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Grandparents of Interventionist Art, or Intervention in the Form

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I'm sure you no longer remember what role art plays in Plato's State as the perfect community. In the interest of community life, he bans art. He has a high regard for the power of art. But he believes it is harmful.

That you no longer remember Plato, doesn't matter at all. There are numerous cases in participatory, activist, interventionist art that confirm Plato in that they culturalise and aesthetise. Political inequalities are concealed and in their care for the "real people, the real neighbourhoods" they continuously need to construct the "Other" first. Much of art production turned toward community art in the early 90s. Generally, on account of the pressure exerted by economic conditions and more importantly due to the slump in the art market. Many of the resulting, superficially politicised projects did not, to a large degree, self-address their own work. But they propagated the straightforward transgression of limits and art as a social cure. In the 90s, Mary Jane Jacob's "Sculpture Chicago - Culture in Action" (1992/1993) became the paradigmatic punching ball in the USA, in Austria the Höhenbüchler sisters were criticised in this context.
And much has also been written on this subject: by Marchart,

Rollig, Kravagna, Kwon, Höller, Babias, and others. But even earlier on and in depth in Benjamin's two small essays on art, especially in his lecture entitled "Author as Producer" in 1934 at the Parisian "Institute for Fascist Studies". In this essay, Benjamin cites examples for his assertion that a considerable share of so-called left literature had no other social function than to take new effects from the political situation and to entertain the audience therewith. For this purpose he used examples of Döblin, Heinrich Mann, the theoretician of activism, Hiller, or the aesthetising products of the Neue Sachlichkeit. A tradition, which, by the way, caused an exponential increase of the revolutionary in the art field of contemporary Austria: theatre directors, exhibition directors, curators, whose voices went silent soon after the initial stir caused by the installation of the right-right coalition government in February, who are now back to business as normal and who are opening their institutions to members of the government for representative purposes, to persons they had rejected just before.

How about the other way round, how about the positive influence of the political in art, what about the success of a politicising art, how about the effective ways of intervention? In the lecture he delivered in the Parisian den of lions, in an institute associated with the national front, where aesthetic quality was strictly subordinate to content, Walter Benjamin rejected the crude utilisation of art, he refused pure tendency art. And his voice was against any instrumentalisation of art's content for the "correct politics", where technique, quality, and form were not even considered. The tendency, the content can only be right if the form is in tune with it. The correct tendency in terms of content must also include a tendency of form.

In accordance with Benjamin's dialectical pattern, I believe that precisely for the benefit of these productive games of micro-

political reformism structural change should be given preference to the big content design, meaning intervention in form, which goes into the vague and puts subjects, both the artists and their objects up front in communities. In terms of a materialist criticism, the question should not be where a project stands in relation to its production conditions but how it is positioned within them.
This brings us to the grandparents of intervention whom Benjamin described, to an artist who in the Soviet Union of the late 20s transformed his art production ever more radically into concrete micro-political interventions:

Sergej Tretjakov differentiates between the operating writer and the informing writer. His mission is not to report but to fight; not to play the viewer but to intervene actively. He defines the mission by making statements on his own work: when in 1928, in the era of total agricultural collectivisation, the parole was "Writers into the kolkhoz". Tretjakov joined the "Communist Lighthouse" commune and began to work on the following themes during two long stays: the convention of mass meetings; the collection of money for the down payment of tractors; convincing individual farmers to join the kolkhoz; the inspection of reading rooms; the creation of travelling newspapers, and the management of the kolkhoz newspaper; writing reports for the Moscow newspapers; the introduction of radio and travelling cinemas, etc.

Behind this pell-mell of activities, which at first glance may seem somewhat strange, there is a concept involving the radical shift of positions not only in art production but also in art reception. On the part of producers, a new way of politicising art comes about by extending the artistic competence in developing new forms to the development of micro-political organisational forms. The political significance of art does not lie in the clichéd resistance of the autonomous piece of art or in the coarse tendency of the

revolutionary subject, but in the translation of the artists' formal competence from a piece of art to the organisational forms of society. The cultural worker, or "operating writer", a special case in point, has the task of producing productive starting conditions, providing incentives, questioning structures. "Tendency" comes not from the subjective proclamation of a know-it-all, it is experienced in a reality that changes on account of a "literalisation of all life conditions". And this is where Tretjakov's argument on the function of producers migrates to the other side where an avalanche-like metamorphosis of consumers into producers is to be effected:
"Everyone can and should ... introduce a maximum degree of precision, clear-cut contours, and purposefulness into the thing produced by him, just as dedicated specialists have until now, the form searchers, the workers of art. Advocates of the transformation of raw materials into a certain socially beneficial form, combined with the ability and the intensive search for the most meaningful form - this is what an "art for all" must comprise. Everyone should be an artist, a sublime master in the thing he is doing at a certain moment in time."
Especially the last item in the list of Tretjakov's areas of work at the kolkhoz made clear how significant the newspaper, radio and film are for his idea of an art for all: from the liquidation of illiteracy and the newspaper on the wall to the transformation of simple workers into correspondents of the Pravda newspaper. This was the concept that allowed Walter Benjamin to conclude, perhaps somewhat precipitously, that in the Soviet Union work itself makes its voice heard.

In any case, the description of Tretjakov as the grandfather of intervention clearly shows the categories both Benjamin and I consider the most important in an interventionist art that is not

considered in terms of content:
The interventionists' activity lies in the preproductive, meaning in a parallel dimension to the work aspect and above all prior to it. This causes products more or less to become unexhibitable, they are not circulated in the art market, they no longer necessitate mediation.
Secondly, it has to do with intervention in the form, in the structures of a micro-political field. Instead of work on products, it must be work on the means of production.
Thirdly, aside from the micro-political effects, the model nature of this kind of art is significant. It is able to provide producers an improved apparatus and incites them to produce.
In my book "Charon, Eine Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung" I analysed how this organising function of art is translated into actual, contemporary art production, using the group WochenKlausur as an example.

"Was tun", "What to do" is not only the question Lenin asked and the title of this conference, it is also a question Alfred Döblin put himself in his work "Wissen and Verändern" in 1931. His communitaristic reply is basically an appeal for humanity, tolerance, and solidarity amongst human beings. Due to his lack of reflection on his own position in the production process, he commits the same error as contemporary identity-political tradition. This tradition is dedicated to helping and supporting so-called "disadvantaged social groups" and to empowering communities. In these examples of community art gone bad, the squalor, the inequalities have been successfully revealed and turned into an object of pleasure and of consumption by presenting community art in a fashionable way. Brecht's cardinal error is committed and exaggerated by providing the material for a production apparatus without changing it. While target group, community, or

neighbourhood are prescribed a limited identity through the process of othering, the participating artists keep their phantasmatic position as flexible universalists overseeing all.

A reply in Benjamin's terms would be: If intellectuals or artists attempt to find a place alongside the proletariat, they already position themselves above them. What kind of position could that be? That of a benefactor, or an ideological patron. An impossible position. If in the artistic-scientific field the question "what to do?" arises, we must suppose that any solidarity of the Foucault's specific intellectual (the only one feasible as model) with "the" proletariat will be one that is mediated. Following Tretjakov and co. it would thus be meaningful not to concentrate on the bettering of us humans, but on changing the structures that permit inequalities to exist. An update of a Brecht-Benjamin demand calling for the production apparatus to be supplied without changing it would be: let us not supply the production apparatus, let us change it.

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