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Strategic Operations

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As the starting thesis for the conference "Public Art Policies. Progressive Art Institutions in the Age of Dissolving Welfare States" in Vienna, Gerald Raunig defined the position of progressive art institutions as precarious on two fronts: on the one hand, all that is often left to the protagonists is the insight that, despite all progressive ambitions, within an art institution they always act as part of a hegemonic structure, on the other hand the progressiveness that they strive for is radically limited, in that the increasingly limited means of the welfare state provide an excuse for canceling funding for critical institutions.[1]

How uninhibitedly especially these kinds of critical projects are currently being terminated was demonstrated with the example, among others, of the art association Kokerei Zollverein Essen: despite the acquisition of co-financing for projects, the curators were fired and one of the most interesting and lively institutions in Germany was closed.[2] Traveling back to Germany after the conference, I noticed that the very existence of this institution is denied: in the magazine of the German Federal Railway there was a presentation of precisely this coal plant in Essen, an industrial derelict of the postfordist age, but there was not a word about the art institution. The article was intended to promote an "adventure

park" - the cultural industry at the service of powerful interests, as ever. In postfordism the motto is probably: less bread, but all the more circus.

Franziska Kaspar described the example of the Kunsthalle Exnergasse as a process of the dissolution of evolved, self-organized structures giving way to streamlined management models. The Kunsthalle Exnergasse, the location of the conference, is part of the WUK, the largest socio-cultural center in Vienna. In previous years, the management of the WUK had promoted the implementation of a "matrix model" (originally developed for General Electric), which included strongly hierarchisized types of collaboration, a new orientation to the concept of the customer, and a reduction of jobs. Franziska Kaspar: "Articulated and organized social interests, such as those of the unions, were disregarded and employee representatives were threatened. The 'objectification' of people, their reduction to 'administrative variables' increased. An intensification of labor was executed synchronously with the elimination of several paid positions, organization structures were 'trimmed down' and 'labor costs' decreased."

Another result of the "matrix" were new demands within the large socio-cultural center for the - from the management perspective less lucrative - exhibition space and a significant decrease in the participation of women in the board and other decision-making bodies. Franziska Kaspar again: "On the whole it appeared to me that by decree from the board, executed by the manager, the political and cultural system was distorted into a business, asociality was organized and the gender relations and gender order were altered. These are mechanisms that correspond to the capitalist market economy of neoliberalism."

In his talk, Gerald Raunig picked up on these concrete experiences of the negative development of an art institution that regards itself as progressive. It is no longer only the state that "governs" in a governmentality setting, but rather a complex mesh of institutions and protagonists. In this specific case, it is not only the reactionary Austrian government attempting to do away with emancipatory art institutions by decreasing funding, but rather a network of outsourced enterprises, NGOs and "responsible" individuals, exemplified here by the NGO WUK, which undergo a neoliberal transformation under an economically delimited argumentation. Raunig: "A new field of the management of microsectors is crystallizing in the dissolution of the welfare state, an in-between field between government by the state and the (self-) government and voluntary self-control of individuals: seemingly autonomous institutions, NGOs, which are invoked and addressed by buzzwords like 'civil society' and 'distant from the state' as being outside the state, but which actually function as outsourced state apparatuses." To illustrate this complex situation, Raunig cited again, as in the conference announcement, the ambivalent statement from Deleuze: "The final word of power is that resistance is primary." The argument of the lecture thus sought not only an analysis and critique of the status quo (in other words, "the final word of power"), but also options for agency, which would allow the actors "to emancipate themselves at least temporarily from the grip of the expanded state apparatus. The dissolution of the welfare state is neither a natural process without actors, nor a linear process without fissures, gaps and folds. It is exactly in these fissures, gaps and folds that there is an opportunity for more than just an orderly retreat from the privileges of the welfare state."

Whereas Gerald Raunig insisted on the "concrete and especially precarious lines of connection between institutions and movement-

related activist collectives" - counter to a separation between movements and institutions - Helmut Draxler expressed a more general distrust of polar definitions of concepts. Draxler recalled that critical institutions such as the Kunstverein Munich, of which he was the director in the 90s, are bourgeois institutions as well (also from a historical perspective). He questioned the extent to which art with political intentions has now become mainstream, and the extent to which one can speak of resistiveness, when the cooptation of political expressions is a widespread marketing strategy. He characterized the position of art institutions and their actors as profoundly dialectical and accordingly proposed "speaking from the wrong place". He contrasted this "speaking from the wrong place" with "speaking from the right place", which executes the self-assurance of "truth" in performative speech acts and, in an extreme case, results in a performance (rather than execution) of putschist fantasies. According to Draxler, this kind of speech act implicitly poses a claim to leadership. Draxler's argumentation reminded me of Oliver Marchart's relativization of historical materialism in his remark: "For Marx, the goal of a classless, transparent society without exploitation implied the disappearance of antagonism. [...] All the subsequent theories, from Foucault through Lefort/Gauchet to Laclau/Mouffe not only disclaim the validity of this postulate, they also recognize its totalitarian implications."[3] At the level of the subject, Draxler calls for directing attention to manifold antagonisms and acknowledging one's own involvement, rather than presuming a fixed dualism: here the revolutionary subject, there the state apparatus. The question would be - in allusion to a statement from Godard - not how one could make political art, but rather how one could make art political. Draxler's point here is to indicate the distinguishability between politics and culture, yet still laying claim

to places that enable the articulation of contradictions of the subject, the institution, etc.

Jorge Ribalta presented the MACBA in Barcelona[4] as one such place: the museum not only enables exhibitions that include and stimulate political activism, it also provides spaces for meetings, which do not end in visualizations, but are instead intended to discuss certain themes. This concept functions parallel to exhibitions of a traditional nature. In the discussions around the symposium it became clear that this model would probably lead to the problem of a cooptation of political groups in Germany or Austria; in the specific situation in Barcelona, however, the museum has developed into a motor for political articulation, for which no site of discussion would otherwise be given. The example of the Rooseum in Malmoe[5] seemed to be similarly productive in inviting artists over the course four years for scholarship stays to work on the theme "In 2052 Malmoe will no longer be Swedish" dealing with migration. These productions, too, are not immediately forced into the status of re-presentation, but will instead be presented to the public at the end of the four years.

In several examples this refusal to present productions and discursive processes immediately in the utilization contexts of art institutions was seen as a strategy of self-empowerment. Marita Muukkonen, for instance, described the structure of the NIFCA, a transnational cultural institution of the Nordic countries, as a workshop structure enabling the participants to work on specific topics in more depth, thus addressing, for example, the problematic concept of a Nordic identity against the backdrop of migration.

The strategic operations proposed in the course of the conference, such as linking individual interests with a communal interest,

cooperative forms of working, collective leadership models, the possibility of a reversal of power relations, facilitating conflictual debates and making discourse and platforms for conflictual situations accessible, refusing utilization in visualizations and spectacle, the slowness of "speaking from the wrong place", all require an ongoing decision and negotiation on the part of the subjects involved.

In addition, it seems to me that the frequently cited and feared cooptation of a critical left's models of working and living by management models of postfordism could possibly go the other way. Specifically the eipcp - European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies - with its transnational orientation, its European-wide network, its international symposia is developing a critical debate against the backdrop of structures that the European Union provides for projects and regards as worthy of support. In this context I would like to recall John Cage's response to McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message": "Just this: the medium is not the message. I would like to convey a word of warning to Mr. McLuhan: talking is lying. Lying means collaborating."[6]

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[1] Cf. http://republicart.net/conf2004/policies_concept01_en.htm

[2] Cf. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/babias/en

[3] Oliver Marchart: Gibt es eine Politik des Politischen? In: Das Undarstellbare der Politik, Ed. Oliver Marchart, Vienna, 1998, p.93

[4] cf. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/ribalta/en

[5] cf. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/esche/en

[6] John Cage, quoted from: Ted Berrigan. "Interview mit John Cage", in: Acid. Neue amerikanische Szene, Ed. Wolf Dieter Brinkmann and Ralf-Rainer Rygulla, Darmstadt 1969, p. 48-52, here: p. 48.