

# International Art Symposia: Educational Places and Power Relations

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## Biography

**Katja Juhola** is a curator, visual artist and the founder and creator of the International Socially Engaged Art Symposium (ISEAS). Currently, Juhola is a doctoral candidate at the University of Lapland in the Faculty of Art and Design. Juhola has been active in the field of art for more than 20 years. She has held more than one hundred exhibitions both abroad and in Finland, and has completed more than ten major social art projects in Finland and five abroad.

**Smaranda-Sabina Moldovan** is a Romanian artist who works in her hometown of Timișoara. She is a neominimalist artist who uses different mediums from traditional painting to assemblage and installations for her art concepts regarding objects and interactions with consumerism and kitsch. Since 2017 she has been an assistant at West University, Faculty of Arts and Design. Her works have been exhibited in national and international galleries.

## Abstract

**Bringing artists together has a long tradition of developing artists and disseminating information globally. This study focuses on power relations and educational places in the field of art, specifically at international art symposia.**

**The study highlights the significance of these encounters for the cultural exchange of artists on the basis of participation in several art symposia by two artist-researchers. Opening up the power relations of these encounters to artistic expression is also explored, with power relations related to gender, culture and vocation discussed. Art-based research methods included various forms of dialogue art, such as discussions, interviews, doing art together and video documentation, which led to a broader understanding. The aim of the article is to explore the power relations in art symposia and problematise the kind of educational space that they offer artists with different cultural backgrounds.**

## **Keywords**

**socially engaged art, power relations, art symposium, art-based research, dialogical art, feminism, educational places, power dynamics**

## **Introduction**

This article is part of artist and researcher Katja Juholas' broader art-based action research on the development of dialogic art in the context of the International Socially Engaged Art Symposium (ISEAS). Juhola is a doctoral candidate of the University of Lapland's Faculty of Art and Design. Juholas created ISEAS, an annual art symposium in Finland, where she acts as curator, participating artist and art researcher (2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). She has attended international art symposia since 2013. Smaranda-Sabina Moldovan is a Romanian visual artist and PhD assistant at West University, Faculty of Arts and Design. Her research is focused on consumerism and reflecting social life in art. She has attended international art symposia since 2010.

This article belongs to the field of studies on the relational networks of international art

symposia. These art symposia have many opportunities to help artists from different countries. Previous research on power relations and educational places, such as art symposia, is scarce. As far as we know, no previous research has investigated art symposia. This research therefore constitutes a relatively new area which has emerged from our attendance at several art symposia in Romania, Poland, Italy, Turkey and Finland. At these symposia, we initiated our collaboration by doing socially engaged artwork with local children. We often shared a room, which deepened the discussions and observations of things that happened at these meetings. To illuminate this uncharted area, we examine the relations between all participants at art symposia. There is no overall goal, apart from uncovering new information from the art symposia field that can improve our educational system and gender equality. The contributions made here are extensively pertinent to education.

There is a long history of artists gathering to work together. At the beginning of the 20th century, artists around the world gathered in France to share their knowledge, make contacts, study and work (Amory, 2007; Chuchvaha, 2018; Hage, 2016; Karvonen-Kannas, Kivimäki & Konttinen, 1996; Rankin-Gee, 2011). Today, art gatherings include art residences, academic meetings such as summer schools, conferences and art camps, so-called “art symposia”. The term symposium—commonly used for academic discussions or conferences on a given topic—is also popular in the world of visual artists. Art symposia (Ionita, 2018; Juhola, 2018, 2019; Juhola, Huhmarniemi, & Raatikainen, 2020; Raatikainen, Juhola, Huhmarniemi, & Lagos, in press) are short-term intensive gatherings of approximately one to two weeks where artists live and work together. The networking of artists and the opportunity for artistic career development are of great importance to artists on an international level.

This article focuses on a participatory study where we implemented art-based methods of community-based participatory research, which is often used for research that discusses community-identified problems or issues (Leavy, 2017). According to Jokela, Hiltunen and

Härkönen (2015), art-based action research (ABAR) is a community process by nature, with research questions becoming more precise during the activity. In ABAR, development work and research are related (Jokela, Hiltunen, & Härkönen, 2015). Art-based research (ABR) generally expands qualitative research methods. The researcher is often an equal participant, and therefore research data reveal experiences that may not be achieved by other means (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009, 2015, 2018). The research result is qualitative evidence that emerges because researchers are part of the events. In this paper, the researchers' personal experiences lead to observations, knowledge and conclusions in the subsequent discussions. ABR and ABAR are widely established and accepted in academics around the world (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Hiltunen & Rantala, 2015; Huhmarniemi, 2016; Leavy, 2015, 2018; Jokela, 2019; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2018). Professor Kallio-Tavin (2008) believes that ABR is more than just artistic intervention; she emphasises the role of art in generating research information. She sees ABR as the starting point for a diverse conception of people in changing contexts, where the methods of art bring out tacit knowledge. She highlights the ability of ABR to produce information about the surrounding reality and its social and interactive significance (Kallio-Tavin, 2008).

In this article, our research focuses on power relations. We examine the following: 1. Working methods. We explore the role of art symposia as places for art education. 2. Invitation systems. We study the appearance of curators and reasons for artists to attend symposia. We analyse invitation methods and the use of power in art symposia. We also locate the significance of one- or two-week art symposia in the context of short-term events in the field of international visual art meetings.

On one hand, our topic is related to the abuse of power, social exclusion and repression in contemporary art society; on the other hand, it is about benefits derived from continuous learning and receiving ongoing feedback through dialogue. We consider that every social interaction

has a power dynamic. Because power is such an active ingredient, we believe that we have to observe it, analyse it and reflect on it. Reflection is a purpose and a result of a good artist. In the *combined approach to art places and power analysis* section, we enter this process of education using a social, political and cultural view (Lacy, 2010). As artists, we lean on different art methods to reveal as much as we can regarding underlying relationship dynamics in art society today. As a consequence, learning issues arise during dialogues with other artists. There are many international art symposia around the world, including in South Korea, China, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Russia, Turkey, Tunisia, Haiti, Brazil, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Dubai, Mexico, Romania, Israel, Poland, Finland, Norway, Germany, Italy (Photo 1), France, Greece, Estonia and Lithuania. These countries host symposia in which we have participated or have been invited to participate. The content of art symposia differs: some focus on sculpture, others on painting or performance, and some are socially engaged art symposia (Cam, 2018; China Art Academy Symposium, 2004; Høxbroe, 2009; ISEAS, n.d.; Tunisia Art Symposium, n.d.). Differences are also created by the funders. When the sponsor is the municipality, the curator is often required to produce the event for local residents as well. The goals of some symposia are to augment the collection of an art museum or a private art collector. In this case, the focus is strongly tied to the collector's notion of art.

## Educational Places and Power Relations



Figure 1. Katja Juhola and Smaranda Moldovan during the socially engaged art days of the art symposium in Trabzon, Turkey, 2019. Photographed by Ekrem Kutlu in 2019

Often when artists meet each other at international art symposia, it is a time of gathering with many discussions (Photo 1). Kester (2004; see also Kantonen, 2005, 2010) states that dialogue is one way of creating art, as dialogical aesthetics recognises many ways to interact. At symposia where people speak different languages, we have often sung, danced and painted together to create a shared atmosphere.

Dialogical art is a very important part of ABR in many cases. According to Hammersley and Knowles (2016), dialogical art and research are strongly intertwined as methodological work of a socially-oriented artist-researcher. The artist-researcher works in different socially engaged contexts, regulates co-written and co-produced meaning-making, and challenges assumptions about the distinction between art and research and detached artist-researcher concepts. The

authors point out that “the dialogue reveals the criticism as one important way to ‘become aware’ of other ways to understand internal relationships” (Hammersley & Knowles, 2016, p. 8).

Professor Suzanne Lacy, an American artist, educator and writer, argues that making art involves several levels such as compulsion, profession and spiritual practice (2010). She believes that the efforts that give rise to art are like other spiritual difficulties. However, the artist’s experience and guides appear in the making. Socially engaged art is the expression of values, as well as the reflection of creativity and enlightenment views and practices regarding the social connection of relationships. If things are seen differently, they will change. From the perspective of these changes, we too are changing. We act and every act affects everyone else. As Lacy argues, “We make the art and the art makes us” (2010, p. 299).

Professor Mirja Hiltunen describes educational places that arise through the will to cooperate and share (2009; see also Dewey, 1980). She argues that communal art education arises from the event of encounter and action as a means of encounter: "The intermediate space-born, reflective-aesthetic commonality, is reciprocity" (Hiltunen, 2009, p. 271). Confronting different social realities, based on the fact that each artist brings their own, leads to a multilayer conversation with no benefit in comparing layers, but a conceptual map of the discussion. It is an experimental conversation, just like experimental art (see Gugliemi, 1976). The experimental approach belongs to a methodology of knowledge and existence, structured in various layers, that has developed based on the historical context of each culture. It is a method of research and investigation and is the point of departure for any kind of conversation. It is what creates originality. The conversation between artists with different cultural backgrounds becomes an art experiment, a living art performance, which could be a place for education.

Tom Barone and Elliot W. Eisner argue that art-based researchers must strive to change the world for the better and always take into account in their study societal issues that they in-

evitably deal with, including power relations and thus ethical issues (2012). American curator Nato Thompson argues that the formation of communities, such as a socially engaged artistic community or the art symposia discussed in this article, affects many things (2015). He argues that collective power can move through effective organisational models. In this study, we focus on power relations at international art symposia. Power relations exist throughout society, wherever one individual or group has the ability to coerce, oblige, command, direct or influence the lives of others. When talking about power relations in the art world, feminist thinking cannot be avoided. Professor Simone Beauvoir (1974) argues that women are subjected to social, cultural, historical and economic demands. Finnish society, according to Suominen and Pusa (2018), prioritises education and focuses on the need for equal art education based on human rights in order to minimise negative gender thinking, conceptualisation and stigmatisation. They believe that “equal access to meaningful, challenging, engaging, caring, and ethically sustainable education is a foundational human right for all of our students” and that it is essential to “facilitate education that is truly relevant, ethical, and accepting of all diversity” (Suominen & Pusa, 2018, pp. 33–54). As both of the authors of this papers have participated in symposia in different countries and have also spent a lot of time with female artists from different societies, we want to shed light on how different the art world still is for female artists compared with male artists, and how art symposia can help to create equality.

Betty Friedan, perhaps the most influential feminist writer and activist, and the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), describes the American consumer society and the changes that have occurred as a result of the masculinisation of the environment. She concludes with a slogan that warns that it is not about material goods, family or education; a woman needs more, including an identity for herself and her children. In Romanian society, sociologist Vladimir Paști noticed that despite communism, where there were equal rights for both men and women in the labour market, the society remained a patriarchal one. Paști (2003) believes that only



through education can power relations be rebuilt, and that education and power relations are bound together in shaping our future world.

## **Methods and Data Collection**

Participatory art has become established in contemporary art as an artistic practice, which has increased the use of art-based methods in various fields of society (e.g., Bishop, 2006; McNiff, 1998). In this study, we used qualitative methods under ABR, which can be described as an umbrella term for many artistic actions in research (Leavy, 2015, 2017, 2018). We argue that our methods are connected to dialogical aesthetic (Kester, 2004) and the relations (Bourriaud, Pleasance, & Woods, 2002) between artists participating in art symposia. Moldovan has participated in 14 different art symposia and Juhola 11, while they have attended six different international art symposia together. Juhola has filmed events at two different art symposia: the Romania Gernik Art Camp 2015 and the Poland Torun International Art Symposium 2016 (Juhola, n.d.). The video footage includes artists' interviews and the curators' perspectives. Juhola conducted video interviews with the participants who attended the art symposia with her. She recorded all discussions and asked why artists were attending these symposia. Because not all the participants could communicate in English, she sometimes had interpreters join the discussion. Juhola also sent questionnaires for curators on how and why they organised symposia. The results were in line with those of the video interviews. Data were also collected while painting side by side with other artists and while having conversations with other participant artists.

## **A Combined Approach to Art Places and Power Analysis**

From our experience of participating in art symposia as visual artists, we started asking ourselves why we were attending and whether others had the same reasons. Receiving an invitation from a curator to join an event is usually a closed circuit. In order to be invited, somebody has

to suggest that you are a professional artist and have the social skills to fit in a group. Today, the latter means that you are comfortable with what we call artists as businesspeople. According to Dutch curator Anna Tilroe (Versluys et al., 1990), art and concept are being accepted in all forms of manifestation, even in modern media, but the artist is regarded more as a businessperson. The same mechanism can be identified in the art symposia. If we use the business model (Piu, 2012) artists should be chosen for promoting fairness, trust and transparency, according to power relations in business. According to Beaufort's (2012) study, the power issue is perceived differently; women relate to power differently to men. So, if being an artist is being a businessperson, women do not plan to battle for a higher position as men do. Beaufort (2012) also mentions that it is very difficult to generalise, as it is "made more difficult by the fact that many variations in approach are linked to the socio-cultural setting".



Figure 2. Artist group photo at the art symposium at Lake Orta, Italy. In the middle is the sponsor of the symposium and six curators from different international art symposia. Juholas' photo collection 2015.

The best symposia are the ones where many curators are also invited, because that might lead to artists being invited to the next symposium. We have both witnessed artists being presented as curators of other symposia.

In our experience, many art symposia around the world are artist-driven and can be reached by invitation only. Persistence is a challenge, because getting funding is always difficult and implies a form of power being used by funders over curators and by curators over artists (Photo 2). Curators, both men and women, must navigate power relations with sponsors, which can be private or public administrations. Curators need to have good managerial qualities to maintain funds to give continuity to the event. It is often the duty of the curator to produce a public exhibition of the event. This is what the founders of the project and the participating artists expect. For artists (Photo 4), it is a merit and it is significant that the exhibition space is valuable. The sponsor of the event may have similar expectations. We have witnessed situations where the artist has not yielded the expected works and the curator has been very frustrated. When it comes to social art in particular, as in symposia in Finland or Italy, the goal has also been art education. Participating artists have not always understood the aims of the symposia and conflicts have arisen. We argue that part of the reason is that curators are not professional facilitators, but pure-intentioned and voluntary artists who easily find themselves in very difficult and complex situations where the demands and workloads of artists, funders and the curator do not align as expected.

The answers from curators regarding the reasons for organising symposia that Juhola received via email were quite similar: they felt that their own participatory experience was the reason they started curating and organising symposia. Curator Delphine Manet (March 2019) said that “despite the difficulties of collaboration and working and living in a new and chaotic way, it was such a fantastic and impressive experience of artistic and personal growth that led me to organize my own international art symposium”.

The curators saw symposia as engaging, and noted the energy associated with the artists' desire to communicate with one another and share their thoughts. Curators want to invite artists to symposia who are not selfish, but modest, with distinctive and pleasant personalities. According to this opinion, a good symposium arises from synergy and a positive atmosphere, which is also reflected in the art. As curator Ekrem Kutlu (March 2019) put it, "if artists aren't interested in participating to create a synergetic atmosphere, they might as well stay home".

These answers led us to think about power relations that curators have with artists. It is not only the way you do art, but it is also the way you do art together with other artists: how do you participate to build a shared knowledge atmosphere?



Figure 3. Art discussions and a common plan of how to do an art action led by Katja Juhola and ISEAS mentor Mari Krappala during the performative based art symposium ISEAS 2018. Photographer Daniel Fuss 2018

Several reasons emerged from the analysis of the interviews which can connect art symposia to places of education. Joint discussions during the making of art were considered the most important gifts of the symposia (Photo 3), leading to an increase in artists' motivation. Sometimes the reason for artists joining symposia was to get away from home duties, to find new inspiration in other cultures or to be influenced by others. At the art symposia, artists can only focus on art (home and home duties are left behind), and there is a purposefulness and even a spirit of competition in the work. Respondents also pointed out that attending symposia is an intensive way of working, while working in your own studio is a slow and lonely endeavour.



Figure 4. Juhola and Moldovan during the opening of the group exhibition in Doku Sanat Gallery, Istanbul 2017. Photo by Rishi Kapil.

According to the analysis of the interviews and video material, we argue that art symposia create educational places: 1) Many artists are eager to attend art symposia to increase their skills and learn from international artists. 2) Many of the participating artists work as art teachers in their home countries. Participation in international art symposia gives art educators more tools for their teaching work, through knowledge exchange at the symposia. 3) For participating artists, it seems to be significant to have dialogue through, with and around art and meet and make new power connections with clients, funders, sponsorship and galleries.

### **Giving and Receiving— An Educational Exchange**



Figure 5. Istanbul 2017. Juhola and Moldovans' socially engaged artwork with children. Photographed by Juhola 2017.

Socially engaged art (Photo 5), which we can see when artists participate in art symposia, means always learning and teaching, because any social situation is a constant exchange of information. The knowledge gained is returned home and spread to the culture of each artist, making it richer. Art symposia also lead to the spread of a certain type of knowledge that cannot be accessed through articles or remotely, as it comes from the personal lived experience of the artists. A good example is learning new technology and impressions of and approaches to different ways of creating. Contemporary learning theorists (Freedman, Heijnen, Kallio-Tavin, Kárpát, & Papp, 2013) conceptualise learning as a process of participation in meaningful group practices, where moments of understanding and new forms of knowledge emerge from social contexts. Modern learning theorists have further highlighted learning as an inclusive and group practice in which new knowledge is increased and disseminated in social contexts. Knowledge is no longer a static possession; it is constantly and actively obtained, shared and renewed. Scholars and theorists have argued that we have entered a new era in which cultural production is no longer a field of professional experts, but rather a shared field that is constantly being developed by all participants (Freedman et al., 2013).

Art also presents opportunities to learn the conventions of different cultures. In one culture, a persuasive artist may not be appreciated. Some cultures value technical skills, while in others the message of art and the opportunity to open political debates are valued most. British art historian, critic and Professor Claire Bishop (2012) argues that artists today achieve invisible meanings in group dynamics, social situations, energy changes and elevated awareness. As a result, it is art dependent on personal experience, preferably long-term experience (Bishop, 2012).



Figure 6. Turkish artist and curator Ekrem Kutlu showing on the canvas of Polish artist Ania Swoboda his painting technique. Photographed by Juhola 2017.

This research into international art symposia as art education places shows that power relations are determined by sharing between participants (Photo 6). Art educator and researcher Emily Pringle (2011) argues that one understanding of a socially engaged artist in our society is an artist who shares and uses the knowledge he or she knows to facilitate and enable the creativity of others.



## Boundaries in Power Relations



Figure 7. Photo 7. Artist Juhola during her performance in Scampia, Italy, 2018. In Naples at the International Socially Engaged Art Symposium 2018, Juhola made a performative experience with participating children where she allowed them to use different foods to cover her seated form. Afterwards, she had a conversation with them about power relations and how she felt during the intervention. Final pieces of art were presented as photographs in the gallery taken by Fabio Cito 2018.

This study argues that power relations exist within each individual artist who participates in international art symposia. We began to wonder whether in art symposia, and in the art world generally, some women are still under pressure regarding their appearance and culturally were taught differently to men. This is despite the fact that we believe that among artists there is generally goodwill regarding equality that is often lacking in society. Symposia are usually representative of different genres and age groups, but lack sexual diversity. The study of Franz and

Ishai (2006) shows that face perception leads to a response based on gender and sexual preference. A good-looking female is perceived similarly by both heterosexual males and homosexual females. There are also studies (Barelds-Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008; Perrin, 1921) which indicate that other factors, such as good behaviour, are part of being considered attractive. Another factor is light skin, which is considered more attractive than dark skin (Hall, 2018; van den Berghe & Frost, 1986). Beautiful people (Jayson, 2011) tend to receive more attention, make more money and be more successful in life. Those who are perceived as more attractive tend to benefit from better jobs, more choices in terms of romantic or platonic partners and, therefore, more power in relationships. Art symposia involve artists, curators and sponsors of all genders, and symposia are a business scene, these participants behave by taking into consideration these factors for their success. Some authors say that they apply equally to women and men (Cowley, 1996), but some disagree, such as the expert in relationships and sexuality Esther Perel (n.d.). We believe that art has more to offer than contributing to the success of a project and can make a cultural contribution to an undeveloped area (Photo 7).



Figure 8. This photograph from Gernik 2016 was taken to support legal abortion in Poland. Artists express their solidarity with Polish women. Photo credit: Gernik archive.

Studies such as the one of The National Museum of Women in Arts show that 51% of artists are women, but only half of them are present in London galleries. The director of Tate, Frances Morris, states on the Tate website that to change the world, women should never be complacent. As modernism took hold in Europe, in Eastern Europe, due to the political situation and the socialist ideological presence, the current that was born was known as socialist realism (Papadopoulou, 2015; Reid, 1996). The art was divided into the official art, realistic art that was used in communist propaganda, and the "proper" cult that was underground, usually far from the capital and held in a restricted environment; these appeared to be different from the countries dominated by the Soviet Union (see Denison, 2009). Artistic creation unaltered by ideology develops theories related to abstract art that are incongruent with regimes. Naturally,

artists that emerge from this kind of background are often in survival mode (Doctor Mirela Pop of Romania, years after leaving the system, still suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder; also see Andronic & Andronic, 2017, p. 122). In these cases, it is clear that participating in these symposia can help female artists see themselves differently by meeting other female artists with different backgrounds (Photo 8).

In art symposia that take place in underdeveloped countries, we noticed that patriarchal traits were more present. In other cultures, roles are more flexible and there are not so many limitations on what you can be or do; they exist but are undercover, with the power shifted to professional and social skills.

The theory of Professor Elisabeth Meyer (2007) reacts in a healthy way, indicating that it is not about gender as two opposite categories, but it is more about the self as a human being. Feminism is not only about "girl power", but rather an equal distribution of power without being rated by gender at all. Other genders are totally absent or well-hidden at art symposia. We agree with Meyer's belief and sustain her method of implementation through art and pedagogy.

## **Conclusion**

We have collaborated as artists on topics of interest regarding artistic practices and developed them for dialogical art. The information gathering strategies implemented during the symposia supported successful deep dialogues. These findings provide additional information about unstable power relations and educational exchange during international art symposia. This conclusion follows from the fact that art symposia are places of art education where every participant can give and receive in an unequal manner. Our results show that power relations exist in these gatherings at many different levels. We see the need for further study of the potential of art symposia to create gender equality. This assumption might be addressed in future studies of Juhola's broader research at the ISEAS, which aims to develop dialogical art as a tool

for researchers and artists.

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