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Possibility, Art and Democratic Deviance

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> *The fall of the Soviet Communist party and the unconcealed rule of capitalist-democratic state on a planetary scale have cleared the field of the two main ideological obstacles hindering the resumption of a political philosophy worthy of our time: Stalinism on one side, and progressivism and the constitutional state on the other. Thought thus finds itself, for the first time, facing its own task without any illusion and without any possible alibi.*
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> (Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Politics' in *Means without Ends*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000 p109)

Agamben sets out with the utmost clarity the position under which we labour. We are increasingly without illusions when it comes to the anachronistic way contemporary society chooses to negotiate its oppositions and find sufficient consensus to continue. Today, we cannot fail to see socialism as a failure, can only see social democracy for the broken compromise it is, and bend the knee to planetary democratic capitalism only because it's the last idea left standing. In return, the neo-conservative evangelists do their utmost to take advantage of this (hopefully brief) moment.

The question Agamben's introductory quotation begs is where and how can thought face 'its own task' to construct a renewed political philosophy. For the field of modern art, the old politics of the left could be imagined as a kind of anti-matter universe - alluring in its familiarity to many artistic concerns but constantly threatening the destruction of its cherished freedom. The shifts of modern and even very recent art oscillated between a desire for social (and political) engagement and a passion for artistic autonomy, yet both extremes were found wanting. The art centres, museums and galleries have usually simply been the vessels within which this activity is housed. Occasionally however, the places where art happens have also been the creative engines for a rethinking of the categories of visual art and the role of artists; of how visual culture can alter personal consciousness, and even change the world.

If we start to imagine a contested cultural future, it might be that this latter possibility is the one we need to re-energise, even as we acknowledge that it is dependent on a collaborationist engagement with institutions by 'free' artists. This difficult terrain between engagement and autonomy or social ambition and the subjective psyche are what we have been trying to explore at Rooseum over the last three years. With varying degrees of success, projects like *In 2052 Malmö will no longer be Swedish*, *Open Forum* and the *Future Archive*, as well as exhibitions such as *Intentional Communities*, *Baltic Babel*, *Superflex*, *Creeping Revolution* and *Rooseum Universal Studios*, have been our way of testing out an initial challenge to rethink the purpose of and the audience for this provincial Swedish Kunsthalle. Rooseum is, of course, not unique in these ambitions but it's relatively isolated, small city base in a historically social democratic state provides a particular environment in which the reality of social engagement outside the art world can be tested intensively.

I am aware that the claim of privilege on behalf of art institutions carries dangers; not least that capitalism's toleration of culture is simply a device to divert resistance away from more pertinent activities. Yet, in this situation of Agamben's political *Stunde Nul*, or what the Slovenian thinker Slavoj Zizek has called a '*Denkverbot*' to exclude all thinking beyond democratic capitalism, I am not sure that any of the existing formal or informal political channels of opposition have any kind of purchase on the system either. Art is, afterall, not the same as politics and cannot be seen as political action by other means. Instead, paraphrasing Agamben, it has 'to face its own task without any illusion'. I am hopeful that such a task could be defined within the experimental institutions, using the broad field of contemporary art to be a permissive and imaginative space for expressing individual and collective desires that could not be accommodated, or even thought of, within current political discourses. Of course, the artists, the public institutions and the self-made artists spaces that produce and promote art are all necessarily located within the economic hegemony of capitalism. They are always already compromised but that compromised position is potentially their very advantage. They stand in an 'engaged autonomous' relationship to capitalism, as much as to political opposition or movements for social change – complicit but fenced off, in ways that define both art's irrelevance and also its possibility to become, in Superflex's terms, 'tools' for thinking and relating.

The term possibility seems a vital one to use in relation to such issues. It is the concept (and the challenge) of creating possibility for the artist, for the audience and perhaps also for the city and citizens where we are based that drives our ideas at Rooseum. Possibility is, in these terms, simply a condition that leads to thinking differently or imagining things otherwise than they are.

Creating possibility is not a fixed point of view but a slippery and changeable condition made of spatial, temporal and relational elements. In other words, for possibility to emerge there needs to be a site, a moment and a group of people – material that is obligingly in the hands of public art institutions with their potential appeal to a wide spectrum of society.

The creation of possibility has also little in the way of precedents in the current climate. There are no obvious formulas to follow, although the frequent talk these days of laboratories and factories gives us the beginnings of certain kinds of models from science and industry. I am however, rather uncertain about these terms as they seem to exclude a position for a visiting public – both labs and factories being be definition private productive sites. To use the institution at its best, we need to balance the need for private experimentation with public discussion, especially as the forums for a generalised intervention are reducing as public space is privatised. Art and its institutions need to move in an opposite direction if they are to play the role of political imagination forum.

If the art institution today has the potential to become such a place, it must begin by being defined its constituent social actors in more complex ways than artists, curators and viewers and to imagine new forms of exchange between them. I would like to imagine that the Rooseum and similar organisations become spaces of 'democratic deviance', where ideas that are beyond what Zizek's defines as the *Denkverbot* are contributed from all participants and issues are raised over a longer period than a single exhibition event. The task of the institution would then mutate to some extent, to become one of clear communication of its own agenda to encourage art 'to face its own task' or think beyond free market capitalism, followed by hospitality towards artistic proposals, as well as direct invitations, and generosity in the dialogues that

result. Only after investing in such a process would the organisation of space and time and outspoken approval for those ideas that seem to take the agenda furthest follow.

The practical application of such an approach is, of course, always disappointing in some ways. Reality can never match the rhetoric though it does not mean that the rhetoric itself is not needed, indeed cannot inspire more ambitious and more carefully thought out projects in the specific conditions of an actual Kunsthalle. At Rooseum, I believe a number of projects have approached moments of genuine possibility or democratic deviance. To describe them in text is of course inadequate, but it might offer some idea of where we have got to over three years of operation. In early 2001, I defined the new mission of Rooseum as follows:

"What's the point of an institution like Rooseum? It's tempting to say 'to offer hope, faith and charity in complicated times' but it's too glib. Some time ago it seemed that art institutions might find themselves constrained by the modifier 'art' and its popular meanings. Now, the term 'art' might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part community centre, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function. They must also be political in a direct way, thinking through the consequences of our extreme free market policies. Secondary questions are whether individual institutions will have the courage to find their own balance in this mix or follow the old centre-periphery model and whether funders can be persuaded to drop the touristic justification for art institutions in favour of increasing creative thinking and intelligence(s) in society. These are the things we will try to deal

with over the next years. The first step is to reorientate the direction of the organisation through shifting the identity of the architecture of the old electricity works. The three levels will be separated in terms of function with studios and a project room upstairs, a main hall for large scale exhibitions and productions on the ground floor and an archive and microcinema downstairs."

Three years on, Rooseum has developed its different strands of activity to achieve something close to that mix of community centre, club, academy and showroom that we originally proposed. While keeping the headcount level, our users have radically changed. Today there are fewer general visitors and many more specifically engaged groups or individuals working with us on projects or returning to see the development of long-term programmes. I am confident that this is the right direction for Rooseum to continue in the future. Based in Malmö, we should take account of the ecology of exhibition and artistic spaces around us, as well as the unique character of the city itself. With a Konsthall and Konstmuseum, as well as a number of smaller exhibition and cinema spaces, the city is well off for 'art shows' relative to its size. With the University and Art Academy, it has a thriving younger audience who have time and curiosity enough to become involved in more complex programmes of activity. With an important community of citizens with close links to cultures outside Sweden, the value of international cultural exchange on the micro-level hardly needs to be explained. As the birthplace of Swedish social democracy, the city can be confident of taking a progressive role in re-imagining the cultural politics of the nation.

Projects and exhibitions like "Superflex – Supertools" and "Baltic Babel – cities on a nervous coast" as well as the long term residency and commissioning programme "In 2052 Malmö will no longer be Swedish" delivered a critical view on public engagement,

regionalism and cultural identity. Other initiatives have been developed in the light of the 'real existing' Malmö, concentrating on the different elements that we have observed in the city and its history. The 'Öppet Forum" programme of local groups who develop their own activities within one space at Rooseum has seen activities from furniture design to a very important initiative called 'Curiocity' organised by the group Aeswad that really introduced many maginalised communities to Rooseum and to the possibilities of cultural activity to make themselves heard. In a different sense, our Critical Studies international study programme creates an international local context, and gives Rooseum 8-12 young artists, curators and critics to contribute to the pool of ideas and projects around the organisation. Many of the approaches we have taken prioritise the long-term and the quiet persistence of artistic work, rather than the spectacle of the exhibition. The intention has been to make the residencies, study initiatives, open forum projects and small presentations or screenings of work into the life-blood of an active, thinking Rooseum attached to the city in a myriad of intimate. Small-scale ways.

The question this begs concerns the purpose of an art institution in a particular place, if not the purpose of art itself. I would maintain that art spaces have a duty to be demonstrably different from the kinds of public spaces dedicated to consumption that have invaded the centres of our cities. There, the displays take on some of the aspects of visual art in their seductive, tempting and luscious attraction. However, as presentations dedicated to a single end – individual purchase – there is a limit to their possible effect on our imagination and thinking. They are aesthetic devices at the service of a predetermined motivation and therefore at odds with any idea of artistic freedom, however compromised that now may be.

Public spaces like Rooseum should seek to engage with that idea of freedom – challenge it and critique it for sure, but still suggest the idea of a society of free thinking citizens as a possible reality, if only for a particular moment and in a certain place. The freedom we propose is one that encourages disagreement, incoherence, uncertainty and unpredictable results. It is also grounded in the locality of its production, and a proposal for what might be needed here. To make sense of that for the visitor requires hospitality above all, but also recognition of the difficulty of asking for people's time and energy in our hyperactive society. That's why it has to be done modestly, over time and in relation to the city itself. It is not good enough to devise a good international programme in isolation; instead what we do must address the separate micro-communities that make up the city.

This is an undoubtedly demanding agenda for a small and relatively weak institutional frame. Yet, it might only be as such a space that an institution might even begin to imagine justifying new or continued public funding. Within the various forms of European socialism and social democracy, exhausted by years of unrelenting attack from the free market fundamentalists, there is little desire to continue to prop up the bastions of what are called 'elitist' cultural institutions. The withdrawal of funding may happen suddenly or gradually, but it is more than likely. In response, those committed to culture as a testing ground for the future are required to refashion our tools. The economic contribution argument will not work in the long term, because the social democratic state will simply privatise culture and let it battle it out with other forms of consumer entertainment. Perhaps only as identified and acknowledged spaces of 'democratic deviance' can cultural palaces be justified at all in the twenty first century, not least to the culturally active themselves.