

autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe (2001)

GelöbNIX and Horror Vacui

Since the 1980s, German city councils are busy reshaping public spaces according to the needs of consumerism, service industry and profit: Benches are disappearing to discourage homeless and other unwanted people from relaxing without consuming, entire streets are sold off to warehouses and transformed into shopping malls, communicative spaces are being transformed into expensive museums. Police is patrolling in the streets to make sure that shoppers remain undisturbed, buskers and beggars are sent away, and the general public is asked to contribute to keep the inner cities clean and tidy.

Many groups affiliated to the left are not amused by this process. Some are not interested in writing petitions, engaging with political parties or organising traditional demonstrations. Increasingly, people are turning to other forms of political speech. The answer of the artist group 01 to the increasing privatisation of the south German city of Stuttgart was:

1. Horror Vacui Summer 1998. A sunny day in the pedestrian zone. People are bargain-hunting in the summer-sales, flaneurs are leisurely strolling on the central „Schloßplatz“, passing the punks who chose this public space as summer residence. The sounds of an indie band are lingering until they'll be sent away. Even some homeless people are around, asking for change. Then suddenly, an obstacle appears. A large empty area is fenced off with red and white plastic ribbon. The designated test-area is secured by ten men and women. Through their green berets and black jackets with „security“ printed on them, they are easily identifiable as members of a private security service. They deny access to everybody who is unable present a permit. To apply for a permit, you need to fill in a questionnaire available at the official-looking desks at both ends of the fenced-off area. They are decorated with the logo of a research group called „Future with Security“. Some helpers dressed in white T-shirts complete with the same logo are distributing leaflets explaining the project. Behind their desks, representatives of „Future with Security“ are available for further information and assistance. They explain that the purpose of both fencing and questionnaire is to set up a profile of passers-by and to test the potential to control the space. The research group has been commissioned by the local company „Firma Biehle“, who are intending to buy the whole square. The results will be evaluated to provide a basis for decision-making of „Firma Biehle“. Their corporate-looking questionnaires are asking for gender, age, purpose of the visit in town, where people live, whether they are paying for their shopping in cash or credit card, and whether they would agree to privatisation of the square. After completion, people are either handed a „Welcome-to-the-Test-Area“ leaflet or a „Sorry-Not-Eligible“ leaflet. No-one would suspect that the two versions are handed out completely at random. Both are complete with logo and formal typography. Only the second part uncovers the „real“ explanation of the project: A critique of the ongoing privatisation of public space. Two policemen left the scene rather confused and without interfering after they were told that this was an art-event, and by no means an unauthorised political action.

Was it political art, even „new genre public art“, or political activism functionalising art merely as camouflage? Karin from the artist group 01 is not interested in definitions. It is clear to her that „Horror Vacui“ was not intended as a defence or legitimisation of „Art“ with a capital A – it was just the best way to distribute as many leaflets as possible: “People are attracted by images”. At the same time she emphasises that the idea owed much to an „artistic“ approach of doing things: A focus on images and stories as the action developed, an ability to let the mind wander without

immediate outcome, an accuracy in realising the aesthetic set-up: “Everybody who has to do with art knows one thing – you need an image or a story”.

In recent years, this kind of political articulation has become more popular among left-wing activists. Drawing on experiences and narratives of the Situationists in France, the Yippies in the US, the Indiani Metropolitani in Italy, the Dutch Provos and the German “Spaßguerilla”, to name only a few , a creative kind of political communication is being re-invented. Anger, analysis and the pleasure to play with signs and symbols are merging and becoming part of the public arena. Mark Dery in the US calls it culture jamming , we prefer the term communication guerrilla , since our practice owes much to reflections about communication theory: We realised that often, the best argument is useless if nobody wants to hear it. So instead of focussing exclusively on the message, we started to think about ways of distorting the ‘channels’ and modalities of communication. Also, the more hardcore strategies of the radical left – breaking windows, trashing McDonalds?, stopping this nuclear waste transport or that neo-fascist meeting – have become the included other of the state: the roles are set, they know how to deal with us, they even need us to provide a symbolic balance against the extreme right and to justify new repressive laws. Yet the image of dangerous troublemakers can become a useful element in the temporary redesigning of public spaces. By playing with the discourses and representations of power rather than banging their heads against them, the “designers” can turn a spectacle of power into their own scenery – this happened at the occasion of:

1. „GelöbNIX!“ - an anti-militarist intervention In October 1999, in the year of the Nato-bombing of Kosovo, the German military forces („Bundeswehr“) celebrated a public swearing of young soldiers on the „Schloßplatz“ in Stuttgart. Since military parades are somewhat unpopular in Germany since World War 2, these celebrations have been invented as a suitable substitute, staging the soldier as the ‚Citizen in Uniform‘. The last public swearing in Stuttgart in the early eighties had turned into a massive riot. Now, almost twenty years later, state authorities thought that it should be possible to try again. Yet, a broad alliance of local anti-fascists and peacenics was pissed off enough with this demonstration of militarist rituals to take action – but not quite as the officials expected.

A series of talks against militarism and war was organised and publicised in various local social centres and the media. The leaflet which put the protest against the public swearing on the agenda used the official logo of the city of Stuttgart, giving a first hint to the style of the forthcoming interventions. Later, another leaflet issued by the City of Stuttgart turned up in households and official information points. Graphics and language were a perfect and only slightly distorted replica of official publications. The slogan „think globally – act locally“, was turned into „think locally – act globally“, referring to the global activities of the German army. Even the symbol of the Iron Cross (a military order which has been in use in Nazi-times), taking off from the icon of a globe, didn’t look suspicious against the friendly Stuttgart-yellowish background. Inside, the major gave a potpourri of catchphrases and buzzwords that had become fashionable during the NATO-bombing of Kosovo: Taking responsibility, facing world-wide challenges, defending the values of civilisation – „Machen Sie mit“! The City of Stuttgart announced its own series of events. The red cross offered the possibility for personalised blood-donations („your chosen soldier will be available after the oath“). A local resident who won the 1998 Olympic 5000 meter race reminded citizens of their responsibility towards their bodies and invited citizens and soldiers for communal jogging. The MP of the green party would chair a panel discussion of airforce-pilots, explaining why attacks on civil targets to avoid confrontations with armed forces are an inevitable moral lesson from German history. The local transport company announced under its own logo that on the day, citizens would be offered free public transport to make good for the delays. And finally, a special hotline was advertised for people to reserve their seats. It goes without saying that all the speakers and organisations learned only from a rather amused report in the local newspaper how the anti-militarist communication guerrilla expected them to contribute.

Only the city counsellor for safety and public order knew beforehand, since the phone number of the hotline was his and never stopped ringing. By that time, people had started talking about the public swearing and what would happen. Rock fans were looking forward to a free concert with famous bands, which was advertised as entertainment for the evening, again under the logo of the City of Stuttgart. The media reported that one of the bands didn't like this kind of fake-gig and tried to sue the designers. To make sure that the police was also alerted, some teccies had set up a really dangerously looking – but un-linked – WebPages? featuring militant action („How to throw an egg“) and calling punks and other anarchists to invade Stuttgart.

The stage was set – police and city council expected a riot, the media had already started questioning the use of a public representation of military power, activist groups were hoping for as many policemen as possible to play with on the day. It became a nice game. The soldiers took position, surrounded by three circles of riot police to protect them. Shoppers and cars were searched („Any dangerous items in that bag?“) and traffic came to a standstill. Later, the papers commented on this – does it make sense to demonstrate the integration of soldiers in civil society when the army must be protected so heavily from the public?

The expected battalions of anarchist thugs, however, remained absent. Instead, some figures dressed in clean white anti-virus-suits and white masks erected a barrier of white material, long enough to encircle the police encircling the soldiers, high enough to cover the length of a human body. Against the green of the lawn, the white border looked like some hygienic device. Some more leaflets explained why this precaution was necessary: a health warning announced „Violence is contagious!“ This time, the layout was inspired by publications of public health organisations and insurances – bulleted lists, FAQs, and authoritative warning icons. Groups at risk were outlined, symptoms (extensive consumption of violent TV programs and alcohol, exaggerated need for security, pathological group formation through uniforms) were identified. In an authentic case study, Johanna H. from „Mothers Against the BW (Bundeswehr) Syndrome“ explained: „How my son got BW“. The „Association for a Secure and Clean Stuttgart“ invited people to help building a security wall against the flooding of the town with the dangerous virus – hence the white fence.

During the next days, the public discussion on representations of military power continued. This time, it was not deferred into a condemnation of rioters. Journalists and readers seriously doubted the army's use of public space, exchanging arguments that shifted the discourse from empty words around responsibility and security to the more tangible concerns about who is to use public space and how. 1. Strategic and tactical uses of public space Public space is an arena of negotiations, full of contradicting spectacles, signs and symbols, never fixed and always determined by social and power relations.

The ongoing process of privatisation is a strategic process in the sense of the French philosopher Michel De Certeau: Situated on the seat of power, city councils work with architects, designers, corporate businesses and artists to reshape inner cities according to the demands of a ‘symbolic economy’, satisfying the needs of potential investors and customers. This process produces a globalised architecture of restaurant chains and fashion shops, multiplex cinemas, museums, art-objects and malls, promising entertainment and the pleasures of consumption undisturbed by social struggles. To keep this promise credible, inner cities must be “safe”.

As a strategic discipline, urban development has many ways to comply with such requests. Benches are replaced by uncomfortable mini-seats or even flower-pots. Entrance areas of representative buildings (parliaments, malls, banks) can be made so intimidating with their aesthetic of marble, glass and steel that no passer-by would dream to sit down on the stairs and have a rest or play the guitar. If the aesthetic fence is not strong enough, homeless people, immigrants or black people, punks, buskers and anyone who might disturb the clean and rich image can easily be controlled and removed by the police or in already privatised areas by security services. Yet public space is not

determined by the strategies of power. It is also shaped by the feelings and desires of ordinary city-dwellers. They bring different expectations to Christopher Street Day, an election campaign, a public swearing of soldiers, the summer sales, a demo against racism, the annual wine festival or carnival.

People are constantly developing practices to use the space in other than the planned ways – this is what De Certeau calls tactics. The expensive new floor of the pedestrian zone becomes a playground for skateboarders, the clean walls of a newly renovated building turn into canvas for graffiti, the covered cashpoints develop into favourite party-zones. All these tactics are not invented from scratch. The material provided by the symbolic economy is already in place. Users and inventors of such ephemeral ‘temporary autonomous zones’ can never expect to remain in place for long – they are not in a position to define the space permanently.

The space-designers who staged “Horror Vacui” created a situation of their own. They condensed the scattered signs and symbols denoting privatisation and control: Security guards with their military-style uniforms and decisive body language, exact lines of red-and-white tape well known from countless building sites reflecting an aesthetics of authority and legality, neatly dressed and logo-ed bodies of the incessantly friendly staff of the service industry, the authority of academia combined with the popular feature of marketing research, the bureaucratic corporate language. In addition, the image was completed by some local characteristics. The name of “Firma Biehle” denotes a specific type of successful local middle-range business, and their promise to guarantee a “safe and clean place in the future” reflects a regional obsession with cleanliness. To their own surprise, 01 was speaking the voice of power so well that Horror Vacui was not removed by the police. 01 had hit the cultural grammar of urban control.

Paradoxically, the effectiveness of tactics may increase where representations of power are particularly manifest. The more the dispositives of normality are developed, the more they become vulnerable to vicious distortion. GelöbNIX re-defined a spectacle of power. Police, soldiers, city-users and activists were included in the choreography of the happening, the boundaries between actors and audience were blurred. It was a policeman who correctly analysed: “Is this a kind of carnival or what?” Long before the day, expectations of audiences ranging from public via administrators and police to activists were raised using their respective languages and media. Popular memory of a big riot during the previous public swearing 20 years ago could be exploited to create a diffuse and ambiguous mixture of expectations and emotions beforehand. A scenery of large amounts of uniformed men against a background of national flags and the lawn of a 19th century castle was provided by the state. From long experience, the GelöbNIX crew knew that the police would close off the space. The best way to deal with this would be to help them in this effort. Yet a strong visual image would be needed to detourn the meaning of this gathering.

The idea was “white” – as a non-colour making a powerful non-statement, as a negation of the black usually used by anarchists, as a nice contrast with the green of lawn and uniforms. “White” set off a chain of connotations: cleanliness, hospitals, germs – the violence-enhancing BW virus was invented. The hegemonic concept of “violence” that is often used against militant demonstrations would be turned against the state itself. The white safety-fence also played with the racist discourse on fear of being flooded and invaded by uncontrollable dangers – viruses, vermin, foreigners. Neither GelöbNIX nor Horror Vacui attempted to achieve a permanent, ‘strategic’ change in the architecture of the urban public spaces they redesigned for a few hours. Yet such interventions may be part of the development of a ‘strategy of tactics...’ 1. Taking Tactics Further Tactics of the everyday are expressing desires other than those included in strategic planning, and in that way, they often acquire a subversive meaning. Yet they are not necessarily meant to be political interventions. The unruly skateboarders mentioned above were attracted by a new and even surface. They played upon its practical function, the symbolic function as a signifier for luxurious urban consumption, or its contextualisation as a sign of the symbolic economy may be part of it, but the

scateboarding didn't happen explicitly as a critique - more like a way to reappropriate public space. The critique is articulated through an everyday activity. Horror Vacui and GelöbNIX relied on this tactical approach insofar as they detoured material provided by the dominant discourse. However, other than the practices of everyday life described by DeCerteau?, as actions of communication guerrilla they were politically articulated, linked to the political discourse. Horror Vacui was positioned within a national campaign against privatisation, exclusion and an obsession with security in German inner cities, called out by an alliance of artist and political groups. GelöbNIX was part of an ongoing political discourse about the role of the German army in the year of the Kosovo war. Both interventions were situated within a wider critical discourse articulated by social movements, in which strategic demands like "no bombing" or "open access to the inner cities" were made. Yet they were not confined to the designated political space marked by a culture of political parties, demonstrations, info-stalls, demands and frustrating meetings and the speech of morality. On the other hand, although happenings have a long tradition as artistic articulations, they could not be treated as affirmative artistic contributions to the symbolic economy. Taking tactics further, contextualising political issues in unusual ways and refusing any clear definition can help to widen the political space.

Detournements, happenings and similar interventions can insert the political into daily life, if the organisers are taking their own experience with public space and their own local knowledge into account. If you go to the city for summer sales, you hardly expect your bag being controlled by police. This caused irritations to many shoppers at the day of "GelöbNIX", distorting a positive image of police who should be there to protect "us" and reserving controls to "others". Ideally, they are part of a specific local environment and mentality, enabling them to draw on detailed local knowledge, local anger, local pleasures and the secret subversive desires of ordinary people. For example, quite a few citizens chose to use the free ticket for public transport in one of the fake leaflets, although they could have realised with a little consideration that it was a prank – and maybe they did. The same leaflet was reported in the local section of the newspaper with some amusement – another sign that it had met local interest. And only if an intervention works locally, it can become relevant in a broader context.

In our experience, a focus on images and playful forms creates new alliances amongst the organisers. If it is not necessary to agree on every detail of the political analysis, preparations can be more inclusive. Artist and activist scene are beginning to overlap. A new arena of political articulation opens up again – and by using images, music, bodies, performances, activists are re-discovering the pleasures of aesthetic experiences as a part of political speech.

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