

Anton Vidokle
**Art and
Sovereignty**

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About ten years ago, I wrote a paper which was later published in our journal titled “Art Without Artists.”¹ What triggered the text was an invitation to speak at a conference on curating, organized by a curatorial studies program in Germany. At the time I was a bit irritated at being constantly mistaken for a curator and wanted to try to clarify things, so I wrote a pretty confrontational text against curating, somehow not realizing how awkward it would feel to read it to a room full of curators and curating students. Halfway through my presentation it suddenly dawned on me that I was basically attacking the cops in the middle of a police academy assembly ... I think I started feeling a little sick. There was not much of a discussion after the presentation. What followed was more like an uncomfortable silence. Nevertheless the text circulated widely and elicited a lot of responses, although I have not been invited to address a curatorial studies program since.

In hindsight, my arguments in that essay may have been a little theatrical and overblown. Curators and curating are probably not quite the monsters I made them out to be. I tend to agree with an observation Boris Groys made in a recent essay that no matter how subjective, a curator of public exhibitions may still be capable of producing more radical and surprising encounters than the numerical, algorithmic logic of social media, or other seemingly more democratic means of aggregating things and making them visible.

There is something in “Art Without Artists,” however, that interests me in relation to the present moment and the topic of this issue of *e-flux journal*: the notion of artistic independence, autonomy, or sovereignty. Here is what I wrote on sovereignty in 2009:

If there is to be critical art, the role of the artist as a sovereign agent must be maintained. By sovereignty, I mean simply certain conditions of production in which artists are able to determine the direction of their work, its subject matter and form, and the methodologies they use – rather than having them dictated by institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors, dealers, the public, and so forth. While this may be taken for granted now, historically the possibility of artistic self-determination has been literally fought for and hard won from the Church, the aristocracy, public taste, and so on. In my view, this sovereignty is at the very center of what we actually understand as art these days: an irreducible element considered to be the “freedom of art.”

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Xerox printouts of *e-flux journal* in the window of a former e-flux office on Essex St, New York, October 2010. Photo: Mila Zacharias.

The notion of artistic sovereignty came up again a few years later. Here is what Brian Kuan Wood and I write on the subject in a 2012 essay called “Breaking the Contract”:

Over the past decade, contemporary art has merged increasingly with the sensibilities of actual, concrete political structures, which have discovered in contemporary art and culture a means of exhibiting liberal, enlightened, globally conscious moral values. The artistic field is happy to serve in this diplomatic capacity, because expanding its rule allows it to bury its own ontological crisis. To create more institutions, more artists, in more places allows artists and institutions alike to escape the question of what is actually happening ... The paradox comes in the fact that the instrumentalization of art as a tool to promote liberal and democratic values coincides in so many ways with the actual history of art, from the modern period back to the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Renaissance. This produces an even more confusing effect for those who see the role of art compromised by its deployment in a broader field of cultural politics, because it also appears that it may not be the art system per se that is expanding, but the very liberal tradition that undergirds it.²

Thinking about this again a decade later, it may be that the liberal tradition is contracting, not expanding. The years leading up to 2020 have been marked by identitarian fragmentation and political closure in many parts of the world, combined with what Liam Gillick aptly refers to as a “neoliberal counterreformation begun by Milton Friedman et al., enacted by Thatcher–Reagan, and now conclusively pantomimed by Trump and the hysterically fabulist global strongmen of 2019 and their all-too-real and shocking new forms of nationalism.” All of these forces seem to pose a much greater threat to the possibility of artistic or any other kind of freedom than narcissistic curators, dictatorial cultural managers, didactic museums, or patronizing funding institutions.

The threat is painfully real. Over the past decade I have worked extensively in Russia and it’s incredibly sad for me to observe a relentless closure of possibilities for public expression, along with attacks on cultural institutions, filmmakers, theater directors, and others. Turkey has been another very important place to work for e-flux and me personally, and it’s surreal and devastating to see colleagues I know well jailed indefinitely for organizing artistic and cultural

projects, charged with promoting terrorism. Recently we had extensive discussions about the possibility of publishing a version of *e-flux journal* in China, only to realize that it would not be possible to do so under the ever-tightening conditions of censorship and surveillance.

In the landscape that is gradually emerging, it’s not so fantastical to imagine the eventual replacement of all international exhibitions with beer festivals, local food and craft fairs, or other types of events that reaffirm a particular identity and sense of belonging, rather than offering an encounter with something or someone outside of that tightly constructed place. It’s also becoming possible to imagine a reduction or even a termination of human movement: from the reemergence and fortification of numerous national borders, to increasing visa restrictions and the exclusion of entire religions or nationalities from entering certain countries, to perhaps requiring a permit to leave. I grew up in the Soviet Union and I do remember living in a regime under which you can’t leave the country without permission from the state.

e-flux was started at the end of the 1990s, when the general global trajectory appeared very different. As we wrote in the introduction to the June 2019 conference that this issue stems from:

From the 1990s onward, national boundaries would dissolve, centers and peripheries would level out, and the internet would host worldwide cultural exchange. In many ways this really did happen, but some other things also happened. As people and ideas began to move across borders, money did too. Faced with an unmanageable planetary scale, capital became a more efficient regulator of flows than laws or nations. Suddenly, capital rises to become the primary form of representation and expression for the global community, and its flair for flexibility and recombination would even be mistaken for a democratic, autonomous, or anti-authoritarian character, sealing it in as a new form of sublime non-governance. Capital’s twin, the internet, would also democratize many scarce resources and forms of representation just as efficiently as it would mask its control by state agencies and some of the largest corporations in human history.³

Both e-flux and the *e-flux journal* have been possible largely through the coalescence of these technological, economic, and political factors of the past two decades, but also through a certain productive conflation or dissolution of boundaries between artistic, curatorial, and

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Installation view of "Museum as Hub: Six Degrees" at *Night School*, New Museum, New York, 2008–2009. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

editorial methodologies that seem particular to our period. In turn, these are very much influenced by the logic of content aggregation and an accelerated pace of information and knowledge acquisition and accessibility. It's entirely possible that my irritation with the expansion of the curatorial sensibility came largely from the fact that basically we were using the same methodology to develop e-flux, which I wanted to see as an artistic work at that time.

Both e-flux and *e-flux journal* came out of exhibitions. I started e-flux following a small one-night show I co-curated with a couple of friends in a hotel room in Chinatown in 1998. We didn't have any money and I was merely trying to find some effective way to invite people without the costly printing of invitation cards. Email seemed to have worked, and that became what we still do today. Coinciding with the rapid expansion of internet, this method created a vast international audience. A few years later this project somehow resulted in an invitation to co-curate a biennial on Cyprus. Our plan was to make this biennial largely discursive: to replace the exhibition with a kind of free, experimental school. A number of artistic projects had taken the form of schools in previous years. I think the main novelty of our gesture was its scale: a large

international biennial becoming a platform for a school during the expansion of the European Union, when seemingly every country wanted to join, and when modern, contemporary, and particularly conceptual art were emerging as a symbol of a kind of new EU cultural identity. Because the school idea was largely indebted to and inspired by artistic projects, we realized that on a certain level this biennial was becoming a kind of an artwork itself, but were apprehensive to say so publicly in 2005.

A lot of my ideas at that time were influenced by *Utopia Station*: a large-scale artistic and curatorial project organized by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Molly Nesbit at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and elsewhere. Participating in *Utopia Station* was both very inspiring and truly vexing: Was it a curated exhibition or an artwork by Rirkrit involving many other artists and thinkers? I think Molly was hoping that it would become something like an artistic political movement, inspired by the ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein and the World Social Forum. As I learned later, it was also largely self-funded by Rirkrit, because the Venice Biennial, despite its enormous size, is notoriously short on funds.

The biennial on Cyprus, Manifesta 6, never



WUNP radio by Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez at the United Nations Plaza, Berlin. Left to right: Fia Backström, Anton Vidokle, and Angel Nevarez. Photo: Chris Frey.

happened. It imploded and was cancelled a few months before opening, after we ran into serious nationalist paranoia and opposition that conflicted with our idea of an open and inclusive project. The cancellation was followed by a number of lawsuits, so despite some discussion of moving the biennial to other venues and locations, no other institution wanted to touch it. Nevertheless, in part because by then e-flux had developed a stable economic base, I was able to realize a version of the school as a self-organized project in Berlin under the name *unitednationsplaza*. Variations of this project took place a little later in Mexico City and New York, and this is where I encountered most of the original contributors who helped shape *e-flux journal*: Boris Groys, Hito Steyerl, Liam Gillick, Martha Rosler, Jalal Toufic, Raqs Media Collective, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, and others, as well as the cofounder of the journal, Brian Kuan Wood, and Mariana Silva, our art director.

The idea to start a new publication actually came from Liam Gillick during preparations for the New York iteration of *unitednationsplaza* at the New Museum. Liam suggested that in addition to seminars and talks, we should start publishing position papers and do so by any means possible: not to worry about budget,

design, printing, or any kind of production, but simply make available existing, urgent texts as rapidly as possible in whatever form, even if this simply meant a stack of Xerox handouts in a museum lobby.

The New Museum was not particularly interested in this plan. Despite the fact that they had quite a history of publishing throughout the 1980s, including the influential anthology *Art after Modernism*, edited by Craig Owens, which became required reading in most art programs, by 2007 the museum seemed to have lost all interest in critical theory or publishing. So once again, and similarly to what happened with *Manifesta*, a necessary idea that was discarded by an established institution could be realized independently through e-flux, particularly since we had the electronic distribution system and some resources to actually pay writers and editors. Brian Kuan Wood, who had recently moved to New York from Cairo, and was a participant in the project at the New Museum, was willing to quit his job at the Tribeca Film Festival and start this new publication at e-flux as editor in chief (and basically the journal's sole employee ...) Our first issue, *e-flux journal* #0, was published online in November of 2008. Here is a key sentence from the editorial, which as I

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e-flux journal opening, Berlin, 2009. Photographer unknown.

remember was extremely difficult to finalize and was a result of a very long discussion between Brian, Julieta Aranda, and me: "With this first, inaugural issue of *e-flux journal*, we begin something of an experiment in developing both a discursive space and a site for actual art production, in which writers, artists, and thinkers are invited to write on topics of their choosing."⁴

Rereading this sentence now, it strikes me as a little peculiar: Why emphasize the fact that artists and thinkers choose their own topics? Isn't this something simply taken for granted? Who chooses the topics if not the artists and thinkers?

This brings me back to the issue of artistic sovereignty. Generally speaking, the word itself is somewhat disliked and viewed with suspicion, maybe due to George Bataille linking it with sexual domination and violence, or Carl Schmitt's Nazi jurisprudence of the "state of exception." What I mean is something else. Again to quote from the essay written with Brian in 2012:

An artist today aspires to a certain kind of sovereignty, to the freedom to work as one pleases. Unlike artists, say, before the French Revolution, who worked merely to satisfy a commission from the church or the aristocracy, or to serve public taste and critics, artists today understand themselves as being not only capable of deciding what kind of practice they want to have, what subject matter is important to them, what form it may take, and so forth; they also understand themselves as fundamentally free to follow their own personal interests or to respond to urgent events in the world around them. And this fundamental freedom is understood as a basic condition of any work of art, as the pillar that the content and form of any artwork rests upon.⁵

While this may be a fundamental conceptual condition, in practical terms it usually creates enormous frustration, because it's so impossibly difficult to achieve or maintain any type of independence or autonomy in the world of relations, interdependencies, divisions, and hierarchies. Furthermore, an artist has to continuously work to produce this condition, because it's not something that simply exists in the world, but is something that requires perpetual internal and external work, and this is kind of exhausting. I suppose all of this must sound a bit romantic and old fashioned: artistic freedom, sovereignty, autonomy, independence, etc., Ten or twenty years ago, when we started *e-flux* and the journal, this would have sounded

like a naive throwback to the 1960s or '70s. But having observed how conditions in the art world have become even more instrumentalizing and alienating to artists over the past two decades, while world politics has taken a clearly reactionary turn, it's possible that the discourse of previous eras can somehow offer a new radicalism for the years to come. Look at Bernie Sanders for example: a politician whose ideas would seem conventional and non-controversial in the late '60s now appears to be the closest thing we have to a model of US electoral political radicalism in 2020.

I suppose in a way *e-flux* has been a two-decade-long attempt to create conditions for this type of artists' self-management. And not merely for myself, Julieta, or Brian, but as a shared space to inhabit with others: artists, writers, architects, filmmakers, everyone who works at *e-flux*, our readers, our audience, etc. I am not really sure this always works, and we have never been able to resolve many internal and external contradictions, so this attempt has only been partially successful at best ... But then here we are.

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Anton Vidokle is an editor of *e-flux journal*.

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Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?," *e-flux journal*, no. 16 (May 2010) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61285/art-without-artists/>.

2

Anton Vidokle and Brian Kuan Wood, "Breaking the Contract," *e-flux journal*, no. 37 (September 2012) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/37/61241/breaking-the-contract/>.

3

A revised version of this text serves as the editorial for this issue.

4

Julíeta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, "Editorial," *e-flux journal*, no. 0 (November 2008) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68454/editorial/>.

5

Vidokle and Wood, "Breaking the Contract" <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/37/61241/breaking-the-contract/>.

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