

Blank positions in ongoing activities

How art and politics make new sense

(c) Michael Kröger

“Politicians represent their ideology, no matter what tasks need to be solved in the community. [...] Artists paint, dance, compose, write and direct, no matter how hopeful or hopeless things are in the rest of society.”

Dirk Baecker, *‘Not hoping for uncertain wealth: innovation in the church’* (*‘Nicht hoffen auf ungewissen Reichtum’*)

<http://www.dirkbaecker.com/Innovation.pdf>

Art

today has quite literally become a *rousing event* prompting viewers to think here and now about themselves differently and to reconsider their relationship with others. One significant aspect is that in the presence of contemporary art, viewers becomes arrangers of new experiences overlapping with media experiences from political contexts.

Depending on the occasion and the exact social situation, individuals can nowadays see themselves as either victims of oppressive social conditions, as accomplices of an imminent ecological disaster, or as co-producers of a society geared to creative aestheticization. Everywhere we are involved in ongoing activities as *participants* – at the stock exchange, in politics or in an art performance, i.e. processes that work (although that’s debatable).

But where would we be if – seen from a certain distance – we adopted our own (political) stance? If we knew the answer to this question, there’d be no need to write this essay. Language is a fine thing, especially the subjunctive! Suppose we saw art in relation to politics and discovered that both changed as a result? What if art couldn’t replace politics but could still comment on its activities? And what if at the same time politics couldn’t develop its own as yet unknown powers without art interfering? Can art change the prevailing sense of politics? And how would the much-vaunted autonomy of art be altered as a result?

.... and its opposite

“Everyone’s a victim – no one’s a criminal.” This would be a politically correct and ideologically apt way of describing the social situation in which we live. Yet despite all the ideology of collective non-responsibility – that social drug which most of those who have

been socialized since the end of the twentieth century have taken and continue to indulge in – today things revolve not just around self-fulfilment but also around the “inevitability of creativity” (Andreas Reckwitz). These days, creativity is a false blessing and a true curse: “People *want* to be creative – and they *should* be.”

Everything becomes possible. *My life* has become an aesthetic event – something which is totally unprecedented. Instead of serving the common good, I place myself on a pedestal: *my life, my story, my presence*.

In the eighteenth century, there was a popular saying which went: *On ne vit qu’un seul fois* (*We live more than once*). Nowadays we could say: *Everybody lives twice – on the one hand in the invisible space of the political and social order, and on the other in moments of visible presentation*. Politics is literally the opposite of visibility, replacing responsibility with presentation. Politics today mainly trumpets its own achievements, i.e. the maintenance of power. It is not necessarily interested in revealing its own conservative workings.

By contrast, art criticizes this form of politics which does nothing but safeguard its ideological reserves by creating forms and contexts which do not primarily place themselves in the spotlight but expose the rifts between the invisible and the visible, between the fictitious and what is shown. It is above all artists who remind us that playing with images cannot replace reality. Instead, it creates spaces between images, symbols and their respective changes just waiting to be filled. Politicians, however, are preoccupied with other things in the background – or present themselves even at their swearing-in dressed without a tie and in white sneakers.

Messages have nowadays frequently been replaced by fun and excitement. Many of those active in the political system play and talk with the help of implicit, unconscious images. Art uses autonomous forms to pretend it can make this state of affairs transparent. Whether it truly can is always a matter for debate – as this essay shows.

References

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