators, the board and different participants in ways which we couldn't have anticipated.

But we came in, in 2014, as the first group of non-Latin Americans to have curated the exhibition, so the first time it had stepped outside of its own continent, and only the second time it had stepped outside of Brazil. Our project for the Bienal was based on a whole series of workshops and projects that we did around Brazil, so not only in São Paulo. Most of us

moved to Brazil — there were five foreigners and, in the end, two associate curators who were from Brazil — we moved to Brazil to reverse the traditional direction of travel, which was: how do you bring the world to São Paulo? And we said, well, how might we bring Brazil to the world, because the biennale is a kind of world forum, so how might you reverse the usual direction of travel?

At the core, that was a problem because Brazil — and its elite — does not want to reveal itself to the world, though I think the conflicts did part of that job. Even after years of leftist rule, the elite remains intact and untouched. New forms of debt helped to upgrade the lives of the poorest, but, to cut a very long story short, Brazil has been described as the United States if the Confederacy had won the Civil War and that's not an unfair description. In that circumstance, and we have seen what has happened since with the coup d'état, what we wanted to do was never going to be embraced and it was only our outsider status and wilful ignorance that got us as far as we did.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: What sort examples from art come to mind?

CHARLES ESCHE: I'll try to get there. Brazil takes off and, as a result, the aspirations of the new lower middle class gradually find a voice in terms of this inequality. So, we arrive to this, basically, to these kind of scenes [*referring to slides with images of street protests*]. So, this is happening outside our door while we are preparing the Biennale and I think we were right to say we want to respond. And then, as we were about to open the exhibition, this happened [*image of Gaza destruction by Israeli aircraft*]. We had a number of Palestinian, Lebanese and Israeli artists in the exhibition and we all agreed to protest the Israeli money for the Bienal. To my mind, this was largely a trigger to what was an underlying

conflict around the Saraus, our lack of engagement with the São Paulo gallery scene, our invitation to Brazilian artists who were not part of the modernist/tropicalismo axis, etc.

During the installation, there was a kind of artistic action in which all the artists would stop work and come together as a spontaneous assembly in order to discuss what to do about this logo and to demand that they withdraw the money. So this process continued while the installation happened in the background, which was also problematic because we were abandoning the workers who were still installing the work. They were fraught days, but we forced a small climbdown from the President and, most significantly, a discussion about the relevance of Palestine in Brazil and vice versa.

For me, this was all part of the artistic voice of the Bienal, independent of the artists' contribution in terms of artworks. Through it, the nature of the biennale — so no longer the representative power of the biennale in producing or showing an artwork, but the nature of the biennale itself — came on the table.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: There are a huge number of points there. But let's take a few steps backward. First, you made the rather provocative statement that an autonomous work of art is no longer sufficient. This makes sense because of the fundamental tension in the relationship with the avant-garde with its claim for authority, whereby, on the one hand, it wants to retain leadership, and, on the other hand, it promotes the idea of emancipatory democratisation for all. Is that tension now irreconcilable, and therefore do we have to rethink the whole status of the artist in relationship to the avant-garde?

CHARLES ESCHE: That's a good question because I think there are different avant-gardes which need to be reclassified. The mainstream avant-garde is irrevocably attached

to an idea of progressive time under modernity and art historical chronology as a process of endless revision and improvement. Modernity places an ethical value judgment on time moving forward and I don't think we can afford to invest ourselves in that any more because of its consequences for human society and the natural world. Modern thinking is colonial, is extractive and is directed towards an endless growth that is unsustainable. In order to position itself in front of modern developments, the avant-garde is dependent on knowing the direction to travel, which means dependence on modernity as a progressive force. Once you take away that direction of travel, once the arrow of time can point any which way or can turn into a question mark or a loop or whatever, at that point the avant-garde simply becomes a minority isolated from the main pack. At that point, it is very vulnerable, as we see today, I think. But it is not its vulnerability as such that is the problem, it is this investment in this narrative of the future progressive.

At the same time, there were practices in the avant-garde — Dadaism, Surrealism, for instance — that were not so modernist. They were there to stimulate new consciousness of the human condition and to act on those realisations. Perhaps some of their ambition can be retrieved in the current situation. Equally, we need to think about the negation of tradition in the artistic field and reassess why that was necessary? Can we recover an emancipatory side to tradition, to caring for the land and environment, to having a spiritual relationship with the non-human? None of this is within the field of avant-garde as it is generally characterised but you can find it if you look.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: So, the avant-garde in general is broken because of a general loss of faith in terms of directionality, or is it also broken because, in a sense, everybody else has appropriated that position? Commercial, political elites have also adopted that idea of wanting to be ahead of

the game, outside of the box, etc. So, now there's a blurring of that boundary between innovation and creativity that was perhaps not so clear a decade or two decades ago.

CHARLES ESCHE: Yes, I guess so. Global capital is very modernist in its self-image. It wants to maintain its colonial type of power, and modernity is its justification for that, so I guess it is not surprising that it incorporates the avant-garde. Why wouldn't it? The avant-garde doesn't offer any resistance to the elite but just playfully entertains them with its critical, unrealistic dreams. Look at how popular 'utopia' was as a concept in the late 1990s/early 2000s. That's not a coincidence, elites love utopias because by supporting them they can show the rest of the world their so-called humanity but by definition they never have to actually construct a place that is 'nowhere' and can never exist. Using the term avant-garde goes along with the rhetoric of innovation, creativity, utopia, blue-sky thinking, creative industries, etc., adopted by capital as a way to offer non-financial compensation to exploited workers. If you're truly avant-garde, you should work for free as a freelance bohemian.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: In Australian society, there's a sort of double take in terms of who is the figure of reverence and who is the figure of ridicule, in terms of the status of the artist today. And it seems to me that there is now a sense that the artist as an avant-gardist is not so much an outsider position, but an object of contempt. The populism which has gripped political discourse means that the political elite want to reclaim that authority of creativity and innovation for themselves but also speaking for the masses. Thus, there is an assault on the 'obscure, self-serving artworld' and, ironically, this attack is expressed in the rhetoric of radicality, and a defence of a new populism. How do you respond to this double move?

CHARLES ESCHE: That makes sense to me, in that the actions of the capitalist elite are no longer defensible in their own terms. Politicians are not going to win today by saying ‘there is no alternative’. They have to more or less say the opposite. Yet they will do nothing to construct that alternative because it would undermine themselves and their exhausted representative democracy. So, it makes sense that they find a paper tiger in the current system — the artists — and they target their ire at them. One thing we have to accept is that the Left in general and the art world in particular have become elites in different ways. We use a language which is not able to convince people beyond our own small circle, and in the art world’s case that is often the oligarchs and super-rich themselves. We speak not only from the platform of art but also speak to that platform, so it isn’t meant to resonate outside the artistic field, except as an unsecured claim to superior insight or in a way that completely conforms to the distraction value of entertainment.

So that charge of elitism does ring true when the politicians make it and the art world should ask itself what it thinks of that. Yet, it’s a paper elite, and only targeted so long as it points away from the financial elite whom the politicians are paid by and acting on behalf of. In that sense, making the art world less ‘radical’ and more publicly aligned with the interests of the oligarch class would actually save it from populist political attacks. Perhaps that is what some of my colleagues are doing, now I think about it!

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Well, yes and no. Isn’t there a level of complacency and conformism in all sectors? How do we measure whether there’s complacency and conformism, and who has identified corruption in that sector? Because effectively what we’re talking about and what you’re describing is a retreat into a corrupt state of being where you’re taking resources but not really delivering back the action that you promised to deliver.

CHARLES ESCHE: I think there's a danger that we kid ourselves that we're doing good. It's not about individuals or evil people here. It's about the system that forces individual actions.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: I suspect that there's something more fundamental, rather than individuals failing on their contracts. The more fundamental thing is to do with the idea that if the avant-garde was there to strip away illusions which were blinding us and we weren't seeing things clearly enough and therefore, as you said, the function of the avant-garde was to awaken the citizen in you. This presupposes that the citizen in the artist never sleeps. So that already gives you a privileged authority: that you're awake and I'm asleep. If, however, the artist no longer has the role to awaken the citizen in me, then who's got the authority or the role to sound the alarm now?

CHARLES ESCHE: My first response is: people with money. That's why you can have private museums that actually have no problems with these issues that you're talking about, because they simply do what they want and their authority is based on the fact that, 'well, it's my own money'. You know, this strange, wonderful, problematic initiative in Tasmania: its accountability is based purely on the fact that the guy makes his money for himself, so therefore he has the right — and we all kind of support that, in a certain way — to do what he likes. So, I mean, his authority is very clearly based on that.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: But you said the authority of the artist was also to do with a capacity to instil emancipation?

CHARLES ESCHE: No, not instil.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: In that case, how is emancipation initiated?

CHARLES ESCHE: Through relations, through intimacy, the difficult stuff of life that leads a community to want to see emancipation from oppression rather than working out how they can best survive it. Art and artists can speak on those levels at their best.

The early Soviet avant-garde was part of a social and political context in which the government was seeking emancipation. They wanted a new order and new forms of social regulation of society, of architecture, design and visuality. The artists were there to supply them. Of course, that whole idea is quintessentially modernist and it won't work today at all.

So, the artist's task is different — and I think what happened in São Paulo is not a million miles away from this. It is to create the places and contexts in which an exchange and projection of emancipation and justice can happen collectively. They might try to give people voices and, by doing so, suggest what emancipation looks like as a collective endeavour — not through representation, not through having somebody stand up on behalf of them, but through the act of being in common in a place at a certain moment.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: So, the insufficiency of the autonomous work of art is exposed not only through the inadequacy of that linear model of progress in historical time, but also perhaps through these new horizons of complexity that come from the jagged interactions of cultural differences.

CHARLES ESCHE: And the artist's job would be to try to read those complexities — to be this sort of seismograph, in a way, that would read them and try to create forms in which those complexities could be played out. I think there are artists who are attempting this, including people like Richard Bell or Tom Nicholson here in Australia.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: As a curator, or as a director of a museum, or even as biennale director, how do you

operationalise that horizontal complexity, and what sort of challenge does that have for the institutions of art now?

CHARLES ESCHE: You operationalise that complexity through action and through a series of relationships that you have with artists and other curators who are not yourself. So, you try to understand through a certain idea of collective striving, which is hard but necessary. The sad thing is, it is hard to stay friends while doing this, as the São Paulo Bienal proved. I think that you try to understand as best you can — and it will always be inadequate — the condition of the world in which we live, the condition of the world in this period of what we've called the next transition, the beginning of the Accelerationist Manifesto. The best way that I can describe it is with this quotation:

At the beginning of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, global civilization faces a new breed of cataclysm. These coming apocalypses ridicule the norms and organisational structures of the politics which were forged in the birth of the nation-state, the rise of capitalism, and a Twentieth Century of unprecedented wars.

That more or less describes the result of modernity, however high-flown its rhetoric. The nation-state, the rise of capitalism, the industrialisation of war, colonialism, resource extraction are all inventions of modernity or massive transformations in scale and effect. We don't need to mourn it very much but we need to agree that it is the problem.

We can only do this collectively and at the micro level at the moment. We need to engage institutions in leaving and remembering the modern world and to play this condition out so that people can see it for what it is. But to see it for what it is, is also perhaps to give up a certain hope and possibility that it (falsely) claimed. So, it will be a tough journey.

Emancipation can happen from below only if top-down modernity and its hope and possibility are abandoned, I think.

There's a nice, representative work in the National Gallery of Victoria now by Jamie North. He has planted concrete poles with organic material, weeds growing out of them. If I may, I can read the concrete as modernity — concrete being its archetypal material — and the weeds as what we have to do. They look a bit helpless and weak but they are the only part that is alive. We need to become the weeds, and there are all sorts of different weeds in there, but they're all weeds in the end.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: This might be an interesting example where the relationship between art and institutions interweave. It marks a departure from the imperial enlightenment vision of culture, in which the pedagogic function of the museum was there to give evidence of progress and provide an overview of the whole world. The museum was there to give that authoritative mapping of the world. By the twentieth century, it shifted more from that imperial enlightenment vision to more of a sort of monocultural, national culture-building exercise. The museum and the institutions of art were directed to articulate a coherent sense of national identity. Now it seems to me that this weed metaphor challenges that capacity to have a clear plant or a clear identity, let alone a structure that can contain it, because the weeds are always just plants that are in the wrong place. It seems to me that the challenge now is how you, as a director of an institution, will move beyond those paradigms and face the new complexities and deal with the sort of challenge of the local and the global that you described in terms of São Paulo.

CHARLES ESCHE: I'm going to come with a couple of examples but I want to slightly correct your periodisation. I think Australia shares some of this history, because of its position as a member of the US alliance, but correct me if I'm wrong as I'm talking very much from a provincial Western European perspective.

At the end of the Second World War, Europe was divided into two camps: an American and a Soviet camp. So Europe as an independent force essentially ceased to exist culturally and politically until after the Cold War ended. Culture became one of the mechanisms through which the Cold War was conducted by the superpowers. On the one hand, there was the instrumentalisation of culture under Soviet Stalinism. On the other, culture was instrumentalised as freedom and free speech — so the more apparently ‘avant-garde’ or ‘weird’ the art was, the more it justified the West’s claim to freedom as its defining value. In Europe, most of these works were even funded by the state, and in the USA both the CIA and tax breaks did the equivalent. The cultural battle was most closely fought between an American-occupied Europe on the one hand and a Soviet-occupied Europe on the other, and everything that we derive from that battle, the welfare state, support for culture etc., is essentially grounded on the negotiation that the European West felt it had to carry out with communism. That situation comes to an end in 1989, yet most of Europe is still living in the decaying spaces of Cold War modernity. I do think that, given the financial crisis, this situation cannot hold for much longer.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: I do recognise and share the view that those social democratic initiatives are an historical compromise between capitalism and communism. I think that’s a recognisable story that Maynard Keynes used to legitimate the formation of, for instance, the English Arts Council. It’s a slightly different story here in Australia, where I think there was more emphasis on national cultural formation. Nevertheless, those historical compromises have formed the institution-building in this country as well. What I want to focus on is the implication of the post-1989 era. This is not just post-Soviet but also the birth of the internet generation. A new kind of complexity, horizontality and interactivity is spawned with the global culture. How you produce a dialogue

between the global and local in this context of multiplicity? In what way can the museum or even an ephemeral event such as a biennial create a conversation that's meaningful when there are so many different perspectives, so many different vocabularies, so many different rules of engagement, all at play simultaneously and coming from so many different sources? How do you create a language out of all of that noise?

CHARLES ESCHE: Well, I have to be specific about some of the projects we've done in Van Abbemuseum now. I'm going to first focus on those projects that try to create the conditions for a dialogue with the remains of modernity, as manifested in our collections. What I'm talking about here is how we might put the collections to use in order to address the questions that occur after 1989, one of which is this question of the heterogeneity of the publics and common interest. Another is to pluralise the kind of narratives that we might allow into the singular story of modern art as originating in MoMA, New York and Alfred Barr in 1936.

Here are two projects which I think could be seen in that light. One is *Picasso in Palestine*, where we took a Picasso in the Van Abbemuseum collection to the International Art Academy in Ramallah on the initiative of Khaled Hourani. Khaled took part in a series of discussions that we organised in the museum with Galit Eilat and about ten people from different parts of the Middle East and North Africa. It's difficult to meet in the region, because of visa restrictions, so basing it in Eindhoven was easier. In those discussions, we posed a question to the artists and curators who were there: can the museum be useful in any way to you? Can the museum provide a role which could have some sense for you in your local conditions? The idea was born then but took two to three years to complete because of endless bureaucracy, funding difficulties, insurance, etc., on both the Dutch museum side and on the Palestinian.

There are some interesting conditions in Ramallah that make it more than a regular loan and not only an exotic journey in a way that might seem about colonial enlightenment of the primitives to some. Firstly, Ramallah is a sophisticated city with its own cultural life (I did two biennales there, so I understood the context a bit). Also, around fifteen minutes away, if you could drive there without any problems, is the Israel Museum. The Israel Museum has more Picassos than it knows what to do with, around 30. It's a wonderful collection, yet it's a collection that is completely closed to most of the people living in Ramallah because of the control systems of the Israeli state and its occupation. So, there are Picassos in Palestine already, just not on the right side. Another level is that the painting is made in 1943 in Paris under Nazi occupation. So, what's going on in 1943 in Paris is that Paris is under occupation and that occupation is clearly part of the history of this work. So, taking this painting to Ramallah, is it some ways a restoration of context.

There are other ways in which you can talk about this project, such as the whole series of negotiations around insurance, around transport, around getting permissions from the Israeli authorities, from Palestinian authorities, from the Dutch authorities, in order to make this happen, and this appears in the film of the whole project in detail. What also happened is that it was seized on by the media, because it offered another story of Palestine than the familiar story of the occupation.

But also, it fed into a double bind which the Palestinians find themselves in very often, between on the one hand wanting the occupation in Ramallah to be bad in order to show the horrors of the occupation, and the other hand wanting to have as good a human life as possible. This double bind plays a psychological game on the people there sometimes and the project fell into this as well. It also reached a level of popular culture in newspaper cartoons, and so on. One moving response was a drawing by Amjad Ghannam, a prisoner in an

Israeli jail, who drew a liberation alternative of the Picasso. These impacts were important and I feel it changed the nature of the painting when it returned to Eindhoven. Now it was the Picasso from Palestine.

Another project is made in a village in China called Qiuzhuang. Probably you know better than me that the question of rural China and how the population of rural China will move in the next fifty years is one of the urgent matters to address in the near future. Li Mu, the artist, is from this village, which has more or less a hundred families — a lot of whom seem to be interrelated. It's an intimate place, at least.

There are some unusual things about the village, but basically it's a typical, small-scale Chinese settlement of about 2000 people. Li Mu wanted to explain to his fellows what he did for a living, what being an artist meant. To do that, he worked together with them to copy and display parts of the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in various locations throughout the village. Again, a film, a beautiful film, was made of the process — a film that becomes a fascinating portrait of the villagers, the artist and rural China. To give you a couple of examples: [*referring to slides*] here's a Daniel Buren stripe system being used for the fence outside the new art library that Li Mu founded for the village children; here is a Dan Flavin round neon light sculpture being copied and installed, and here are Andy Warhol's Mao screenprints being reproduced for the main street of the village (this was quite controversial there); and this is a Sol LeWitt steel gridwork that is reproduced in the village multiple times and goes from its autonomous art function on the wall, to shelving and eventually as a hanging device for bird cages.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: Let us now face the economic problem: how are we going to think about the future viability of art and its institutions? On what basis should the patrons, whether they're private or public, support or invest or fund the arts? Up to now, we've had a variety of models:

the scientific model, which says you've got to support the arts because it's a form of experimentation that expands the horizons of knowledge. On the other hand, there is the kind of economicistic model that says art is a good investment. Or there's this aristocratic potlatch view that is just a status-building exercise. You just throw your money at it. And finally, the view which is what I was referring to in relation to the Australian examples, where art has been co-opted to produce a kind of cultural identity. Now, are these the models that we're going to rely on forever for justifying the value of the arts, or do we have to come up with new criteria, new concepts, a new vocabulary, for expressing what's valuable in art?

CHARLES ESCHE: Of course we have new arguments already which I think we've been talking about here. The world, including the oligarchs, needs to deal with inequality, injustice and climate change. Humans and other animals are dependent on one another and culture is one central way in which we express that dependency. On that basis — the need to be able to share experience — then culture needs to find the means to exist. Whether that's the current system or not is another question.

The entanglement between state and private interests is so great and there's not a functioning representative democracy, so let's not dwell on the difference. The question is how to articulate the argument for publicly accessible cultural experiences that are not limited to a small elite by money or education. In many ways, existing museums serve a very narrow, bourgeois community of enlightened elderly people, so the current system is problematic. Instead, we need to repurpose our current institutions around specific, and specifically different, constituencies — people that can make use of the museum for deviant ends, I would say, and feel confident to ask the museum to be what they need it to be. These constituencies can include people like us working in those museums but must be much broader than that.

Understanding that artists and curators needs to address the gap between most people's expectations and experiences is absolutely vital in this. There was an interesting review recently of a newly opened private museum in the Netherlands. It was full of praise but then commented on the lack of discord in the displays. It was, the writer said, as though 'life is a beach', in that clumsy way the Dutch often use the English language. But I recognised it, the perfection of the building matches the perfection of the collector's life — he is living his dream and everything must be done to keep up those appearances. I imagined it would be burnt to the ground if there is ever another old-style revolution. And I wouldn't want to say the arsonists were wrong.

During this period of transition that I believe we are now in, I am sure art has a particular role, like it has always had a role in each historical period. It is not to celebrate the success of the excessive class of oligarchs but to capture, however fleetingly, the complexities of our moment of discord and to transmit the heterogeneous voices that are all around on the internet and in our heads. If we just look at one topic which I think is shared across Australia and Europe, the question of migration and the question of the increasing difference, it is clear that there is no answer in returning to some bogus homogenous past but rather to try to understand the value and the possibility of the new conditions and even to get to the point of embracing it. That's part of the role for artists and curators today. We can create the conditions for a shift in the value system, in which the idea of wealth, conspicuous consumption, the 'life is a beach' world becomes valueless and in which contentment is redefined. That's optimistic, I know, but I think that's our potential as an art field. The murkier aspect is to believe that we can realise it.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: I'm going to now turn it to the floor for questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thanks very much for a really fascinating discussion and, if I understood you correctly, I think what you were saying at the end was extremely counterintuitive and very radical, because what I took you to be saying was that there was a radicalism in contentment. And so one point would be to ask you to say a little bit more about the role of the artist in promoting a radical contentment, and also just to push you a little bit on the question of money that Nikos was mentioning at the end. So you were talking about how art can show that endless consumption isn't necessary, but we've all just seen the Picasso painting sell for this extraordinary sum of money recently, and people writing in *The Guardian* saying that 250 million for an artwork at auction is quite imaginable. So how do you — how would you recommend resisting that drive to extraordinary financial value being put on art?

CHARLES ESCHE: Well, I wouldn't recommend resisting it. I think it's irrelevant, actually. Georges Bataille has a nice term for the economy, which is that 'the question is limited to how the excess is to be squandered'. And I think we can say that it's maybe slightly a shame that it's squandered in this way rather than in some other way, but the squandering of the excess is what society produces. Potlatch was the squandering of excess that was produced by certain Native American and First Nations groups in North America at one time, and potlatch has many, many equivalents around the world. So, in a sense, this is potlatch. We have to see it as potlatch and as a necessary part of society.

The question is why does somebody have that kind of wealth in the first place to be able to do it, but that's a question which I don't think is related in any way to the art field. It's related to the bigger issue of responsibility for society and how tolerable such inequalities can be. History teaches us that at a certain point such excessive greed produces a violent backlash.

So, radical contentment maybe isn't a bad aspiration, as long as it is an aspiration and not an idea of passive acceptance. Even the latter is maybe not so bad if it were possible but to observe injustice at such a scale in the world does not allow contentment at any level. I think the idea of understanding that our agency, our capacity for action, is something which can make us feel good, can make us feel enabled, can make us feel emancipated, is the contentment that I would try to strive for — the process of emancipating yourself as contentment with the world. Also, we need to find a contentment with complexity.

But I think that that idea of how we can celebrate the possibility of change and understand the dynamics of the society in which we live are actually what gives us life and that destroying those dynamics is condemning us to death, as we saw in the Second World War, you know, by trying to extract — trying to disentangle what is already irreparably entangled. Once we can celebrate that entanglement, then I think we can feel contentment, and I think that art is one of the mechanisms — maybe even one of the main mechanisms, and I'm thinking of art including literature and music — that art is one of the main mechanisms in which that process can take place, and I think it always has been. It's actually something that goes way back.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: I thought I heard that paradox of radicality and contentment also in the sense of the possibility that art can function as a sort of process of connectedness across and through difference.

CHARLES ESCHE: Yes, I would agree.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I just want to turn for a moment to this question around the autonomous object. In my understanding, the two projects that you spoke about — the Picasso in Palestine and the project in China — were both processes by

which autonomous objects were being kind of activated by being sent on particular trajectories, so I guess I want to put it to you that the autonomous object is still at the core of your conception of art's potential.

CHARLES ESCHE: Hmm, do you want to rescue modernity here, because I'm not sure its possible? Autonomous objects are, of course, at the core of our modern collection — how could they not be? So, the origin of those two projects has to lie in such a thing as an autonomous artwork. But I feel that very status is questioned through the Picasso project by returning it to an historical condition — occupation — which the concept of the autonomous object does not recognise; or in Li Mu's work, by the objects acquiring a use value as a shelf or hanging device; or a political loading, as in the Mao portraits. All that use value seems denied in the claim of an object's autonomy that is independent of external conditions. So, they rely on an aspect of autonomy, but that autonomy is also undermined through the process and I think moves more towards a relational object dependent on external conditions. It also changes the reception of these works in the museum. Just to add briefly that I am talking here about the problem of an autonomous art object — not autonomy in a political sense, something that is still at stake in every encounter with art.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I can visualise this big red arrow as you talk about the kind of line of history through twentieth-century modernity. I'm thinking about the kind of multiplicity of red arrows within history and then I'm thinking about the kind of red arrow of the ISIS avant-gardists who are now sort of returning to pre-modernity and enacting their accelerationism on many sites of antiquity, and here we are in the Greek Cultural Centre, so it's quite apt. I'm just wondering about your thoughts on — well, your thoughts on —

CHARLES ESCHE: — on ISIS?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: On ISIS or this sense of, like, returning through history and returning to — destroying this, well, canon of —

CHARLES ESCHE: It's a difficult topic, because anything that might be said in defence of ISIS cannot be a justification for their actions. I think it would be a bad thing if these things in Palmyra were destroyed. I do believe that we have them really well documented and we kind of know a huge amount about them, so that means that their destruction physically is not going to destroy the digital information that we have, and therefore there's a degree to which they will remain accessible. I think we also have to understand that the destructions of modernity were at least as violent to these kinds of sites, so the fact that it's an exceptional site is also because so many similar sites had been destroyed in Western Europe in the process of time. Would we want the Roman Forum to still be fully constructed in Rome? It would probably mean that life in Italy would be in an even worse state than it is.

NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS: But that's because the Allies bombed it.

CHARLES ESCHE: Yeah. Well, I mean — so there you go. That kind of proves the point in a way, no? So, the fact that it hadn't been preserved and, indeed, was actively destroyed at certain times in its history — we have to put that alongside what is happening in Palmyra at the moment. Equally, we can ask why the West seems more concerned about these ruins than it is about the population of Tadmur, which is the nearby city. Perhaps that's inevitable — '*ars longa, vita brevis*' or whatever — but it's also pretty punishing. But I would like to say that there's an element of the critique of modernity in ISIS that is understandable given what modernity has wrought in

the Middle East. I some ways I would share it, though their remedy is deeply flawed in my eyes and may even be just as modern, in trying to shape the future from the top down, as their opponents'.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, maybe this brings us back to the beginning. It's a question about the funding of arts by the state. When architects do projects, public projects, they're required to undertake consultation to make sure that what is being proposed is actually what people want. Recently, the New York Public Planning Department undertook a ten-year public consultation process for the redevelopment of 125th Street. It included an artist who proposed a football game played by three football teams, and the artwork was basically the documentation of the consultation process that had to take place in order to get these three teams to agree to play to a new set of rules, and the consultation process was, in fact, the artwork. So, the question is: should a documentation of a public consultation process as an artwork also be funded by the state?

CHARLES ESCHE: I don't know what to say about that, to be honest. I'm interested in what art does in the world, and I think that an artist that documents the consultation process is valid — because it's exactly about reflecting on the conditions in which that artwork come to be without ever actually realising it. We need to understand art's processes of coming into being in ways which are much more complex than we tend to do now, ascribing it to an individual or ascribing it to an action in a studio. Rather, we could understand that the invention of cubism, for instance, was something that was done collectively and at a moment when the art system needed it. But I think there are so many ways in which art comes into being that I wouldn't legislate for a single publicly funded form — that would be quite frightening. One of the joys of being a curator is constantly being confounded

in your expectations by artists themselves, and I hope that would continue, and also — you know, the most interesting artworks are the artworks that are surprising and that you hate initially.

Notes

About the authors

Charles Esche is a museum director and arts curator. He lives between Edinburgh and Eindhoven. Since 2004, he has been Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands. In 2012, he established, together with six other European museums, the L'Internationale confederation that aims to establish a European modern and contemporary art institution by 2017. He curated the 31st São Paulo Bienal in 2014 with Benjamin Seroussi, Galit Eilat, Luiza Proença, Nuria Enguita Mayo, Oren Sagiv and Pablo Lafuente. In 2015, he co-curated the Jakarta Biennale in Indonesia. He is Professor of Curating and Contemporary Art at the University of the Arts London and is co-editorial director of *Afterall Journal* and Afterall Books with Mark Lewis.

Nikos Papastergiadis is Professor at the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. His current research focuses on the investigation of the historical transformation of contemporary art and cultural institutions by digital technology. His sole authored publications include *Modernity as Exile* (1993), *Dialogues in the Diaspora* (1998), *The Turbulence of Migration* (2000), *Metaphor and Tension* (2004), *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday* (2006), *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (2012) and *Ambient Perspectives* (2013), as well as being the editor of over ten collections, author of numerous essays which have been translated into over a dozen languages and appeared in major catalogues such as for the biennales of Sydney, Liverpool, Istanbul, Gwangju, Taipei, Lyon and Thessaloniki, and Documenta 13. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and co-chair of the Greek Centre for Contemporary Culture, Chair of the International Advisory Board for the Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, and Visiting Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

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**Governance and ignorance:
A conversation between Charles Esche &
Nikos Papastergiadis**

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In this text, Charles Esche, influential curator of biennales and museum director, reflects on the tensions between art and politics. Having forged his own outlook in the grim and polemical Thatcherite era, Esche has moved on to engage with questions on the autonomy of art and the decolonisation of museums. Through this wide-ranging conversation with cultural studies scholar Nikos Papastergiadis, Esche points out the limits of the social democratic and welfarist models that have shaped European public institutions, and urges us to explore new transnational collaborative models.

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