

Death of the Arts Manager¹

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The Arts Manager is dead.

Repeat this a few times. It is not meant as spectacularisation in a time, like now, when only spectacle is what counts. Would anyone be sad if the Arts Manager died? Is the Arts Manager needed anymore? And if she/he is – in what way?

How many times have arts managers been asked by an artist, “What, you want to manage me? You want to manage the arts?” This eventually leads arts managers to ask themselves “Does art, or do the arts, or do the artists, function in the same way as other ‘providers’ in society and can they be managed?” (Bereson 2005, 28).

Then, there is process of management. How do you manage something that has a constant tendency to be unflappable while apparently the whole world is in *crisis*? How do you manage something that has a chaos theory in its core? As philosopher Emil Cioran was poetically saying - “chaos is rejecting all you have learned, chaos is being *yourself*...” (Cioran 2010, 43). Here, we are also raising discussions of the philosophy of work, and differences between the notions of work and creativity (Serafide, 2015), as well as the question of hierarchy of these notions. You will always find those that see creativity as superior to work, and others that consider work to be the only relevant paradigm. That is not to mention the seriously difficult task of trying to understand and define the notion of creativity (Bohm, 2009). Arts managers often get involved in these discussions, since they flow between the concepts of work and creativity. How do you resist that desire to control and manage something that maybe has the concept of laziness in the core of its being, as the conceptual artist from Croatia, Mladen Stilinic said in his manifest “The Praise of Laziness?”

Laziness is the absence of movement and thought, dumb time—total amnesia. It is also indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence. It is sheer stupidity, a time of pain, futile concentration. Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art.

Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected. (Stilinic, 1998)

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Still, in the same way that art has always existed (Lorblanchet and Bahn, 2017), arts management was also there. But it existed as a function and a process, in the same way that art was/is important as a process. Depending on the balance between the importance of the process and the product, are the transitions between the collective function of arts management and the individual function of an arts manager, both of which this article will address.

A parallel can be made with the world of performing arts. Who is actually directing a performance? If we look at the formal, structural function of the notion of directing, especially looking through the lens of the era of strong (usually male) individuals as theatre directors—it's them, directors (i.e. Ivo van Hove, Robert Wilson, Robert LePage, Alvis Hermanis, Ong Keng Sen, Tomi Janezic). However, performance is a syncretic art form. It is a number of individuals (and collectives) that influence the process and final result(s)—writers, dramaturges, directors; stage, costume, light and sound designers; composers, graphic designers, technicians, “and the producers should by no means be forgotten” (Groys 2013, 97). They are all engaging in the collective process of influencing the relations of ideas, characters and objects, as well as the relations of energy in a space. They all engage in what Radivoje Dinulovic and Tatjana Dadic-Dinulovic define as process of *scene design* (Dadic-Dinulovic, 2017). If we try to connect the dilemma of arts management with the dilemma of theatre practice, it is the choice between the theatre of a strong (male) director and devised theatre (Oddey, 1996), as a pathway towards a “truly creative collaboration” (McBurney, 2015). It is a choice between the arts manager as a strong individual and arts management as a function, shared between all the participants in the process of creation.

What about curating? It is a relatively young discipline that a number of people see quite similar to what arts management claims to be responsible for (and which seems much more self-confident/self-important than arts management). Discussing the power structures within and around art creation, Groys provocatively challenges the idea of curating as one more questionable intermediary between the art and the audience/public:

“The work of the curator consists of placing artworks in the exhibition space. This is what differentiates the curator from the artist, as the artist has the privilege to exhibit objects which have not already been elevated to the status of artworks. In this case they gain this status precisely through being placed in the exhibition space” (Groys 2013, 43).

Some would see this also as the role of an arts manager. However, one would have to then ask if one of the roles of an arts manager is to place the artwork in the wider social/political/communal space and work on nurturing those connections? To balance the

tensions between the Dionysian (the creation) and Apollonian (structure and containment) within the process of art making (Bereson, 2005) and apply some kind of Janus syndrome as a pathway closer to resolution (Brkic, 2009)? If this is the case, what happens with the role of artists within this concept of separation of *tasks*? Is it that art managers implicitly say that artists are not capable of doing that? Art historian and critic, Claire Bishop, sees this position in an interesting way:

The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or longer-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder,’ is now repositioned as a co-producer or *participant*” (Bishop, 2012).

This all seems about power, where a number of people, organizations, and disciplines want to participate and get their piece in this alchemic game of transforming non-art into art. They may be reminding us that the world of “capitalist realism” we live in— the term Frederic Jameson, Slavoj Zizek and Mark Fisher have discussed (Fisher, 2009). In this context, thinking about arts management takes us to a place where we cannot give precise definitions anymore (in case one still believes in those).

Arts management is contextual, and it is about the function it plays within certain arts organization or inside the particular art production process. Depending on the distribution of power within the organization or in the process, arts management can have a centralized/individualized position, or it can be a dispersed function that spreads within the system, as a shared/collective function. Here, we have to remember that the most visible arts organizations to the *outside world* are flagship institutions that have systems in place that mostly use the corporate ways of structuring (such as Tate Modern or National Theatre in London), while majority of arts organizations internationally are small to mid-sized organizations that have much more fluid/flexible ways of operating. When it comes to art production processes, they also vary and roles are often fluid depending on many factors. As part of that process, depending on the context and their ability, interest, and skills, arts managers float on the scale between the words “arts” and “management.” Within the process they are either more creative, or more resourceful (with only rare individuals managing to get closer to the perfect balance).

This chapter is more about asking as many questions connected with the main, ontological question of the reasons and the meanings of the existence of the arts management in the context of today, than about giving definite answers. It aims to contribute to a dialogue that should help

us think more deeply about the future of the field we still call arts/cultural management/administration.

Arts Management and the questions of Authorship and Legacy

Seen from outside, from any Archimedean point, life— with all its beliefs— is no longer possible, not even conceivable. We can act only against the truths. Man starts over again every day, in spite of everything he knows, against everything he knows.

E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, 2010, p.46

So, arts managers are dead. And people are whispering, “I see dead people!” like in M. Night Shyamalan’s film “The Sixth Sense” (1999). Is it good or bad to feel dead? If we do feel dead, we are keener to start thinking about our function within the process of the art creation we are supposed to be part of? In case we feel more alive than ever, we start getting closer to the center of the stage, thinking about how to stay remembered, what to leave behind us and, ultimately, how to defeat death. The questions of authorship and legacy in this process are not questions only for artists, but for everyone else involved in the process, as well, including arts managers.

Teaching arts management in most of the countries in the world in the last 10 years, means that you confronted yourself more and more with the pressures of the real life frames applied to higher education. It is all about employability, entrepreneurship, and leadership nurtured as goals from both above (government and market) and below (family and social environment). Why isn’t there a respectable resistance to this? Mark Fisher saw the reasons in a combination of “reflexive impotence”, a self-fulfilling prophecy, “where you know things are bad, but you also know you can’t do anything about it,” and “depressive hedonia,” – “an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure” (Fisher 2009, 21). There are people in the field of arts management who are trying to promote the concepts of co-operation and collaboration (i.e. Hagoort 2016) instead of the fetishization of leadership and individualism that we can see clearly in the promotion of a culture of entrepreneurship, start-ups, and *coolness of precariousness*.

In the last few decades, trends have shifted from the people’s ambitions of being part of the communities that share the experience of stable jobs-for-life, to the mobile individuals that are constantly changing their living environments, communities, professions and organizations they work for, often without the traditional safety nets, such as health insurance and pension schemes. Various stakeholders in this process of promoting precariousness cleverly used popular culture,

media, as well as New Age ideological frameworks, to connect the ideas of risk, insecurity and instability with the notions of freedom, individualism, and democracy (Standing, 2016). As a result, the framework of *coolness of precariousness* was constructed, making new generations believe that this was their choice, their decision, and construct they made for themselves.

The prevailing success criteria in the core of the neoliberal capitalist societies was driven by the culture of egoistic self-centered individuals, interested to find a place in the culture of the God of Capital. Everything outside of that was mostly seen as failure - you were destined to go to the periphery (of the family, society, profession, field). A minority was choosing to go to this periphery, resisting these benchmarks of “depressive hedonia”. Today, when more people choose to be part of the arts and creative sector, some economists came up with a new term for this shift, a *lifestyle economy* – “where the choice of work is partly or wholly driven by the worker’s desire for enjoyment rather than remuneration” (McWilliams, 2017). The problem they see in this shift to jobs “that offer less remuneration than those that their predecessors might have accepted but that offer a more attractive lifestyle or more opportunities for helping others” (McWilliams, 2017) is that it undermines the growth of GDP, as the ultimate success criteria of the capitalist framework we live in. What they are saying is that, although people find enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose in these jobs, from the perspective of economy, they are less *useful*. Or maybe, the issue is in the lack of questioning of the usefulness of GDP as a measurement tool of success, as well as in the problems with the definitions and contextualization of remuneration and enjoyment.

In a promotional video (Biesenbach 2010) praising a new volume of interviews by Hans Ulrich Obrist (also known as HUU), one of the most powerful and influential curators in the world, Marina Abramovic was holding a sign reading:

THE CURATOR IS PRESENT
THE ARTIST IS ABSENT.

Whether this can be understood as a support for a close friend/colleague or a double-edged irony, the question remains how to avoid this egocentric position? We can also replace the term arts manager in place of curator in that sign and it would not look too wrong. Or, is this ego an inherent part of the process and we just need to accept it for what it is?

These challenges from HUU can be seen as “attempts at securing his own—as well as existing, complementary—legacies, what he calls ‘the protest against forgetting’, could constitute an elaborate sarcophagus, of which only pale imitations can later exist,” (Balzer 2015, 21). Is, then,

the ultimate goal of a successful arts manager to secure his/her legacy, and not to be forgotten? Problems and frustrations become more complex when it comes to artistic practices that have no tangible product that can be collected and preserved, but are elusive and immaterial, —such as the performing arts. And if we do think of the legacy of an arts manager, it is really difficult to say what would keep it alive?

Part of the identity of arts managers is the identity of an impostor. Arts manager often sees herself/himself as a bridge, mediator, connector, or communicator. For this reason every move of an arts manager has an aura of suspicion, because of his/her implicit claim that other participants in the process of creation would not be able to reach the goal if there wasn't for mediation performed by this individual. If we lightly accept this position of someone standing between the artwork and its viewer (as curators do too), “insidiously manipulating the viewer's perception with the intent of disempowering the public” (Groys 2013, 45), we end up being trapped in a community that has trust issues. For “anyone who speaks in the name of others is always an impostor. Politicians, reformers, and all who rely on a collective pretext are cheats. There is only the artist whose lie is not a total one, for he invents only himself” (Cioran 2010, 18). The task of an arts manager creating “bridges between the inherent bureaucracy of organizations and the typically more free-form artistic project” (Byrnes 2009, 275) then becomes even more complex.

Maybe arts management is all about storytelling. Is the work of an arts manager about generating value through PR-production, with storytelling being a skill used to manipulate and manage perceptions for the sake of success and legacy? The problem comes from the current space in which we live, where “to tell people how to lose weight, or how to decorate their house, is acceptable; but to call for any kind of cultural improvement is to be oppressive and elitist” (Fisher 2009, 73). This may present a better view of where arts managers are now given the pragmatic acceptance by many of them to tell stories about the expansive and ever-growing creative industries and the fantastic numbers that the industry produces. In the recent years of austerity, that seemed easier and more efficient a story to tell, compared to finding new ways to tell the real stories about art(s). And now, arts managers are stuck in the middle of a (survival) story they created, even if they never actually liked the story or expected it to go on so long.

In recent decades, documentation and the artistic process gained the status of an artwork, especially in the context of large exhibitions, such as Documenta or Venice Biennale. According to Groys, “the formulation of projects is developing into an autonomous art form whose significance for our society has yet to be adequately understood” (2013, 100). Are the projects that arts managers are constructing also some kind of autonomous art form (Groys, 2002)?

Maybe in the future we will have more examples of museums of rejected project proposals, such as the “Museum of melancholy,” collection of unrealized projects, written by Velimir Curguz Kazimir (2015) or “A museum of refused and unrealized art projects.”²

The question of authorship will become even more relevant in the future with tensions between the concepts of copyright (the culture of individual ownership with intermediaries who each have their own stakes in the process) and commons (the culture of sharing). Since Duchamp, an author, “is someone who selects, who authorizes” and “art today is defined by an identity between creation and selection” (Groys 2013, 93), but we are not sure where the power of selection will be in the future. The question of legacy may become irrelevant when the process of capturing the content of our human memory becomes a reality. The new question will be one of the “legacy of our soul,” as referred to in Charlie Brooker’s TV series “Black Mirror” (2011-2017). But, arts managers are humans, after all. Should they be the only ones to be blamed for not being able to resist the forces of “fundamental human insistence on recognition” (Zizek 2017, 13)?² The issue of authorship will continue moving somewhere between the ideas of peer sharing and collective authorship (creative commons) and more efficient ways of gathering payments for creators from the users of creative works (intellectual property), without intermediaries. We can already see the example of this efficiency in the use of blockchain technology (O’Dair et al, 2016), as well as the examples of the ideology of peer sharing in number of open source collaborative platforms that can be found online (i.e. Backfeed, Stocksy). Arts management as a function can find its place in any of these two scenarios for the future, either becoming more equal with other authors/creators, or sharing the ideology of collective authorship with everyone else.

² www.moremuseum.org

Everything is art and everyone is an arts manager

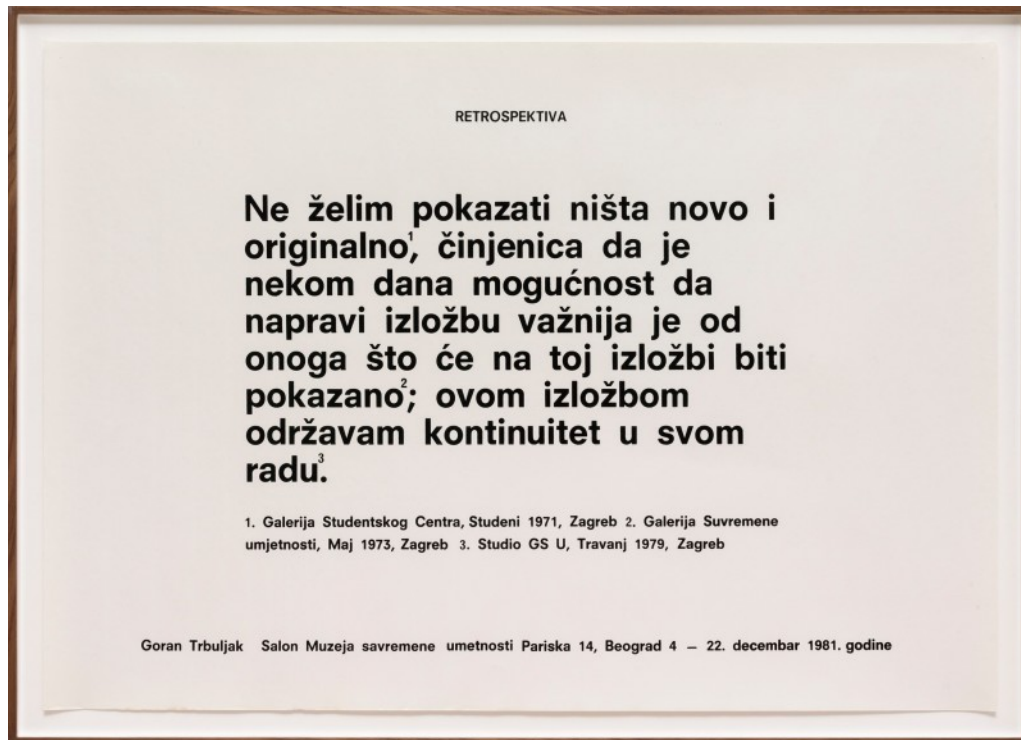


Table 1. Goran Trbuljak, “Retrospective” (1981), Museum of Contemporary Arts, Zagreb, Croatia and Museum of Contemporary Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

This poster, created by Goran Trbuljak, artist from Croatia, was printed for an exhibition in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Serbia (1981), and was the only artifact at the exhibition. It contains three sentences from his earlier posters. The sentences say: “I don’t want to show anything new or original; the fact that somebody is given the opportunity to stage an exhibition is more important than what is shown at that exhibition; with this exhibition I maintain continuity in my work.” This work became an important representation of the period of contemporary conceptual art in (former) Yugoslavia, raising the question of power in the (art) world and our relation to it. As Slobodan Prosperov Novak would say - “the one that owns the space, controls the space” (Novak, 1984).

The era of arts managers as impresarios is a matter of the (romanticized) past. That past was the time of large centralized and controlled media outlets almost without alternatives (few newspapers, few TV and radio stations in ones community), much more hierarchically structured societies, and only a few arts managers that were able to get close to the sources of power (i.e. economic, political, cultural). That gave them the position of being gatekeepers, deciding who will get the exclusive right to the information, contact, connection, opportunity, as well as

deciding who will take over that position from them when they decide to retire or move on. It is not very difficult these days to rise in a field, discipline, or an industry. The culture of entrepreneurialism democratized the processes of entry while at the same time de-professionalizing them. Companies like Google with their liberal and so-called cool cultures are used as benchmarks by other industries, and the notion that anyone can become anything is a leading mantra. Technology makes knowledge and access to networks available to almost everyone at any moment, anywhere. Gatekeeping is no longer a significant impediment as it was back in the days of the pioneers of arts management/administration (Mitchell and Fisher 1992).

For these reasons, arts management has also been subjected to a certain level of de-professionalization. Students more frequently ask themselves and their professors, “Why do we need to *study* arts management?” (“Why do we need to *study anything* today, when *everything is available* to us?”) Walter Benjamin’s prophecy that “the reader is constantly ready to become a writer” (2008, 23) became a reality in the times of integration of our “real” and “cloud” lives. This interchangeability of roles, like most other things that exist in nature, depends on the use. The culture of openness became a tool for the democratization of the process of creating and communicating with the arts, and at the same time a tool for the de-professionalization of the arts.

If we apply this to arts managers, one of the questions to be raised is, “Will arts managers transition from the role of those who provide resources for the arts to happen, to those who are considered artists themselves? Arts managers are making decisions and actions that deeply influence the character of art works. They do this while working with the artist(s); as well as with the acceptance and perception of the artwork, and while working with different potential stakeholders and public(s). The question is also connected to the wider changes in the processes of art making. Are we going towards a more collective approach to art creation where arts managers are an integral part of art collectives? If we accept arts management as a function (or a set of functions related to the process of art making), rather than as a fixed individualized position, we can imagine it being shared within a collective that is working on the art project, especially in the case of a syncretic art like performing arts.

Another pathway can be connected to the individual artists playing the role, as their own arts managers, as already often happens. In that case, part of the discourse of the field can move towards the idea of “Arts Management for Artists,” or empowering artists to be their own arts managers, or at least understanding arts management functions better, performing some of them by themselves, and outsourcing the others. At the same time, the distance between artists and the public is being reduced, thereby removing the cynical echo from the concept of intermediary (the

bridge) that is often presented as one of the substantial elements of arts management as a field. By making artists understand the function, as well as the issues, in the field of arts management better, the gap between them and arts managers, in the world of professional practice, may become much narrower than it often is now.

The paradox of sustainability in the arts management

Knowing that our human nature cannot resist the urge to categorize (which in reality means to indefinitely re-categorize) the world around us, to be able to understand it better, we can also categorize the roles that arts managers play in the arts/cultural ecosystems:

- Managing the structure (being part of the management structure of an arts/cultural organization);
- Managing the process (working on an arts productions/events);
- Managing the career (taking care of the career of an artist/arts collective);
- Managing the message (creating, promoting and monitoring the story of an arts organization/event/artist).

Thinking about the strategic management in the arts, and in the context of “the design school” where strategy formation is a process of conception, “the strategist must have the capacity to predict the changes that will come about” (Mintberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel 1998, 44). In all four above-mentioned categories, the arts manager’s function is to deal with changes that are initiated internally, or came from the external environment in a sustainable manner. But how do we define sustainability in these contexts? This is where we come to the communication as a central element of arts management as a function. Communication is at the same time a central part of the multiplayer model of sustainable change as explained by Sacha Kagan (2011), with emphasis on implicit systems and the importance of understanding the diverse means of communication, and their uses, within these systems.

But, sustainability of what? Of structures, processes, careers or messages? All these directions are seeking for re-definitions of sustainability in their own context. In the context of the management of structures, there will always be a tension between the priorities of organizations (long-term, venue) and the art event/installation/work (short-term, project). Looked at differently, it can be that the ultimate goal for an arts manager working with a visual artist is to find a permanent place for him/her in the flagship museum, since “the museum emerged as the new place of worship” (Groys 2013, 44). In this way, the arts manager’s role is to make an artist (and maybe even himself/herself as his/her arts manager) sustainably immortal? Understanding

these differences is of the utmost importance given that the constant process of negotiation between them is the core of arts management as a function. Likewise, in a wider, social, and political sense, we need to fight for that space where we can discuss and negotiate between the sustainability of structures and “sustainability of ideas” (Antariksa, 2016) in order to fight against the cancellation of the long term as an excuse for a progress in the cynical discourse of late capitalism (Fisher 2009, 76). This function of arts management, split between everyone involved in the process of creation, is responsible for this negotiation process and continuous balance that should get everyone closer to the notion of sustainability.

However, the contestability of sustainability in the context of arts management is connected with the notion of risk as a central element of every process of art creation. In this case, the management aspect of the equation strives for constant mitigation and a lowering of risk that is otherwise inherent in the arts. This tension is not exclusive to arts, however. We can find it in all any industry/sector where innovation is now the center of their existence, mostly expressed through Research and Development (R&D) strategies. Maybe the main difference is that in the arts, the whole operation can end up being one large R&D adventure, where this risk, representing “cravings for the strange, the unexpected, the weird” (Fisher 2009, 76), is the “product” of the organization. In that case, arts management tends to become some kind of “anti-management,” deliberately subverting business management doxa.

Waiting for RAM while hoping for ROM

David Balzer asks a question about the position of a curator that is commonly asked in the same way about arts managers:

“What exactly do they do? Are they distant mandarins who force-feed us super-theoretical art? Hyper-professionalized agents—effectively business consultants—working for high-powered international cultural organizations? Bridges between artist and audience, showing us the best of what contemporary culture has to offer, and translating it in an effective, accessible way? The last proposition is idealist, the former too pejorative.” (Balzer 2015, 54-55)

One of the questions in focus in the last couple of years, also discussed widely at the AAAE³ meeting in Edinburgh in 2017, is “What will our role/goal in this world be when we let robots/artificial intelligence (that we created) take over a number of functions that humans are

³ Association of Arts Administration Educators, www.artsadministration.org

currently undertaking?” Will there be a need for a Robot Arts Manager (RAM)? Let’s take three scenarios into consideration:

- We stay in the realm of capitalist realism and continue with the decay of humanity in which the dominating art discourse “remains blind to any art that is produced and distributed by any mechanism other than the market” (Groys 2013, 6);
- Capitalist realism falls apart and we move towards an alternative still unclear to us;
- We stay in the space “in between”.

If we manage to save ourselves as humans, there will also be hope for the arts and arts management in these unregulated spaces of transition, the, in between spaces. This is the space where our imperfect humanity, often expressed through arts, can find new ways of interpreting and re-interpreting the world within and around us. In that context, art, with the concept of Return on Meaning (ROM) and not (business) management, with its Return on Investment (ROI) as a core value, is something arts management should always be subsumed to. All other areas, including business management/organizational studies are potential areas from which arts management creates its own toolboxes.

At the risk of sounding neo-conservative, we must challenge concepts of flexibility, nomadism and spontaneity with concepts of openness, critical reflection, reflexive professionalism and sustainability. Can we stay liberal and open-minded without being excessively mobile? Can we be so nomadic without becoming too superficial? Is spontaneity driven by our wish for constant excitement? Would stopping or slowing down this excessive mobility mean that we would have to confront others and ourselves with difficult questions?

In the context of Europe, artists and arts managers have allowed bureaucrats to become the primary decision-makers on arts and cultural policy. It could be that one of the political spaces for arts managers in the future is educating and appropriating bureaucrats, or taking their positions. There has to be a collaborative effort to resist the prescribed outcomes that are typical of governments—or anyone else who tries to own and control the space (Pick 2005). I would dare to say that in the quest to *charm the system*, communication should also be used to manipulate the potential (political and economic) owners of the space through creative activism/*artivism* as a legacy of “infrapolitics of resistance” – socially and/or politically engaged acts, gestures and thoughts not perceived as “political enough” (Scott 1990, 183). A special focus should be directed to the spaces of media, popular culture and sports (Brkic 2014), for the sake of releasing

tension from the arts (i.e. “Yes Men”⁴). These are some of the roles that the function of arts management within the process of creation should be responsible for.

Danto developed a defense of his book “After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History” (1998), positioning himself as a part of the historical narrative he was analyzing being in that way in two positions at the same time, influencing both the past and the future of a discourse. The idea of the end (or death, like in this article), therefore, becomes part of a cycle, instead of being understood as some kind of point in a linear development of one field or a discipline. Arts management will still stay an element of Becker’s *art worlds* (Becker 1982) that is dealing with the Janus type of balance between “essentially uncontrollable and surprising” Dionysian ideas of the artists and Apollonian context of the world that surrounds us, reconciling the tensions, containing and (re)creating structures (Bereson 2005, 30). To be able to do this and create a position for oneself as an arts manager, one has to develop a critical eye that is, compared to (business) management, driven by Return on Meaning (ROM) instead of Return on Investment (ROI). We should not forget that all the frames in our societies first need to be imagined, then connected with the “works made in reality”, and at the end of the day someone needs to “deeply interconnect” these two planes (Papastergiadis 2012, 15). Arts management as it was before is probably dead, but the function of arts management within the process of art creation, is more alive then ever, with number of challenges and responsibilities that lie ahead of it. That is where the thoughts for a new life of the discipline called the Arts Management should go.

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⁴ www.theyesmen.org

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