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Steps for Fleeing from Work to Action

Can artistic work be a militant research? A field report in the project "ExArgentina"

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Before we begin this field report, we must first explain what the project "ExArgentina" was: ExArgentina was a project that was financed by the German Federal Culture Foundation and organizationally supported by the Goethe Institute of Buenos Aires. Its thematic starting points were the economic crisis and uprisings in Argentina in December 2001. The project consisted of several stages: from November 2002 to May 2003 we stayed in Buenos Aires, where we met various groups and artists and started a process of cooperation and discussion, which was to last three years and is still not over yet. We returned to Berlin and organized the conference "Plans for Leaving the Overview" there in the fall. The conference was intended to discuss the theoretical and methodological issues that had so far crystallized with people from Europe as well. In March 2004 the exhibition "Steps to Fleeing from Work to Action" was shown at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Part of the exhibition was shown in September 2004 in

the exhibition "How Do We Want to be Governed" at a Centro Civico in the district of Las Minas in Barcelona.
This spring the final part of ExArgentina took place in Palais de Glace, a city institution in Buenos Aires. During the course of the exhibition a three-week discussion program was conducted in various decentralized locations: in the occupied hotel BAUEN, in the occupied printing plant Chilavert, in the Kasa de los H.I.J.O.S. (organization of children of disappeared persons during the military dictatorship) and in the alternative media center La Tribu. It is also important to mention that the third part of the project was curated by the artists Loreto Garin, Eduardo Molinari and Federico Zukerfeld in Buenos Aires. This internal process – the discussion of hierarchies and speaker positions – could be a consequence of a "militant research".

It would be false to call our experience process in this project a transition between two theoretical models, that of genealogy and that of militant research. Nevertheless, these models help to describe the experience.[1]
We traveled to Buenos Aires with the intention of starting a kind of genealogical practice, with which we wanted to attempt to explain the political and economic crisis that happened in Argentina in 2001 / 2002. We based this on the concept of genealogy that Foucault developed in his lectures at College de France in 1976. He begins these lectures with a complaint about the deficiency of his research, stating that it is fragmentary, discontinuous, useless erudition. When he attempts to defend this uselessness, then it is not to prove the opposite – in other words, efficiency – but rather to indicate a critical potential, a particular and local critique of an autonomous, non-centralizable theoretical production that would have the effect of a brake block on global and central theoretical productions. At the same time, he also

speaks of a "return of knowledge" that has been covered up by the representative systems, a local, differential, non-universal knowledge. The point is to conjoin useless erudition, which "leads to nothing" (which is also said about art), with this disqualified knowledge, the "knowledge of the people". "Let us give the term 'genealogy' to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today."[2]
When Foucault speaks in the end about an uprising of subjugated knowledge with the methods of a knowledge that cannot be effected, then this primarily involves a visibility of this knowledge. It appeared to us that this non-efficiency of the methods of making visible could be transferred to the reservoir of artistic categories, which have finely honed their optical instruments in their pretension of autonomy. For this reason we wanted to transfer the methods of genealogy to our attempt at a close reading of the Argentine crisis. We were seeking a manner of depicting "how what is perceived and the consequences, the outrage and the solidarity can be held in memory like a poem or an image that first becomes a 'tactic today' in this form." (This was how we formulated it in our first concept paper.)

First we developed concrete questions: Which cases could be compared with the Argentine crisis – e.g. Mexico 1994, Russia 1995, Asia 1997? Who are the protagonists of the crisis? Why are the new investors' buildings and shopping malls never pictured, but always only the burning tires of the street barricades? What are the connections like between political apparatuses and profiteers? From which perspectives do patterns of explanation emerge? How much "external enemy" is needed to export dependencies, or how much "internal crisis" is prognosticated to overlook global economic dependencies? Which identitary images does the crisis found, and

how can one work against them? These questions disappeared in the first weeks. They landed in the same place where two stacks could be found in bookshops: one stack offering a multitude of books analyzing the crisis and corruption in Argentina, the other offering psychological guides and self-help literature. For us, both of these stacks were the symptom of a bourgeois dilemma: there is a permanent analysis and criticism of the political present, which may have no other social connection than to the prison of self-optimization.

How many collaborations and translation breakdowns are needed to modify the geopolitics of the observers' inscribed map?

Through the artists and groups that we met, it seemed at first as though we were moving away from an analysis, because we were involved in a process of social solidarity and political self-organization that we had not known before. It is difficult for us to describe this process without running into the danger of reproducing kitsch: battles in the street, assemblies in occupied factories, outrage at the everyday repression on the part of the police. We believed less in the images that were produced for these battles at the time than in presence and experience in a specific situation that is not suited to be a reproducible model.[3] How does one remember a situation like this? How does one convey what it was about? We observed how the "intellectuals" behaved in this situation. We noticed that it seems to be part of the intellectual's job to always be capable of judging and maintaining one's own balance – as though one were sitting in a loge and watching a play in the theater: How radical are the initiatives of the unemployed today? When are the social movements taken over by whom, and what are the first symptoms of this? Which utopias are developed and are they historically stringent? It became very clear that the "power of judgment" defines a social status, whose

holders are intent on maintaining this status. The point was holding a political criticism that cannot escape from the prison of representing its own interests. It became apparent that this judging functioned according to the immanent categories of government or a social stock-taking.

In Buenos Aires we read John Holloway's book "Change the World Without Taking Power"[4], which had just been published in the German translation. We were able to apply the criticism of the fetish concept to this form of intellectuality and its unquestioned objectivization, and we were finally able to imagine a criticism of the fetish concept in art as well, which could not be reduced merely to the commodity form, but applied to the claim to universality itself. We became aware of a form of negation, which we later described in the exhibition in this way: "You are standing in front of a curtain of black sequined material, on which a comic is appliqued. It is the story of the legendary magician Mr. Invisible Hands. He magically pulls rabbit subjects out of his top hat, which jump through the hoops of the rules of competition and existential anxiety and clarify their positions before disappearing back into the top hat only to be tossed out again – into the prestablizing harmony of the capitalist system. (This anxiety nourishes the existence of the top hat.) This story is dedicated to the concept of negation, in which bourgeois philosophy has a special solemnity. It is as if reason, which has the privilege of understanding the misery of the capitalist system, celebrates its division, empties the champagne glasses in the evening and tosses them against the wall, and creeps into the office the next morning with a hangover."[5] Holloway drafts a negation that understands the no to rabbit harmony as the beginning of a social action. He succeeds in suspending the "no" from the various futility judgments that it is so often linked with, because he seems to be lacking the historical

perspective. Negation also means the refusal to draft a post-revolutionary scenario with its new state, its new society or its new work.
We liked the topos of flight and leaving in Holloway's book, which could be used differently from Foucault's topos of war / battles.
Shortly before our return to Germany, there was an event in Buenos Aires, which was to describe the status of our project so far. It was called "Plans for Fleeing from Work to Action", and it translated this concept of negation to our experiences in the project as follows:
"In November last year we came to Buenos Aires to start a project that informed as precisely as possible about the economy that caused the so-called crisis in Argentina, about the connections of power between the international and the local oligarchies, and which lines form between this power in its apparent abstraction and the misery it causes. However, we met no mere informants here, but people who are involved in something that we would like to call 'Fleeing from Work to Action'. On the one hand, 'fleeing from work' characterizes the flight of capital, the withdrawal of the investors from a lost wager, the surrender of industries and thus also the end of a form of exploitation that was organized in jobs. At the same time, this flight also conditions a further loss of rights in the jobs that still exist, an extreme repression and expulsion of those who are unemployed.
On the other hand, 'fleeing from work' can also mean all the forms of people's self-organization, which have been left behind by capital and its government functionaries. It can mean that this unexploitability is a form of release to what one could call social action. This action is the opposite of work, it is namely taking action that is no longer separated from the environment and the life in which it takes place.
This release is especially a concern of the institution of art, because

'work' is usually negotiated there in a highly exemplary way – in the separation of contexts and the compulsion to find universal gestures in order to be of value. The question arises as to where these shifts can be described in a hegemonic field that so often exploits images and razes their messages, so that every statement becomes invisible. For this reason, it proved necessary to conduct a discussion of artistic methods parallel to the discussion of the contents. 'Plans for Fleeing from Work to Action' therefore also means finding an emergency exit from these institutions' lack of political expression. That is not merely a question of information or methods of depiction, but a question of whom one shares one's life with and for whom one becomes engaged." The reason why we quote this passage at such length in the press release is that it summarizes the experience that we had in the course of the project. In conclusion, we come now to the concept of "militant research", which we rediscovered in the discussions with Colectivo Situaciones, and which summarizes for us the involvement with and holds the affective relationship to the "object of research", in which the subject lays down their office as an instance. In the exhibition in Cologne we assigned artistic works to this concept, among others. (We had a total of four concepts that we assigned works to: negation, militant research, cartography and political narrative.) Ultimately, however, this concept applied to the overall project, because all the participants strongly identified with it. We initially related "militant research" as a mode of working exclusively to activist and collective modes of working, such as Tucuman Arde, the performances of Grupo etc. during Escraches, the signs of the Grup de Art Callejero at demonstrations.[6] In retrospect, however, this seems too narrow to us. We had long discussions about importing activism into the institution, in which a polarization between the "street" and the "museum" quickly emerged, but in which neither place was really questioned in the

end. Instead, the places were elevated to criteria. Activism is not inviolable, we found many activist statements universalizing, course and paternal. We also found it characteristic that many subsequent invitations for the artists in the project related exclusively to activist works, as though professional curators connect activism with an extreme topicality – the latest news that will already be supplanted tomorrow by the next. In the project it turned out that militant research is not so much a discussion of grounding, and certainly not a discussion in which one can forget one's own individuality and enter into a movement identity. For us, militant research was explicitly a method discussion.

Yet this method discussion is ultimately oriented again to the ethics of genealogy: How closely must one listen, how precisely must one think, how vehemently must one proceed against the repressiveness of not wanting to know exactly? Which images can be found, how can one's own experience be envisioned in them, and how can one describe in them one's own involvement? Which measure of credibility, of the interest in communicating to observers and of the revisability of the work can be achieved?

It was interesting that in the exhibition reviews the art character of many of the works in ExArgentina was denied – perhaps exactly because they resist the universality character of art, and perhaps also because they were a particular and local critique: autonomous, not centralizable, like a brake on central theoretical production.[7]

Epilogue

We have been asked to write more on the understanding of militant research as we experienced it in the project. The question was: "Whereabouts in your project did the subject surreptitiously regain its office?" The subject was permanently present. (To us it

would have seemed like a total annulment of boundaries, if the ideal had been to completely dissolve into the community/field to be investigated.) But what about the "office of the subject"?
We attempted to resist a normative gap that occurs between curators and artists, between theoreticians of politics or of art and activists or artists. This resistance led to a lot of conflicts with people who were removed from office, so to speak, in the project, or mistook this resistance for the equality of formal grassroots democracy – which does not work, if one does not want to become indifferent in artistic debates. In fact, however, the people in our project were never without an office, but they changed offices permanently. On the one hand, we mean this ideally: when one is an artist, activist, visitor, polit-tourist, friend or theoretician – but also in terms of institutional power: it was important to us that artists could become curators and vice versa, that assistants made artistic contributions and heads of institutions had to take over translation services. It was also important to us to influence the often unquestioned hierarchies and power structures of the institution: Who writes the press release, who determines PR work? Which financiers are excluded and which are attacked directly, like Nelida Blaquier, for example (an heiress of the sugar and paper empire LEDESMA, which massacred workers during the Junta era), who is a member of the association of friends of Palais de Glace. Sometimes we were insensitive and could not believe it was necessary to consult a lawyer, for instance, before hanging up a poster against Nelida Blaquier, whereas we felt that even this consultation was censorship. In other cases we had the assumed privilege of a better legal security. On the other hand, sometimes we were exposed to attacks from the institution due to this fluctuation of offices. However, we do not want to apply the theory of the power vacuum to this, but rather to speak more of personal libido.

It often happens that critics / observers / "symbol analysts" support, announce and join in celebrating the progressiveness of political movements without taking a transfer to their own framework of representation into consideration. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the concept of resistance between the cultural and the political field remains valued differently. Resistance can mean the destruction of the field by continuing to cultivate it.
Along with the deconstruction of hegemony, the central point of "militant research" for us was our own involvement and permanently finding a balance. Naturally it is a historical self that is involved here with all its experiences and its own space of reflection. This self neither can nor should be the voice of a political group or a political situation; we believe there is no unison in this. However, it can oscillate to balance between the experienced situation and its own form of experience and capability for reflection, thus contributing much to the polyvocality of solidarity and the intensity of political narrative and its concerns. In this intensity we see an opportunity for artistic work to sometimes transcend its own system immanence. (Those who believe too firmly in the predestination of the art system, ultimately underestimate the audience.) We would contradict Foucault: this intensity is not a tactic, not a strategic device: not occupying the art space to make political statements, but rather a love of action in all its political sense.

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[1]Since this is a discussion of methods, the concrete subject matter and cooperations of the project are unfortunately more in the background. We refer the reader to the catalogue: *Schritte zur Flucht von der Arbeit zum Tun* (Ed. Creischer, Siekmann, Massu,

Cologne / Buenos Aires, 2004) and the web site: www.Exargentina.org

[2]Michel Foucault: *In Verteidigung der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/M., 1999, p. 17 (cf. "genealogy": http://users.california.com/~rathbone/foucau10.htm)

[3]Cf. Colectico Situaciones: *Que se vayan todos*, Ed. Ulrich Brand, Hamburg, 2003

[4]John Holloway: *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London/Ann Arbor, MI, 2002 (2005)

[5]Alice Creischer / Andreas Siekmann: Ausstellungsführer, chapter on "Negation", in: *Schritte zur Flucht von der Arbeit zum Tun*, op.cit., p. 18.

[6]Cf. the chapter: Militante Untersuchung, ibid.

[7]Cf., Michel Foucault, op.cit., p. 16