

**glossary**

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**knowledge**

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glossary  
of  
common  
knowledge

Edited by Zdenka Badovinac, Jesús Carrillo, Bojana Piškur (curators)  
and Ida Hiršenfelder (ed.)

Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2018

Beyond the conventional usage of the language in contemporary art.

Terms associated with referential fields, as proposed by narrators in the course of seminars,  
to negotiate various positions, contexts and local narratives about contemporary art.

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## Curatorial statement

Zdenka Badovinac, Jesús Carrillo, Bojana Piškur

The *Glossary of Common Knowledge* (*GCK*), unlike an encyclopaedia, makes no attempt to unite all the world's knowledge in a single totalising system, or to assemble a variety of viewpoints under the roof of tolerance and inclusion. What makes the glossary different from similar efforts is that it does not make just one list of terms but is instead concerned with multiple lists. Each of its terms is always associated in different ways with terms from other lists and other contexts. Families of terms are thus created, and these families are the core of the glossary. Every term in the *GCK* has its own story, and every story has a narrator, who is present alongside the term. Indeed, it is only through the presence of narrators that we can build a glossary of common knowledge. The *GCK* therefore represents a multitude of first-person narratives, which confront and interact with each other.

The presence of narrators is something we have learned about from oral histories. The dialogical structure of oral histories and the presence of different protagonists have in fact made them one of the most important references for the *GCK*. At the same time, this model, especially in the form of interviews, has been an important research tool for compiling the glossary.

Although the spoken word is but one of the sources for the *GCK*, it is a key reference point for the entire work, and this is because we always associate a voice with presence. Our glossary seeks to redefine presence as something that is in constant tension with writing. Mladen Dolar, referring to a similar kind of presence, writes in his book *A Voice and Nothing More*: "The voice seems to embody a presence, a background for differential traits, a positive basis for their inherent negativity. To be sure, its positivity is extremely elusive – just the vibrations of air that vanish as soon as they are produced."<sup>1</sup>

While the *GCK* goes beyond the metaphysics of presence, it also maintains its active position. In this sense, the *GCK* is a collection, not of authentic definitions, but authentic gestures – subjective positions within a world of international languages.

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1 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 36.

The point is not that we believe in the factual truth of oral histories, but rather that, with the help of such narratives, we try to change the existing order of things. Here oral histories interest us not primarily as alternative forms of historicising that are privileged over writing, but as a way to introduce multiple histories and truths, including the kind of psychological truths expressed in the imagination, symbols, and desire. Alessandro Portelli discusses all these things in his essay “What Makes Oral History Different”. Oral histories are fragmented and tied to the memory and the subjective perspective of the individual, the group, or the class. For Portelli, while orality is “saturated with writing”, the memory behind it “is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings.”<sup>2</sup> Not unlike oral history, our glossary relies on the differential credibility of memory, and shows more transparently the relationship between histories and their protagonists.

The *GCK* acknowledges the tensions between the oral and the written, between the norm and deviations from the norm. In a very similar way, Giorgio Agamben describes the relationship between the rule and life: “Neither written word nor living voice, the rule constantly moves between these polarities, in search of an ideal of the perfect common life that [it] is precisely meant to define.”<sup>3</sup>

Through its reference to oral histories, our glossary stands in opposition to the institutions, classes, and elite practices that have dominated writing. Or, to put it better, it tries to create a model that offers greater possibilities for dialogue with those whose collective memories are yet to be written. History as a glossary of common knowledge is a history, not of the winners, but of diverse groups and individuals in various horizontal networks. In this way it becomes one of the most important tools in a new institutionality.

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2 Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different”, in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed. (Oxon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2006), 37. Originally published in 1979 in Italian, Portelli’s essay first appeared in English as “The Peculiarities of Oral History”, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 12 (Autumn 1981), 96–107.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013), 75.

## Referential Fields

The referential fields (Historicisation, Subjectivisation, Geopolitics, Constituencies, Commons, and Other Institutionality) met the need for discussions that addressed various localities and temporalities. Contemporary art contains a variety of social, historical, cultural and political references that exist as referential fields outside the focal ideas, concepts, and artworks themselves. These references also condition the form and practice of artistic production. Since each narrator spoke from a particular point of view connected to their local historical and cultural conditions, choosing the ways in which they direct themselves to the world, thus each term contains extratextual fields of reference, which are made visible in order to disrupt the existing dominant discourse in contemporary art. As a consequence, both the structures and semantics of these fields are subject to certain deformations. Each term may be connected to any other in an unpredicted manner, often surpassing cultural and geopolitical borders in order to form new contexts, which nevertheless include, and depend on, the very function these fields have within the structure of the dominant art world. This function provides the background against which the restructuring may take place.

One of the most significant processes undertaken by the method proposed by the *Glossary of Common Knowledge* is a shift from the act of selection to the act of combination, resulting in an intratextual crossing of cultural boundaries. This may be especially visible in a proposition of artistic neologisms (*creleasure*), neologisms from critical theory (*heterochronia*), culture-specific terms (*kapwa*, *ñande/ore*, *travesti*). Throughout this process, the lexical meaning of a particular existing word also fades out and a new meaning fades in, although without the loss of the original meaning. Another level of relationships is to be seen in the organisation of specific semantic demarcations within the text, which give rise to intratextual fields of reference.

The various clusters of words that are interconnected, whether they are words with surpassed meanings or semantic demarcations transgressed by the narrative, are inseparably linked. They inscribe themselves into one another, every word becomes dialogic, and every intratextual semantic field is doubled by another. Through this multi-voiced discourse, every utterance carries something else in its wake, and thus the acts of combination unfold a space between them. What is said ceases to mean itself, so that what is not said can thus gain presence. The multiple meanings of words that depend on the cultural, social and temporal environments they emerge from and are used within are thus joined together in an unfamiliar way, and related through the different influences they have upon one another.

*Note: The compilation of the terms in this book resulted from discussions in five seminars at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, +MSUM in Ljubljana and one seminar at the Liverpool John Moores University. Each seminar was dedicated to a different referential field.*



[Pages 9 to 352]

# MG+MSUM

Moderna galerija / Museum of Modern Art plus Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova / Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova  
Windscherjeva 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia  
T: +386 1 2416800, www.mg-lj.si, info@mg-lj.si

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Represented by: Zdenka Badovinac

Curators: Zdenka Badovinac, Jesús Carrillo, Bojana Piškur

Editor: Ida Hiršenfelder

Texts: Zdenka Badovinac, Boris Buden, Jesús Carrillo, Ekaterina Degot, Miglena Nikolchina, Raúl Sánchez Cedillo

Contributors of terms: Nick Aikens, Azra Akšamija, Burak Arıkan, Marwa Arsanios, Zdenka Badovinac, Sezgin Boynik, Boris Buden, Zoe Butt, John Byrne, Jesús Carrillo, Colin Chinnery, Keti Chukhrov, Anyely Marín Cisneros, Rebecca Close, Lia Colombino, Bart De Baere, Carlos Prieto del Campo, Marta Malo de Molina (Manos Invisibles), Ekaterina Degot, Galit Eilat, Róza El-Hassan, Patrick D. Flores, Kate Fowle, Cristina Freire, Anthony Gardner, Chema González, Alenka Gregorič, Dušan Grlja, Khwezi Gule, Aigul Hakimova, Vít Havránek, Beatriz Herráez, Ida Hiršenfelder, Marianna Hovhannisyan, Manray Hsu, Marko Jenko, Vasif Kortun, Anders Kreuger, Lisette Lagnado, Thomas Lange, Miguel A. López, Manos Invisibles, Sohrab Mohebbi, Gabi Ngcobo, Miglena Nikolchina, Ahmet Ögüt, Meriç Öner, November Paynter, Alexei Penzin, Jabulani Chen Pereira, Bojana Piškur, Paul B. Preciado, Tzortzis Rallis, pantxo ramas, Rasha Salti, Raúl Sánchez Cedillo, Aida Sánchez de Serdio Martín, Ania Szremski, Igor Španjol, Mabel Tapia, Francisco Godoy Vega, Jelena Vesić, Stephen Wright, Darij Zadnikar, Adela Železnik

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