I Reality Check

“We (all) are the people” reads a public banner in twelve languages by Hans Haacke, which was installed for this year’s documenta 14 at various sites in Cassel. It updated the slogan “Wir sind das Volk,” which was chanted by protesters in the historic “Monday demonstrations” against the East German government before the 1989 fall of the wall and was recently adopted and misread by the movement Pegida, or Patriotic Europeans against Islamisation of the West. Aiming to show that it should be our duty to engage and shape the future of our living and interaction, Haacke in his statement simply adds the word “(all).” In current times, such an engagement does not seem easy. Fostered by various shifts, such as sudden terror attacks in European cities, rising migration movements from South to North and ongoing wars in the Middle East, hegemonies seem at stake and an uncanny feeling of uncertainty and insecurity is spreading throughout the Western world. Just a tip of the iceberg, these developments, and their media distribution are successfully leading to an increase of populism in many democratic European countries and North America. These tendencies are highlighted by such events as the Brexit and Trump’s election. At the core, the real crisis that Europeans and Americans might find themselves in their own scarcity making them lose their privileged status as our world is undergoing global change. Clearly, I believe it is time for a change of mind, habits, and conceptions.
II Thinking about Curating

I am not quite sure whether I am the right person to speak about such global issues. I am not trained in political science and do not feel part of any political movement, but this seems to be the current backdrop against which we are all acting and behaving – it’s just the time we are living in. So, I will take this opportunity to reflect and write about my way of working as a curator with the problems described above.

Before getting deeper into the subject, I’d like to explain my perspective a little further. Working in the field for some years now, I believe it is not just the curator’s mission to lend fame to the “next hot artist,” but to use the spaces that are given to us and to mediate between the public, its social and cultural conditions, and the visionary world of artists. Art spaces do have the opportunities and resources to discuss the world from an artist’s point of view. Being spaces full of freedom, they can enhance curiosity, educate a generation, and serve the community. Art spaces, I believe, should be forward-looking spaces that form the new standards of living together. Subsequently, curators should take risks whenever they can and reflect on urgent subjects.

III Making Exhibitions

In 2016, Fabian Schoeneich and I co-curated the exhibition “House of Commons,” which was developed in partnership with Kadist and shown at Portikus in Frankfurt. Among the 23 participating artists and collectives were Rossella Biscotti, Yto Barrada, Mohamed Bourouissa, Jonathan Monk, Superflex, Charlotte Posenenske, and Danh Vo. The show took its title from the British House of Commons, an elected political body with legislative functions and more than 650 members, which, in short, grants seats to the citizens of Great Britain to shape moments of social and political decision-making. It also understands itself as an open house, welcoming all citizens to join in and watch the discussion from its balustrade. The seats in the House of Commons are arranged in a very specific manner, organized like two stands along the walls. The majority members gather on the right side, and the opposition
representatives take their seats on the left side so that they are directly facing one another. This architectural structure was first implemented in the Curia Julia of the Roman Senate in 29 BC and has deep roots that still function in Great Britain and Canada. It is not so in Germany, where the parliament is located at the Reichstag building in Berlin and designed very differently. Following the tradition of the ancient Greek theatre, in the Bundestag, the seats of all members are distributed in a circle facing a stage, with the speaker in front. Most striking about the House of Commons design is that a member of a certain party always stands up to address the oppositions’ representatives while speaking with its party members at their back. This momentum of dialogue, confrontation, and direct discussion is manifested in the architecture – and this caught our attention. Eventually, we decided to build the exhibition design based on the British House of Commons and borrowed its title to create a situation for discussion and parley. The talented architect Paul Bauer, who is based in Frankfurt, joined in and created the final design for Portikus, in which two 13-meter-long staircases meander along the walls, one gray like the floor, the other white like the wall, so that the final installation adds a clever shift to the building’s rigid symmetry.

IV The Disguise of Politics

The title and the architecture were chosen as a response to a mood sensed in Germany and beyond. People, we thought, are losing faith in democracy and starting to become suspicious of politics and administration. Public debates were becoming hectic, right-wing parties gathered incredible numbers of new voters, and many people took to the streets to loudly raised their voices, for example in Pegida or AFD demonstrations, the latter, Alternative for Germany, is a recently founded right-wing populist party. “House of Commons” arose in response to the feeling that our democratic sensibility was at stake. It aimed to use its space to introduce a locally unknown architecture for debate, thus offering an uncommon setting for gathering and talking. The whole endeavor benefitted from the given conditions at Portikus, being located visibly on an island in the river Main, accessible from the oldest bridge in town and free of charge for everyone, it took on its new shape and direction quite naturally. Funnily enough, its bare architecture slightly resembles the ancient Curia Julia, so we basically just installed the exhibition architecture and added an outdoor sign stating, “House of Commons,” thus already changing the meaning and mission of the house. Portikus was kind of dressed up and disguised as a political platform without becoming inaccessible or wired; it all happened very subtly within the language and the premises of contemporary art. The whole endeavor acknowledged that Portikus is, first and foremost, a space dedicated to the arts and artists. We didn’t want to change the world; we aimed to take a political stance and argue through art, while still being aware of our resources and own limits.
V Creating a Commonplace

Flanking Portikus with four steps toward the left and right walls of the space, the exhibition architecture served as a display for artworks, but not just that; it was also used as seating for the audience. During talks and performances, people would simply sit among the exhibited artworks to listen, speak, observe, and watch what was happening in the space. During regular opening hours, people could climb up the steps to check out the presented artworks from different angles, just hang out, relax, or read books. The entire space felt very open, welcoming and friendly. The structure had a human approach, being two meters high in total, the steps had a depth of 70 cm and were built from plywood, which was later lacquered with acrylic paint. It all implied a certain softness, warmth, and humanness. People felt invited to stay and join in for the various events. There was “Afrogalactica,” a rare performance by Kapwani Kiwanga, a public discussion with Claire Fontaine about the notion of politics in their work, as well as a performative reading by Shadi Habib Allah, who recaptured the experiences he had on a week-long journey with Bedouin people making their way through the Arabic desert to Jordan.

VI Changing the Setting

Highlighted by the subtitle “A constantly changing exhibition presenting artworks, talks, screenings, and performances” was the second conceptual layer of “House of Commons” at Portikus. Each week on Monday, the only day the space is closed; we changed the setting of the art works. We moved the works of art around, swapped positions, added new objects, and took others out. Throughout the show’s duration, seven different chapters were installed, sometimes the space was crowded with art of all media at other times it looked rather empty. The chapters were indicated by numbers and announced with a list of artists. Behind the scenes, we organized each chapter around a specific subject matter, which was taken from the richness of the artworks and from how they co-existed in the space. Starting with the notion of freedom, such issues as migration, politics, post-colonialism, terrorism, escape, collaboration, and humanity were discussed alongside questions fundamental to the arts itself. The exhibition was kicked off by juxtaposing only two works: Danh Vo’s sculpture “WE THE PEOPLE” (2011), a one-to-one replica of the Statue of Liberty in 225 fragments, of which a part of the foot was in the show and “Passer en Angleterre, Accès terminal transmanche, Calais, juillet 2007,” a photograph by Bruno Serralongue that captures a moment of waiting in the lives of refugees on the French coast. Starting from this dual presentation, the exhibition continued to grow and, in subsequent chapters, presented more paintings, objects, sculptures, and video works. This dynamic process was a response to the stasis of regular exhibitions and their time-capsule character. Arguing in the tradition of Jacques Rancière, who said that art and politics are not similar, but are “two forms of distribution of the sensible,” the exhibition aimed to distribute positions and opinions. People and works of art alike were perceived as voices, having in common that they can speak about either a specific
or a rather universal issue, but still tell a story that could be inspiring or beneficial for other people.

VII Making Space for Art

“House of Commons” was more than a group exhibition; it aimed to engage in questions on how to deal with current political trends in the field of art. It simply asked what an exhibition can do in times when the political sphere seems to be out of balance. It did not seem an appropriate solution to make a show that would try to archive Trump’s election or the Brexit while explaining or historicizing these events when the effects that they might have are still taking shape, and their outcome is still unpredictable. I’d like to quote Rancière again because his thoughts on the similarities of exhibition making and the making of politics seem to be great assets to bring the two fields – art and politics – together.

“Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experiences, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them.”

Rancière shows us that art and politics seem closer than we usually think. Like political spaces, art spaces, places for exhibitions, are shared spaces that gather people to devote themselves to elaborate on a given subject. Surely, artists, curators, and the audience must admit to certain institutional rules, act within site-specific power relations, but the value that art spaces, as open mental spaces, add to our lives are elusive. Allowing for an aesthetic
sensation as well as for a change in perspective, art spaces give works of art the greatest voice so that we can dedicate ourselves to new visual experiences. Art adds multiple perspectives to our worldview; it helps us to create visions and in this way, adds to what is happening on the internet, on television, in the news and politics. In short, art can shape our perception of the world. Elaborating further on the relation between art and politics, Rancière writes:

“the relationship between aesthetics and politics consists in the relationship between this aesthetics of politics and the ‘politics of aesthetics’ – in other words in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the commons and the singular.”

With Rancière in mind, exhibition making and politics seem to have various features in common. Both spaces work to distribute subjects and objects, to re-arrange positions, and make propositions for our future lives. Consequently, exhibitions can be spaces where the effects that political trends might have on our lives can be discussed, where we can learn about how these events influence people’s lives and, hopefully, this can help us to find a strategy for shaping our interaction and collaboration with others. This idea is central to my practice, and I believe curating can have, and I also perceive it as its political dimension, a crucial impact on ways of living together and communal interaction. Having said that, artworks should always be the point of departure for setting up an exhibition rather than a strict curatorial concept that instrumentalizes works of art to explain its subject literally. Truly, I believe in the power of the arts and, as Hans Haacke revealed with his banner for this year’s
documenta 14, it can be very easy to change a current mindset by just making a short but smart proposal. This is exactly what exhibitions allow for; they make space for new propositions of how our world could be. I would like to close this essay with a thought by one of the greatest political thinkers of the last and this century, Hannah Arendt, who envisioned public spaces to become open spaces “where freedom can appear,” and I believe that it is possible for art spaces – along with other public spaces – to become those places of freedom.
Participating artists: Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Fikret Atay, Sven Augustijnen, Monika Baer, Yto Barrada, Eric Baudelaire, Rossella Biscotti, Mohamed Bourouissa, Banu Cennetoğlu, Keren Cytter, Michael Dean, Claire Fontaine, Ferenc Gróf, Shadi Habib Allah, Roni Horn, Kapwani Kiwanga, Jonathan Monk, Charlotte Posenenske, Bruno Serralongue, The Propeller Group & Superflex, and Danh Vo.

Thanks to Paul Bauer, Dr. Stefanie Heraeus, Ronnie Fueglister, Léna Monnier, Prof. Philippe Pirotte, Sophie Potelan, Emilie Villéz, Élodie Royer, Louisa Schmitt, Fabian Schoeneich, and Vincent Worms for their collaboration and Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain as well as Institut français for their generous support.

Notes
1 “House of Commons – A constantly changing exhibition presenting artworks, talks, screenings, and performances” was shown at Portikus between December 3, 2016 to January 29, 2017. URL: http://www.portikus.de/en/exhibitions/203_house_of_commons
3 Ibid, p. 24
4 Ibid, p. 25
5 Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought, Meridian, Cleveland and New York 1961, p. 4.

Images can be found here: http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2017/01/house-of-commons-at-portikus/