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Subject production and political art practise

This text aims to expose the ornamental arrangement and application of models of reality in the historical development of art practices since the 1990s, further to demonstrate how art threatens to disappear into its models of presentation and, finally, to show what kinds of problematic relations to plundering it maintains with the sphere of the social.

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At the moment both everyday life and cultural life seem to be dominated by a production aesthetic of coolness closely interwoven with lifestyle culture. «Crossover», «Gesamtkunstwerk Pop» and «Network» are the slogans of a young generation, growing up away from the social and economic change of post-Fordist society, and for whom the political has the function of an ornament. The so-called retro and crossover art, produced by the generation of artists that grew up with Gameboy and Playstation, predominantly refers to this lifestyle aspect, which has risen sharply in terms of its social status. This has, in turn, meant that subjectivity has itself become a commodity and the art that reflects it largely consists of clever re-combinations of signs given a speculative charge. It is therefore difficult to combine this theoretically with the modernist promise of «authentic experience» —something that the avant-garde hoped would emerge in the confrontation between the viewer and the work of art.

This argument has nothing to do with the demarcation lines between elite culture and mass culture. Those distinctions were anyway blurred by Marcel Duchamp and Walter Benjamin and seemingly eradicated by post modernism in order to announce the «Gesamtkunstwerk of Pop». Instead, current marketing strategies suggest different cultural opposites, such as underground/overground, because it is easier to sell products charged with subcultural appeal. In this way, a strict regime of signs are almost put back into place, structuring the relationship between high and low on the popular culture side of things. The code of this new apartheid of signs is the social, because you can still find real outcasts there (homeless people, drug consumers, ghetto-kids). Their misery, properly appropriated through aesthetic devices, successfully makes the demarcation line between high and low visible once again. Today, the line runs between pop and social politics, while the technique used for the reconstruction of the two parts is called dissolve. It is precisely when the homeless

and consumer-kids meet for real in the shop windows of mass-consumerism —be it on the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica or in Frankfurt's Zeil— that the divide between pop and social politics becomes visible. It appears again where those shops sell clothes modelled on the credibility of decay, or when call centre jobs are moved from the industrial nations to Indian programmers in order to save money, or when white, racist, middle-class kids in Arkansas appropriate the street wear and «nigger» attitude of rappers.

The New Cultural Production of Identity

The expansive character of «style-pluralism» has penetrated the sphere of production and remixed the criteria for aesthetic judgement. Group affiliations, status and coolness gain value while analytical criteria lose. But the more self-fulfilment and happiness are anticipated in the sphere of consumption, the more the isolating structures of particularism and subjectivity are consolidated. Pleasure turns into a chimera. In a society where commodity value is determined by the working time required to produce it, yet where individuals do not use or reproduce their working labour to produce pleasure, then pleasure itself is of no value but merely comprises its own cultural charge. At exactly this instance, the field of art production plays the role of double agent.

The object (a sneaker for instance) onto which a group of young people project their libido, has a price that structures the organisation of the group. This process of social identity production has been democratised step by step in the wake of mass consumption because the appropriate, culturally charged commodities such as walkmans, sneakers, mobile phones, notebooks etc. have become cheaper and cheaper. While this process leads the way to increasing numbers of consumers, the cultural and economic conditions enabling the act of purchase remain untouched by this form of «democratisation». The cultural charge given by purchase suggests a heightened individual sensitivity culminating in the consumption of

culture. It pretends to hold the false promise of overcoming social conditions. Although collective substitutes of communication, such as certain dress codes, do stabilize the social status of participants, they do not cancel out the basic economic and social differences within as well as outside of the group. After all, such collective substitutes of communication, as stable as they might seem on the inside, are themselves mechanisms of social exclusion in relation to the outside.

A receptivity to sensuality culminating in the consumption of culture stimulates an ornamental appropriation of everyday life and strengthens the function of art and culture as a socio-political mechanism of integration —instead of, as the avant-gardes anticipated, using the pleasurable realisation of sensuality as a means of setting free possibilities of individual emancipation that might overcome consumer society's substitutes of communication. Cultures in general and art in particular (as an interface between youth culture, pop and fashion) have turned into battlegrounds over social, political and economic supremacy. Here, hegemonic struggles between lifestyles and political attitudes are fought out and new career paths opened up. Underprivileged social groups are granted the power of speech in art projects in order to transfer them from the category of «class» into the lifestyle-construct of new —as the contemporary jargon goes— «subject positions» under the key word: «empowerment». Here the zeitgeist industry has an easy job in planning their economic exploitation. This new writing of deviant juvenile behaviour by pop art theory results in the stylisation of consumption happy subjects as «subversive» artists. For this, the reconstruction of the mainstream/underground opposition is indispensable, as subculturally charged consumer hedonists not only promise dissident behaviour but higher sales as well. With this perspective, dissidence becomes the key concept of a proliferating «left lifestyle».

Even if this text only roughly sketches out the problem of subject production in the visual

arts, one conclusion might be that capitalism releases its dissidents into self-control, defining dissidents as those who try out new exhibition possibilities on the periphery as cheap labour and thus contributing to the flexibilisation of institutions as well as rehearsing new socio-economic forms of life.

Art Activism: A Diorama of the Social Forces of Production

Despite its increasing marginalisation, a form of critical art practice, pointing towards new possibilities of cultural resistance, did survive and continues to evolve. As a practice, it understands art as a diorama of the social forces of production and can be exemplified by the American artists' collective Group Material. Group Material —as well as General Idea, Gran Fury, the Guerrilla Girls or Paper Tiger TV— embodied the stimulating force of contemporary American art on European developments. Yet the (self)-disbanding of the group on account of its increasing co-optation by the art world in 1996 was not only a consequence of the changed conditions of art practice, but also cleared a path towards an appropriate critical response to those changes. The story of the group therefore provides a pertinent view of the what and how of critical art practice today.

Group Material was founded in 1979 and originally consisted of 18 people, breaking apart in 1981 with Julie Ault, Mundy McLaughlin and Tim Rollins as the only remaining members. Doug Ashford joined in 1982, Félix González-Torres in 1987 and Karen Ramspacher in 1989. In June 1990, the project «Democracy Poll / Demokratische Erhebung» organized by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin was staged as a reaction to German reunification. At the time Julie Ault, Doug Ashford and Félix González-Torres were members. A non-representative survey was carried out concurrently in Berlin and New York that questioned around 60 people on topics such as German reunification, freedom, migration, nationalism, and neo-

conservatism. The responses were published in three different forms: 14 texts were put up on large-scale billboards in five subway stations; 60 texts were fed into the electronic Avnet image-wall on Kurfürstendamm (2x2 statements every five minutes) and a supplement for the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* (circulation 40.000) was designed by the group containing 18 texts and five images.

For the dissemination of the statements, Group Material had deliberately chosen a heterogeneous media strategy in order to reach various social groups and classes, as well as increase the depth of infiltration into the social field of the addressees, for whom reunification was mainly unfolding in the media as a so-called historical phenomenon rather than in the sphere of everyday life. Among the respondents, expectations, desires and fears were expressed directly and effectively. Temporarily they were granted the power of speech in the media, usually restricted to «letters to the editor». Prominently placed and presented, the statements represented a corrective to the abstract political level of the process of German reunification seemingly evolving apart from actual personal influence. Moreover, they threw into relief the possibility of actually intervening in political developments without setting up a normative frame of action.

Critical Art Practice: The Methods of Cultural Deconstruction

Throughout their career, Group Material realised a series of critical projects characterised by a collective structure of production that accentuated the political perspectives of cultural practice. Since the 1996 break-up, which can be perceived as a strategic consequence emerging from the antagonism between co-optation and resistance, the former members of the group have been working individually. While *Democracy Poll* figures as an example of

a collective art practice intervening on a political and media level into the processes of German reunification, Julie Ault's individual project «Power Up: Sister Corita and Donald Moffett, Interlocking», realised in spring 2000 at UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, draws the logical conclusions from the claim to a totality of critique. The artist diversifies her role as an activist and operates as both curator and exhibition designer. While fully aware of the dilemma of political art to both destabilise and legitimise institutions, she provides the display structure for a collective form of production in which artists, activists and visitors can participate equally. Thus, she not only eludes her typecast role of providing critique to be consumed within bourgeois concepts of cultural representation, but also transgresses the antagonism between artistic intervention and political failure imposed by the concept of political art practice.

For her exhibition project *Power Up*, Ault, in collaboration with Martin Beck, constructed a multi-functional display structure that accommodated works by Sister Corita Kent and Donald Moffett. The piece consisted of silk-screen prints, posters, paper clippings, documentary photographs and videotapes. Sister Corita — a nun, artist, and political activist — had been active against the Vietnam War and supported the black civil rights movement since the 1960s. Moffett, founding member of *Gran Fury* (1987–93) and Marlene McCarty's Bureau partner since 1989, is an AIDS-activist and works as a political illustrator for *Village Voice*. Consisting of coloured partition walls, billboards and cube-chairs, the display structure constitutes a form of visual editing of historical and artistic material, operating as a kind of methodological toolbox. According to Ault's approach, critical art practice is a method governed by historical reassessment and recombination while aiming to demonstrate the connections between political practice and cultural representation. The curatorial approach to historical material and its presentation in the exhibition space is

thus declared as the sphere of action of art practice. But the act of curating is not confined to selection and reordering, from the very beginning it includes all participants, which transforms their usually passive role in the art world into an active form of collaboration.

Summary

This text aimed to expose the ornamental arrangement and application of models of reality in the historical development of art practices since the 1990s, further to demonstrate how art threatens to disappear into its models of presentation and, finally, to show what kinds of problematic relations to plundering it maintains with the sphere of the social.

The process of art becoming identical with context, discourse, and reality mediated by lifestyles, millennium euphoria and consumerist hedonism does, however, also open up perspectives of a new critical art practice which potentially has to redefine, technologically modify or completely transgress the model of collectivity sustained in times of visible antagonisms, as I tried to show in the case of Julie Ault's individual practice. Pierre Bourdieu described this necessary process of transformation and adaptation of political commitment to social reality, of theory to practice, in his concept of the «collective intellectual», a concept that demands a strategic global orientation of action from artists, authors, and academics in the era of neo-liberalism with its new economic structures of subject production. According to Bourdieu, the rapid proliferation of neo-liberalist ideology in all realms of the lived world would have to be countered by the fierce determination of critical networks «in which "specific intellectuals" (in the Foucauldian sense of skilled and competent scholars) coalesce as a truly collective intellectual who is able to direct his thoughts and actions independently, who, in short, maintains his autonomy».

In particular, the kind of academia that strictly subscribes to the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition of differentiating between scholarship (academic respectability) and commitment (political dedication), can only help the neo-liberal breakthrough with its research and insights. Now would be the time to give up academic restraint and reconquer the political

and social sovereignty of interpretation. The «collective intellectual» would first have to take on negative responsibilities, i.e. to radically criticise the hegemony of the economic over the political and cultural, before contributing to political renewal in a positive way. What is necessary is an alliance for action endowed with the authority of a competent and skilled collective embracing academic disciplines and art communities that implements its critique of the neo-liberal order in the form of direct interventions in the sense of a new agitprop. Where academic, artistic and political practices appear in union, an actual perspective of political participation emerges.

Notes & references

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