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Art in the Era of Globalization

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In "The global 500" Oliver Ressler critically examines the effects of the new neoliberal world economic order on the self presentation of its initial actors, major monocapitalist corporations. This book presents the project within which this research is framed. These actors are apprehended in word and image and through interviews confronted with critical knowledge of the partially disastrous effects: cultural and especially social, on the economies and societies which are dependent on them. And in particular, the effects on the subjects whose labor power is used as a base for their financial emporiums. In my opinion, Ressler's work does not need a cultural theoretical introduction - its didactics and means are self explanatory. Instead of an affirmative piece of writing and the mimetic or supplementary re-telling of this artistic work, it seems to make more sense to deal with a few transmission difficulties which appear in the course of the globalization process and the accompanying talk of increasingly global (and leveled off) cultural spaces as it concerns artistic practice and the cultural industry. Parallels between the field analyzed by Oliver Ressler and the one to which I want to dedicate myself could be read at any time without having them specifically pointed out. They are obvious. An addition from my position as art critic is perhaps still of importance. In contrast to earlier projects, this time Oliver Ressler

also increasingly concentrated on how visual text is dealt with in power industries and has therefore gone a step further in the decoding of symbol contexts.

In the meantime it has become commonplace to see economic globalization as a homogenizing, universalizing model which absorbs cultural differences and therefore ultimately rejects them. Nonetheless, much of that which is, for example, considered local - with a reference to tradition or, as having the nature of a localized culture - which is put forward against this tendency as worthy of preserving, is based on just the same foundations - for example on the myths of unmediated social relations and cultural essentialism. The concept of cultural difference, which is constitutive, for example, in the cultural paragraphs of the European Union somehow assumes that regional cultures are transparent for all of those who take part in them. But also the concept of community which has achieved so much importance in art dialogues of the past few years, is founded on a similar concept of social and cultural transparency. A community is, according to this, a socially and culturally homogenous space within which everyone is completely clear about the intentions of their own, and other "cultures".

Here too, although it is spatially or socially a different dimension, the concept of difference collapses within a totaling perspective that harbors the danger of indiscriminately eliminating all that does not conform to this perspective. The normalizing of the European states, to name just one example of cultural spatial consequences of neoliberal politics and economies' which has been strongly thematicized in the cultural realm in the past few years, is therefore in no way merely an economically imposed phenomenon, but is closely connected to ideas of transparency which are likewise co-founded in ideas of community. The principle of the

heterogeneous cosmopolitan city is replaced by that of the village and its surveillance schemes.

In a space such as the present cultural and economic one, in which different and unequal power relations unfold, a clearly defined site and a community within, or a local cultural tradition of course no longer exist in and of themselves as a solid field of reference. Sites are the result of cultural, economic, ethnic, technological and medial constructions. It is to Oliver Ressler's merit that his work analyzes the symbol politics behind the self presentations of the global players in economic life. Series of parallel arguments can be gained from his texts for the field to which this observation is dedicated. Here one needs to mention only the most obvious motif of the firm as a community. Communities constitute themselves within hierarchically structured spaces, within unequal fields of power. Cultural construction processes and the arising fields of reference and underlying power relations which remain largely ignored during these transports would therefore be precisely the central themes to which post colonial aesthetic and representational practices must dedicate themselves.

But unlike Oliver Ressler most of them avoid it. The American anthropologist and cultural studies expert Arjun Appadurai explained his concept of the new globalized spatial organization in an interview with Ressler. Appadurai has always provided, in other places as well, [1] a methodological model for the analysis of these spaces with his differentiation between "locality" and "neighborhood". According to him, the world is covered by a pattern of de-territorialized ethno-landscapes. Sites which are "charged' in terms of identity, are less and less in line with actual lived in spaces. That which is commonly associated with the concept of the "local", previously expressed by the term "homeland", increasingly contains a virtual character. For

Appadurai the relevant frame for examination consists of imagined worlds which are created in a creative process. These sites are not to be understood as replicas or imitations of a site which actually exists yet is nonetheless distant and abandoned by immigrants. It is the experience of de-territorialization itself which must help significantly in shaping this new creation.

But even today this contradicts the powerful, old, western centered art industry. It still sees in art a global paradigm which supports the interests of its metropolitan centers. After Soho in the eighties, New York now allows for the economic revitalization of a second city district through art with the move of several galleries to West Chelsea. The price is that the professional public no longer wants to acknowledge in any way that which is sold in these galleries to finance the move are the quality products of a long style-defining art metropolis. Berlin is modernized with youthfulness by an ambitious Biennial which presents the young mainstream of gallery art in a cool ambient; with public spaces by construction site art actions at the Potsdamer Platz; and with cultural consciousness by the Holocaust memorial.

The consumer good in all of these efforts, art, is a stylistically institutionalized half-hearted mainstream postmodernism of painting, objects, installations, large format photography, which should, so to say, maintain the power position of the old - and in the art boom years of the eighties - golden triangle of market, media and museum against the new relations which have again begun to stabilize in the past two or three years around a new personnel.

The globalism fever has also gained ground within this power cartel. In the meantime even the guardians of western avant-garde such as the great Swiss curator Harald Szeemann have fallen prey

to its virus. As the head of the Venice Biennial 1999 he bought from institutions such as the New Yorker P.S. 1 - as of late merely a dependent of the MoMa - entire exhibitions with People's Republic of China contemporary art and spread them within his exhibition show. But also most of the others in Szeeman's collection of world art with the almost neoliberal dream motto "Everything Open" from young studios in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America found its means of transport to Venice through representation by both larger and smaller western trading houses.

Increasingly, critical voices are being raised in opposition to this new idea of world art of the hybrid. They suspect no more behind its boom than a refined version of the old postmodern strategy of artistic accompaniment to a differentiated market economy of lifestyle goods in a world wide commercialized cultural environment. In the multitude of exhibitions, for example those with contemporary African art which have assured visitor numbers in the past few years in Europe's art houses, they see a totally different mechanism in play: As a bazaar for non western artifacts - which totally satisfies the needs of the powerful in the global markets - such exhibitions delivered, so to say, finer and finer versions.

For the recently courted artists from Africa, Latin America or Asia this means that a balancing act is necessary for them to succeed in such contexts and at the same time make local and specific aesthetic and political issues understandable. It is precisely the local points of reference of their art which form the indispensable requirements for success. This balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult in the current economic situation.

It is primarily the youth, namely the immigrant children of the second or third generation in London, Paris, Los Angeles, New

York and other "global cities", who no longer fit into the identity models brought over and whose social positioning "in-between" must be regarded as a typical phenomenon of our times who have become the darlings of the glocal exhibition scene. Their identities appear to be built for the needs of the European world-culture exhibition industry: they carry the genetic traits of the ethnic other, clearly bringing the cultural capital of family or social experience of break and continuity, the knowledge of another social or historical construction and a complex network of experiences into their work. The question of to what or for what they belong, becomes an existential challenge for them.

Many of the exhibitions and art transports under the new self appointed "glocal" art industry have also served to make visible the metropolitan art scene which until now has been unexposed in the west. But even then they still significantly contribute to obscuring the in- and exclusion relationships still dominant in the translocal art industry.

The burning question is namely: can local potential still be seen at all after being transported into the exhibition and art industry of the western metropolis?

How such localities of artists can be built, how changes in a political situation at the transnational level and how an effect of the globalization process can directly influence the representation in such localities in the art industry, can be explained using several examples. Here I would like to choose an example which is significant not only because it deals with a real cultural, political, economic and medial border but also with a later appropriation of critical art strategies by institutions and their new interpretation in the sense of a pleasant post colonial universalism. In 1984 a group of local artists, activists, journalists and people from the educational

system in coalition with artists from LA, San Diego, New York and Mexico City, from both sides of the border in Tijuana and San Diego, began to confront the problems of this border, one of the best guarded in the world, with a series of projects, performances, exhibitions, info-evenings, video pieces, etc. which involved the local population and the local media.

It was not only about the border as a site of provocation [3], the disparity of a clash of a super power with a fast developing nation, about the exploitation of the Mexican workers in the American factories near the border, about the people who died during the illegal attempt to emigrate, but also about the empty space of the border itself which must be reinterpreted. With that, one does not only tie into the long Mexican tradition of cooperation of intellectuals, artists and activists or, along the same lines, onto the activist traditions of the New York scene, but rather attempts to make from both experiences a third, locally transplanted one. English speaking Chicanos and Americans, but also Hispanic immigrants on the one side and people from Tijuana who don't feel themselves at all to be Chicanos on the other, were involved. A paradigmatic situation. The motto was, among others: We cross, because we cross in different identities. The activist work lasted for several years and was severely and repeatedly impeded primarily from the American side. At the time the negotiations for the American free trade agreement (NAFTA) were underway. When this was agreed upon in the nineties, the representation and relationship of the American institutions with respect to the activities of the Border Arts Workshop changed fundamentally. Although it was clear that NAFTA was concerned with the free movement of goods and not people - in contrast, the borders which were still penetrable in the eighties were even more strongly

secured. The border crossing for business people was actually made significantly easier but for the rest it was made more difficult.

On both sides however, the representation of the border changed. In Mexico, official Chicano artists were brought into cities to acquaint the population with the population of Mexicans from the North using the structures of the Border Arts Workshop. In the USA on the other hand, the Border Arts Workshop label was reinstrumentalized into a festival label although not by the artists but rather by a series of cultural institutions. Suddenly there was plenty of money, artists with big names were invited to participate in these activities and the critical confrontation with the border mutated into a series of events used to indirectly profit tourism, advertising purposes and the promotion of good neighborly relations. Increasingly, the original participants were excluded or left the initiative of their own accord.

This story in particular shows that for many projects of the globalized art industry, it is then when they land in institutions that they no longer perceive questions of inclusion and exclusion from society, the rights of groups and the ways and means that the binary models such as public/private, active/passive formulated from them are used to differentiate citizenships. In this these works also dispense with the task of adequately presenting the concept that they profess to present. Nation and state as the concepts from which citizenship is represented symbolically but also concretely through initiatives from the art realm, must also be attentive to the many subnational border closures which have arisen under new economic conditions.

In addition to his concept of locality, Appadurai has also brought another concept into the discussion, that of "neighborhood". This refers to the virtual or actual spatial realization of locality through

social relationships. Neighborhoods arise not only in confrontation with the ecological and economic conditions but primarily in contrast to and as a dismissal of other neighborhoods, other "ethnoscapes". Appadurai's considerations about the social construction of locality are the result of thinking over the consequences of a "global cultural flow". According to that, the local, the site, is essentially a fragile social achievement.

Techniques of the production of locality however are still given too little attention. If one goes into the cultural sphere, eastern Europe is a good example of this.

"Eastern Europe functions like a symptom of the highly developed West, especially in terms of media and avant-garde art strategies. If one observes the parallels between East and West, then one finds in eastern European media and art production important examples of a perverted and/or symptomatic logic with regard to western strategies and visual representations which are tied with each other in various ways." wrote the Slovenian theorist and video artist Marina Grzinic in springerin [4]. Grzinic probably has, among others, quite a particular aspect of this logic in view: the import function of the Soros Centers. As we well know, the financial speculator, Georges Soros, has calmed his Popperian conscience calling for the development of an open society in eastern Europe with a financial support program for social science, educational programs, social programs and also centers for contemporary art. Through these centers, imports from art discourses were brought into local scenes which had already proven their critical ability in the West. Many, including even those who profited from these activities, complain that that led to a shift in attention away from local points of juncture. It is from these points of juncture, also at a level of symbol politics, thus in art, that the resistance against incessant western imperialism should actually still be developed.

The newly imported use of western discourse tools from Cultural-Studies, Race- and Gender studies to a universalizing post-colonial approach, certainly bring with them the danger that the on-site cultural production merely orients itself according to their standards. The art which results from that is a type of locally colored rehashing of New York's media critical neo-conceptual art of the late eighties. Yet now that the Soros Centers have become the refuge for curatorial and journalistic information from Manifesta through documenta to the feature story of journals of western European art, much of what has come out of eastern Europe in the international exhibition industry of the past few years has gone through precisely this filter. This is also because the centers were the only ones which financed catalogues, worked out exhibition projects, were highly present in the Internet with their info-pages, and continuously supported the development of Internet art.

Grzinic asks even further, "what, if in contrast to the fantasy of the Internet and its overpowering globality which imagines itself to be the utopian dream of a (virtual?) community in harmonious and universal exchange relations, the eastern European 'Monster' is introduced as not only 'Monster' but also as a terrifying neighbor (at least some of the eastern European artists, media activists and theorists fall under this category) which rejects the philanthropic western ideology of sharing and pure exchange?"

Already at the beginning of the nineties, with a somewhat different focus, Martha Rosler pointed out the dangerous burdens of representing a cheerful globalizing multicultural culture industry: "from the perspective of an industry which is driven by the dictates of fashion and the arrival of identity politics, multiculturalism in the art world means no more than the inclusion of a fringe group of producers who stir up public interest with their novel glance. A

handful of young colorful, gay or lesbian artists are thrown into the system for an undetermined amount of time, they are given shows in international museums and galleries. A few are offered highly paid sponsorships and stipendiums. A smaller number of already older artists are recruited for university posts - whereby, I'll quickly add, these reasons for being recruited are of course no worse than any others. What differentiates the fashion of 'multiculturalism' from the art world's 'Marxism and political art' fashion of the seventies is the size of the reward. Powerful cultural institutions such as the Rockefeller-Foundation and many universities which did not really pay much attention to the older version of political art, are now quickly clambering into the sponsoring of multiculturalism which sets up more the support of integration than an economic restructuring. Multiculturalism accepts that artists represent communities beyond the art world. Who then do artists represent when they work on political critique? It is naturally quite possible that the two, despite the shift of rhetoric, are bound only by the common status of being passing fashion phenomena. But what remains certain is that these marginal shifts don't change the 'white' power structure of curators and high officials in museums." [5]

The statements from Grzinic and Rosler clearly support exactly how fictional this supposed globalization of the art industry is. A convincing conception of critical and political aesthetic practice beyond the traps of a pleasant multiculturalism necessarily goes along with a radical re-definition of the concept of political/critical artist. Oliver Ressler's work on such a conceptual change and his insistence on the emancipatory ability of such work also in the art realm, has led with "The global 500" to a shift in attention away from local points. It is from these points that most of the resistance to the incessant western imperialism is developed, also at

the level of symbol politics, i.e. in art. Then if, as is commonly desired, it can be assumed based on the advancing globalization processes that exhibitors and exhibits no longer belong to two different socio-cultural "totalities" but rather, are part of a global economy of reciprocal connections, then how can the common differentiation between internal and external be maintained and described as inclusion/exclusion in models of exhibitions?

[1] see the interview by Christian Höller with Arjun Appadurai in springerin - Hefte für Gegenwartskunst Vol. 3/98.
My argumentation also further follows: Peter J. Bräunlein & Andrea Lauser, Grenzüberschreitungen, Identitäten. Zu einer Ethnologie der Migration in der Spätmoderne. In: kea 10, 1997.

[2] Christian Kravagna pointed out this fact again and again in a number of publications (among others, in springer Vol. 3/97 and springerin Vol. 3/98) and lectures.

[3] also see in addition, Ursula Biemann's Video work "Performing the Border", 1999, and the documentation of the project: Money@Nations.access der shedhalle Zürich from November 1998 and the project presentation for that in: springerin Vol. 2/99.

[4] The manuscript presented at the symposium put together by Christian Höller, "translocation (new) media/ art" in January 1999 in the Viennese Generali Foundation can be read in: springerin, Vol. 1/99.

[5] Martha Rosler's "PlacePositionPowerPolitics", In: "The Subversive Imagination", Ed. Carol Becker, London 1994.

[from: Oliver Ressler (Ed.), "The global 500", Edition Selene, 1999]