

## **Open Space – Zentrum für Kunstprojekte:**

### ***Bringing together theory and practice***

*by Nicole Kanne*

#### **Preface**

**Open Space – Zentrum für Kunstprojekte** is a non-profit organization that aims to create a room for contemporary creative practice, as well as encouraging theoretical discourse on art and politics. This institution (the word institution understood in its widest sense) was founded in 2008 and is up to date led by Dr. Gülsen Bal, a visual artist and theoretician.

If one was to describe what Open Space actually is, its closest match would probably be the “Off Space”.

Compared to other institutions in the art field, like museums or galleries, the institution Off Space is harder to define, as its objectives and practice vary from one to another. For a general definition, one could describe them as non-commercial art galleries that are mostly led by the artists themselves. The phenomenon Off Space can be grasped for the first time in the 1970s in New York. Here, the Off Spaces, also known as *artist run galleries*, were set up in order to create an alternative to the traditional art-market and promote new forms of art like performance, video and concept art.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at Gülsen Bal’s Open Space, this institution certainly has a lot in common with this definition, but there are differences as well. Considering these, the question rises, weather this institution even falls into the category Off Space.

This was only one among other questions, Gülsen Bal willingly answered in the following interview, held at Open Space on January 26<sup>th</sup> this year. The interview took place within an art history seminar, held at the University of Vienna.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicole Scheyerer, Profis im Off, in: Falter, 7, 2007, S. 20.

One of this seminars objectives was to use the interview as a source for theoretical reflection on practice in the Viennese art field. Yet, since one of Bal's main concerns is the question of identity, she already offered most of the theoretical reflection on her practice in the interview herself and even put her practice in a context to Viennese institutions similar to Open Space. For this reason, this paper mainly concentrates on the interview itself, as it already contains most of the theoretical reflection on this institution.

## **Interview**

How did you come to build up Open Space here in Vienna?

**Gülsen Bal:** *I started of being a researcher at Central Saint Martin's College in London and at the time I was pursuing my PhD, I did various different case studies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. At one point, I decided to bring all those different case studies together in one physical location. For me, Vienna, as holding somewhat of a gate position between Eastern and Western Europe, was the ideal location for this.*

In an article by Christa Benzer, published in the *Springerin*<sup>2</sup> in February 2008, she mentioned Open Space in line with a group of Viennese Off Spaces. Looking at the etymology, the word "Off" implies a physical as well as a mental isolation, a standing outside. Do you see Open Space in this kind of isolation?

**Gülsen Bal:** *Not really. My objective with Open Space is to provide a room for artwork as well as for theoretical discourse and at the same time create a network for artists, curators and other people in the art field.*

So would you even consider Open Space an Off Space?

---

<sup>2</sup> Christa Benzer, Selbstorganisierte (Neben-)Schauplätze. Ein Rundgang durch die Wiener „Off Space“-Szene, *Springerin*, 2, 2008, S. 68.

**Gülsern Bal:** *The way I understand what an Off Space is, is a place that is settled at the breaking point of the hierarchies in the art field. At the same time, it can be a place that opens for artistic practices and theoretical discourse, which wouldn't be possible in classical institutions in the art field, like museums or galleries. I tried to set up Open Space to operate somewhere in between, so even though it is organized like an institution, it provides a laboratory for creative practice as well.*

Speaking of the organization of Open Space, how does it finance itself as a non-profit organization?

**Gülsern Bal:** *We usually get funding for the different exhibitions and programs that take place here, mostly from different international organizations. Since I don't want to tie Open Space with a single funding partner however, the funding is project-based. By financing just one program at a time, the funding partners don't gain as much of an influence on Open Space.*

How accessible is Open Space for emerging artists?

**Gülsern Bal:** *We do have quite a few emerging artists and curators here at Open Space, since this is something very crucial for me to work into. We even encourage them to join us at biennales.*

What about the aspect of being alternative and actively staying alternative that some Off Spaces promote? Does being alternative play a role for your practice at Open Space?

**Gülsern Bal:** *For me, being alternative comes at the latest stage. What comes first in my opinion is to deliver what Open Space is trying to establish. Being alternative or not is something that is judged by others anyway.*

One of your objectives is to highlight the importance of cultural diversity and bringing questions of cultural complexity into light. How do you achieve these goals?

**Gülsen Bal:** *Apart from the exhibitions that take place here at Open Space, I also want to create a room for discussion and theoretical discourse. In addition to that, there are also educational programs and workshops.*

Now, you just mentioned you want to create a network for artists and curators. What are you trying to achieve with that?

**Gülsen Bal:** *The idea behind this network is to give artists and curators a chance to connect. This way, I create a space for them to find new ways of producing art and provide a room for theoretical discourse. But beyond just creating a network ourselves, we want to connect different networks as well. Having these pluralistic approaches come together in one physical space, we can encourage a dialogue between them.*

With the idea of highlighting cultural diversity and cultural complexity, there automatically is a political aspect that comes with it. What you do here at Open Space is creating a theoretical discourse on politics with the medium of art. But how far does your political influence actually go? Does the theoretical discourse ever leave this room and actively participate in politics?

**Gülsen Bal:** *Our program always shifts from being critical art towards new forms and new ideas of what art is in life and this way creating a theoretical discourse. In addition to the theory on politics, we also encourage a dialogue between the people that meet at Open Space. These are usually international artists and curators that come here for an exhibition or a workshop, but sometimes we also have students from the Akademie der bildenden Künste or the TU joining in.*

Well, if we take the theoretical discourse on politics as a first step and the connection between international network partners that you encourage here as a second one, then where is the third step? Where is the moment when

you actually go beyond the theoretical discourse and act your political ideas out in real life?

**Gülşen Bal:** *See, the third step is the practice itself. By promoting an international network and giving the people a chance to meet and exchange ideas, a new way of thinking is created. I see this thinking agency as a production itself. It doesn't necessarily have to come in line with an exhibition either, as it is more engaged with the encounters that happen here at Open Space.*

Doesn't this very theoretical approach leave people with the feeling of missing out on the art?

**Gülşen Bal:** *I think your question aims in a direction that would rather insist on a clear distinction between theory and art, and promote a form of art that is very object orientated. The positions shown here, however, are positions by artists that wouldn't distinguish as much between their practice as an artist and the theoretical discourse. I think they are very interested themselves in melting these two aspects together. If you look at the artwork shown in this exhibition, it is as theoretical as the discourse that comes with it.*