02 2011

Aesthetic-emancipatory dispositives

Several questions and a few answers on the exhibition project a work that can't shake off what it reflects

Andrei Siclodi

Translated by Mary O'Neill

For some time now, one aspect of contemporary art has been very much to the fore in theoretical discussions: art as a field and a medium of specific knowledge production. In the context of disciplinary practice in particular, which describes academic activities as "artistic research", there are repeated, indeed ritualistic, references – not least by this side – to the constant need for a stable embodiment of artistic knowledge production, to be accompanied by a socially critical (self-) reflection of art and its producers. As the basic trend suggests, in the twenty-first century's globalised knowledge society, art needs to position itself quickly in order to maintain its social relevance and safeguard it in the longer term. Such arguments promote academic standardisation of an artistic criticality at the level of the nation-state and, in terms of educational policy, give it official status (to translate that delightful term, *pragmatisieren,* once current in Austria). But can such a top-

down criticality, standardised through academic curricula, have any real impact beyond a self-referential framework? Doesn't it serve, rather, to further entrench existing hegemonies and (distribution) economies of knowledge? And what alternative strategies might be used as effective aesthetic-emancipatory dispositives to counter an increasingly dominant discourse theory and practice of "artistic research" ?

A dual memorial work

A valid example for discussion in this context is the exhibition project *a work that can't shake off what it reflects* [1], showing in winter/spring 2011, in different versions, at Innsbruck's Kunstpavillon der Tiroler Künstlerschaft and at the Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna. The project presents "debates about continuities and ruptures in colonial, fascist and Nazi practices in Austria. [...] Taking as its point of departure Austria's involvement in colonial practices, present as well as past, and its links to imperial and fascist policies of expansion, the exhibition brings together artistic positions that examine these practices and counter them with resistant strategies. The multidimensional perspectives on interwoven pasts should then challenge existing competing memories and open up spaces for action to yield processes of political and anti-racist self-empowerment."[2] The exhibition title is a quotation from the educationalist, Astrid Messerschmidt, who recently produced a detailed analysis of postcolonial memory processes in Germany's post-Nazi society and their significance in dealing with racism and anti-Semitism. *A work that can't shake off what it reflects* is a post-Nazi and postcolonial memorial work for Messerschmidt, which calls to mind the continuities and ruptures in colonialism and Nazism in today's society, and which must be absolutely achieved from two mutually independent perspectives to

minimise the risk of one perspective relativising the other.[3] This dual memorial work is essential if we are to understand and deal with modern forms of racism and anti-Semitism in Europe, the current targets of which are mainly migrants. This work, which can't shake off what it reflects, is hugely significant in a society where reappraisal of the Nazi past is by no means complete and where the colonial past, despite clear evidence, goes unacknowledged even now. The exhibition's organisers are a group of artists and cultural workers who, by their own definition, are "linked by a common history of artistic, theoretical, activist – and therefore political – analysis and debate". Their common, resolutely political, goal in an area predefined geopolitically and culturally – in this case in Austria – is, so they state, to bring constructions of history and knowledge resources that have been hitherto inadequately or incoherently investigated and hegemonically suppressed together with appropriate critiques, thereby drawing a picture that challenges the current status in relation to such knowledge and our dealings with it. So the exhibition brings together, on the one hand, artistic positions that are clearly concerned with knowledge that is either marginalised from official consciousness or else suppressed within it. On the other, by taking these contributions as its point of departure, the exhibition aims to draw relevant connections with contemporary forms of racism in Austria so that current mechanisms of racist exclusion and oppression, the results of colonial and Nazi thinking, are made visible and accessible.

Institutional issues

I don't wish to go into detail here about the numerous works in the exhibition, although a discussion about their various aesthetic strategies would doubtless be informative. It is enough for our

purposes to say that, in general terms, the exhibition examines three broad thematic areas that mesh together again and again. Firstly, there is the history of the racist stereotyping and registration of migrant subjects and their anti-racist struggle for emancipation. Then, there is an attestation to a colonial and racist past that, for its part, conditions the post-Nazi and postcolonial present. And thirdly, this development is examined in the context of global capitalism, which, in its turn, generates old forms of colonialism in new conditions. Through numerous monitors, posters and wall works, in archive formats and in a small spatial installation, the exhibition raises questions on these topics, documents facts, generates discussion and makes knowledge accessible. The question one has to ask here is: why does this exhibition take place in a space for contemporary art rather than, for instance, a museum? The possible answer: because the claims and facts in this exhibition have not been validated academically. And because they probably never will be. An exhibition of contemporary art is not an academic argument constructed according to scholarly methods. Therein lies its opportunity but equally its difficulty; although the questions it poses are by far the more relevant, it risks being ignored or condescended to from the very outset by the hegemonical mainstream. Were the exhibition to take place in an official institution, preferably one with a recognised historicising function, then it would no doubt meet with quite a different reception. It's just that this type of exhibition concept could never be transferred satisfactorily to a museum. Because an institution like that will never unconditionally involve itself in the transfer of an open-ended, transitory project, especially one that is contradictory and reflects its own emancipatory process in itself. So the only remaining option for a venue is the alternative, non-commercial exhibition space.

Publication strategies for an emancipatory practice

On the other hand, the fact that this knowledge, garnered through its own emancipatory actions, is "published" in the art context is intrinsically related to the crisis of quality in the mass media, which have long lost the capacity to lead a socially constitutive discourse of this kind on racism and migration with any degree of sophistication. The crisis in the mass media is one of the decisive reasons for the development of an artistic practice that Alfredo Cramerotti calls 'aesthetic journalism'[4], a term I believe is totally applicable to the exhibition *a work that can't shake off what it reflects* with its many videos, posters, archives and documents. Among other things, the increasing commercial pressure on the media as part of a rampantly globalising capitalism has meant that news nowadays tends to be packaged as entertainment. As a result, the clear distinction between information and opinion is more and more blurred, and solid, subtle reporting geared towards objectivity is losing ground increasingly to news presentation based on infotainment. Running parallel with these developments, in the art sphere, one can detect a rapidly growing interest in aesthetic strategies that fall back in an unmediated manner on the processing and reviewing of materials and information derived from investigative working methods, and that use journalistic or quasi-journalistic formats to publish these. The question of what reality is and how it is communicated or presented becomes far more significant in the field of art. In view of this development, there is often a qualitative shift in the question of what we really see and experience away from the milieu of journalism towards that of art. Like the media, art too makes use of images and other evidence of reality – in short: documents – in order to establish its own (visual) discourses about the real. So it's not by chance that the exhibition

a work that can't shake off what it reflects uses mass media formats primarily to trigger within these a discussion about forms of social facticity that are under-represented or simply not represented at all.

The significance of exhibition projects like *a work that can't shake off what it reflects* lies above all in the fact that they have the potential to make an emancipatory process both visible and readable. Exhibitions of this kind are by their nature open-ended and transitory since they themselves reflect a snapshot, the state of things at the very point when they come into being. Their political dimension lies paradoxically in the fact that they combine contradictions within themselves, rather than articulating ready-made statements and lines of thought. With this strategy, and with no concern for possible losses (can there even be any?), they appeal to viewers with sense of responsibility to play their part, to *participate* in this process of emancipation. They then open up the possibility of a shift in – or a rapprochement of – the positions from which those with a stake in society and those without, those who are affected and those who are addressable currently speak. The resultant knowledge is at the same time an inherent act of subjectivation. Therein lies the fundamental difference between this knowledge and an academically standardised knowledge which, because of its standardised and normative composition, is too open to ideological or economic exploitation.

---

[1] An exhibition project by and with Petja Dimitrova, Lina Dokuzović, Eduard Freudmann, Can Gülcü and Ivan Jurica, as well as Ljubomir Bratić/Richard Ferkl, Christian Gangl, Marina Gržinić/Aina Šmid (in cooperation with Zvonka Simčič), Nina

Höchtl, *kegnschtelik* - Yiddish Resistance 3.0, *maiz* - Autonomous Centre run by and for Migrants, Marcel Mališ, Ivana Marjanović, MigrafonA, Katharina Morawek, Platform History-Politics, Research Group on Black Austrian History and Present Time, Marika Schmiedt.

[2] From the text accompanying the exhibition.

[3] The exhibition title explicitly references the article: *Postkoloniale Erinnerungsprozesse in einer postnazionalssozialistischen Gesellschaft – Vom Umgang mit Rassismus und Antisemitismus,* by Astrid Messerschmidt, in PERIPHERIE No. 109/110, Vol. 28, Münster 2008, pp. 42-60.

[4] Alfredo Cramerotti: *Aesthetic Journalism. How to Inform Without Informing*. Büchs'n'Books, Vol. 2, Intellect Bristol Chicago 2009.