

Artistic organisations

Transcript of interviews with Iva Kovač and Elvis Krstulović, Focus Group Rijeka, June 2019.

Establishment of the collective

Elvis Krstulović: At the very beginning when we started working as the Focus Group, fifteen or so of us lived in a house in Zagreb circulating and living there at different times. At that moment, we were trying to make the conditions for our functioning which was not closed.

In that sense, very specifically, that *Kružok Group* we had in Zagreb, I can't remember, what year it was. First in 2008, then a break, then in 2009 again, and so on. It was a tight group of people who met quite regularly. The primary idea was a platform for exchange and discussion. And the idea was never to produce something, but actually having somewhere to co-create own mental context, where someone literally reads something, someone watches a film, and we bring it up all in a discussion. Just doing these things collectively instead of alone. And at the peak of it, everyone moved out of Zagreb. Or almost everyone, I don't remember anymore. One person went to Ljubljana, another to Vienna, and then it just burst.

Iva Kovač: We were founded in 2012, we were in France then, so we established ourselves in France, and we had worked together before, we just didn't have an umbrella name. And the two of us are the collective.

Zoran Pantelić: Did you consult astrology to be in France?

Iva Kovač: Of course, astrology, and numerology, just to round it up into a collective.

Elvis Krstulović: We have worked together through certain projects, from the very beginning. That idea was firstly a pure need to work together on a project. We liked it so we started talking about the option to start it the way we do, but it took a while. It was a period from when we finished our studies until 2012, in which we thought about whether or not we would like to work that way. And then in 2012 we decided. In that sense, there is pre-history and some pondering about it. The name was very important to us, that this way of working ceases to be like a meeting of the two, and then to speak of that meeting as of a content, etc., rather than actually having a third entity assume authorship, take responsibility, ownership of the work. That was what we wanted. Couples working together, in the sense of Ulay and Marina Abramović, where two individuals meet and this becomes the content of the work, that was not our motivation. Our motivation was to erase those individual identities in the context of a work of art, and to speak from a perspective, like a third person is an author.

Iva Kovač: That lasted long. Quite long, because we had been discussing working in the collective since 2009, since this larger, joint project we had been working on, on the subject of contracts. It took us quite a while to define the name. The name was meant to be... This was a sociological method that deals with opinion research as well as the market, and we were interested in this ambivalence - of simultaneous speaking within some humanistic disciplines, or within something that can be used in this sense for another type, i.e. for profit. We liked that kind of tension, but in principle, it was terribly important to us to have a name, because it meant we could distance ourselves from working under our own names. But we did not give so much importance to that particular name we chose. So, I would say that...

Elvis Krstulović: in the sense that the name does not necessarily say anything about our method. It didn't matter, we liked that moment that you've described now. Like, you are part of market and perhaps emancipatory things simultaneously, you are ambivalent as an artist. Then we summoned it through that name somehow. But we did not need it to describe the practice.

Iva Kovač: We were thinking of whether at some point, we sometimes use this method, but it didn't seem important. It was really, really important to us to have a name, and thus emancipate from ourselves.

Manifesto (framework of operation)

Iva Kovač: The topics of the manifesto were very specific. It was interesting, as we had seen, that early-twentieth-century practices entered the world of public, often through manifestation and writing manifestos. An earlier work we'd done together, and which was not done by the Focus Group, but was done as two of individual us, deals with artistic contracts. It was interesting to us then, how to describe what each practice is, in order to

draw up an artistic contract. And as these were often contracts that dealt with conceptual practices, they somehow described, through a contract, in an apparent legal language, what type of art it would be; what it would apply to, the copyright ... For example, Daniel Buren, who must, in some way, want to denounce the authorship of work, must explain what his work is like within that contract, in order to clarify what he is talking about. So we somehow made that parallel, between the contract and the manifesto, and sought „manifestity“ in that legal language, which was later used in conceptual terms, in essence. So, in a way, through that dealing with our position in art, as an individual collective, in a way we have...

Elvis Krstulović: For example, this work functions as a manifesto, although it deals with the analysis of others and talks about contracts, in that sense, yes.

Milica Pekić: This work preceded the forming of the group?

Iva Kovač: Yes. That research of artists' contracts preceded, we did it in 2009, just when we decided to make that comparison between the manifesto and the contract, we did it later as a *Focus Group* during 2013, or so.

Working strategy and methodology

Elvis Krstulović: A number of works, which is quite important to us, dealt with nationalism. And in our case, that meant dealing with monuments, which somehow equalise victims, which write history again and again and suchlike. It is a series of works that we have been doing from the very beginning, and we are doing the latest research piece with Gal Kirn in Slovenia, where we are actually trying to make a map of reactionary monuments in Europe. And now something we are working on by actually applying for a discussion which Gal Kirn has launched on Facebook, on that subject. He posted that it would be useful to have such a map, then we replied - let's do it. This is an idea, where we are not even its initiators, but we've reacted with our own experience regarding the topic. That's a good idea, let's get together, let's work on something together. This is now one ongoing study, where we now bring together a broad community, across mostly Eastern European countries, where we have found most people who knew something about it. And the density of such monuments is the greatest there, at least it seems so. And we've created a network and are collect info on various monuments. We have done some things beforehand regarding what was happening in Croatia, for example, a series of works. Another series, starting from the very beginning, from these contracts is, in fact, is what we call institutional criticism in the art domain. So that is where we are dealing with the economic framework of artwork.

Iva Kovač: Which is now being implemented in a project where we have been invited by the *Second Sea (Drugo more)*. We've been invited to do something on the topic of work. In this project we will explore issues of agency work - that is, changes to the law, which in the context, i.e. the Croatian legislation, generally at EU level, have opened up the possibility of short-term employment. And how one avoids the legal frameworks set by the state, how one manages to avoid it. We find it interesting, and we want to try. We'll see how it will work - to set up an agency through a project. And it's been a year and a half now that we've been working on it. So, we'll be working on that project for another year and a half. Besides...

Elvis Krstulović: These may be two lines of work and ideology, although intertwined in that sense, the material conditions on the one hand, and on the other that representational tool of entering reality through the state, through...

Elvis Krstulović: We have this table which is a place where, since we are in this studio, one of us comes up with an idea, or with a potential idea. We have this phase where we terribly need some concentrated space where one proposes a topic for discussion, which could become work. It does not have to become art, but it is a crucial collective part, the moment when we discuss a topic primarily. Rather than what the work will be, whether it will be the work and with whom we will do it and none of that may be there yet. It's like, look, I've read this, and I'm interested. See this work, see something; let's talk about something. And this conversation is terribly crucial, it is perhaps most typical of our way of working, to draw some of the contours of a topic for future work through discussion. So, discussion and debate, and sometimes even conflict, arise at that moment when the topic is discussed. And in that sense, maybe the specific thing is that we start from a topic, not from our line of work; not from some medium we use, but from something that we find important at that moment to be happening around us.

Iva Kovač: We don't resolve conflicts in public, never in public. And we are doing very well, so in a moment we talk and negotiate and communicate until we reach some form of consensus. Sometimes consensus does not necessarily mean that we have met halfway, but let's say, one of the methods we've introduced recently, a year or two ago, is to somehow get out of a heated discussion in its midst and allow ourselves to process it in silence and peace and then we meet post factum and somehow, start the discussion anew. But yes, of course communication ... When we try to work together it leads to conflict, it is simply necessary.

Elvis Krstulović: When there is a longer period of active work, then there are fewer conflicts. Then somehow that goes much more smoothly, we synchronize, it goes nicely. And then, when there are some breaks, then we have to learn that communication again. It's easy to forget, it's not something you learn and you know it, and it's some kind of skill that works. And it even works, and then it stops working, as if we have changed and that old method is no longer working, and we have to start from the scratch. It's like some eternal reinvention of communication on every plane.

Iva Kovač: As far as cooperation is concerned, I think we often cooperate with people and we were initially open, we planned for the Focus Group to become a group, really, that there were more of us. But, as it did not happen, we are actually approaching other people in some way, or other people are approaching us, it depends on what project we are talking about. And in fact, most of the things we work on, we do with other people. What is important to us is that we have a vision of what we will do together, which we define to some extent. Which then, in collaboration with someone else, goes in a different direction. We don't have to agree more, but somehow to the extent that we as a collective have some idea of what that would be in the end.

Elvis Krstulović: In that sense, these are mostly the people we invite, or that we know are doing things that have become interesting to us in that project as a possible output, as a possible tool somewhere in the project phase or similar. And then we invite people, which may be a more common case of inviting people, and we work because someone shoots in this manner; someone programs interesting things; someone works with a community, or they know something about a topic. In that sense, that is how we approach people and then invite them to work with us.

Individual / group / network work

Iva Kovač: Our sociability in terms of our stay at a place where we share space is absolute. This is our living social space where we exchange ideas. Now I am not sure that we enter all these relationships necessarily, as a *Focus Group*. When we go to protests, we go as individuals, we don't have to go as the *Focus Group*. So the answer is both yes and no, in a way. Of course, through action, new forms of sociability are created, of course it is created through activities and communication with others. And yes, *Focus Group* is...

Elvis Krstulović: intertwined with those relationships, but it's also not the monolithic entity that fully defines us. We also exist as people who are not members of the *Focus Group*, we're beyond being members of the *Focus Group*, and we participate as such. And sometimes it's really mixed up, intertwined, so it's really hard to say in specific situations whether we were a *Focus Group* in that case, or Iva and Elvis who were part of something else. And this is quite difficult to distinguish, because these are not really very clearly defined interactions, where we sign a contract under what conditions we enter this relationship, so in that sense it is difficult to say. You are part of a variety of overlapping networks, and each of us, both individually and collectively, has some overlapping and non-overlapping phases. And so are the other entities we work with, and it's so soiled, there's no clear demarcation line really ... and that's why it's hard to say how to talk about it when talking about Focus Group practice. Because in this sense it is most convenient to talk about the context within which we operate, rather than the real *Focus Group* activities. Like, it surrounds and defines us and influences who we are, but it's not our practice, just like that ...

Iva Kovač: Concretely, we are not us - *Focus Group* in a *Molecule*, but *Delta 5* is an association that is in the *Molecule*. In that sense, we did not approach the *Molecule* directly. - We're one of them. - Maybe not, I would not say that our activity within the *Molecule* is some kind of activist approach to the scene, yes...

Elvis Krstulović: But maybe just a way we want to participate somewhere we live. We do not want to participate as a *Focus Group* that lives in a city somewhere and works in their studio. On the contrary, there is one larger community that is the interface for that city and the first place you go to and when you return, through

which you make contact with that city. So, it seems to me to be a function of this space and the people we are with.

Collaboration in wider platforms

But in a more literal sense, wherever we live at some point, we tend to have the *Focus Group* as the first step we have made from the individual to society. Then the second step is through a wider collective of which we are a part, so then this is a way we participate in society. We did this with that *Kružok* in Zagreb when we lived there, then we moved here to Rijeka and we joined *Delta 5*, that is, we started it together with others, so that is how we operate. It is not necessarily activism, we would like to be careful here, as to what we call it. It is not gathered around a specific political goal that we want to achieve, or that we want to counter, but is actually some way in which we want to participate primarily in the artistic and cultural scene, and then we can certainly come to conclusions. That may be the way we have approached it.

Artistic and social engagement

Elvis Krstulović: Well, we make a distinction between something that is in the narrow sense of the word artistic practice. This results in some kind of art exhibitions, or publications, something. And then it's like a core collective activity. And then, the issues that we are involved in that touch on our practice; then we talk about them as of an extended context, some framework in which we operate. Depending on what context we talk about, how we present it. We say that these are our collaborative collectives, that this is our immediate environment in which we operate and that is how we are here ... These are under some miscellaneous activities on our website. They are not listed as some of our central activities, because somehow our position in these projects is not the same as how the group runs the whole project. But we somehow contribute to something, we support something, we join something that has been initiated by someone else and in that sense the dynamics are different.

Iva Kovač: And ultimately, these are not things that require signatures. It is expected within the art world, in a way, to define what one has done. So, for example, on the outside we are forced to define ourselves within how we share space, we are not, i.e., at some administrative level we are. At the administrative level, by opening an association and being members of associations, we are. But nobody asks you to declare yourself as part of this or that collective.

We insist that we act as a *Focus Group* in an artistic context. We have been insisting on this since 2012, and it is important to us because it's what we are. We've said we wanted to have some type of entity. This is absolutely irrelevant to us in other activities. And we find it terribly funny when we are called *Focuses*, and we perform in some other ... in public as people.

Relationship between artistic and scientific research

Iva Kovač: They differ, of course they differ. There is a difference between the non-exactness of the result, which is tolerated within the artistic context, which is not necessarily seen as positive, but it is a good playground for going towards being as precise as possible. But in some ways, we are not expected, the art system expects no certain rigidity that the academic world does.

Elvis Krstulović: This maybe allows us to ask some questions earlier, which would take much longer to do through scientific methodology. Well, in that sense, it's faster, but it's also frustrating in a sense, because the methodology you're using doesn't have some validation points that it may have in a scientific context. But it seems to me that depends on how this research goes. Our research is a deliberate attempt to use the research methods we see as non-artistic, and that their mere displacement within the art context provides some sort of change. From artistic research, in the sense to just collect visual material on a topic in some historical context, or something else. And how we get into that, either theoretically or otherwise. So yes, it depends on what project is being talked about. Research alone can be drastically different from scientific, or actually quite close to us, with only minor subtle differences.

Iva Kovač: And quite recently we've been moving towards trying to treat research more rigidly, so in that sense we are changing ourselves - and our practice.

Plans for the group

Iva Kovač: Well, that project connected to the work is something central, we aren't continuing it but are in the phase of building, defining what exactly it will be. We are continuing some projects, the project with Gal Kirn, it is a map of monuments in Europe, that is, revisionist monuments that equate Communism and Fascism, and in this sense, it is a matter of further searching for a case study. This is essentially a project that needs to be continued, and that means finding associates. Because in fact, we collect information and organise, and we're looking for collaborators who then work, who inform us, because we don't know the contexts everywhere. In addition, Invisible Matter is the project that may have gone furthest right now. We may be simultaneously in a dead end about it because we've found ourselves in a rather complicated situation because we are working with a programmer. It's not complicated, but it's technically challenging to do the segment we need right now, which is NLP training we are doing with students, that's been going on for a while. One type of process, and the results are questionable. We are not sure if we will get what we expected we would, and that is the basis of the whole project. This may be the most challenging part for us ...

Elvis Krstulović: There's a lot of work ahead of us, it's awfully questionable whether we'll get it. Because we have already started this process once, stopped, reset it and started over. Because it turned out to be going in the worse direction, not the better one...