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The Double Criticism of parrhesia

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Translated by Aileen Derieg

On the day before the Euro Mayday (1 May 2004 in Barcelona and Milan), activists from Indymedia groups all over Spain gathered at the invitation of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) in Barcelona. The activists had traveled from Andalusia, Galicia, Madrid, the Basque region and the Canary Islands, and they had taken the opportunity not only to participate in the Mayday demonstration against precarious working and living conditions, but also to conduct an intensive debate during the days beforehand about their media-activist practice: issues of (non-) institutionalization, the expansion and the limitations of freedom of speech, information strategies in between communication guerrilla and counter-information were the focal points of the discussion. The dense debates framed by inputs - drawing lines from post-1968 activism to the present - from Franco Berardi Bifo (Radio Alice, Bologna 1976/77), Carlos Ameller (Video-Nou, Barcelona 1977-1983) and Dee Dee Halleck (Paper Tiger TV, USA, since 1981), and a discussion with Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis about their new film "La Toma" were interrupted by a critical objection from an Indymedia activist. Politely but firmly, the activist called attention to the fact that the MACBA, as

organizer of the conference preceding the Mayday actions against increasingly non-self-determined precarious working and living conditions, is itself involved in the game of cognitive capitalism and the tendency toward precarious conditions, in which the institutions of the art field play a role that is by no means innocent. This criticism of the ambivalent role of art institutions was further discussed in the days that followed and demonstrated in a manifestation and a graffiti attack on the Fundació Tàpies (one of the more important contemporary art foundations in Barcelona) in the course of the Mayday demonstration.

Following a model from Foucault, which is also frequently cited in the art field now as well, the current development of society can be illustrated with the concept of governmentality[1]: the dismantling of welfare-state forms of intervention is accompanied by a restructuring of techniques of governing, which transfer the leadership capacity of state apparatuses and instances to the population, to "responsible", "prudent" and "rational" individuals. This development relates primarily to the self-government, self-discipline and self-technologies of individuals, yet it goes beyond this. A new area of the management of microsectors is crystallizing in the dissolution of the welfare state, an intermediate zone between government by the state and the (self-) government and voluntary self-control of individuals: seemingly autonomous facilities, NGOs, which are invoked with buzz words like "civil society" and "distant from the state" as an exterior to the state, but which function as "outsourced" state apparatuses at the same time. Many art institutions belong to this category as well.

In the governmentality setting, it becomes theoretically impossible and strategically not very promising to construct a dichotomous opposition between movement and institution, because not only resistive individuals, but also progressive institutions and civil

society NGOs operate on the same plane of governmentality. In a reflection on the relations between political art practices and progressive art institutions, it can be neither a matter of the abstract negation of existing and incipient institutions and micro-institutions, nor of an acclamation of "anti-institutional" free networks or autonomous art collectives as being outside the institution.[2] Contrary to a view that occasionally imputes this kind of naïve freedom propaganda to poststructuralist authors such as Deleuze and Guattari, disparaging them as anarchist aging hippies, with a little good will one can read from Deleuze and Guattari that they unequivocally identify the pole of movement and organization/institution and set it in a relation: in "Thousand Plateaus" Deleuze and Guattari not only hallucinate - as has often been imputed - hybrid streams of deterritorialization, but also describe a permanent connection between deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This connection relates less to a geographical "territory", but rather to exactly the relationship of political movement and institutions, of constituent and constituted power, of instituting and institutionalization.

Guattari problematized organization and institutionalization in 1969 thus: "The problem of the revolutionary organization is basically that of establishing an institutional machine that is distinguished by a better axiomatics and a special practice; this means the guarantee that it does not enclose itself in various social structures, especially not in the state structure."[3] For the art field that would mean reflecting on the danger of the closure and establishment of the art institution as a state apparatus and keeping sight of the coopting function of the institution, yet without principally condemning the institutions straight away because of it. Against this background, a "progressive" institution would be one which conducts - counter to the initially static quality of the term institution - a moving practice of organizing.

The problem of the concept of governmentality in this context lies primarily in the appearance of an inescapable totality, which seems to leave a defeatist withdrawal and individual exodus a la Bartleby[4] as the only "forms of action" possible. Foucault, however, also sees a possibility specifically in the indissoluble linking of power and self-techniques. This possibility is developed in his Berkeley lectures from 1983 in the genealogy of a critical stance in western philosophy within the framework of the problematization of a term that played a central role in ancient philosophy: *parrhesia* means in Greek roughly the activity of a person (the *parrhesiastes*) "saying everything", freely speaking truth without rhetorical games and without ambiguity, even and especially when this is hazardous. The *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth, not because he[5] is in possession of the truth, which he makes public in a certain situation, but because he is taking a risk. The clearest indication for the truth of the *parrhesia* consists in the "fact that a speaker says something dangerous - something other than what the majority believes."[6] According to Foucault's interpretation, though, it is never a matter of revealing a secret that must be pulled out of the depths of the soul. Here truth consists less in opposition to the lie or to something "false", but rather in the verbal activity of speaking truth: "the function of *parrhesia* is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of criticism: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself."[7]

Foucault describes the practice of *parrhesia* using numerous examples from ancient Greek literature as a movement from a political to a personal technique. The older form of *parrhesia* corresponds to publicly speaking truth as an institutional right. Depending on the form of the state, the subject addressed by the *parrhesiastes* is the assembly in the democratic agora, the tyrant in the monarchical court. Parrhesia is generally understood as coming

from below and directed upward, whether it is the philosopher's criticism of the tyrant or the citizen's criticism of the majority of the assembly: "*Parrhesia* is a form of criticism [...] always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor."[8] The specific potentiality of *parrhesia* is found in the unequivocal gap between the one who takes a risk to express everything and the criticized sovereign who is impugned by this truth. Through his criticism the *parrhesiastes* enters into exposed situations threatened by the sanction of exclusion. The most famous example, which Foucault also analyzes in great detail[9], is the figure of Diogenes, who commands Alexander from the precariousness of his barrel to move out of his light. Dio Chrysostom's description of this meeting is followed by a long *parrhesiastic* dialogue, in which Diogenes probes the boundaries of the *parrhesiastic* contract between the sovereign and the philosopher, constantly seeking to shift the boundaries of this contract in a game of provocation and retreat. Like the citizen expressing a minority opinion in the democratic setting of the agora, the Cynic philosopher also practices a form of *parrhesia* with respect to the monarch in public.

Over the course of time, a change takes place in the game of truth "which - in the classical Greek conception of *parrhesia* - was constituted by the fact that someone was courageous enough to tell the truth to *other people*. [...] there is a shift from that kind of *parrhesiastic* game to another truth game which now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about *oneself*."[10] This process from public criticism to personal (self-) criticism develops parallel to the decrease in the significance of the democratic public sphere of the agora. At the same time, *parrhesia* comes up increasingly in conjunction with upbringing and education. One of Foucault's relevant examples here is Plato's

dialogue "Laches", in which the question of the best teacher for the interlocutors' sons represents the starting point and foil. The answer is naturally that Socrates is the best teacher; what is more interesting here is the development of the argumentation. Socrates no longer assumes the function of the *parrhesiastes* in the sense of exercising dangerous contradiction in a political sense, but rather by moving his listeners to give account of themselves and leading them to a self-questioning that queries the relationship between their statements (*logos*) and their way of living (*bios*). However, this technique does not serve as an autobiographical confession or examination of conscience, but rather to establish a relationship between rational discourse and the lifestyle of the interlocutor or the self-questioning person.

The function of the *parrhesiastes* undergoes a similar change analogous to the transition from the political to the personal *parrhesia*. In the first meaning there is a presuppositional condition that the *parrhesiastes* is the subordinate person who "says everything" to the superordinate person. In the second meaning, it only seems that the "truth-speaker" is the sole authority, the one who motivates the other to self-criticism and thus to changing his practice. In fact, *parrhesia* takes place in this second meaning in the transition and exchange between the positions. *Parrhesia* is thus not a characteristic / competency / strategy of a single person, but rather a concatenation of positions within the framework of the relationship between the *parrhesiastes'* criticism and the self-criticism thereby evoked. In "Laches" Foucault sees "a movement visible throughout this dialogue from the *parrhesiastic* figure of Socrates to the problem of the care of the self."[11] Contrary to any individualistic interpretation, especially of later Foucault texts (imputing a "return to subject philosophy", etc.), here *parrhesia* is not the competency of a subject, but rather a movement between

the position that queries the concordance of *logos* and *bios*, and the position that exercises self-criticism in light of this query.[12]

My aim is to link the two concepts of *parrhesia* described by Foucault as a genealogical development, to understand hazardous refutation in its relation to self-revelation.[13] Criticism, and especially institutional criticism, is not exhausted in denouncing abuses nor in withdrawing into more or less radical self-questioning. In terms of the art field that means that neither the belligerent strategies of the institutional criticism of the 1970s nor art as a service to the institution in the 1990s promise effective interventions in the governmentality of the present. This is especially so because there is no obstacle to the cooptation of political contents by (supposedly) progressive art institutions within the framework of these strategies.
Parrhesia as a double strategy is needed: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation, and as self-questioning. This brings us back to the situation mentioned at the beginning: in my interpretation, the Indymedia activist described assumes exactly the role of the *parrhesiastes* in the double sense in MACBA: in general, Indymedia's tradition of political *parrhesia* (also at the conference in MACBA and the actions in conjunction with the Euro Mayday the next day) involve contrasting the molar truth production of the media monopolies with counter-information. In addition, though, the activist also assumes the role of the *parrhesiastes* in the personal sense: he compels the institution MACBA to test the concordance between *logos* and *bios*, between program and institutional reality. The political *parrhesia* as hazardous refutation is not carried out here in the free space of the agora, but rather in a specific public sphere, but one that is also not limited to the internal structure of the art institution. The personal *parrhesia*, the movement from

parrhesiastes questioning the concordance of the institution's *logos* and *bios*, to the actors in the institution, who propel the self-questioning of their own institution because of the way it is questioned, develops as an open and collective self-critical practice of the institution. A productive game emerges here in the relationship between activists and institution, which is neither limited to a cooptation of the political by the institution, nor to a simple redistribution of resources from the progressive art institution to the political actions. Recomposing social criticism and institutional criticism means merging political and personal *parrhesia*. It is only by linking the two *parrhesia* techniques that a one-sided instrumentalization can be avoided, that the institutional machine is saved from closing itself off, that the flow between movement and institution can be maintained.

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[1] Cf. Michel Foucault, Die Gouvernementalität, in: Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann, Thomas Lemke (Ed.), Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main 2000, 41-67.

[2] See also the Discordia debate on this topic: http://www.discordia.us/scoop/story/2004/2/10/191433/396

[3] Félix Guattari, Psychotherapie, Politik und die Aufgaben der institutionellen Analyse, Frankfurt/Main 1976, p.137

[4] Cf. Herman Melville's novel "Bartleby, the Scrivener", written in 1853, and the reception of the figure of Bartleby by Deleuze (Bartleby oder die Formel, Berlin 1994 / Bartleby; or, The Formula 1997) and Agamben (Bartleby oder die Kontingenz, Berlin 1998 / Bartleby, or On Contingency" 1999).

[5] In ancient Greece *parrhesiastes* was not only grammatically but also actually always masculine. This is naturally not the case in the present: almost directly contrary to ancient Greece, both the term and the phenomenon are increasingly addressed in feminist discourses (cf. Postkolonialer Feminismus und die Kunst der Selbstkritik, in: Hito Steyerl & Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Spricht die Subalterne deutsch? Migration und postkoloniale Kritik, Münster 2003, 270-290, and others).

[6] Michel Foucault, Diskurs und Wahrheit, Berlin 1996, p.14 (cf. discussion of *parrhesia* in English: http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/).

[7] ibid., p. 17.

[8] ibid., p. 16f.

[9] ibid., p. 125-139.

[10] ibid., p. 150.

[11] ibid., p. 92; and Michel Foucault, Die Sorge um sich. Sexualität und Wahrheit 3, Frankfurt am Main 1989.

[12] This also shows that *parrhesia* cannot be understood here as an aristocratic, philosophical prerogative, and certainly not as a relationship of representation, for instance in being communicated through media. *Parrhesia* requires direct communication and mutual exchange: "Unlike the *parrhesiastes* who addresses the *demos* in the Assembly, for example, here we have a *parrhesiastic* game which requires a personal, face to face relationship." (Foucault, Diskurs und Wahrheit, 96f.)

[13] Cf. also Foucault's analysis of Ion's and Creusa's *parrhesiastic* discourses in Euripides' tragedy "Ion": Foucault, Diskurs und Wahrheit, 34-58, especially 57f. (http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/Lecture-03/06.ion.html)