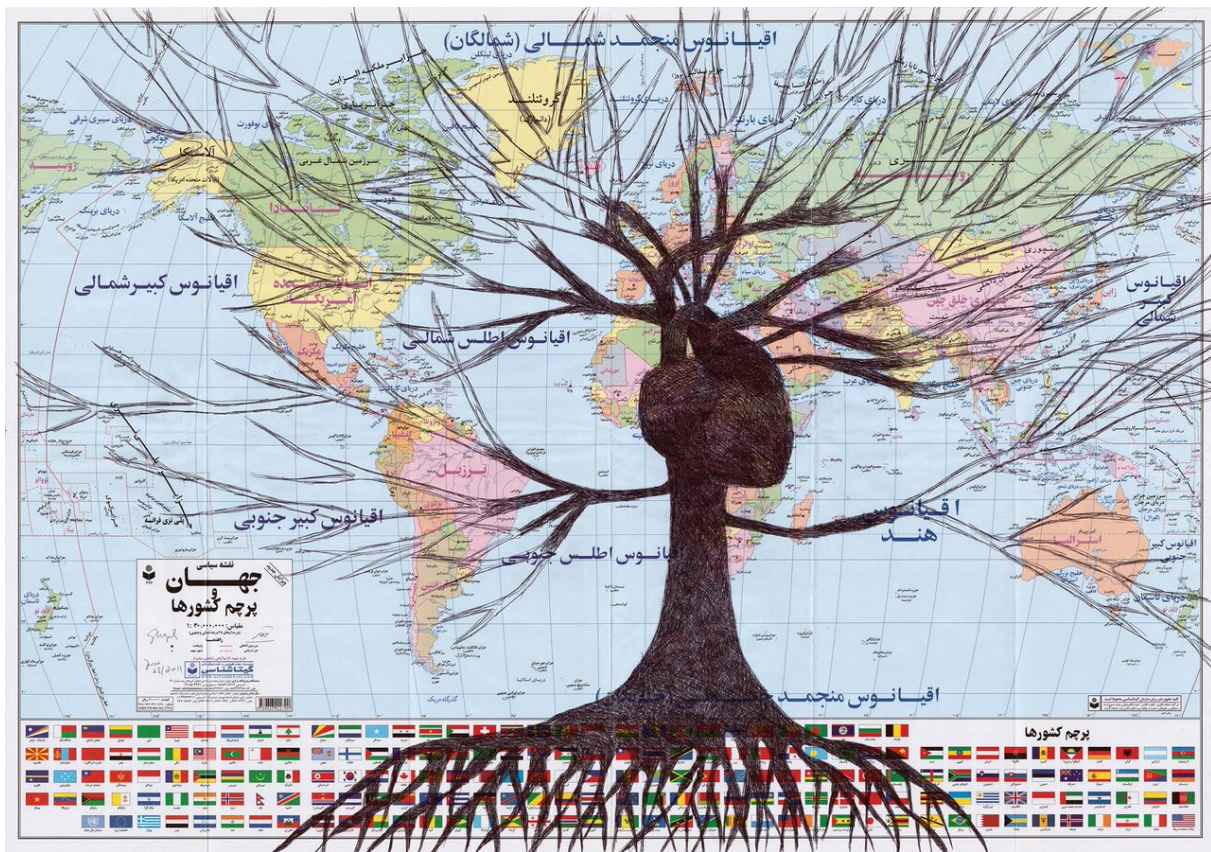


# International symposium

## *Humor, globalization, and culture-specificity in modern and contemporary art*

Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem

June 16th, 2017, 10:00 – 17:00



Organization: Mette Gieskes (Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands)  
Anneke Schulenberg (Open University, the Netherlands)

More information: <http://www.ru.nl/humorglobalizationart/>

Registration: [humorartglobalizationsymposium@ru.nl](mailto:humorartglobalizationsymposium@ru.nl)

## Conference theme

In these times of globalization, we are increasingly confronted with art from other cultures and countries, a significant portion of which has humorous elements. Humor is known to subvert expectations and conventions; it pushes boundaries and is, consequently and paradoxically, culturally specific, operating both within and beyond borders. This symposium explores the tensions that arise when humorous artworks that are made in a specific socio-cultural context, in some cases intentionally made for a global art world, are viewed in another cultural environment.

Speakers from countries as diverse as Chile, South Africa, Great Britain, the United States of America, Australia, Turkey, and the Netherlands have been asked to present papers that address one or more of the following questions: What types of humor in art might be understandable to a global public? Which subjects in humorous art might be considered transcultural and inclusive in that they transcend borders of all kinds: humor that engages family relations, the body, collective memory (world news, film or rock stars); humor that builds on stereotypes; humor that undermines hierarchies or the global art world? Does humorous art created within a specific cultural context but adjusted to be successful in a global art world become homogeneous and take away the opportunity of viewers to acquaint themselves with truly *other* modes of thinking and viewing? Is the type of humor that ridicules an ethnic, racial, or sexual other dying out in a globalized art world where postcolonial discourse and political correctness reign? Are there instances of artworks that have triggered cultural sensitivities in a negative way through humor, either advertently or inadvertently? How do migrated artists use humor as a tool to examine their homeland and/or country of residence, and is their humor adapted for wider accessibility? How might culturally- or spatially-specific humor in artistic practices be related to historically- or temporally-specific humor? Does culturally-specific humor or humor that mocks local issues require textual elucidation (wall texts, exhibition catalogues) in a global art world, or do explanations level and ruin the effect of humorous artworks? Is visual humor more readily and widely understood than textual humor? How does verbal humor integrated in visual art operate on a global level? Contemporary art is often perceived as difficult, accessible only to a limited number of people with a particular background. Does humor in art in a globalized world exacerbate this problem, especially when it is culturally-specific, or can humor lower the threshold and invite those that are normally put off by contemporary art?

Following a general introduction by the conference organizers, each speaker will focus on a case study with a distinct geographic focus, including Chile, South Africa, the MENA region, Azerbaijan, Slovakia, Turkey, and the Netherlands. After the symposium, conference participants will get the opportunity to visit the exhibition *Now that's something! – Humour of 100 years of Dutch art* at the Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen.

## PROGRAM

- 10:00-10:05** Ann Demeester – director Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen  
*Word of welcome*
- 10:05-10:30** dr. Mette Gieskes – Radboud University, dr. Anneke Schulenberg – Open University  
*Introduction*
- 10:30-11:00** prof. Roberto Hozven – Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile  
*Self-deprecating visual humor: pharmacopeia for Patrimonialism and Casuism in Chilean visual art*
- 11:00-11:20** Coffee and tea break
- 11:20-11:50** dr. Katja Gentric – Centre Georges Chevrier and University of the Freestate  
*Sugar & Salt, like licking your mother-tongue: translation and intergenerational humor in the work of South-African artist Lerato Shadi*
- 11:50-12:20** dr. Alice Planel – Kingston University and Bristol School of Art  
*Humor me. An alternative interpretation of the work of a select number of MENA region artists*
- 12:20-13:15** Guided tour *Now that's something! – Humour of 100 years of Dutch art* at Frans Hals Museum and De Hallen
- 13:15-14:10** Lunch break
- 14:10-14:40** dr. Monica Steinberg – University of Southern California  
*Humor and Activism in Contemporary Azerbaijani Art*
- 14:40-15:10** dr. Sophie Knezic – Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne  
*Droll "Observations": Roman Ondák's Comic Displacements*
- 15:10-15:30** Coffee and tea break
- 15:30-16:00** Lora Sariaslan, M.A. – University of Amsterdam  
*(No) Laughing matter: Humor and contemporary artists from Turkey*
- 16:00-16:30** dr. Janna Schoenberger – Amsterdam University College  
*The Ersatz Art School and Councils of Councils: Playful Dutch Institutions of Critique in the 1960s*
- 16:30-17:00** Plenary session
- 17:00-18:30** Reception and opportunity to visit the exhibition *Now that's something! – Humour of 100 years of Dutch art* at Frans Hals Museum and De Hallen, Haarlem



## ABSTRACTS

### ***Self-deprecating visual humor: pharmacopeia for Patrimonialism and Casuism in Chilean visual art***

Prof. Roberto Hozven

A humorous procedure often employed in Chile is self-derogatory attenuation. So ubiquitous is this type of humor that it often goes unrecognized in everyday life, media, artistic and literary channels that express it: news, memes, opinion columns, poems, stories, paintings and sculpture.

We call “Pacific” the fierce ocean that lines our coasts: “that sea that calmly bathes you” — so goes our national anthem — as its swells destroy roads, bridges and buildings. Earthquakes, catastrophic downpours and fires give us an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity toward our countrymen’s tragedies. We make of this need for assistance a basis for humor: we are sarcastic toward those we help while simultaneously feeling the morbid effect within ourselves. Does this humorous poignancy imitate virtue as a form of controlled vice —as runs Rochefoucauld’s dictum? Or rather, does it obey a derogatory Hispanic mechanism of “people who do not delegate *but alienate their sovereignty* to their *caudillos*”? Or is it a sordid form of revenge against those who hold unrestrained political power? One of Nicanor Parra’s visual artifacts displays puppets of Chilean presidents hanging by the neck. Humor appears as transmuted rage against authority: both towards authority which prohibits, as well as towards authority which forces us to act. Chilean humor is a mechanism with which we forgive ourselves for always answering yes to authority.

I will examine this self-deprecating humor in the following two works of art: Enrique Villalobos’s sculpture *Monument to the Memory of Native People*, placed at the *Plaza Mayor* of the city, which makes an enigmatic antinomy of this Mapuche people’s memorial, showing both praise and scorn; Eugenio Dittborn’s *The 23rd History of the Human Face*, which deconstructs with dialogical humor the patrimonial mores of Chilean society.

### ***Sugar & Salt, like licking your mother-tongue: translation and intergenerational humor in the work of South-African artist Lerato Shadi***

dr. Katja Gentric

Sporadically, news of the complex recent history of South Africa with its dramatic turning points and moments of unfathomed violence surfaces amongst news-items of the globalized world. At all times, cultural differences in South Africa, however difficult to reconcile, have been accompanied by humor. Some of these jokes, considered particularly provocative and insensitive, have been met with enraged outcries and explosive reactions. These incidents have drawn attention to the depth of the rift embedded in South-African post-Apartheid society. Others are subtler; they engage most intimately with bittersweet resonances.

One such work is a video by Lerato Shadi, showing the artist and her mother licking salt and sugar off each others’ tongues. The humor, of course, lies in the literal interpretation of the expression “mother tongue”, the uncomfortable witnessing of the absurdly comic exercise of tongue licking accompanied by the protagonists’ facial expressions, reflexes triggered by the stimulation of their taste buds, provoking involuntary

grimaces. Wording in Shadi's work is in Tswana, her mother tongue. Shadi does not provide a translation; she confronts the spectator with an unmediated situation.

Within the complex cultural landscape of South Africa — a country which since 1994 counts 11 official languages, a country where the choice of language as teaching medium led to protests with lethal consequences in 1976 and which since 2015 has experienced a resurgence of the same frustration in the form of country-wide student protests — the word "mother tongue" holds connotations of pent-up emotional exasperation. Within this turmoil, Shadi positions herself resolutely as a member of the Tswana culture, staging her point of view from a humorous intergenerational perspective.

Even though South Africa is subject to a particularly complex tissue of political discrepancies, it has much in common with the situation in which Milan Kundera wrote *The Book of laughter and forgetting* in 1978, which will serve as point of reference.

### ***Humor me. An alternative interpretation of the work of a select number of MENA region artists***

Dr. Alice Planel

As early as 1990, Kobena Mercer identified what he termed a 'burden of representation' by which black British artists were expected to act as spokesperson for an imagined 'community' of origin (Mercer, 1990). The rapid rise of art of the MENA region in European institutions throughout the noughties has done nothing to counteract the problems of representation and interpretation that Mercer heralded. Indeed, while we must acknowledge the fact that Okwui Enwezor's own rise to curatorial stardom has been instrumental to the careers of a large number of artists from MENA origin and has therefore facilitated our own work as academics, curators and pedagogues, his interest in political subject matter in contemporary art has continued the belief that artists of this region or its diaspora are political artists first and foremost. Whilst I would not deny that many artists have produced art that is political in nature, I take this opportunity to consider their work from a different perspective: humor.

Focusing on the work of Ghazel (b. 1966 Iran, France), Kutlug Ataman (b. 1961 UK, Turkey) and Rima Najdi (Lebanon, Germany), I will consider how these artists subject their own bodies to ridicule as a means to mock stereotypical views of Middle Eastern and North African individuals. By way of contrast, multi-disciplinary artist Hassan Hajjaj (b.1961 Morocco, UK) juxtaposes references and objects in his work to humorous effects. This will lead me to discuss global contexts of production and creation, analyzing the work of Larissa Sansour (Israel, USA) and Mounir Fatmi (b.1970 Morocco, France) and their use of new digital technologies to create visual puns that can be understood by a global community of artists and internet users.

### ***Humor and Activism in Contemporary Azerbaijani Art***

Dr. Monica Steinberg

How might culturally-specific, humorous details of contemporary Azerbaijani art operate alongside bilateral considerations of national identity and geopolitical statehood? What, and for whom, do these details translate, and what is (un)intentionally lost or

miscommunicated? Projects by artists Orkhan Huseynov, Farid Rasulov, and Rashad Alakbarov—all of whom experienced the time before 1991 only as children and thus know Azerbaijan as a post-Soviet, postcolonial, independent nation—activate incongruent humor in a manner that elides dogma, all the while averting censorship and reprisal. Tapping into the possibilities of incongruence, their work galvanizes irony in a manner that makes explicit what is culturally implicit, calling attention to a shared sense of identity among those who “get the joke.” Their works vary widely in terms of complexity, formal means, visual languages, and especially the shared histories on which their projects are built. While the specificity of such visual utterances may effectively curtail transmutability in one sense, it also expands the works to consider the limits, variations, and potentialities of a shared sense of humor. Using author-conducted interviews and archival research, this paper fills a void in the rapidly expanding body of literature examining art and politics in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and Central Asia by considering the role and agency of art in Azerbaijan, and doing so in relation to both the contemporary Caucasus and the wider political field.

### ***Droll “Observations”: Roman Ondák’s Comic Displacements***

Dr. Sophie Knezic

Contemporary Slovak conceptual artist Roman Ondák’s drawings, performances and installations are known for their ability to ‘act upon a situation’,<sup>1</sup> extracting humor from everyday materials and events. Ondák’s collage suite *Observations* (1995-2011) was first exhibited in full at DOCUMENTA 13 (2012). Comprised of found photographs of the urban environment (street scenes and bourgeois interiors) and supplemented by devised captions, *Observations* encapsulates Ondák’s understated comic sensibility. This series of collages demonstrates a typology of humor that works through a logic of displacement and contradiction, as the characters in the photographs go about their business with a seriousness that is undercut by the witticisms of the accompanying captions.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud argued that humor is produced when the ego’s tendency to repressive censorship is bypassed. Like dreams, jokes operate through processes of condensation and displacement where, disguised through riddles and puns, humor is able to surface and allow the subject an experience of pleasure. Comparably, the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel asserted that the play of contradiction was essential to comedy. In his *Aesthetics* (1835), Hegel claimed that humor is effected through a subject who makes his actions contradictory, resulting in a self-cancelling gesture. ‘What is comical ... is the subjectivity that makes its own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing.’<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that for both Freud and Hegel, the comical occurs through gestures of negation and displacement that undermine the unity and seriousness of the subject. This notion of subjective negation permits us to see how the humor apparent in Ondák’s *Observations* is created through a mechanism of comic displacement. Finally, although the photographic imagery in *Observations* is culturally specific, the humor it creates is universal

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Filipovic, ‘The Ordinary as an Aesthetic Operation’, *Roman Ondák: Notebook*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin, 2012, p. 123

<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, quoted in Mark W. Roche, ‘Hegel’s Theory of Comedy in the Context of Hegelian and Modern Reflections on Comedy’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol 56 No 221, September 2002, p. 412

– echoing philosopher Alenka Zupančič's claim that, ultimately, comedy is 'the universal at work'<sup>3</sup>.

### ***(No) Laughing matter: Humor and contemporary artists from Turkey***

Lora Sariaslan, M.A.

Contemporary visual artists from Turkey who have left their 'home' for various reasons, such as migration or education, have emerged as a distinctive voice on the contemporary European art scene. What makes these artists pertinent for an analysis of new forms of identity- and citizenship-making in contemporary Europe is that their art presents the sheer diversity of artistic approaches that address, incorporate, and fold cultural interaction as well as confrontation with the identity and cultural 'container' that is Western Europe.

This paper focuses on a selection of contemporary artists who are based both/either in Turkey and/or abroad, querying whether and how their humorous, and at times ironic artistic gaze can provide critical insight into identity negotiations. Using humor to subvert expectations and conventions, these artists create a global language that is rooted in their cultural specificity. By creating art that incorporates humor, these artists reject the dominant notions, preconceptions, and presuppositions of what their identity is supposed to be determined by, transforming it into political transgression enriching the global artistic discourse. Building at times on stereotypes (*Undressing* by Nilbar Güreş), or criticizing the global art world (*Road to Tate Modern* by Şener Özmen and Erkan Özgen), or commenting on both East and West, (*Supermuslim* by Şener Özmen — in which the artist hilariously recasts an American pop culture icon through the lens of Islam), or globalism (*Just Coke* by Nasan Tur, and *Punch this Painting* by Ahmet Ögüt), these and many other examples vividly present how contemporary artists from Turkey use humor in a manner that exceeds their existence as mere *Turkish delight*. By querying how mobility and transnational encounters shape humorous artistic production, this paper will propose how such transnational and intercultural works can shed new light on the making of contemporary European identities, integrating Turkey through art.

### ***The Ersatz Art School and Councils of Councils: Playful Dutch Institutions of Critique in the 1960s***

Dr. Janna Schoenberger

In the 1960s, the Netherlands was unique because of major government initiatives that supported contemporary art. If artists could prove that they fit certain minimal parameters, they could receive weekly payments in exchange for artwork: a welfare system created especially for artists. Museums, galleries, and collectors were also financially supported by the government, guided by the belief that it was their moral duty to ensure artists have the ability to express themselves freely. As an unexpected outcome of this system, conceptual artists formed groups that mimicked government institutions, such as the cultural event-planning board of a city council or ministries of culture. They consciously utilized an aesthetic of administration to refer to the bureaucracy driving artists' subsidies, forming

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<sup>3</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2008, p. 27



ludic cultural agencies and creating administrative paperwork as works of art, thereby acknowledging their own complicity in the system. In this paper, I will explore the specific social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that enabled contemporary artists to parody the institutes that guaranteed their existence, and contributed to their misunderstanding outside of the Dutch context. Notably, when Lucy Lippard referenced the International Institute for the Re-Schooling of Artists in her renowned anthology *Six Years*, she mistook the endeavor for an earnest attempt to create an art school.<sup>4</sup> By examining case studies of playful art, such as the Association for Scientific Research in New Methods of Recreation, which includes several sub-committees, as well as the International Institute for the Re-Schooling of Artists, I will demonstrate that, while artists in the Netherlands replicated bureaucratic structures as parody critiquing the government, they paradoxically relied upon governmental subsidies in order to create artwork.

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 1997), xvi.



## **SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

### **prof. Roberto Hozven – Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile**

Roberto Hozven is full Professor of Latin American Literature at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Previously, he was full Professor at the University of California, Riverside, USA. He has written on major Latin American essayists (Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alfonso Reyes, Octavio Paz, Luis Oyarzún, etc.) exploring their patrimonial and casuistic roots.

### **dr. Katja Gentric – Centre Georges Chevrier and University of the Freestate**

Artist and art historian, Katja Gentric completed her studies in South Africa and in France. She holds a HED from the University of Stellenbosch, a BA from the University of Pretoria, a DNSEP (Fine Arts) from the École Nationale Supérieure d' Art Dijon, and a PhD from the Université de Bourgogne. In 2017 Katja Gentric is Chercheur associé at the Centre Georges Chevrier, Dijon, France, and post-doctoral fellow at the University of the Freestate, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

### **dr. Alice Planel – Kingston University and Bristol School of Art**

Dr. Alice Planel trained in Art History at Reading University and the School of Advanced Studies, London, writing an MA thesis on the work of Zoulikha Bouabdellah, published in the first monograph on the artist. Her AHRC-funded PhD at Kingston University, London, from 2010 to 2013, focused on the work of contemporary artists of Algerian origin. She has published research in monographs, catalogues and journals, worked as deputy editor of the Fine Arts Journal of the Middle East and as a curator in Ireland and Germany. Alice founded the international not-for-profit The Dinner Exchange in 2009 and continues to work as a political and environmental activist. She is committed to widening participation in Art and Art History, lecturing at Kingston University and the Bristol School of Art, and curating arts events in the community.

### **dr. Monica Steinberg – University of Southern California**

Monica Steinberg is the Doheny Postdoctoral Fellow at The Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West (ICW) and USC Libraries at the University of Southern California. She earned a Ph.D. in Art History from The Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 2016. Her current book project examines how artists in Southern California used humorous and alternative forms of authorship to creatively disrupt the socio-political climate of the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Her recent articles and essays have appeared in *Archives of American Art Journal*, *Woman's Art Journal*, and *Love Me, Love Me Not: Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan and its Neighbours*. Steinberg's research and writing have received generous support from The Amon Carter Museum of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center, The Center for Creative Photography, The Huntington, The Schlesinger Library at The Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, Brandeis University, the UNLV Center for Gaming Research, and several other institutions.

### **dr. Sophie Knezic – Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne**

Sophie Knezic is a writer, researcher, visual artist and lecturer. Her research focuses on the relationship between contemporary art and continental philosophy with specific research interests in the phenomenology of perception, the metaphysics of transparency, virtuality,

memory, humor and time. Sophie completed her PhD, titled *Transparency, Translucence and the Crystallisation of Time*, at the University of Melbourne in 2015 and her critical writing has been published in *Frieze*, *Artlink*, *Australian Book Review*, *Un Magazine*, *Object Magazine*, *InVisible Culture* and *Art Monthly Australasia*. Her catalogue essay on contemporary art and humor will accompany a major exhibition titled *The Humours* at Monash University Museum of Art, Australia in late 2017. Sophie is currently a Lecturer (Sessional) in Critical and Theoretical Studies, Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne.

#### **Lora Sariaslan, M.A. – University of Amsterdam**

Art historian and curator Lora Sariaslan is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam with her dissertation “What *moves* artists? The Making of Identity in the Transnational Art Practices of Contemporary European-Turkish Artists”. She went to Knox College, Illinois, USA, where she received her B.A. in Art History and Integrated International Studies, and her M.A. in Art History from the University of Texas at Austin, USA. She has worked at the Dallas Museum of Art in Texas, USA (2001-2005) and was curator at Istanbul Modern (2005-2011) in Turkey. She has curated numerous exhibitions some of which include: *World and Dreams of Salvador Dalí*, Dallas Museum of Art, USA, (2004); (co-curator) *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever*, Istanbul Modern (2011), *Life in the UK/ Balance of Probabilities* as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia Triennial Manchester, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, UK (2011); (co-curator) 2<sup>nd</sup> Mardin Biennial: *Double Take*, Mardin, Turkey (2012), *This yearning is ours!*, Center of Contemporary Art Znaki Czasu, Torun, Poland (2016). As a member of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) Turkey, Sariaslan is the National Correspondent for the European Museum Forum (EMF) for Turkey.

#### **dr. Janna Schoenberger – Amsterdam University College**

Janna Schoenberger completed her doctoral studies in art history at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her dissertation, *Ludic Conceptualism: Art and Play in the Netherlands, 1959 to 1975*, is the first extensive study on art in the Netherlands in the 1960s and '70s. It investigates ludic art, a phenomenon that Schoenberger traces to Johan Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938), through a diachronic thread of play in art that extends from the first iteration of Constant's *New Babylon* in 1959 to the death of Conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader in 1975. Dr. Schoenberger's research in this area began while translating Dutch documents for the exhibition *In and Out of Amsterdam, 1960 – 1975* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009). Last year, she published “Jean Tinguely's Cyclograveur: The Ludic Anti-Machine of Bewogen Beweging” in the journal *Sequitur*. In 2015, she contributed a chapter on Conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, “Bas Jan Ader's Ludic Conceptualism: Performing a Transnational Identity,” to the book *The Power of Satire* (John Benjamins Publishers). Dr. Schoenberger is a Core Faculty Member at Amsterdam University College, where she teaches Modern and Contemporary art, art theory, and photography.