

# reSource Chat with Ela Kagel / SUPERMARKT

SUPERMARKT is a creative resource centre for the city of Berlin. SUPERMARKT presents a programme of events on digital culture, alternative economies and social innovation, as well as providing coworking offices. Ela Kagel is an independent cultural producer and curator.

**r: Would you like to describe the background of SUPERMARKT? Do you see the space as part of a specific scene (i.e. media and art?)**

E: [For us (because I run this place together with my other two partners)], this space was not really planned, because we have been nomads throughout our whole professional life, and we kind of enjoyed it. [W]e never really thought of having a space, and when I worked with transmediale and developed the Free Culture Incubator [...], I realised that being on the move can also have its downsides. [...] It takes a lot of energy to always open up a new space, to create the space, to get acquainted with new spaces. You might need [this energy] to run the programme and also since I became a mother at that time, I knew for me it would be quite good to settle down and have a space where I could invite people [to]. Together with Zsolt, I [went for] a walk and we happened to be here in the neighbourhood, and that's when we spotted the SUPERMARKT for the first time. We [saw] this beautiful building sitting empty here at Northern Brunnenstraße, which is so close to Alexanderplatz and still it's in a hibernation for a long time. The SUPERMARKT really has been sleeping for more than ten years [...] people living here in the neighbourhood still can remember [it being a supermarket], but [for around] ten years nothing happened [neither] here [nor] in the neighbouring offices. [...] And then at a certain point when the fashion industry started to rise in the city, the real estate company who owns this whole quarter decided that it would be a good idea to get all the traditional businesses out and invite fashion businesses to

settle down here [...]. This didn't work out at all, because they established a monoculture which couldn't connect to the people who lived here at all. [...] And then again, people left, and [...] it was all empty. [...] I thought what I would like to do with my work in the future; I thought what maybe my best quality in my professional work is the ability to bring people together. [...] I see myself as a host, as someone who provides a platform, and creates special situations. And because of that, I wouldn't see myself as part of a specific scene [...]. Of course in a way I'm very close to the transmediale scene, if there is a scene at all, and I'm also really close to the open source scene, because these are people with whom I share lots of interests and projects. But I think it's also good to provide an open space that is not for a specific scene, which is really open, [and] allows for encounters that are not curated [...]. Nonetheless I have my focus, which definitely is based on open source technologies and alternative economies.

**r: Since you named it SUPERMARKT, do you see your programme within the context of the "free economy" issues? And is your activity based on the reflection on economy itself?**

E: [...] My work has always been located at the edge of art, technology but also economy. [...] One of the reasons why I'm so interested in that is that I see so much nonsense happening in this intersection. Nonsense in terms of labels that start to spring up like "creative industries" or other terms which I think are really questionable. I see many labels coming upon that edge and I feel it would be so helpful if we really would start

a real dialogue about money and values with everyone, not just with people from the industry sponsoring artists, which in my opinion is not an equal partnership. At the same time I'm really curious about alternative models to the traditional business plan, which seems to be the one and only economic reference model. I simply can't believe that there shouldn't be any alternative to that. And also I'm interested in the different notions of trade and gain. [...] I think this is a field which is not explored at all, due to existing paradigms of growth and accumulation of profit, which have been so predominant, that no one really questions that. And nowadays I feel that many people start to question that and we are just at the very beginning to establish a dialogue [...].

**r: I remember when we had a seminar at SUPERMARKT, you defined your initiative as a business. In which way do you think you are also working with business - in terms of sustainability? What does it mean that SUPERMARKT is a business?**

E: That SUPERMARKT is a business means for me that we can stand on our own feet, that we don't have to rely on external sources, and for me it's at the very core of independence that we find ways of financing the structure by our own means. And that anything else that comes inside – either from a bank, which we don't want, or from funding, which would be welcomed – can support the programming. [...] [It means] to continue [being] in the position where we can open the door to any kind of programme [...]. [...] So what we try to do is of course we have different strings of

income. We have the café-bar, which brings very tiny revenues, and if we have requests, for instance for conferences [...] [with] funding, [...] we have some income that secures the structure. [...] [F]or me it is also important to look at it as business, because it's not a subsidised project.

[Note: Six months after the interview, the SUPERMARKT was granted a three-years fund from the European Fund for Regional Development.]

**r: Your business is oriented to provide sustainability, but you are also reflecting on business models in general, and working with free culture. Are you reflecting on economy in a meta-level by developing a business project?**

E: I can see [...] very concrete [...] [and] profitable strengths [...] [rising] out of free culture projects such as software which is basically free and open, but people pay for trainings or extra services. And then I am very interested in community-based financing models, where a group of people buys shares of the infrastructure and then own and maintain it collectively. This is something we want to explore further. Look at many others things that came out of the more technologically driven free culture field – [...] at some point [...] many of them really asked themselves the questions: where do we get, or how we can secure some money in order to really be sustainable? [...] [However] I wouldn't say that my main interest is in turning free cultural business into traditional business. It's also the other way around [...]: how [can] trade economy or share economy really [...] work within a community?

**r: And what groups are sharing resources here? Who are the groups that you usually invite?**

E: I would say it's mainly people from our networks, [...] groups and initiatives such as the reSource network, open source companies such as Sourcefabric, collectives or people like the Open Knowledge Foundation, who work with Open Data initiatives throughout the world, people that I know from the transmediale context, activists such as Tobias Leingruber, who did a critical project on Facebook, [...] mainly groups [...] from media activism.

**r: And are there also people renting this place?**

E: [...] [Yes, but] I would say mostly people from within the community. They rent the space for hackathons, workshops, conferences and the like. [...] Around 50% of the events are curated by ourselves: DIY Masterclasses, the Freitagsfrühstück, special events featuring women in Berlin's media art landscape and the like.

**r: But your income doesn't come from the space only, does it?**

E: No. I also [...] give talks, and I have couple of other activities as a consultant or curator [...] as a freelancer.

**r: You also developed the Free Culture Incubator: which links do you see between that experience and the one you are having now here at SUPERMARKT? What did you gain from that experience?**

E: Yes, my partner Zsolt often says that the Free Culture Incubator has found a physical home in a way, which is true, because I continue my activities that happened on a nomadic base throughout the city in this space. [...] A lot of people with whom we worked in the past come here and continue their programme, either [in] workshops or conferences. And I would say that my major learning is that we still know very little about the price and value of cultural work. We have had a lot of events based on that question, [...] panel talks, workshops or dinner sessions where we really talk [...] on a private basis with people. [...] I realised that we still have to develop a language, a discourse

for that. [...] We have to establish a base for the community to really share how much they actually earn, and how much money they actually live from. [...] People never talk about that. [...] [It seems in Berlin] anything that brings money is something you don't really [like] to discuss. [...] But at the same time I [...] don't share the attitude that anything goes, anything is possible. [...] I'm more interested in really starting a dialogue, identifying key issues in that field. The notion of price and value related to cultural work is still not clear. There is no alternative matrix to the business plan. [...] There is no real honest debate between policy makers and creative people; [...] maybe [it's just] starting now in Berlin, thanks to initiatives such as Haben und Brauchen. [...] On the other hand we have all these new approaches, sharism [and] crowdfunding; [...] I'm very much interested in that as well. But I still think the state plays an important role, too. It's not that we can cut out the state [...] and we can only rely on our community resources. Economically we are not strong enough, I believe. [...] In order to [become stronger], we need to have a dialogue on a par with other stakeholders.

**r: You said when you created this place, you also had to make a business plan. This discourse about money is always the unknown and the untold. From my point of view I would actually see the coming up with a business plan as an art piece. That could also extend on trying to think how art could become business or business could become art in a more disruptive way.**

E: I totally agree and [I] would force people more to put themselves in these categories of the business plan protocol which is always this notion of profit. You need to have a clear idea of your values and of your gains; any process based on [...] open processes is not welcomed in a business plan, because anything needs to be estimated and forecasted. And artistic work very often is just the contrary of it. [...]

**r: Trying to hack the business plan! What do you think are the major problems for art producers in Berlin, especially people that are part of our field of work?**

E: What I always find quite problematic is [that] we speak about the media arts scene [...] [as] very detached from mainstream culture. [...] I think that's a pity, because I would like to have more links to a broader audience, so that people really start to cherish the relevance of artist works [...] [from] that field and at the same time it's an artificial funding category. This notion of media art or net art has been brought into the public subsidy sector, and it continues to live there, even though it does not make any sense at all, because how you would justify a media art exhibition these days? No one will take you seriously, if you [have] that approach. [However] in order to get the money for that, you have to adhere to that idea of [...] media art. [...] I also think [...] people here in Berlin haven't really shared their resources or contacts so much. When I lived in other cities, I found the scenes partially much stronger and more generous towards sharing. [...] Here in Berlin you could get by without for a long time. [...] [Maybe Berlin is just now starting to open up more towards] this idea it is actually good to be part of a larger collective, that it can also protect you in a way [...].

**r: Where do you see exactly the problem?**

E: I think in Berlin this idea of belonging to a scene has always been very strong, but the energy in a scene can evaporate very quickly. [...] Anything that ties a scene together can change rapidly just by people moving away [...]; things are very fragile within a scene, whereas in a network which incorporates different scenes [...], it may be stronger. [...] I have the feeling that this individualisation has quite a tradition [...].

**r: You are also involved in the Upgrade Berlin network. What do you think about that experience? Did you actually succeed in bringing these different scenes together?**

E: Sometimes I did and sometimes I did not. To be honest, Upgrade Berlin was like an entry point into the media art scene, and I always had a huge interest in that topic, and it took me a while to really find my place in it. [...] I got acquainted to some people who ran Upgrade events in Bulgaria in Sofia [...] during the Mobile Studios tour in 2006. That was

for me really a great opportunity, because already back then it was an international network [...] active in more than 20 countries in the world. [...] I [...] had this idea of taking th[at] label to Berlin and do[...] something with it. [...] [This] label gave me some sort of protection, [...] because not many people knew me at that time and [...] and Upgrade was my key to introduce myself in the city.

**r: Were you a member of the network?**

E: Yes, which by now is a little sleepy I would say, but at that time the network was really live and kicking. [...] I was so impressed how this people managed to set up global events, for instance we did a global Upgrade international meeting in Sofia, in Macedonia, where I was one of the co-initiators and also helped in raising the money. For me this was one of the best experiences in my professional life to really collaborate with people from all over the globe, [...] fundraiser [and programme] over the web [...]. We made a great festival with no budget basically and the standard and [...] quality of the festival were so high; I was really surprised. [...] I felt I really want[ed] to be part of it, so I brought it to Berlin.

**r: But then you visited some places with Upgrade Berlin...**

E: Yes, I [...] did. In 2006 there was no maker scene, no betahaus, no co-working [...]. And now this intersection between arts and business, which I find sometimes very problematic – startups, arts, creative industries, science – everything is thrown into one pot [...]. But that wasn't there by that time. [...] Everyone was in his/her own field, cooking their own soup. That's how I got to know the scene. And being a nomad and visiting all these different places and bringing [...] audience and [...] programme was for me the best education ever, because I got to know so many people [...]. It was also a bit exhausting I must say, because I had to apply for places all the time, come up with a good programme, and it was absolutely nonpaid [...], but I was really happy [...] I did it.

**r: Within the reSource we are also working with network models and reflecting on what is missing in the scene of Berlin. This is why we are**

**doing these interviews: we are visiting different people that are running spaces asking for advice. What would you imagine the reSource to become? We would like to provide a network context, but projects should also come directly from the people. Do you think a reSource network is actually needed in the context of transmediale?**

E: I think that transmediale in a way has the obligation to do [this], because it is such a strong cultural brand within the city, and I think that if transmediale [hadn't] come up with this [all-] year programme for me, it would have been highly suspicious [...], because it just can't be that such a great group of people and resources only gets visible once a year. [...] This was also why I came up with the idea of the Free Culture Incubator for instance, to have something that would continue. [...] What would really be needed, especially if we look at the reSource [...] as a part of transmediale 'brand', [is] the biggest luxury [...] it can bring to people: [...] open[ing] up a space for good questions [...]. This is really something I would appreciate [...], because I think we have so many people with ideas and concepts and stuff, but [...] what I'm very often missing is a space where [...] people dare to ask questions [...]. I think this can be really valuable. And the other thing [...] of value is what you actually do with the documentation, that you in a way share the outcome of your findings [and your reflections and dialogues] with the community [...].

**r: Which questions are really crucial right now in the field we are working in?**

E: [...] People are always asked to have a strong opinion these days and infrastructures such as Twitter really suggest this very rigid 140 character form, you have to have a strong opinion. [...] On the other hand, people find it really hard to have a strong opinion, because very often [...] things are [...] so incredibly complicated. [...] When they are sitting in the debate, they hardly dare to open their mouth, because they are totally afraid of saying something stupid about copyright [or] forms of political participation [...]. Anything we talk about these days is highly complex, and I'm sure people maybe just have a glimpse of an

idea of what it is actually about. [...] It would be really good to have a space where we can really go back to the very basics of what we actually [...] talk about and [away from] all the buzzwords [only] [...]. For me this goes back to the idea of developing intelligent questions that have the power to open up spaces, and for me this is one of the highest art forms in itself. When I was a student, I had one semester at the academy in Amsterdam, where the only thing we had to do was to develop questions. One semester, nothing else. [...] For me that was the most valuable experience that I had in my artistic education, because [...] I understood what it actually takes to come up with questions that have the power to activate [...], because they all have their take on possible answers. [...] If you ask about what kind of questions are really pressing these days, [...] you see how difficult it is to answer that, because there are so many [...].

**r: What are the questions you try to answer here? Or at least to begin to answer?**

E: [...] I try to [find out] the value of what I'm doing, [...] how to recognise my value, [...] how to work with it, how to deal with it. I'm not talking [about] a market price, but of the [real] value.

**r: What are your thoughts about the first reSource event? What would you like us to improve in the next one?**

E: It could [...] be interesting to ask people for a statement in advance or something that you can really incorporate into the introduction [...] to find a starting point. You did a great effort in inviting everyone personally; you asked them [...] questions [...]. [One] really felt invited and there was no way of not coming. [...] What I really appreciated was the mix of people that came together, that was a success in itself to activate such a[n] [...] interesting group of people [...]. First of all, that is a good sign. People are following your call [...]. [...] Maybe it would be good to have questions which are a little more focused. The debate went incredibly broad, which [lies] in the nature of that kind of debate [...]. I know it from my own events [...]; [so it would be important] to facilitate such a session [...] [to] follow a narrow strand, because we had so many different viewpoints about the quality of living in Berlin

[...], [...] the regular talk [...] about Berlin. We always come back to that over and over again. [...]

**r: What would be some topics you would like us to discuss? I will ask other people as well, and we can put them together.**

E: I think I would really be interested in getting people's ideas about what they consider as resources. Because if we look at resources in a traditional notion, there is always surplus values attached to the word resource. I find it very interesting to bring the [word] resource to the cultural world, and then [...] see what it actually means to people. Maybe [we can] find a way of mapping what people consider as resource in a city like Berlin, [...] who has those resources and who lacks them. [...]