

Daniela Jauk

“I sometimes had no money, but I have never been poor” – An interview about diversity, art, and life with Reni Hofmueller ([esc medien kunst labor](#), Graz-Austria & International)

***Reni Hofmueller** is a multidimensional queer-feminist artist, art organizer, media maker, DIY tech activist and educator, policy advisor and cultural instigator who profoundly shaped the cultural and political landscape of Graz, Austria for more than 25 years. Most recently she received the prestigious Art Award of the City Council Graz in November 2018 for her creative work. In this interview with Dani Jauk/DIVANOVA she talks about her take of the commodification of diversity, technology, feminist punk, and how she extends her hand to the universe, literally.*

Since more than 25 years you are organizing art, creating art, sparking collaborations in international contexts, and shaping local politics -- when you started to work in the late 80's intersectionality was not a concept, what does it mean for your work today?

It is always difficult to give a good record of the past because memory regularly fails us, it is an interpretation of something that happened. I think that intersectionality did play a role, even though it was not a coined term or a concept. It was rather about context-thinking, trying to find out what is visible and what is invisible. This is a feminist working strategy and something that has always been with me. That attitude is nothing I "found out" at a certain moment in my life, that was part of my upbringing.

“Nobody ever killed my curiosity”

My mother was a feminist, my father as well, to a certain extent. Until I came to school I was not aware that there is a discrepancy between genders. So there always was a notion of "making things possible" in our household and not judging, for example the time span I spend with a topic, or an instrument. It was rather "facilitating exploration." I would say, nobody ever killed my curiosity. Even when there were limitations through school or people, there was always someone or something to counter-balance that.

I grew up with a lot of music and books around us. I have two sisters and we always got money to buy the books that we wanted. I was never interested in fashion or painting my face but rather painting something on paper. This is due to my social and emotional surrounding that supported me in being curious. And it helped me to overcome the feeling that I am not entitled to something *because* I am a girl. I do not have this doubt

that I should not do something because I am a woman. And many people, including men and people of other genders are also dealing with that. Whenever you participate in society, whenever you create, whenever you are part of something you are confronted with that - yet it is not part of my inner compass.

“I had the courage to pose questions”

At an early age I encountered people in technology and music, and there I had a lot of sexist encounters with guys but I also had non sexist encounters. I needed to understand how a mixing table works, and what happens through the wires, and I had the courage to pose questions. And then there were people who answered them or figured it out with me.

I left my hometown Innsbruck because it became too small and I wanted to experiment more. You always bring yourself with you and the question is how you talk about yourself and how you talk about your past. It is like you have an empty table and you decide what you put on that table. What is in the center there, what is most important? When I came to Graz, I decided to be an artist. Everything else I am is also there, but it shifted to the background. Right in the beginning, I met Eva&Co, a feminist art collective, and that helped me experiment. I realized there is a lot of things you can do alone, and there is a lot of things you can do better collectively. (Note: [Here](#) and [here](#) are some German infos about Eva&Co, and there is also a [Spanish TV portrait](#) of this influential artist collective)



Filmstill from the [Spanish TV portrait](#)



Filmstill from the [Spanish TV portrait](#)

This feminist surrounding was really a practice of inclusion; it was less theoretical but a practical application of inclusion and intersectionality. Soon after I came to Graz radio piracy started again (this was not the first wave) in the beginning of the 1990s. We did not want to be outlaws. Our approach was to say, if the law does not accommodate us, we need to change the law. At that time, end of 1980s until mid 1990s in Austria and in Europe, there was a general sociopolitical understanding that these expressions are part of democracy and general education, and that we need to understand how these technologies work. That we as individuals, and as part of groups, have a right to access this information and these technologies.

I find it so interesting that in your biography you are weaving together art, activism, technology, politics, music, and media and these are all places of homosocial production -- almost everywhere we find more men in power. I find it wonderful how you irritate these systems and you shared some strategies already: you are in feminist networks, you relocated, you keep disrupting by questioning. We seem to have more understanding of gender and race at this point in history, but does class matter in your worlds?

Yes, I was hinting at that when I talked about education and access. That also has to do with my upbringing. I am part of an academic family, but grew up in a working class area of the city. Most of the people I grew up with came from working class backgrounds and they had a different

approach of what knowledge means or why you would want to know something. I think to learn or understand something has nothing to do with your capability or talent as a person and an entity. I mean this not only in the sense of how one can make money out of knowledge, but in general: Why would you want to know things?

"Because it is knowable, I want to know"

Being surrounded by books I realized that my early friends and neighbors did not have this “matter of factness” about knowledge. This idea that "because it is knowable, I want to know." For example, I am excited about astronomy, and I want to know about it but I do not need to be an astronomer (even when the first job I ever wanted as a kid was astronaut). It was interesting to see how narrow their perspective sometimes was about what could be interesting. I am talking about imagination. That has to do with access to knowledge and education. I sometimes had no money, but I have never been poor, in this sense. Poverty has to do with money but it also has to do with your social positioning. It is a race thing, and a gender thing, as it has to do with this social positioning that plays out hierarchically.

Of course also in the arts you see a lot of the "well-educated white."

Intersectionality here offers a tool set for us to be more alert and attentive and for us to start understanding how to read these social patterns and to disrupt them. There are so many layers of exclusions and we need to

understand how to analyze them. You can have a Marxist toolset. Or you have a speech therapeutic toolset. Or it can be Zapatist, as we can look into how Zapatistas find out how their way of living and working together can work on the bigger scale or the toolset of Kurdish women resistance, etc. For me it is a technique of pattern recognition on an artistic, sociopolitical and cultural scale. It is about patterns and about finding out which patterns we are following here.

You talk about exclusion, inclusion, and patterns – concepts such as intersectionality and diversity have become buzzwords. As much as it is important that there is an understanding and a political commitment there is also feminist critique that these buzzwords become depoliticized and mere marketing tools. What do you think?

Taking differentiation and creation of diversity and more and more spaces of difference can be positive. The commodification of this process is a capitalist process that has probably always been there. One of the more visible examples is fashion: running around in torn jeans was a symbol of rebellion against middle class norms of being neatly dressed from 9-5, created by punks. But how crazy is it that people nowadays go buy pants that already have holes, bizarre! In approaching this in a holistic way and acknowledging that the body is the vessel we need to exist, I am looking at young women running around in pants that are completely open around the knees. I find it so bizarre because the knee is a body part that needs to be sheltered, it is among the most complex joints in our body, and we need it to keep ourselves mobile and autonomous. I am thinking of this in a multilayered manner.

I want to take that as an example of how this commodification functions. Bruno Preisendoerfer wrote an article ([Leute, auf die es nicht ankommt](#), People who do not count) about the huge amount of these replaceable jobs around, e.g. with Amazon. I think this commodification has been going on for a long while and it also happens in the field of ideas. What we are facing is an acceleration in this process, due to connectedness and new technologies and the internet, as things can go so fast. We are, for example, talking about big fashion industry companies like Zara appropriating indigenous patterns and producing them cheaply.

"I don't fit into one of these boxes, where do I belong, politically?"

Also sociopolitical terminology has been commodified. The term solidarity has been emptied out. I cannot hear "sustainability" anymore because it has been abused by mainstream culture and politicians to a point where it has no meaning anymore. The term diversity is similarly problematic. Maybe less so because of its commodification, but because of its very implication. I feel a contradiction here: on the one hand, I know how important it is to name something, to give it strength by calling it out (that counts for positive and negative aspects). All these identity concepts that evolved, intersex, trans-gender, etc, make something visible that was invisible. On the other hand: Is it really strengthening or is it weakening? If I say "I don't fit into one of these boxes, where do I belong, politically?"

It is a bit like "forking" in open source code environments, where many individuals produce open software collaboratively and adapt it to their own needs. So if there are longer processes of development it can happen that versions are not compatible anymore. Then you have to decide; you go in this direction with the fork - and have a particular set of possibilities - or you take the other route of the fork, but you cannot have both. Sometimes I feel like forming more and more subcategories of something might be dividing us. For instance: I am 50+ and you are not 50+ so there is a differentiation, same for age, gender, ethnicity and that may actually lead to less solidarity.



Photo: Reni Hofmueller, /etc - eclectic tech carnival, organized by the enderchangers, feminist hacking at the pd-workshop at ICA, institute for contemporary art, Graz/Austria, 2005.

“Sometimes it may be more fruitful to ask what we have in common”

What do I have to do with a farmer in Indonesia? Sometimes it may be more fruitful to ask what we have in common. And to ask what do we all need. What we need is clean water, deep emotional connection, legal security, that I am treated well as a citizen or even non-citizen, including people who may not be "legal:" in the places they are. In order to be in solidarity, do I need to know your sexual orientation? I say: I do not. Because it is none of my business. I am not saying that calling out categories is a bad thing, I am just openly questioning if thinking along the lines of difference-feminism actually supports us in this quest of a “society of companions,” as I want to name it. Or if we may just fall into the trap that we are all different and that we are far away from each other.

You wanted to become an astronaut, and among many things you do you are part of several collectives, you are running an art space, you host a radio show, you play in a feminist punk band, and you are building antennas. What are some projects of yours that you are in love with right now?

I just come back from two concerts we had with the band ([Lonesome Hot Dudes](#), follow links to intriguing musicvideos to their songs “[Obey](#)” and “[Books](#)”) in Vienna and Linz

and we are getting so much great feedback! It is always beautiful to see that young women really enjoy it and were jumping with us. The heart opens, there is no other way to describe that. I love this band because we are so heterogeneous, and we are a feminist band.



The Lonesome Hot Dudes, Photo: Alexandra Gschiel, image post production: Hicran Ergen

The other thing that I am doing is more like a solo thing at the moment. I really love doing art with other people and then I also enjoy doing projects where I am "the artist" - that doesn't mean that I do everything, but that I am in control of everything. That is sometimes really important because I think it is beautiful and challenging. I learn a lot when I am with others because we have to come to a conclusion that is not oppressing anything. If you and I do something together it would be different than doing it alone. But I also enjoy doing things alone because then I can improvise until the last second and things can change.

"So now I am building antennas"

So now I am building antennas since about 3 years. I am part of a team of people and we attempt to build a nano-satellite called [mursat](#). Because of that I started learning more about transmitting information through magnetic fields. I also have a history in the pirate radio, and there is this technological relation. And so I started building antennas and learning about relations of a transmitting and a receiving source. I started building these antennas you can buy in a shop because I thought "DIY!" – I can do it myself. But I do not own professional tools and I question if I need to own professional tools, as they are expensive. I got frustrated and thought what am I doing? I could buy such an antenna

in a shop. That's a lot cheaper and takes less time. And so I decided I build antennas only I can build, as an artistic intervention.

With an antenna you are expecting to receive a certain frequency (Note: e.g. 92.6 MHz, the frequency of [Radio Helsinki](#) in Graz where Reni hosts shows). In my project I turned it around and I thought I'd build an antenna only I can build, and I built one that is really huge, I built [one that is 4.5 x 5 meters](#), and the antenna structure is based on the hand lines of my left hand.

What I am doing is listening with my extended hand to what can be perceived. There are many more things out there than we know and who knows what's gonna happen there?

So recently I built an antenna with it's structure out of bamboo, and I covered it with copper, and I am going to build another one next week. And the bamboo I used I took from the exhibition place because I like developing my work from that what is already there. It has to do with choice, in this case choice being the possibility to get to know something without a direct commodification of this knowledge afterwards. The exhibition space for the next antenna has a lot of reed on its property, so I am going to use that material to again build a similar structure. This time it will be divided in two. So one part of the antenna will be working in one tree, and another part in another tree and there will be a sweet spot - if you stand there you see the both antennas overlapping and thereby the entire antenna as it is meant to be.



Photo: Reni Hofmueller, KUNSTGARTEN 2018

It is amazing to do these things and to develop them. If I am alone, I can decide all that by myself and only have to negotiate with myself. With more complex collaborative structures you always have to negotiate which can be very time and work intensive. They say: "There is no feminist content in this", for example the antennas. Then I say: "Please, have a little bit of an open mindset", because what I think is important is the attitude and set of thought behind it, that we bring into the things we do. Everything I do is embedded in feminist thoughts and feminist approaches to life. This is my humus and my ground base out of which all these things can grow.



Photo: Nikolaos Zachariadis, Reni Hofmueller in the background of her project RESONANZRAUM in the context of the art in public space project Comrade Conrade in Graz/Austria, 2018

PS:

