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Reconquering Subjectivity

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The Uncongenial 1990s

The 1990s produced a series of uncongenial phenomena, the offshoots of which have determined the millennium. The collapse of state socialism unleashed globalization, at least according to the neoliberal narrative. The reunification of Germany in 1990 is regarded as a world model for globalization in miniature. The German Democratic Republic, representative of the socialist orientation of Eastern Europe, was branded an aberration of modernism and politically, socially and culturally reassessed. The West, which seemed to have the superior economic concept, assumed sovereignty over interpretations in all questions of society. Thanks to the IMF, the WTO and Guggenheim, the principle of reproduction prevailed as the global standard. The exodus of capital across national borders created a "supranational state of capital" (André Gorz), a state without a territory, which affects the nation-state from outside it, but itself eludes political control.

The art market that had been in a crisis in the late 1980s revived in the mid-90s due to the New Economy billions freshly earned in the world stock markets, reanimating media that had been

pronounced dead, such as painting, because they best reproduced art's conformity to commodities. The collective critical art practice that developed at the peripheries of the art world in opposition to the institutions and briefly gained the power of discourse, was successively repressed to make room for the traditional individual model of artistic practice. Director-artists such as Matthew Barney are the ones who profited from this development. Probably the most unpleasant manifestation among the phenotypes of the late nineties is the artist-subject drawing creativity from within, providing an aesthetic fruit basket for the bourgeois gain in distinction, just as it has always been. Old and - from the standpoint of development-historical evidence - exhausted media and genres, such as painting, sculpture and drawing, which had been declared over and done with by a politicized young generation, have been experiencing a boom since the mid-nineties, which continues up to the present day. Photography and video art have become the painting ersatz of the times; photography and video art dominate art fairs and major exhibitions.

Ironically, it was the success of high-tech values on the stock market that inspired the success of the old media, which dominated both *documenta X* and the Venice Biennale 1999 and 2001 with an imperiousness that had not been considered possible. It is especially bitter that Catherine David had to illustrate her critical *documenta* discourse in 1997 with an overkill of photographic works. Yet Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta11*, embedding visual art in an interdisciplinary discourse between post-colonialism and globalization, could not dispense with video cabinets either.

The Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism in Essen was an art project for a total of five years, which developed a production display for the transformation from the labor society to the knowledge society from 2001 to 2003. In late 2000 the Dortmund-based Foundation for Industrial Monument Conservation and Historical Culture, on recommendation from Kaspar König, invited Florian Waldvogel, who curated the program of the Kokerei Zollverein together with the author of this text, to prepare a report profiling the former industrial grounds as a center for contemporary art. In 2001 works by twenty-six international artists were exhibited in the exhibition sections *Arbeit* ("Work"), *Freizeit* ("Leisure") and *Angst* ("Fear"), intended to initiate new social processes of communication. The exhibition, which also made its genesis transparent in three phases, was accompanied by discussion events on the thematic fields of "Geschichtskultur" (historical culture), "Bitterfelder Weg" (Bitterfeld Path), "Existenzgeld" (subsistence money), and "Rechtsradikalismus" (right-wing radicalism). The project for the year 2002, *Campus*, then dealt with another socio-politically explosive issue: educational policies and knowledge production. In the project for the year 2003, *Die Offene Stadt: Anwendungsmodelle* ("The Open City: Models of Application"), an exploration of the "public sphere" and the locations of its emergence and effectivity was conducted in artistic and discursive projects. Because of their history and obvious significance, the grounds of the former industrial plant of the Kokerei Zollverein were ideally suited for a future-oriented new utilization by a project centering around the development of new means and models for conveying knowledge, political responsibility and subjectivity.

The Kokerei Zollverein was built in the years 1959 to 1961 and was in operation as a coal plant until 1993. The architecture that was

created according to plans by the Bauhaus architects Fritz Schupp and Martin Krenner was striking both technically and in its design: cubic forms and steel trellis work constructions form an austere and imposing synthesis. The Kokerei Zollverein was regarded as one of the most modern industrial plants in Europe. Up to 1,000 people worked on the 600-meter long battery of coal ovens with its 304 ovens. On the so-called "black side", they produced 8,600 tons of coke from 10,000 tons of coal for the steel industry every day. Side products such as raw benzene, tar and ammoniac were further processed on the "white side". The coal plant was shut down in 1993, because the steel industry was in a crisis and the demand for coal was continuously decreasing and because the production of coke became too expensive. Since December 2001 the entire plant has been part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage.

The concept for the project Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism, which was originally planned until 2005, was to create a production location, in which visual art was to confront socially relevant issues - taking industrial and social history into consideration. At the same time, the program for each year was not only to be devoted to a different theme, but was also to produce a respectively different, specifically appropriate model of presentation and communication.

Theory Practice

Critical practice - whether in the sociopolitical field or in the art field - has significantly decreased since the 1980s. The project Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism understands critical practice not as a means of supplying legitimization for a new location, where the notoriously dissatisfied and those at the edge

are to be given the power to speak. Foucault presented a concept of criticism relating to the analysis of power and its social control mechanisms, which also distrusts itself to a high degree. For where criticism becomes set and instrumental, it turns into self-discipline.

Adorno could be another point of reference, especially his late political fragments, in which he analyzes the fatal effects of a tabooing of political criticism in Germany since the founding of the empire in 1871. The repulsion of criticism in Germany, according to Adorno, derives from an aggressive, institutionally interwoven spirit of militarism that seeks to dominate the civil areas of society. Adorno contrasts this with a concept of political responsibility, the motor of which is political criticism.

A look at the history of counterculture since the 1960s shows that the successor generation of social movements of the 1970s, early 1980s, had a major problem with a theory-practice distinction: no comprehensive theoretical model could be constructed for the fragmenting practice interests. This led to a depoliticization of youth culture and political life in general. What is the political public sphere today? And where does it take place? Pop culture has increasingly covered over the question of the political public sphere, subordinated and visually enslaved it. A form of political illiteracy is encroaching in society. The entire project Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism did not attempt to reduce what appears as practice - whether in the form of political events, exhibitions, hip-hop workshops or culture jamming seminars - to a theoretical matrix, but rather to expand a critical practice of seeing, thinking and acting.

Analysis, Counter-Model, Attention Economy

The analysis does not necessarily include an exhaustive answer to the question; the analysis can also pause at a point where the project investigates the answer on site. Within our commodity-shaped image culture, it is difficult to even make counter-models imaginable. Our seeing and thinking are so colonized that eradicating this heteronomous determination requires a certain effort. The Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism provides a display for knowledge production for dealing critically with visually and textually based forms of knowledge.

There is an opportunity here to achieve, under certain circumstances, greater attention with a political project that has been infiltrated into the cultural field, than directly in the political field. The fact that this practice has led to incorporations in cultural operations, that political activists have become "polit-artists" and thus reduced to a style term, is a historical dilemma from which consequences must be drawn. In retrospect, the attempt to rigorously orient the form of the political postulate, specifically political practice, to an ideal appears to be ideologically overburdened. It is just as legitimate to enter into political fields and operate there in an infiltrative manner, as to attempt to create a situation or reality in the field of culture, which is capable of establishing a critical public sphere. Not playing these two approaches off against one another, but relating them to one another instead is one of the first consequences from the theory-practice dilemma.

Intervening in Reality

The Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism defined itself as a production location bracketed by theory and practice, with a sphere of activity characterized by artistic-social

responsibility to reconquer subjectivity. The reconstruction of the subject as an informatic circuit in the New Economy was to be questioned, the transformation of communication into a service to be interrupted, alternatives to the content industry to be formulated. Critical artistic and art-mediating practice was a method defined here by historical treatment and recombination relevant to our times, in order to reveal connections between political practice and cultural depiction or representation and, to quote Toni Negri, to intervene in reality.

Following three years of the existence of the art project Kokerei Zollverein | Contemporary Art and Criticism, which had been guaranteed for five years by contract, the project was abruptly terminated on 31 December 2003. Despite existing financing for the project *Ramp* for the year 2004 by the Cultural Foundation of the Federal Government, the entire project has been discontinued. The former carrier - the Foundation for Industrial Monument Conservation and Historical Culture - terminated the contracts of all employees at the end of the year 2003. The foundation for this was purported to be a specification from the Ministry of Urban Construction and Living, Culture and Sport of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which provides for the overall coordination of all Zollverein projects by the Development Association Zollverein (EGZ - Entwicklungsgesellschaft Zollverein) beginning in 2004. Negotiations regarding co-financing for the project "Contemporary Art and Criticism" through the EGZ failed.

So it remains: losses are still socialized and profits are privatized.