

UNIDEE – University of Ideas Statement 2017

*The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time
because it is a new phenomenon.*
Boris Groys, "On Art Activism"

Now into its third year, and with a long history of residency programs for international students (2000-2013) behind it, the new UNIDEE-University of Ideas of Cittadellarte format proposes an **educational model** based on 'other' ways of gaining experience in the **meeting of critical theory, activism and artistic practice**, not through subordinate relationships but rather through **levels of interaction, exchanges and reciprocal interference**. Laboratory or seminar modules are held each week at Cittadellarte, moderated by a knowledgeable **mentor** with the support of a **guest**. The groups of participants, who are always different and arrive from all over the world, interact intensely as they discuss and examine relationships between art and the public sphere in depth, starting from different practices and going through connections with various disciplines (from visual art to the theory of economical politics, music, etc.). The **resulting storyline is woven from their words, discussions, actions, images, works and the pre-texts for other works** created every week, in different ways and forms. This is done **in a common environment of thought and action** in which the *demo-practical* (from the neologism "demopraxia" that intends the power of *demos* as an exercise of practices) sharing is circular in its meanings, knowledge and perceptions that are not only the **final result of the process** that was initially activated in the module but **also becomes the tool for the following steps** each participant will develop on their own, or in a group, in their own academic research and artistic planning.

In a relationship of methodological continuity and semantic connection with the key words selected for 2015 (Temporality, Responsibility and Participation) and for those in 2016 (Research, Gift, Alteration), the 2017 course will use an interdisciplinary approach to examine three more macro-themes. They will be **Revolution, Desire and Mediation**, which are central to contemporary social-political debates as well as in the practices of many actors (artists, curators, public and private institutions, organisations, etc.) operating in the public sector. Inspired by the words of Michelangelo Pistoletto: "The Third Paradise forms the basis for a new educational vision involved in every formative level, necessary in starting the third phase of human evolution, that of responsibility, after the ancestral age of lack of awareness regulated by nature and the era of knowledge generated by artificial progress", UNIDEE is an **experimental school that uses methodologies, practices, the languages of art and the forms of activism** to educate 'artivators' or **agents for the organisation of actions and processes responsible for change** in the social contexts in which they live.

The origin of the term '**revolution**' was astronomical and indicated the movement of the stars, therefore, a recurring and cyclical motion. The word comes from the Latin *revolvere*, composed of *re*-again and *volvere*-turn, literally meaning 'to turn again' and not only 'turn over' or 'spill' as it is commonly meant today. *Re-volvere*, referring to an action of turning twice along a curve to return to the starting point, reveals a sense of ambiguity and apparent change. If applied to politics, the word would mean that known forms of government represent themselves in an endless procession, which on one hand is very far from the idea held by all of the revolutionaries to bring about the fall of an old order to establish a completely new one, but on the other hand, it is *unfortunately* very close to the real results of these phenomena, from the French Revolution to the Russian one and onwards to the recent Arab revolutions. Consequently, and in accordance with the *École des Annales*, instead of revolution we prefer its antithesis '**evolution**', or the daily manifestation of slow and continuous structural changes to society (in that sense, the industrial revolutions would represent a multi-century evolution beginning a long process of worldwide economic transformation).

The term 'revolution' was used for the first time in a political sphere in the XVII century to indicate the time, in 1660, in which the Monarchy was re-established in England after overthrowing Cromwell and his dictatorship; therefore, when the concept made its way into the political sphere it meant '**restoration**' (H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 1963). The moment in which revolution assumed a definitive form and made a concrete entrance was in the French Revolution and the American Revolution, even though both began under men who believed their task was to restore an ancient order: therefore, they had a precise **project** in mind.

Protest, from the Latin '*protestari*' (with the meaning to 'publicly declare one's will', as well as 'to testify', given the presence of the etymological root '*testis*'-witness), is not in alignment with the revolutionary project, as it contains the **practice of research**, of going through an event to the end in the hope of finding one's object, of elaborating the sense, of being 'formed' by it: the protest comes from the bottom, the protester is the unformed, usually students, workers and crowds.

Instead, the **revolt** can be distinguished from the revolution because it is delimited by precise temporal and spatial boundaries, it is "**a suspension of historical time**" the instant in which the participants self-identify themselves deliberately as part of a collective (F. Jesi, *The Suspension of Historical Time*, 1968).

Is it possible to imagine other forms of protest today? How do we combine political renovation and artistic experimentation for a reorganisation of the next society with revolutionary phenomena?

The concept of **desire** (from the Latin '*de-siderium*', derived from '*de-siderare*' in the sense of "removing one's gaze from the stars") contains the movement of will towards someone or something that is missing, which is liked, for which affection is felt. Therefore, in the semantic origin of the word we find both the presence of the '**desire of another**' (in a subjective and objective sense) as well as the '**desire for other**' (in an impersonal and personal sense).

Jacques Lacan in his '*VII Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis*' (1986), stated that for the subject it is more ethical to act *in conformity with one's (subconscious) desire* than to modify one's behaviour in the eyes of the great "Other" (society, family, law). The French philosopher connected this ethical position to the figure of Antigone who, on the death of his brother, broke the law to sit next to the body beyond the city walls. Antigone is the subject that does not renounce his own desire, persevering in what he feels he has to do. However, such concentration on individual needs does not implicate an exclusion of the social but, on the contrary, plays out against the background of society's rules and obligations. Giving power to desire means thinking about the other in critical terms and not as a conformist or 'do-gooder' and implies the possibility of creating **a fracture between the subject and the collective**.

The 'desire for other' is the form in excess of a precarious identity that has the real and symbolical need to nourish itself, 'increase itself', change itself, as a form of alienation. "The greater the human energy invested in the productive activity, the greater the increase of power in his enemy, the capital, and so much less is left for himself" (Franco Berardi Bifo, *L'anima al lavoro - The Soul at Work*, 2016). In this case, the technical-scientific progress plays an essential role, as the technological mutation allows the living – and more so for the human being, given the particular talents of one's own language/thought – to always *desire* other than what one is to be more powerfully one's self. This is the 'sidereal' dimension that the Situationist International defined as 'The Society of the Spectacle', (G. Debord, 1967), and that social science 'restricted' to the category of **Capitalism**. The present system of production and consumption prevents us from dealing with any topic that can be unhampered by the present: everything connects back to the **present**, everything involves the present, the present has to be continually produced and continually consumed, in a vortex that grows faster and faster, in changing shape and substance. An 'ideology of the present' like this would seem to paralyse any effort aimed at thinking 'other', different, **alterations**.

How can we desire to imagine the future regardless of consumer logic? Can artists organise moments, places, situations to try and carry out the investigation of other possibilities of thought and action?

Mediation is attributed with a meaning of 'mediocre', 'moderate' and, therefore, is a bit negative. However, that which is in the 'middle' between two polarities and what the 'medium' represents are very interesting aspects today, as we live in an age full of 'mediation' (with respect to the ways through which things of the world reach us), that has penetrated into every aspect of daily life, experience, imagination and narrative. According to different processes and levels that pass from an artistic proposition to political practice, we go from the artist who *mediates* reality through his work, to the curator who has the job of *mediator* with institutions, to the people seen as *mediums* and fundamental artistic material in participatory works (C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012), to the exhibition that is the *mediation apparatus* for the public, to the education department of the museum that has the task of *mediating* with specific communities, to the museum itself that *re-mediates* its own contents in a digital format, until we reach an even wider sense of the substantial role of mediation carried out by politics that goes **'beyond' the protest** having it 'act' concretely through the re-creation of bridges and relationships between the involved parties.

In 1954, Marshall McLuhan stated that a medium is a **habitat** and not a neutral communicative channel: "the effects of the mass media are new habitats, for the larger part subliminal, which are as imperceptible to us as water is to fish" (*Counterblast*). Thirty-five years later, Bolter and Grusin went back to a famous thought of the Canadian sociologist, "the content of a medium is always another medium", and applied it to digital media thus coining the neologism of **'re-mediation'** intended as the appropriation of social techniques, forms and meanings by a new medium compared to the previous one "with the aim of competing with the old one or to remodel it in the name of reality" (*Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 1999). This integration, between the old and new mediums, determines and overturns the concept of 'medium/mediocre': for example, in the case of digital remediation, it implies **an alteration** that is not a reduction of but rather gives more power to communications, the relational nature, of the connections of our society. Therefore, the media are **instruments of transformation for the territories** on which they intervene and re-territorialize in the form of **expanded communicative habitats** on a spatial-temporal level.

Michel de Certeau in '*Invention Du Quotidien*' - The Practice of Everyday Life', (1990), evoked an extremely concrete image: in Greece today, public transport is called *metaphorái*. To travel around the city of Athens or to return home, you take a **'metaphor'**, that is a bus or a train. Literally, it is a **'medium' that transports you to another place**. Bearing in mind the poetic, artistic, medial and political apparatus, we are dealing with an operation of mediation that resembles the **translation, in the true sense of transfer, of moving of sense from one part to another**, mixing the spatial dimension (with an in and out flow from the physical to the electronic without a solution of continuity) with a performative action, to act with the body in a *common* field of production, assembly and communication of words, images, shapes, times, things and worlds. (J. Rancière)

Is it possible to imagine a society without mediation? Which actors and organisations carry out the role of 'good' mediators between politics, economy and culture today?

Cecilia Guida, Director and Curator

The mentors and guests for 2017 are (in order of appearance):

Etcetera (Loreto Soledad Garìn Guzmàn and Federico Zukerfeld) with Franco "Bifo" Berardi; Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri with Carla Bottiglieri; Riccardo Fassone and Juan Esteban Sandoval (el puente_lab) with Gabriele Ferri; Diego del Pozo Barriuso with Julia Morandeira Arrizabalaga; Andrea Caretto and Raffaella Spagna with Ernst Zürcher; Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio with Luigi Fassi; Attila Faravelli and Enrico Malatesta with Adam Asnan; Aria Spinelli for the EU project "Trauma & Revival"; Petra Köhle and Federica Martini; Adrian Paci with Leonardo Caffo and Zef Paci; Assemble (Amica Dall) and John Bingham-Hall with Efrosini Protopapa; Rick Lowe with Elpidia Rikou.