

The most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world, Como 2010 - 2012

Making people meet – a report for an ubiquitous Kunsthalle

There are so many affinities between the natural set of the classical Arcadia – that remote, paradisiac, rural vision of the perfect harmony between man and environment – and the location of the city of Como, which constituted the original stage for *The most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world*, that in fact it seems more than appropriate that a project with such a strong idealistic component was born in this idyllic location of Como.

Despite being just 40 km distant from Milan, Como remains quite a remote location, traditionally more concerned with itself than with its outside. It focuses on its natural and historical resources and has an overall attitude of detachment from the activities of its larger surrounding cities such as Milan or Lugano.

Not everything is positive from this willingness to turn its back to its neighbours, and what in fact happens is that the cultural activity of this city is quite reduced for this middle-sized, wealthy location that detains an important natural and historical patrimony that goes from the late-medieval local school of architects and builders (as the «Comasine Masters») to the legacy of Rationalist architecture, in particular that done during the first decades of the XX century by the worldwide famous architects Antonio Sant'Elia and Giuseppe Terragni.

Indeed, such posture of the city, of calling to itself the world outside it, was one of the elements that instigated a research upon the possibility of providing this area with a forum that exceeded that common place of exchange of goods and became a location for cultural and artistic proposals that related both to the locals and to those who happened to spend some time in the city. However, it would be difficult to impose to Como an institution that its inhabitants and visitors do not feel the need or desire to have.

For that reason, it was conceived a project of consultation that would hopefully increase and nourish a sensibility for contemporary culture, by addressing professionals from diverse areas of expertise of cultural production, inviting them to come to Como and to share with the city's inhabitants their ideas, visions and advices on how to create what would ideally become *The most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world*.

The inquiry upon the possibility of constitution the most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world, that is, of the conditions to create an exhibition space that would function in the best possible way, was developed through twenty-two encounters that took place during a two-year period on an average of one a month.

In developing the programme, we felt the need to experiment different formats in our public encounters, as to propitiate the best possible relationship between themes, speakers, timeframes and audiences. One of the most successful models was the one-to-one dialogue with certain personalities that we felt had an important testimony to pass, as it was done with Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Nikolaus Hirsch or Vicente Todoli, who were all invited to speak in Italian as to be linguistically closer to the audience.

There were also the moderated sessions, in which a younger professional coordinated and moderated the discussion, as it happened when Paola Nicolini moderated the encounter between Art Angel's James Lingwood and Creative Time's Nato Thomson, on a discussion about producing for exhibiting, or when Francesco Garutti was the host for a session on architectural exhibition displays that included Andreas Angelidakis, Kuehn Malvezzi, Dieter Bogner and others. There was a whole day dedicated to the curator, which was divided into three main blocks (the canon, the exhibition and the institution), and for which we invited Maria Lind, Bruce Altshuler, Raimundas Malasauskas, Celine Condorelli, Jens Hoffmann, among many others to discuss about the history, role and pertinence of such controversial figure.

Some encounters were dedicated to specific themes (as the relation between exhibition spaces and their cities), while others were based upon the analysis of a specific format (as the German model of Kunsthalle and Kunstverein) or of peculiar case-studies (as the relation with the public operated by the Camden Arts Centre in London and the Friedericianum in Kassel).

The encounters

The first meeting of *The Most Beautiful Kunsthalle in the World* took place on Saturday, the 23th of October 2010. The decision was to start with a reflection about the possible relations between art centres and some key European cities. Our interest was that of inviting some individuals who, through their work and through the programme of the institution they have been running, were able of producing a strong dialogue with the cities they were located at, and of triggering important processes of community-making. Believing that plurality and diversity of experiences allowed us to capture the dynamism necessary to the creation of social spaces, this encounter represented the occasion to put together a group of individuals whose work has been crucial for discussing the relations between artistic institutions and forms of dialogue and of exchange and to discuss how cultural institutions can have a positive and beneficial influence on the cities that host them.

The encounter had the participation of Nikolaus Hirsch, an architect who was responsible for the project of *Cybermohalla Hub*, a continuously changing institution, a hybrid between a school, an archive, a community centre and a gallery – an institution that has a constant need to dialogue with both virtual and physical space that hosts it. In addition, Nikolaus Hirsch was one of the founders of the European Kunsthalle, in Cologne, and is currently the Rector of one of the most

important art schools in Europe, the Staedelschule of Frankfurt. Hirsch gave an outstanding contribute in this opening session by comparing the architecture and functions of different European institutions, analysing their changes throughout the years and according to the intentions of each new director.

Beatrix Ruf came to share her experience of running the Kunsthalle Zurich, an institution that changed its character and attracted a whole new set of visitors since Ruf was appointed Director and Curator in 2001. In less than ten years, the city became a fundamental location for the production and display of contemporary art, and spaces such as the Kunsthalle played an essential role in this positioning. In fact, the relation that the institution established with its city, the location it occupied in a non-central neighbourhood, in a cluster of culture alongside other institutions and commercial spaces, radically altered the relation that its denizens and visitors alike established with the urban territory of Zurich.

Angela Vettese came to bring an experience related to the Italian context, as she brought the case of the Bevilacqua la Masa Foundation in Venice, where she has been President since 2007. Bevilacqua Foundation has played a very important role in the city's cultural life, often serving as a bridge between the upcoming generations of artists and the more consolidated practitioners. Through its residency programme, the foundation has given the opportunity to many young artists to start their career and have a workspace for a considerable amount of time. At the same time, Bevilacqua hosts exhibitions of both the awarded recipients of the residency and of established artists, assuring a continuous vitality to Venice outside the periods of the Art Biennale. The importance of this constant gaze towards two poles of the same sphere, that of artistic production and of the conditions of hosting that can be offered through an institution was the core topic developed by Vettese in her contribution for the programme.

The second encounter of *The Most Beautiful Kunsthalle in the World* touched a very important subject for the identity and constitution of an art institution, which is that which relates to its container. Art Spaces, which took place on the 16th of November of 2010, was structured as an informal gathering between several designers who have been closely working with the realization of exhibition architectural displays.

The encounter was coordinated by Francesco Garutti, the current art editor of *Abitare Magazine*, who has a degree in architecture but has been working with contemporary art since the early years of his career.

Five were the participants of this session, which started with an overall contextualization on the current situation of thinking and conceiving the spaces for art, presented by Dieter Bogner, an art historian, curator and museum planner.

Bogner conceives the space for art as a complex and lively organism that establishes relations with the city, its tourism, and both local and global economies, demonstrating how management and project have to come side by side in an overall thinking of exhibition spaces.

Instead, architect Andreas Angelidakis came to talk about his design of environments and exhibition spaces, which have to adapt to the given spaces and offer new possibilities to conceive displays in a logic that combines use of space, content matter and the logics of the discourses proposed by the curatorial team. Based on several case studies, as the exhibition «Collateral – when art meets cinema» (Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2008), Angelidakis illustrated how to think the exhibition space alongside curators is a recipe of success of a project.

Also based on specific case studies and on their experiences of large provisory containers for art, such as the Binding brewery for Documenta 11, the duo Wilfred Kuehn and Simona Malvezzi sustained that if the origin of the exhibition space is in the studio and if the artist is the one who determines the place that becomes model for galleries and museums, observing how the art production has evolved can help to understand the logics and the forms of the museums of tomorrow.

Paul Robbrecht, co-director of the architecture studio Robbrecht en Daem, founded in 1975 in Gent, Belgium by him and his partner Hilde Daem, gave an outstanding contribute to the discussion by presenting his exhibition project for Documenta 9 (1992), which shows a radical transformation of the attitude and in the use of exhibition strategies between XX and XXI century. The Milan-based architect Frank Boehm introduced an Italian note to the conversation, as he presented his own ideas based on certain examples of projects done by him, namely The Milan Gallery Kaufmann Repetto.

On the 27th of November of 2010 the project of *The most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world* hosted one of the most relevant and fascinating figures of the world of contemporary cultural production, the Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. Obrist has taken the legacy of Harald Szeemann further, expanding the role and stretching the range of activities of the curator. His immense creativity and energy, his willingness to discover and to share, and the speed and intensity in which he moves make of H.U.O. a fundamental person to consult on this project. In the conversation that he had with Marco De Michelis, they spoke about how curators came into being, about how the process of gathering and processing cultural memory is an essential feature of any cultural agent, as it assures the preservation of our identity and of our references. Hans Ulrich Obrist also spoke about some of his projects, in which aspects of temporality and spatiality were very important.

Twenty days later, on the 17th of December, another bastion of cultural production joined the project. Alanna Heiss, the founder and former Director of P.S.1 and the current Director of AIR – Air International Radio, came to Como to talk about her experience. Among the subjects of her

talk, a very important aspect was her emphasis on the importance of the reuse of abandoned and disused buildings, as she did for several exhibition projects, which provided a very good example for what can be done in Como.

On the 12th of January of 2011, Alberto Abruzzese, Stefano Baia Curioni, Pier Luigi Sacco and Angela Vettese discussed the issue of the politics of cultural production, This was a very pragmatic encounter, based on the analysis of concrete data and statistics that reflected on the current situation of public and private economic strategies for culture in Italy.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev signed yet another high moment of our programme, as the curator of the 13th edition of the Documenta of Kassel is unquestionably one of the most important figures for contemporary art worldwide. Interested in etymology, collapse and recovery, and planned with a number of curatorial agents, advisors and artists in multiple locations around the world, Documenta provided a very important model of how to think and do large-scale exhibitions, and how to make artists, denizens, cultural operators and locations meet and engage in a productive and long-lasting dialogue. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev mentioned what she considers the end of the model of the exhibition as it is conventionally considered, launching proposals for other ways to relate to showing and presenting art.

Different models of institutions were also analysed throughout our programme of encounters. The first of these was the French FRACs, which were discussed in a meeting entitled *From the eighties until tomorrow: The French FRACs*, which took place on the 24th of February 2011. It gathered the French theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud, the then director of Frac Bourgogne Eva Gonzalez-Sancho and the sociologist Alain Quemin, whose research topics include sociology of the art market and its international actors.

The event, which was coordinated by Andrea Lissoni, departed from the history and activity of these artistic institutions to explore the relevance of this model of Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain, which were created in France in 1983.

Producing for exhibiting, the 8th encounter of the programme, which was presented on the 24th of March 2012, put together James Lingwood, founder and director of Artangel, an agency that has been operating in the U.K. since 1991 outside institutional spaces, producing some of the most acclaimed works done in recent years, which stimulated the debate on the diversity of contexts of contemporary art in an infinite spectrum of languages and media, and Nato Thomson, a NY-based curator that collaborates with Creative Time, an arts non-profit based agency to foster artistic experimentation, enrich public space and the everyday experience.

Both discussed the importance of commissioning, producing and presenting artworks outside the conventional institutional frames of museums and galleries, bringing art closer to the public sphere.

Not Only Art, our 9th encounter, which took place on the 29th of April 2011, invited the editor of Domus Joseph Grima to discuss with fashion curator Maria Luisa Frisa, the architecture writer and curator Carson Chan and the Director of London's Design Museum Deyan Sudjic to share their thoughts on the importance of conceiving exhibitions that deal with other contents than contemporary art. Design, fashion and architecture, their ways of exhibiting and their multiple relations to the display strategies and modalities of contemporary art were some of the subjects treated in the encounter.

The project of *The most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world* moved exceptionally to Venice, on the occasion of the opening of the 55th edition of the Biennale, where it was hosted by the IUAV University of Venice to discuss the Non-profit reality in Italy. Roberto Pinto, Stefano Chiodi and Emanuela De Cecco were the guest speakers, which were supported by the contribute and real experience of four young collectives who have a direct experience in the field, as it was the case of Fucking Good Art, S.a.l.e, Sottobosco and Granaio.

Displays, on the 21th of June 2011, was yet another important moment in the whole research process, as it created the opportunity to launch a discussion on the aspects of the exhibition display, that spatial apparatus that determines the relation between works, installation and visitors, that offers a logic to the sequence of works and contributes for its the overall meaning. For this encounter we invited the Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, London Iwona Blazwick, alongside with the curator of Hangar Bicocca in Milan Andrea Lissoni and Mario Lupano, director of the course in design and theory of fashion of the IUAV University, Venice.

Vicente Todolí came to Como on the 15th of September 2011 to be interviewed by Marco De Michelis, in a conversation that was focused on his experience as director of three important museums in Europe, the Ivam in Valencia, Oporto's Serralves Foundation and the Tate Modern in London.

After the French Frac's, the second model to be analysed in our encounters was the German one. For that encounter, entitled *Kunsthalle and Kunstverein, the German model*, we counted with the presence of the director of the Kunstmuseum of Bonn Stephan Berg, the then Director of the Witte de With in Rotterdam Nicolaus Schafhausen and Peter Pakesch, Director of the

Universalmuseum Joanneum of Graz. Launching illuminating elements for the distinction of the different sorts of institutions that exist mainly in Northern-European contexts.

Yet another predominantly North Europe model was analysed in the following encounter, entitled *By the lakeside*, which happened on the 4th of November 2011 and which gathered the Director of the Museo Cantonale d'Arte of Lugano, Marco Francioli, the responsible for the artistic projects of the CIAP of Vassivière Frédéric Legros, and the chief curator of the Kunsthauus Bregenz Rudolf Sagmeister. If the previous encounter was based on the discussion of the specificities of the different forms of German cultural institutions, this one relied mainly on peculiar case-studies similar because of location by the lakes, not different from Como's.

Curating the most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world was a whole day dedicated to the discussion of the figure of the curator, analysing that such role acquired in the last decades and putting in evidence their large contribute in the changes of a whole system of relations and functions that overall establishes the way we relate to culture. The encounter was organized around three themes, the Canon, the Institution and the Exhibition. The Canon counted with the presence of Bruce Altshuler, Teresa Gleadowe and Christian Rattemeyer. The Exhibitions featured Jens Hoffmann, Raimundas Malasauskas and Celine Condorelli and the Institutions saw Dirk Snauwert talking about his recent experience at the Wiels in Brussels.

Expanded Exhibitions, gathered experts from the most experimental areas of publications and press, who came to share their opinions on the importance of art writing and on the relevance of text-based pieces for an on-going dialogue within the context of contemporary art and critique. Maria Fusco interrogated the phenomenon of writing about art and about the possibilities of teaching art writing, David Velasco, who came as editor of Artforum.com gave a deeply personal statement about his relation to writing while Julieta Aranda shared with the audience her experience as founder and co-director of e-flux.

Nikolaus Hirsch was the last of our one-to-one guests in an encounter that was held on the 26th of January 2012. The Rector of the Frankfurt's Staedelschule, who was also our guest in our first encounter of the project, was invited to talk about his experience of conceiving spaces for art and about his recent functions as the Rector of one of the most important art schools in Europe.

Building an art audience, on the 16th of February 2012, put together two representatives of two of the foremost institutions that do a consistent and outstanding programme of interaction with the audience. In fact, the theme of the encounter was Building an art audience, and the discussions held by the two directors, Rein Wolfs of the Fridericianum in Kassel and Jenni Lomax of the

Camden Arts Centre in London, were articulated between their respective institutions and an overall gaze towards the importance of developing strategies and forms of engaging public and different audiences in culture.

Temporary Kunsthalle, on the 22nd of March 2012, put together Viktor Misiano, the President of Manifesta Foundation, and Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, the recently appointed director of MACRO in Rome. Together, they animated a discussion about aspects of impermanence and utopia in the contemporary arts.

On the 3rd of May took place another encounter, which saw two Italian artists as the actors of a discussion about *Exhibiting in the most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world*. These were Annie Ratti, the President of the Antonio Ratti Foundation, and Michelangelo Pistoletto, one of the most important living artists in Italy. Each one of them spoke about their views and experiences in working with institutions of various nature and in the conditions of exhibiting their works.

The project of the Kunsthalle functioned with the help of ten interns who gave an outstanding contribute to the development of the project and to the implementation of new measures and ideas. They helped to prepare the individual sheets about each participant that were freely distributed during each encounter. Moreover, when in an early stage of the programme they expressed their desire to have a more intimate encounter with the participants of each session, we introduced a preparatory meeting, which allowed them to meet and dialogue with those who came to speak. These informal moments became a unique formative experience for both interns and speakers.

The last encounter signed a decisive moment for the development of the Kunsthalle. After two years inviting international professionals to bring their expertise and proposals to Como, the time had arrived to focus on our city, and to face its needs and problems. This also became the moment to gather what was said and suggested and to decide if the most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world was due to remain in a research project that provided guidelines for those interested in thinking institutions or if we would use these theoretical foundations to imagine the configuration of a centre for the arts in Como.

It was most probably the speculative nature of the project that called for an experimental proposal, which would function as a test-site for a different relation between cultural institutions and audiences, especially the new ones, with a whole new set of desires and demands. Such proposal was born out of the need to answer a series of questions that emerged while thinking about an institution for culture in the present context, such as: how can cultural institutions in

general, and a new institution in particular, establish a close and long-lasting dialogue with its visitors? How can an individual feel part of an institution and feel identified by its positions, statements and activities? How can an individual trust an institution? How can a space be more than an area of display and encounter and become a key element for the identity of a place, adapting itself to it? How can we feel at ease at a venue? How can a cultural centre generate needs and desires in its visitors, some of them they did not even know they felt? How can we spend less with infrastructures and maintenance in order to redistribute those large costs to production and creation investments? How can an institution relate equally with diverse physical and social realities?

We did not answer these questions. Moreover, it was the questions that, altogether in their complexity, offered hints for a proposal. For one thing they seemed to attest that the desired closeness between cultural institutions and public did not derive from logics of emplacement but from the promotion of a more flexible and less imposing space for the production and promotion of culture.

A central aspect that came out of the discussion sessions about the most beautiful Kunsthalle in the world was that such institution does not need a fixed physical location to exist and that its initiatives could take place in different locations of the territory, as institutions seem to be extremely able of triggering processes of aggregation and identification that do not require the association with a place.

The current situation of certain cultural institutions in Italy, such as the two main museums for contemporary art in Rome, just to name two – the MAXXI, which is threatened with closure only two years after it opened (in May 2010), and the Macro, which suffers from a directional instability that lead to its gradual loss of identity – mirror well the apotheosis and crisis of the museum as a status symbol.

These sad occurrences seem to confirm the fact that if culture is an essential element for the aggregation of individuals and the edification of a local, national and international identity of a given place, it does not mean that it should be presented inside a costly and obsolete containers, that absorb a considerable part of the resources for research and production.

These examples (and many others, in Italy and abroad) make us believe that a new space for culture in Como should be based on participation and have a changing identity, one that is itinerant and adaptable to the diversity of the presented projects, because its strength relies on the activation of processes and not in an immobile presence. This would allow for a concentration of expenses and costs on a constant reconfiguration of a place that can be different each time.

The possible faces of this itinerant centre for the arts would largely depend on the nature of its projects - that most probably would not be exclusively of contemporary art but that would reach many areas of cultural production, from music to science, from ecology to performing arts, from

urbanism to literature, philosophy or anthropology - in such a way that they could relate in a more incisive way with central elements of the territory.

This would also allow for the activation of the architectonic, natural and human patrimony of the city, places that, by hosting new functions and allowing new uses, would be traversed and occupied by different individuals that could positively alter its fruition.

As part of these we could consider disused structures, industrial edifices, but also old cinemas, petrol stations, former hotels or commercial spaces, and many other spaces, according to the physical and symbolic characteristics that a given project would request.

Can this ubiquitous Kunsthalle become a reality, in Como or elsewhere? Or is it destined to remain a vision of an imagined cultural Arcadia? Only the future will say, but what is sure is that a project such as this one is of utmost importance for a collective thinking about what we want, desire and expect of contemporary art, its actors, agents and institutions.

Filipa Ramos, October 2012