

## ***Fields of action, an interview with Joulia Strauss***

**Raúl Hott**

At night, on a ferry crossing the Mediterranean Sea, I had the opportunity to talk to Russian artist and activist Joulia Strauss. It's always challenging to present and think about Strauss's artistic practice: she's someone with the capacity for questioning any existing template of thought. A cat in a human body, a shaman, an incredibly quick mind, and a radical vision give life to her persona. Coming from a tribe called Mari, from the eastern region of Russia, Joulia is the heir to a valuable pagan and matriarchal tradition. She began her career as a sculptress in St. Petersburg, where she quickly became one of the leaders of the local contemporary art scene and of the Neo-Academicist movement of the 1990s. She moved to Germany to continue her studies at the University of Berlin, where her interests shifted towards technology, sciences and math, always manifesting her desire for a unity among these fields, and collaborating with the most radical and influential media theoreticians. Strauss took part in the seventh Berlin Biennial, and her work has been shown in places such as Tate Modern and ZKM Center for Art and Media.

Joulia Strauss is very active politically, always aware of the sifts and challenges we go through as a society. She's been living in Athens for more than three years, and there she founded and organized Avtonomi Akadimia, a multicultural free-access university. The project is conceived as an experiment in radical pedagogy and takes place at the archaeological site and gardens where Plato had his academy. Avtonomi Acadimia constantly invites thinkers, artists, and activists from all around the world to speak and give workshops.

For the latest *documenta* in Athens and Kassel, Joulia Strauss held a symposium entitled *The School of Everything*, hosted by *documenta 14's* public programme and its educational department. This symposium's objective was to discuss the future of art education in Europe. *The School of Everything* searched for new methods for horizontal intervention, understanding education as a decisive tool for generating social change.

The migratory situation affects Joulia deeply and she has carried out a series

of workshops in refugee camps. Even so, her hope is directed to the use of micropolitics, to one-on-one work, to specific cases of helping refugees, as in the case of Ariam, an Afghan teenager who is just 15 years old. In this conversation we discussed how to approach working with refugees, the work of NGOs, the current situation of the refugee camps in Athens, the eventual way out of the migratory crisis, and the future of Homo Sapiens.

**Raúl Hott: You stated on several occasions that you don't want people writing any more doctorate and PhD papers about your practice with the refugees or about activism in general, with which you meant to say and emphasize that we need more action, we need to get busy.**

Joulia Strauss: So it is. And experience often shows us that even when people are curious and honest about the way they approach Athens, they keep replicating the class structure we have in our society. In the case of scholars who work as activists, the landscape becomes in a sort of test lab that manifests the symptoms of the S&M relationship between Greece and Germany, between north and south in Europe. When anthropologists come to Athens, what do they do? What tools do they have? They offer only the approach with which they've been pre-conditioned to write, and keep replicating vertical interaction structures. This is the classic ethnological pattern of the traveling scientist who seeks to have vacations in the company of miserable others. This is why the most typical reaction to Athens is to write. I aim to disrupt this situation with Avtonomi Akadimia. When one changes the format and creates a different environment, one can provide a platform that allows people to experience themselves as part of a community instead of continuing to follow the academic culture. Our immediate approach reveals that it's ethically irresponsible to keep a 'top down' scheme and sustain the position of the observer. In this way people get involved.

**RH: I'm interested in this new way of offering help. Today I was thinking about Rachel Clarke's activist practice in Berlin with Syrian refugees through storytelling. You know each other, you're friends, and there are many similar points between both practices. The way she thinks about the integration process seems very interesting, as well as the way she prepares young**

**refugees to not lose their original values and cultural heritage. In this sense, how would you describe your way of working and the toolkit you use?**

JS: This toolkit is not as professional as the one a theatre director like Clarke has at her disposal. In the artist's case there's always a degree of anarchism. At the same time there's a degree of lack, or absence of professionalism. You know this approach very well: an anti-disciplinary and emancipatory approach of the artist who loses their professional and sub-systemic capacity. For instance, not using brushes or avoiding the set of tools the NGOs present when it comes to help. That's why my toolkit is my hands and legs, my feline brain, and a very particular kind of dance. One must dance when entering a refugee camp. It's the same kind of dance when one is dealing with immigration problems; or when, for example, one faces the highest level of German academia, with whom I happen to work. It's exactly the same kind of dance. It's the cat's dance. A feline dance. And while you move and dance, you're going to encounter different beings and creatures in those spaces. Relationships are created in the context in which you are immersed, be it a university or a refugee camp.

My approach to this work comes from a highly politicized angle, from the global revolution. In this way you already know the result you are looking for in each experiment. This is why, for example, for the 'Universitas' project that we carried out in collaboration with AthenSYN, I looked for relationships between people I know in Berlin and their connections to Athens. One might think that when one enters a camp, the refugees will be jumping up and eager to participate in your workshops, but it's not quite like that, it may nevertheless look like this to the public when you communicate it. In fact the human relationships that are forged are the most important thing for me, and they are the result of this feline-like dance. For example, I met Mohammad Abu Hajar during an extremely cold demonstration in Berlin, who connected me and introduced me to Ahmad Alkhatieb, who was in the Skaramagas camp at that time, just outside Athens, when we were coincidentally conducting the workshops. This backstory is irrelevant to the public, but this is the background that makes and creates a community. In this community there are no nations. The participants never in their lives would have thought that they could be integrated into something. It's a different language. We must differentiate between the language of the public sphere, with which Rachel Clarke operates, and the language of a subculture, or of art. Both in very different ways are contributing to developing

debates and re-distributing privileges. I would not call it 'help'. Both practices show the change in how and how much we want to see and think about the world.

**RH: Today it's obvious today that we're surrounded by 'choreographies of help' that are established and executed by several institutions, NGOs of European and North American provenance. There's a tendency to unconsciously replicate different forms of violence. It's a loop. And one somehow feels that despite all of the help provided, nothing changes in the end.**

JS: There's nothing really civil about our society anymore: everything has been militarized. When an NGO enters a refugee camp there are already many criss-crossed interests in action. The same can be said of individuals who replicate the structure of the kind of society we have, in which it's obvious that the person destitute of legal status is positioned totally below the person who provides help. The helper immediately starts to replicate the structures of violence, because he or she is already inscribed in a kind of political behavioural algorithm. We can tackle this situation, we can see the truth in each of us and we can acknowledge the privileges we have, if we really dare to navigate this world.

A camp is a totally different world, one where the law of the jungle dominates, where there are people who look at you and ask themselves "could we use you?", "do you have some drugs?", "could we have sex with you?", "could you take us to Germany?", "could you give us money?", "do you have contacts in the Immigration Office?". No one sees you as a human being. Do you have any problem with this? If you do, then you haven't quite realized in what kind of situation the refugees are. So you decide to engage in a complete different kind of relationship with those who are there.

Regarding the problems caused by these same NGOs in the camps, that's a wide generalization, since many people use the NGO structure to help others. Many refugees are also hired, so for many of them who are looking for work and to upgrade their status, this is a big opportunity to achieve that, little by little. At the same time, it's also a structure that can be abused for any urgent purpose. Today we're not in a luxury position of choosing among many options. All we have is the depersonalized and super-bureaucratic NGO structure, with its obscure interests on

the one hand, and on the other hand the pure interests of being in the camps. Again, you navigate and move through this fragmented reality which involves the whole of our society, from the top down, from the bottom up.

**RH: Some weeks ago you introduced me to Ariam, a 15-year-old Afghan refugee who arrived in Athens with his family many years ago and is in the Elefsina refugee camp, in the capital's periphery. Ariam evidently stands out as a teenager, is extremely intelligent, and it's obvious that his future would be different outside of the camp. You know him intimately, have helped him, and we could say he was lucky to have met you and benefitted from your knowledge. Why is it so hard to come up with different options for the life of someone like Ariam? I ask myself, what should happen for a real change to this situation?**

JS: All of them are ghosts trapped inside a shell. As living beings, they're the exception. The path Ariam and his family must go down will lead them to create exceptions in the current system in order to get out the situation in which they unfortunately find themselves. I believe Ariam is making progress and taking strong steps to change his future. I think he'll lighten up the 'humanity' in a lot of people during his life. Yesterday he promised me three things: 1. Not to be broken; 2. Not to let his heart turn to stone; 3. Never to lose the spark and the curiosity for his education and self-improvement.

**RH: Have you in the past met other refugees with the same strength as Ariam?**

JS: If we're talking about strength, no. I've never met someone like *that*. He is fighting alone. He is fighting in a militarized field. This is Elefsina. He's away from the city, there are no acceptable basic hygienic conditions, there are no walls, only moisture and fungus, extremely dangerous for the human body. These camps are highly dysfunctional, there are several generations and age groups put into the same space, that has a psychoactive acoustic that causes strong headaches. If one is constantly exposed to cacophonous environments, the voices at some point gain a strong influence in one's psyche. And you can't learn, you can't think. These are dehumanizing conditions. They live with their families in meager spaces, along with drug and alcohol traffickers. So what kind of camp is this? Why does the military

keep managing it if it's a disaster, worse than living on the streets? This is what Ariam must fight against to ensure his survival in Europe. In order to be a 15-year-old he has made a revolution in the camp. This is his own revolution in order to get education. The way he acts inside and outside the camp, all the relationships he has built with those who go through the camp, make him a unique human being, because it shows to others what's possible. I'm sure that he'll fight for more justice, not only in theory, but through his experience.

**RH: From the interviews with refugees in the publication *Krytyka Polityczna Athens*, the book that documents the 'Universitas' project, I get the sense that many of them have an inner strength that makes them search for help, not only for themselves individually, but also for their people. They have something more, what could be described as a very special energy, to detonate and bring about change on a much bigger scale.**

JS: Yes. Those who speak in the book are not that worried about their own destiny; they're more concerned with making some problems public.

**RH: I'm under the impression that they know that even if they lose their refugee status their fight will not be over and that they should keep fighting for more change.**

JS: Exactly, they've seen the impossibility of being helped, the failure of any positive and successful intervention. The situation in Syria shows that we live in a financial dictatorship. This prompted us to focus on something that we didn't expect exists, something that we shouldn't face or fight because it's too complex: the way in which Europe is involved and the interests behind the conflict in the Middle East. The migratory crisis shows that Europe is an accomplice in the war in Syria and reaps benefits from these conflicts. No one wants to accept this truth, because to accept it means to lose one's credibility as 'good' Europeans. The impossibility to help points to something important: Europe is no longer what it pretends to be. This is not democracy at all. The refugees show us that.

Understanding the need for help is not the same as having to act out of compassion. The acting out of compassion is a motherly discourse. And I don't give a shit about all these actions inspired by motherly discourse. It's to clean the shit as

soon as the children—or presidents of corrupt governments—have thrown it around, by tackling secondary effects in the same way social workers do. I refuse to become a social worker. Evidently our struggle to open the borders is united with the plight of the refugees. At the same time, they're united to our struggles as artists. They help us help them. And they're helping us unite ourselves in the way we offer help. Together we help the world to breakdown frontiers in multiple directions.

**RH: I'm very interested in the way you describe this 'big picture' and I wonder, what then? What is this disaster moving towards? Is there any path or possibility for triggering change in the benefit of a bigger transformative movement? Basically, what can we do?**

JS: This movement, transformation, or change is a kind of expectation that something should be going in the right direction, and therefore it means that right now we've taken a wrong path.

**RH: Exactly.**

JS: I don't believe that Homo Sapiens is going to improve someday. This shift of consciousness will never happen. It has to do with the number of Homo Sapiens who have already taken that leap and their capacity for interconnection. McDonald's will always have visitors. They won't disappear unless there's a catastrophe, and in that case we'll also vanish with them. But the notion of a consciousness leap for everyone, one that could possibly halt all wars forever, according to the probabilities this will never happen. The best leap I can imagine is that Homo Sapiens finally gets out, is finished, ceases to exist in its current form. Because it has betrayed itself. The new form awaits.

**RH: Despite the criticism to concepts such as Anthropocene and Capitalocene, I find it interesting that they're pushing people towards thinking of different options and ways out.**

JS: The fact that we live inside a gas balloon has provoked a discussion about what we are doing, it has not been because of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. We have invented a new art form: workshops in the refugee camps. Art in the twenty-first century cannot claim unique inventions; it is only doing what must be

done. Instinctively we think that a world without borders can provoke a new mental state. When we are able to spend time together we are incredible, we are splendid, because we are one.

**RH: This is a great way to understand the basic configuration of being together.**

JS: There is great optimism. Let us ask the oracle: the coming times will be ecstatic, orgiastic and fulgurous, towards a new human being. Meeeowwww.