



Research Fellow 

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Doing Solidarity: But How?

Abstract:

The interdisciplinary and ongoing research project entitled "Doing Solidarity, but How?" deals with the potential importance of solidarity in cultural institutions and transglobal cultural collaborations. The project examines the meaning, form and relevance of solidarity in the transformation of traditional power relations in cultural institutions from different perspectives.

As part of the CIRCE Fellowship, the project found practical application in the investigation of Manifesta 14 in Prishtina, Kosovo. This report is a reflection of this commitment. Manifesta 14 in Prishtina, Kosovo was examined in a variety of ways for its potential for solidarity and understood as an example of a transglobal cultural project from which potential lessons can be learned.

The main component of the project consisted of an in-depth study of Manifesta 14 in Prishtina, Kosovo, and an associated residency on site. Various methods were used during several weeks in Prishtina, such as city walks, exchanges with creative mediators, extensive reading and research on Manifesta 14.

The results of the field research reveal the intricacies of solidarity, the challenges of applying external concepts in a local setting and the economic and socio-cultural impact of Manifesta 14 on Kosovo. Ultimately, the question of what can be learned from Manifesta 14 in terms of the transformation of traditional power structures in transglobal cooperation and the transformational potential of solidarity can only be broadened with further questions. The project therefore recognizes the need for ongoing research and in-depth analysis of the political aspects that are closely intertwined with the topic.

Doing Solidarity, but How?

Solidarity plays a crucial role in today's political climate, and its expressions are readily apparent in our everyday lives. During times of multiple crises, its significance becomes particularly pronounced without, however, defining exactly what it could mean. This report is a reflection on the potential importance of solidarity in cultural institutions and transglobal cultural cooperation. The ongoing research project "Doing Solidarity, but How?" is dedicated to these topics in an interdisciplinary way. The project is based on two synchronous lines of development that I have been observing for some time.

Firstly, one can make the observation that powerful cultural institutions quite regularly display public solidarity. For example, in the form of raising the Ukrainian flag, signing the "Erklärung der

Vielen”¹, public statements on websites or social media like the *Museum Garage Moscow* presented, or specific event formats like the Ukraine Solidarity Residency Program at the *Helsinki International Artist Program*². The observation, however, is that these expressions of solidarity often appear as isolated, one-off expressions. It seems that they, while akin to a band-aid, are primarily employed to address acute and momentary crises. Yet, as time passes, the attention wanes, and there appears to be a lack of sustained commitment to the affected groups, regions, or crises. Following this observation, the sociologist Serhat Karakayali takes a critical look at the practice of emergent expressions of solidarity. Karakayali criticizes the short-lived nature of singular expressions of solidarity because, according to him, they eventually “burn out”. He argues that effectiveness can only be achieved if they are transformed into long-term, enduring structures³.

Secondly, one can notice an increasing effort to reduce global asymmetries of power and / or resources. Examples such as Documenta 14, which was dedicated to the decentralization and decolonization of the Northwest canon, or Documenta 15, in which the artistic direction was given to the collective *ruangrupa* from Indonesia. As well as the debate surrounding the restitution of looted objects/subjects/cultural belongings⁴ from colonial contexts show these efforts. This gives the impression that in recent years cultural institutions, biennials, and cultural formats are increasingly questioning global cooperation against the backdrop of traditional power structures. Both observations, it is concluded, describe efforts in the cultural sector to rethink and rework global collaborations, as well as efforts to show solidarity through very explicit expressions.

These observations form the basis for the research project insofar as they evoke the following key questions:

How can *doing* solidarity be institutionalized?

What efforts for a practice of sustainable solidarity can be observed in the cultural sector through transglobal cooperation?

¹ “Die Vielen” (The Many) is an alliance in which many established and influential German cultural institutions have joined forces and have adopted the motto “Solidarity instead of privilege. It’s about everyone. Art remains free” to combat society’s shift to the right, at: <https://dievielen.de/>, last accessed 25.09.2023

² This program started in May 2022 and offers residencies and accommodation for Ukrainian and Ukraine-based artists and art professionals who have been affected by the war in Ukraine, more info: <https://www.hiap.fi/ukrainian-aid/>, last accessed: 28.09.2023

³ Karakayali, Serhat (2021): *Institution und Affekt. Dimensionen von Solidarität*, In: Kastner J. & Susemichel, L. (Eds.): *Unbedingte Solidarität*, Münster: Unrast Verlag, 89-106.

⁴ Following Priya Basil, I would like to refrain from reproducing the common perspective of historical actors who speak of “collections” and “objects”. To counter the accompanying negation of colonial subjugation, objectification, and specific notions of ownership, Basil writes: “If we were to replace the term ‘objects’ with “belongings”, might it help underline that instability, signaling the precarious nature of possession, the ever-shifting, living relations between people, places, and things? Belongings tie up notions of (not) having, of being, of longing. Belongings suggests a multifariousness that requires many modes of telling”, in: Priya Basil, “Necrography: Death-Writing in the Colonial Museum”, *British Art Studies*, no. 19 (Feb. 2021), 2021. <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-19/death-writing-in-the-colonial-museums; 7/37>, last access: 23.09.2023

And how can the practice of solidarity ensure not to enter the common “trap” of reproducing hierarchies, inequalities, or paternalism?

The foundation of the research project lies in these three meta-questions, which are intricately woven into a theoretical debate defined by three distinct lines of thought.

The first influence this project has, is reflected in the title – by emphasizing the *Doing*, I refer to the text “Schwierige Solidarität” (2021)⁵ by Sabine Hark to encompass an understanding of solidarity that is not a rhetorical phrase or symbolic gesture but focuses on practical action. In this text, Hark emphasizes that solidarity is characterized by the fact that it cannot be had or be done without further ado or work, that it neither comes naturally nor automatically. Moreover, it has to be worked out and articulated politically and only comes into being by becoming practical. This idea of solidarity articulated through “*Praktisch-Werden*” is complemented by reflections on the politics of redistribution of (material) resources. With the term “*Constructive Politics*”, the U.S. philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò⁷ describes a possible approach to the current debate on identity politics. Specifically, this (Marxist-oriented) concept emphasizes the importance of not ignoring the material consequences of hierarchical inequality. Constructive politics stands in difference to so-called deference politics in the context of the work. By deference politics, Táíwò understands a practice that, borrowing from (feminist) standpoint theory, focuses on the situatedness of knowledge. The actual practice thus seeks to redistribute attention. However, as Táíwò notes, it does not pay attention to the material consequences of the structures of inequality, and to change these structures, deference politics is not enough:

“Deference politics is right about the *what*: it does in fact matter that we pay attention to lived experiences, and it is politically important that we pay attention to difference. But it is wrong about the *how*, because the more we focus on changing our norms of interactions to ones that locally and cosmetically elevate the voices and perspectives in the room, the harder it becomes to change the world outside of the room.”

(Táíwò 2022: 82f).

In doing so, constructive politics pursues specific goals or results rather than aiming to avoid “*complicity*” in injustice. In this, constructive politics is directly concerned with the task of redistributing social resources and power. In order to understand the position of one’s own involvement in existing or historical contexts of injustice, the position of the “*implicated subject*” helps. This subject theory expands the existing vocabulary of the binary of victim and perpetrator by a third and thus represents an addition to the existing vocabulary in the discourse on power,

⁵ Hark, Sabine (2021). Schwierige Solidarität. In: Kastner J. & Susemichel, L. (Eds.): Unbedingte Solidarität, Münster: Unrast Verlag, 67-80.

⁶ In free translation: becoming-practical

⁷ Táíwò, Olúfemi (2022): Elite Capture. How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else), Chicago: Haymarket Books

violence, and injustice. Fundamentally, Michael Rothberg works with the assumption that every regime relies on subjects who become beneficiaries of injustice through their “*violent innocence*” (Rothberg 2019:19). This refers to individuals who, while not originators of regimes of domination, inhabit them, benefit from them, perpetuate them, and thus also perpetuate the conditions of existing injustice. As part of history, the implicated subject reproduces the structures that generate current continuities of violence. Here, the respective contexts of injustice are considered multidirectional, both historically and locally.

These three ideas shape the project and the meta-questions presented in the following way: If we apply Michael Rothberg’s subject theory, which emphasizes historical implication and its impact on the present, to cultural institutions, a new perspective on political responsibility emerges. Finally, the assumption of an institution-inherent ethics in transglobal cooperation is reflected in the understanding of solidarity, which is characterized by two features: the attention to material resources and the realization of solidarity beyond rhetorical symbolism.

Following this meta-level of the project, I would like to present the specific perspective that was the focus of this CIRCE fellowship. My study looked at the Manifesta 14 biennial in Prishtina, Kosovo, and its immediate event character, and repercussions and tried to gain insights through this case study.

Manifesta is a European Nomadic Biennale for contemporary art that takes place every two years in different European countries/cities since 1996. It claims to rethink the relationship between culture and civic society, investigating and instigating positive social change through contemporary culture in response to, and in close dialogue with, the social, economic, and political sphere of the Host City and its communities⁸.

The Manifesta 14 took place in the capital of Kosovo, Prishtina from July to October 2022. My interest in this format arose from two reasons:

Firstly, in the article “Situated Solidarity: A New Curatorial Model for the European Nomadic Biennial?” the author Sjoukje van der Meulen examined the Manifesta 14 for its potential regarding solidarity and describes how the Manifesta14 was a successful artistic and curatorial translation of the concept of solidarity. Van der Meulen proposes the hypothesis, that Manifesta’s “new model of cultural research as pioneered in Prishtina is related to (and can be understood through) a concept of solidarity known in academic research as ‘situated solidarity.’”⁹.

Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger developed the concept of “*situated solidarity*” in 2007 as they looked for a way to conduct fieldwork on feminist and gender issues globally across borders and a variety

⁸ A digital overview of the recent Manifestas can be found here: <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennial/>, last accessed 23.09.2023

⁹ Van der Meulen, Sjoukje (2022): “Situated Solidarity”: A New Curatorial Model for the European Nomadic Biennial?, in Artmargins, <https://artmargins.com/situated-solidarity/>, last accessed 16.09.2023

of divisions (social class, ethnicity, and gender) without simply projecting the interests of “the privileged,” or white, Western attitudes, ideas, and perceptions¹⁰. To do “progressive research”, which seeks to engage in the “material politics of social change”, Nagar and Geiger are convinced that it needs more than just the researcher’s understanding of their own identity and perspective. They define situated solidarity as being:

“attentive to the ways in which our ability to evoke the global in relation to the local and to participate in processes of social change are significantly shaped by our geographical and socio-institutional locations, and the particular combination of processes, events, struggles underway in those locations”

Nagar, Geiger 2007: n.p.

Van der Meulen was convinced that an extension of this concept is found in Manifesta 14 in a series of material and immaterial ways and that it has managed to successfully engage in local issues, challenges, and concerns and contribute to concrete social, cultural, and political change¹¹.

Secondly, next to this individual estimation, it was Manifesta’s 14 goal to work radically local. The Biennale consisted of 25 exhibition sites spread throughout the entire city, ranging from (decrepit) historical landmarks and institutions to open spaces, abandoned buildings, and unexpected or underutilized urban spaces. Four of these locations – the Grand Hotel Prishtina, the Center for Narrative Practices (CNP), a shuttered stone factory on the outskirts of the city, and the so-called Green Corridor, an abandoned railroad track that was converted into a trail – were described as “pillars”¹². The approach of radically local is also reflected in the selection of participating artists - of the 103 participating artists (including 25 collectives), 39% had Kosovar origins, and a further 26% of the participants were from the Western Balkans, meaning that 65% of the total participants came from the region¹³.

These two insights on the Manifesta gave grounds for the following research questions: Can Manifesta 14 be a positive example of transglobal/European cultural work? Where can traces of a broad concept of solidarity be found? How sustainable are Manifesta’s investments (in terms of attention, content, and material resources)? Together: what can we learn from Manifesta 14 regarding *doing solidarity*?

In order to approach these questions, an essential part of my work was a stay of several weeks in Prishtina in June 2023 – eight months after the end of the Biennale. My research here consisted of

¹⁰ Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger, “Reflexivity and Positionality in Feminist Fieldwork Revisited,” in *Politics and Practice in Economic Geography*, ed. by Adam Tickell et.al (London: Sage Publications, 2007).

Nagar has further developed ideas on solidarity and related terms, in Richa Nagars “Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism”, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014)

¹¹ Van der Meulen, Sjoukje 2022: n.p.

¹²Press Release, Manifesta 14, 21st of July 2022: Manifesta 14 Prishtina opens in Europe’s youngest capital city Thursday the 21st of July 2022, https://manifesta14.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/20220721_Press-Release_M14_EN.pdf, last accessed: 20.09.2023

¹³ Ibid.

three methods: First, I made so-called "city walks", following the Dérive method by Guy Debord, exploring the city, but especially the venues of Manifesta 14. This method of urban exploration is characterized by wandering through the city unplanned and without fixed destinations and thus exploring new things. In addition to physical locomotion, the focus is on metaphorical drifting, so that aesthetic, spatial, and social phenomena can be discovered anew. In the process, I walked to almost 20 venues and checked to see if they were still open. This idea came to me because Manifesta 14, with its 25 exhibition venues, had also used empty, formerly public buildings and thus reopened them. I was interested in the question of what had happened to these places in the meantime. To illustrate this with an example: The so-called "Kino-Rina" is a former cinema in Prishtina, that opened in the 1950s which was closed and opened in the course of privatization and the war. Like many public buildings in Prishtina, Kino Rina has a long history not only of opening and closing but of inhabiting different uses. During Manifesta 14, the cinema was open again as a venue but unfortunately was closed when I was there. In line with the interdisciplinary approach of my project, these walks helped me to get a feel for the city and to feel comfortable in my role as "the stranger"^{14, 15}.

The second facet of my research involved cultivating my existing network of local creative intermediaries and engaging in conversations. I refrained from conducting qualitative interviews and the conversations and dialogs that developed unfolded with remarkable openness. One particular dialogue with two artists who were also part of the Biennale left me deeply contemplative. They expressed their discontent, asserting that the "radically local" approach appeared incredibly mundane to them. Given the relative isolation of Kosovo's inhabitants from much of Europe, their familiarity with the Balkan art scene is pronounced. However, they have limited opportunities to encounter artists from Western European countries. In other words, the radically local approach was conceived for the Western European visitors to Manifesta - and not for the local artists. So, I wondered: For whose needs and interests is Manifesta 14 catering? Coming back to the constructive politics of Táíwò, I once again wondered: who gets to sit in the room, and if we redistribute attention (e.g. by shifting the focus onto Kosovo) how can we include material consequences (such as visa-isolation)?¹⁶. In further discussions with participating artists from

¹⁴ In vague reference to the concept of Georg Simmel. Although I didn't come to stay, the encounter with the city allowed me to critically examine the question of the productivity of my role. The danger of exoticizing the "Balkans" through the perspective of Western European researchers is echoed by Maria Todorova and Milica Bakić-Hayden. Find in: Todorova, Maria (1997): "Imagining the Balkans", Oxford University Press, New York and Bakić-Hayden, Milica (1995): Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia. in: *Slavic Review*, 54(4), 917-931.

¹⁵ An important addition to this exploration was the so-called metamorphosis walk organized by project space 17 (Shtatëmbëdhjetë). The metamorphosis walk is a city tour through Prishtina that focuses in particular on the narratives of abandoned buildings. During this walk, I was able to get to know the city and the social and historical developments and their representation in architectural form in a distinctive way.

¹⁶ The next venue of Manifesta 15 is in Barcelona (08.09 - 24.11.24) and as Spain does not recognize Kosovo, the inhabitants from Kosovo cannot visit the Manifesta 15. I am curious to see how the participating artists and curator

Manifesta, it became clear how interest from external exhibition organizers and curators has noticeably increased. All the artists I spoke to had exhibitions abroad planned or in prospect. I am convinced that this evolution requires extensive discussion, as I find it difficult to attribute this development linearly to Manifesta 14.

The third aspect of my research on site consisted of an intensive phase of reading and reviewing material on Manifesta 14. The focus here was on the local reception of the Biennale and how it was reflected in local newspaper and self-descriptions from the Manifesta 14. An important text was the public survey which was designed by the organizers¹⁷. The survey mainly worked with the terms of legacy regarding the economic impact and it helped me to understand how the project - according to the survey - was evaluated from a monetary point of view. It was interesting to see how the economic impact and the return of investment was positively coined and how the social impact of course was more difficult to capture empirically. In my quest to gain insights into the repercussions of Manifesta 14 on local structures, I stumbled upon an article that delineated the impact the event had on the local art organizations. Lirika Demiri describes in this context the frustration felt by local cultural organizations, as the monetary contribution to Manifesta from the authorities means a deficit in the funding of local organizations¹⁸. This text captivated me, as my research project also includes the question of how we can strengthen existing local structures in transglobal cooperation and at least not jeopardize them. Knowing the limitations of the project, I asked myself whether and how, for example, Manifesta 14 as a one-off project has an influence on the annual Dokufest¹⁹ film festival.

With these three facets of my research around Manifesta 14, I was then able to gather the following insights: When thinking about the Manifesta as a solidary act one could say that the redistribution of attention was somewhat significant. This refers on the one hand to how Manifesta 14 has given a positive connotation to the external perception of Kosovo. For example, the survey shows that of all the visitors, 20 % were international visitors and that the Manifesta 14 significantly changed the external image of Kosovo from a post-conflict war zone to a “vibrant, young and dynamic society with a strong cultural offer”²⁰. This assessment is remarkable as it shows how art and cultural events can serve as tools for enriching transglobal perspectives. Knowing the possibility

respond to and address these political questions and tensions. It remains to be seen whether the accompanying program or discussion events will shed light on these issues.

¹⁷ Public survey (2023): Assessment of the economic and socio-cultural impact of the 14th edition of Manifesta, the European Nomadic Biennial, <https://manifesta14.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Manifesta-14-Public-Survey.pdf>, last accessed: 23.09.2023

¹⁸ Lirika Demiri and Aulonë Kadriu (2022): Prishtina bids farewell to Manifesta, on 03.11.2022 at Kosovo 2.0, to be found online: <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/prishtina-bids-farewell-to-manifesta/>, last accessed 12.09.2023

¹⁹ Dokufest has been held in Prizren since 2002 and is the largest film festival in Kosovo.

²⁰ Public survey (2023): Assessment of the economic and socio-cultural impact of the 14th edition of Manifesta, the European Nomadic Biennial, <https://manifesta14.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Manifesta-14-Public-Survey.pdf>, last accessed: 23.09.2023, p7.

that formats such as Manifesta 14 can enable new perspectives through the redistribution of attention, it is important to examine which narratives and connective readings of history were presented. Furthermore, I am convinced that it would be worthwhile to pursue the following question in terms of content: How can transglobal and multidirectional connections be made recognizable in formats with a regional focus?²¹ On the other hand, the impression about the external perception of Kosovo ponders with the “new” interest in the art scene in Kosovo. The interest in the art scene is reflected in the exchanges I had with local artists and creative intermediaries. It became clear that Manifesta 14 has generated a clear interest in the work of Kosovar artists and their integration into the hegemonic art world. For me, this raises the question of temporality, because only the next few years will show how lasting the interest in the art scene from Kosovo is. To put it in Táiwo’s words: only time will tell whether this attention to the art scene in Kosovo was a cosmetic elevation of voices and perspectives that ultimately merely reinforced existing norms.

Another insight that I find worth exploring in the context of Manifesta 14 was the question of funding and monetary resources in general. So even though the survey stated that the investments in the Manifesta have paid off, the local cultural organizations articulated their dissatisfaction about the dis-investment of their institutions. As part of Manifesta 14, the Centre for Narrative Practices (CNP) was built – a library, co-working, and cultural space that remained beyond the biennale. This is also the first time that Manifesta has allowed a physical space to exist permanently. These developments are exigent: on the one hand, we see the creation of a permanent physical location (financed by the Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and UNDP - United Nations Development Program) and, on the other hand, the disposal of existing structures that are underfunded. I do not think it would be so simple in this case that the existence of the CNP would hinder or preclude the existing funding of local cultural institutions (especially because, as far as I know, funding for CNP is unsecured from 2025), however, this example perhaps highlights the complexities that arise when transglobal projects with foreign sponsors meet local urban politics. Coming back to the research questions while looking at the Manifesta 14 then I have difficulty determining whether Manifesta 14 is a positive example of transglobal/European cultural work. On the one hand, it could be said that the success in terms of drawing attention to the art scene in Kosovo and creating a new narrative of this state is definitely a success. On the other hand, I would like to urge caution here, as this positive assessment runs the risk of overlooking the long-term impact of Manifesta 14 on local structures. In dealing with Manifesta 14, traces of solidarity could

²¹ This idea ties in with the current Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts 35, which explores the connection between the former Soviet brother states of Ghana and Slovenia. More information: <https://bienale.si/en/>, last accessed: 22.09.2023

be found insofar as the "situated solidarity" described in the introduction was reflected in the concept of Manifesta 14. The organizers' emphasis on the local, the enormous inclusion of local perspectives (and the accompanying possibility of local capacity building in the cultural sector), and the inclusion of urban issues of vacancy in public space reflect these efforts. However, these efforts stand in contrast to the fact that I found, for example, that many of the Manifesta 14 venues closed again eight months after the end of Manifesta 14 and thus little sustainable change happened for the city's inhabitants. It is therefore questionable how concepts of situated solidarity can also encompass temporal dimensions. This observation also delves into the issue of the long-term viability of investments (in terms of attention, content, and material resources) since, in the end, these aspects only manifest themselves gradually over time. Recognizing the project's inherent limitations, my goal is to offer insights for actively shaping the conception of transglobal collaborations. Beyond the exploration of formats like Manifesta 14 and their enduring impact on local structures, I see an opportunity to reflect on the learnings and outline initial recommendations for the cultural and creative industries (CCI).

Firstly, the same is true for CCI as for projects like Manifesta 14 – traditional power relations persist and cannot be easily dissolved. Both the CCI and projects like Manifesta 14 must address questions of political responsibility. The current crises show with all urgency that changes are necessary, and they give a chance for a change of direction. However, overcoming these traditional structures requires more than just goodwill (the many examples of complicated attempts to change existing structures in the art and culture scene show how difficult it is).

Secondly, the project demonstrates the relevance of exploring the grounds for financial resources to support local cultural organizations in conjunction with international collaborations. The intermediate link between one-off funding projects and their potential benefit/damage for existing local structures must be addressed more effectively. In the example of Manifesta 14, this applies not only to monetary structures, but also to the use of public space and local urban planning. The project points out the challenges with international projects: Challenges that arise when transglobal projects collide with local urban policies, highlighting that thorough analysis and preparation are essential to ensure that international initiatives take into account the needs and realities of local communities.

Thirdly, what Manifesta 14 showed is that cultural and creative events can play an important role in strengthening the external perception of a region and making it internationally visible. Emphasizing the local offers great potential as long as it is not essentialist. The inherent complexity that we encounter in current polycrises can (and must) be given space. Avoiding this complexity misses the potential of transglobal cooperation which lastly brings me to my final thought.

In light of present political complexities and crises, the significance of solidarity comes to the forefront - it is crucial to delve into the ways in which solidarity is put into practice. Fostering research, that is geared towards practical solutions is crucial as the imperative for global solidarity is so very urgent.

≈ 30.000
(including spaces)

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