BARCAMP:
MAKING KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC

CP Interview with Agata Pyzik and Kuba Szreder for Warsaw Free/Slow University
Publication From Critical Practice Chelsea

In October 2009, Critical Practice jointly facilitated a public "unconference" with the Free/Slow University of Warsaw. This "unconference" (called a "BarCamp") took place at Nowy Wspaniały Świat (the former Nowy Świat café), at Nowy Świat Street 63 in Warsaw, and examined the "Public Body" as its main theme. Some of the questions shaping this one-day event included: What kinds of subjects/bodies/abilities are authorized to enact the public and how? What infrastructures and ideologies are necessary to facilitate a public body? And how can the public body be inhabited and activated?

Reflecting on this BarCamp, the following text is based on a conversation between the members of Critical Practice and Agata Pyzik from the Bęc Zmiana Foundation. This discussion considers various issues, such as the methods of self-organization Critical Practice employs and the BarCamp as a discursive platform for assembling people with diverse points of view. Also discussed are cultural distinctions between "the public" and "the private" and how these categories promote varied ways of occupying space in Poland and in the UK.

AGATA PYZIK: Could you explain the beginnings of Critical Practice and your modes of operating?

NEIL CUMMINGS: Critical Practice formed because we were interested in exploring some recent developments, emerging around software, particularly free, libre and open-source software. Well, we were not so much interested in the software itself as in what it enabled us to do, to think through, and think about. Some undergraduate students, researchers, academics, artists and members of the staff at Chelsea College of Art and Design (part of the University of Arts in London) proposed a series of events around these emerging issues, and they tried to see whether these technologies, ideas and processes could be mapped onto art and other areas of cultural production.

We proposed a conference with Tate in London, which eventually developed – after 18 months work – into Open Congress <http://opencongress.omweb.org>. It was an enormous and complex event, with multiple and simultaneous strands, some self-organized, focused on Governance, Creativity and Knowledge. The event was super-successful, and all of us who participated were so energized by it that we decided to continue working together.

AP: When did it take place?

NC: In 2005. Subsequently we started working together as Critical Practice, and we have some of the members here.

CINZIA CREMONA: One of the interesting things about open-source software is that the people who started developing the software also developed new ways of working together, new ways of associating, which has a political value. Because they didn't necessarily need hierarchical structures – where there is a president who makes decisions, or a treasurer who administers the money, etc. – they allowed an organizational structure to emerge that mirrored the production of the software. Some people collected together these new organizational experiences under the umbrella of open-organizations.org. They published some simple functional guidelines. Typically, these organizations started to emerge from the inside, where management structures were not already established, into horizontal, mobile and self-organized elements. Part of what we do as Critical Practice is to try out and practice the experience and knowledge, developed by such open organizations, and within the guidelines, as much as possible.

NC: For us, this is for two principle reasons: one is that we realized (after Adorno) that all art is organized, and, mostly as artists, we tend to ignore that we are organized, and then reproduce terrible organizational structures. Secondly, the open-organizations.org guidelines say that as soon as two people come together, the issues of governance arise. So if we don't attend to how we associate with one another, we will also revert to these bad organizations and lazy practices.

MARSHA BRADFIELD: Transparency is an important principle for us and an ideal we aspire to. Hence, we make all of our proceedings available on the Critical Practice Wiki. Or at least we try to publish all our meetings, agendas,

minutes, projects, budgets and texts there. Hopefully, this interview can appear there, too.

NC: Quite early on, we realized that to remain true to the spirit of Free Libre Open Source Software development we would have to license ourselves outside of the copyright: using free, copyleft or Creative Commons licenses. The genius of Open Source Software is the General Public License, the GPL. It enables instances of creativity to be shared, modified and redistributed by others. So we've made a commitment that the knowledge we produce will be licensed under these terms. If we are in receipt of public money, we guarantee that the knowledge remains public so that it could enrich the common wealth. We will not use any restrictive licenses.

CC: All these ideas, and our Aims and Objectives are on our Wiki. And the Wiki is accessible – anybody can change the content of the Wiki. If a member of Critical Practice, more or less committed, wants to change our Aims or Objectives, they can do it. Also our budget can be seen and edited on the Wiki. People contribute to Critical Practice mostly in two ways: firstly, by getting together physically for the meetings and events, and, secondly, by contributing to the Wiki, or through the mailing list. Some discussions happen on the list. And there are people who read the e-mails and then become active.

NC: Whenever we manage to attract resources, like money, we post how much we have on the Wiki, and how we intend to structure the budget. The budget is online, so everyone can see it – our funders, the people we need to pay, everyone. It's open, accessible and editable by every participant.

MB: Our Wiki, together with the attitudes it encourages, exemplifies the kind of public space that we're interested in. It's a space that needs to be occupied and maintained. The members exercise the Wiki by posting regularly and editing the collectively written texts, gathered there. Critical Practice is concerned with various cultural distinctions around space – both online and off. Addressing the difference between the public and the private space is part of what brought us to Poland. Yes, we're interested in what might be termed "publicness" and how it's performed through the daily practice and shaped by various infrastructures.

NC: I think this is one of the themes which links Critical Practice, the recent BarCamp and the Free/Slow University of Warsaw. There is a general tendency for Universities to adopt a "corporate" model of knowledge production, because they capitalize knowledge through the Intellectual Property (IP) regimes and make knowledge a private property. So, one of the things that Critical Practice has been testing is whether this is appropriate or not. And certainly in a public university it's not.

CC: Because CP is an open organization, the participants keep shifting all the time. And so some of the people who began with Open Congress are no longer here anymore, and some of us arrived later. The structure is flexible and scalable. For example, I'm not a part of Chelsea College of Art and Design in any way. This information should be made public. It's Critical Practice. It's research by practice. CP has an openness. It is connected with and supported by the University, but it also functions in a very different way.

NC: On our Wiki we state that the University hosts us, but we are not necessarily contained by them.

KUBA SZREDER: If the University funds you as a research cluster, how is the (IP) property issue related to the different kind of knowledge, which is generated by CP?

NC: We make it clear that if we are supported by public money, we will make all the knowledge produced free, open and accessible.

AP: Who joins Critical Practice apart from artists, researchers, etc.?

MB: Lately a financial journalist has joined the group, and he's interested in CP's preoccupation with various kinds of economies. And we're excited by his knowledge of final economies in particular – his understanding of monetary markets, how money floats around, and how certain notions of wealth are circulated along with this capital.

NC: Although currently most participants are Ph.D. students, staff members, researchers, or other students at Chelsea.

CC: Having a practice in mental health provision, I come from another

background. Even if we are all connected to the art discourse, or/and practice, we come from very different backgrounds, which is not so common in many art organizations.

MICHAELA ROSS: I come from a teaching background, and I'm working in education in museums and galleries. I'm interested in how CP, with our various modes of operating, can function inside different institutions.

CC: We have a set of principles – our Aims and Objectives that we aspire to. We're not bound by any manifesto. But we often find that we understand our aspirations differently. And so the collaboration pulls us in different directions and has an interesting way of settling on a certain combination of ideas that emerge from these differences. This is not always very "efficient," but when we actually materialize our projects and transfer all the contradictions to the project, it can be super-productive. During the BarCamp here, people were very good at arguing, expressing the contradictions, even between people who worked together. And I saw that maybe culturally it is easier here to express dissent when something becomes public, in a public domain.

AP: Could you explain why you are experimenting with the BarCamps and tell us something about the previous ones?

NC: BarCamps emerged from our research and interest in various forms of knowledge production – who produces what, how it is distributed, or how it is owned or embodied. Generally, at academic events, you have a conference format where famous people are invited to speak to a largely passive audience. It's a broadcast model. So we wondered how to develop different forms of assembly, forms of assembly that facilitate the engagement of the audience, or that collaboratively generate discussion, knowledge and dissent, agreement, contradictions, or provocations.

CC: BarCamps are an international network of user-generated un-conferences: open, participatory, and often thrilling workshop-events, whose content is provided by the participants.

MB: They work like this: presentations are proposed in advance, usually through an on-line sign-up table, or on on-the-day by the attendees. We then try – live and on-site – to build themed "sessions," or groups, of related presentations, using white boards of flip charts. All the attendees are encouraged to present and share their expertise. So there are usually about ten-minute presentations, with ten minutes in between each for questions and a discussion. We try and keep lots of notes. There's usually a live scribe, and everyone is encouraged to share information and experiences of the event, both live and after the fact, via blogging, photo sharing, social bookmarking, Wiki-ing, twitter, and so on.

So, we have created a series of "platforms." Yes, a BarCamp is a platform where people can share their knowledge, and the ideas they place into circulation can be further developed by the group.

NC: We have also developed new forms, one of them being called the "Market of Ideas," where, instead of this famous speakers/passive audience model, we invited the "speakers" to be distributed around the conference space at tables, which we called "stalls." The audience did not passively sit, but moved around, and listened to whom they wanted to. So this "market" or "bazaar" structure enabled the audience to be the most active and transactual. They could go to someone and listen, and "take" some knowledge, and then trade or transact it somewhere else. The Market was an extremely lively and productive experience. A noisy, distributed, peer-to-peer exchange replaced the older, broadcast, conference model.

AP: It's like the Black Market for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge, run by the Mobile Academy. They did one in Poland around 2006. Are you familiar with it?

NC: Yes, but I think our market is better [laughs], because actually the audience is the most productive in the Market of Ideas, whereas from what I know about the Mobile Academy, it's mostly performative – you watch people in discussion.

KS: No, it's quite similar.

NC: But there's a one-to-one exchange at the table, while the "audience" is hanging around, waiting for their turn.

AP: While yours has many multitudes, not one-to-one situations.

NC: Exactly!

KS: I think that the idea of Hannah Hultze of the Mobile Academy was to control the content; it was curated. She still holds the idea of authorship. The Market of Ideas, however, is somehow different, with all those people participating. I think it's an important difference.

NC: Ours is a really lively and discursive event, where the audience is the most animated and productive. As we know, there is more knowledge in the audience than in the famous invited speaker, so, in a way, the Market tries to unleash the potential of the "audience." It is the very opposite of a conference.

CC: We tend to generalize the "audience," but they are people who have expert knowledge to contribute. So that the group of people who attend a "market stall" not only "take" the knowledge of the expert, but also give as much as they can. So, at each stall, knowledge was produced in action, by participating in that particular activity and environment. So I think the market is a model of distribution, but also of creative co-production.

What comes up and what doesn't come up during the discussions is equally important. We think about the models of the distribution of knowledge and the production of knowledge. The fact that we are coming from London to organize a BarCamp in Warsaw might produce a different kind of knowledge. One is the explicit knowledge, which is the themes we discuss. But there will be also the implicit knowledge, which is the things that happen which you do not expect to happen. This happens when inside a group of people there are people from two countries: it is a kind of a mirror effect – we reflect back to each other about what we are prepared to talk about and what we are not prepared to talk about, and the kinds of behavior we tend to engage with and the ones we don't tend to engage with.

AP: So what were the surprises of the Warsaw BarCamp? What kinds of behaviors emerged? Did you expect anything?

CC: It's not about expecting anything, but we have noticed that there are differences in approaches in even the ways of collaborating, or preparing of an event. There were many propositions that were put on the table, and many did not happen. But when we go somewhere as Critical Practice, we usually present a united front. All our contradictions merge into a tacit agreement. And during the BarCamp I felt that people from Warsaw are very good at expressing contradictions in public.

AP: Maybe people in Poland crave for any form of expression for their frustrations, and I think that it is because they are convinced that their participation in democracy is not effective.

KS: If you take Hobbes' Leviathan, which is at the roots of the social sphere in the UK, there is the idea of a social contract between all of us. That we agree to give the sovereign power to protect us. Which is something like: don't demand from somebody else that which you are not prepared to give up yourself, in terms of your rights. Like, if I demand more taxation, I will be taxed more, etc. And maybe in Poland it is still true that our cultural roots are those of a "nobles' democracy" and the liberum veto, and that everybody is an individual ready to say what they think. But in Poland usually people are ashamed of expressing their opinions in public, and it is actually surprising.

CC: It's not about expressing their opinion, but it's about disagreeing! Because this expressed itself in another way. A BarCamp is a type of a self-organized conference. You don't want to force people to contribute, so at the beginning everybody is invited to say their name and two keywords. When we did it for the first time at the PubliCamp in London, even people who didn't want to contribute said two keywords. So people conformed. When we suggested some rules, they conformed. In Warsaw people refused to say the two keywords. I was surprised by that. It's about saying "No" in public, disagreeing with the rules.

KS: It's rather about being ashamed of showing anything, even your interests in public. It was more about the passivity of people. They didn't want to participate, or be active.

CC: But in England the way to refuse participation would be to just sit at the back of the room and disappear. But here people were saying "No" with a really strong voice. They came to the table, and then refused.

MR: Does it have anything to do with the space?

KS: Here people are not used to talking in public.

MB: Yes, it seems there's a different sense of public space in Poland than, say, in the UK. Even if people in the UK aren't always sure how to behave in this space, there is still a strong, if vague, sense of "publicness" there. I think many people feel entitled to being in public and to constituting a public or publics. But when I asked people in Warsaw about what public space entails in the Polish context, they would usually say: "We don't have any public space here." I still don't really understand this. Why aren't places like parks, the parks in Warsaw, for example, not understood as public?

AP: So, either people have a different sense of what is public and private here, or they do not have the sense of it at all. I want to return to the passivity that Kuba mentioned. Do you think the Polish society is passive?

KS: No, the point is that you have a quite strong division of the public and the private. In the BarCamp, there were people who were at ease, because the organizers were their friends, so they felt more at home. Or they come from other backgrounds, like that American girl. People were more relaxed and it enabled them to be more improvisational, even spontaneous.

NC: Maybe it's not necessarily a distinction, but... The first BarCamp we organized in London was about how to manage money and budgets. We realized that we were not very good at managing money, but also other arts, NGOs and volunteer organizations were not good at it either. We felt almost embarrassed by spending and distributing money. The idea of the first BarCamp was to set a particular problem as a theme, and everyone in the camp addresses this problem. BarCamps are quite functional in that respect. So we set ourselves the task that, through the BarCamp, we would produce guidelines on how to manage a budget for an open organization. As a result, everyone at the BarCamp made a presentation more-or-less related to budget management. And for me, this was one of the most productive BarCamps; the theme was quite specific and people had time to prepare themselves. It's important to be really well prepared, even if your presentation is short.

Sometimes improvisation and spontaneity can be good, but equally they can produce a mess. I'm not drawing a distinction between Poland and the UK – I'm just thinking generally about the BarCamps that we have organized, and that worked well for me.

AP: Could you point at the issues that were more willingly or reluctantly discussed during the BarCamps?

MR: I don't think it's about preparation. It's about understanding what your role in the BarCamp is. What makes you want to contribute, contribute to certain kinds of discussion, or hierarchies of discussion. I find these digressions quite interesting. It's about the attitude, about recognizing a willingness to participate in a democratic way.

MB: CP aspires to create conditions for a new kind of knowledge production, and BarCamps are interesting models in this regard. This is because BarCamps are performative, by which I mean that the conditions they create shape the knowledge or the knowledges they produce. In contrast to more formal pedagogic models, such as a lecture, where an expert disseminates his or her knowledge through one-way content delivery as s/he talks at a group, BarCamps, with their more intimate atmosphere, promote a sustained conversation or conversations among all those in attendance. As such, and to echo an earlier point, they're a good context for testing new ideas and forming opinions, as they tend to assemble diverse points of view – or at least that's when I think they work best.

KS: With a BarCamp, there is always this problem of how to adapt to the changing needs. It evolved from this hacker culture where it has a quite specific aim: to solve a technological problem collaboratively, in a network. And here in Poland it was not so much about having an outcome, like writing a code together, so it operates differently. For me, as a curator, it's also important that it's not so controlled – you can surprise yourself. And the responsibility is distributed, you don't need so much preparation. To make a conference, you need six months or a year, and a BarCamp you can make tomorrow, if you know people will come.

NC: We use this term "productive" a lot, but it's very different from the production that is then owned. It's not about walking away with the knowledge, like the recording of a "famous" lecture as an MP3. With a BarCamp, the knowledge is produced as the event is produced. And every single person contributes and takes from it what they want. It's as much about peer-distribution as production.

CC: Because of this history of Warsaw and the different perception of the public space we were describing, I don't think that people are open to this kind of conversation, of acknowledging that knowledge doesn't necessarily come from the invited expert. Knowledge emerges in practice, through interaction.

KS: It comes from Poland being a Catholic culture. If you think about the Protestant way of discussing the Bible, in Catholicism you still have a priest and hierarchy. And within the Polish intelligentsia, you have this image of the charismatic person able to teach others.

CC: Do you think that people are prepared to admit that they fear to express their opinions in the public sphere? Is that a question you can ask outside your immediate circle of friends?

KS: If you have eighty percent of people going to church every Sunday, meeting a priest who tells them what to do, it creates certain patterns.

AP: One of the things is that people in Poland didn't learn how to use their freedoms gained after 1989. But the other thing is Bourdieu's distinction: you prefer to listen to an expert, who knows better, and submit to his or her power.

KS: And an expert must be someone recognized as a person whom you listen to. It provides all those gratifications, like prestige that comes when you put a famous person on the list of the invited speakers.

CC: Do you think that this incapacity of using one's liberties has something to do with the incapacity to play in public?

AP: I think that the years of the abuse of power in Poland created a certain amount of seriousness and rigidness in Poles. One has to learn again how to take pleasure in something.

CC: Just to repeat this idea that we learn from the outside – the presentations that had the strongest reactions were those that challenged or played with pleasure, that introduced themes often considered superficial. If you struggle against some oppressive political system, the pleasure and the fun of getting together is a really important tool.

KS: But referring to the discussion during the BarCamp, I disagree that there is no fun on the Left. As far as having fun goes, go to any bar here in Poland, or in the UK, and you will see the difference. In the UK you won't see any people dancing on tables.

NC: You won't see me dancing on the tables!

AP: In the UK, bars and pubs are open only until 11 pm! That is unthinkable here!

CC: But I'm talking about behavior in public. I have been to parties here in Warsaw, so I know you know how to have fun! I appreciate that, but there is no such thing in public, on the streets. When it comes to organizing the ways of getting together, self-organizing publics, I'm sure that there is a disconnection between the serious political discourse and the way people get together for fun. So maybe it's underestimated here, how people are getting together in public?

AP: Maybe if the frame is considered serious: like an exchange of ideas and knowledge that are not associated with fun.

MB: Going back to Kuba's point about the pubs and bars being open late and how this differs from the pub culture in the UK, is enjoying oneself in bars in Poland considered a political gesture? Is it a way of opposing the authoritarian culture?

AP: Not really. When you go to have fun late at night, there are no proper rules.

For more information, please visit the Critical Practice Wiki at http://criticalpracticechelsea.org.