

Subversive Affirmation

On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance

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In the present issue of *Maska* we are presenting articles and materials which critically analyse examples of different strategies of subversive affirmation - like „over-identification,“ „yes revolution,“ or „paradoxical intervention“ - in various contexts. Thus the issue includes articles that lend a voice to the methods, strategies, and practices of an artistic perspective of affirmation within totalitarian and democratic systems and socialist and capitalist economies, while taking the respective context into consideration. Furthermore some articles are attempting to historically classify the artistic practices of affirmation and trace them back to their origins.

Our thesis is that the methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification that have been forming since the 1960s especially in Eastern European art, were later - i.e. after 1989 - increasingly perceived in the West, appropriated, and carried over to other areas, such as (media) activism. Since the second half of the 1990s we are witnessing an increasing use of subversive affirmation in contemporary media and net activist contexts. Thinking of projects and artists like Christoph Schlingensiefel, ubermorgen, 01.org, Heath Bunting, -Innen, and The Yes Men it becomes clear that they all have (more or less successfully) made use of the tactics of resistance through apparent affirmation of - and compliance with - the image and the corporate identity and strategies of their opponents. However, what is utterly remarkable is that at closer inspection a lot of these projects seem to draw, although this is never explicitly formulated, on artistic tactics of diversion developed in Eastern Europe, or more precisely, in various Eastern European Socialist countries since the 1960s.

This thesis is discussed at length in **Inke Arns'** and **Sylvia Sasse's** introductory text „Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance“. The article attempts to identify tactics that have allowed artists to take part in a certain social, political, or economic discourse and affirm, appropriate, or consume it while simultaneously undermining it. These tactics always become visible where art is curbed by the strongest restrictions, for instance in Eastern Europe until 1989 and in political art, particularly leftist political art since the 1960s. The article attempts to historically classify the artistic practices of affirmation and trace them back to their origins (going back as far as to the absurd literature of the late 1920s in Soviet Russia). These mimetic practices, initially adopted by way of necessity (i.e. underground) in Socialist Eastern Europe and later chosen deliberately, led to an „art of practice“ and to forms of action and performance art that became one of the few „Eastern imports“ known to the West.

In the mid-1970s, **Natalya Abalakova** and **Anatoli Zhigalov** started working on projects using affirmative practices, for instance the series *Komandantskaja rabota* (*Commander's Work*), performed in 1982. TotArt characterizes its work as "total presence" in a "total situation" which „does not play with or imitate any constructions of ideological language or realia of social life“, but „immerses in the subterranean torrents of collective unconscious feeding them, looking for their deep roots and links, and giving them their true name“.

Double Life, a photographic series produced in 1975 by Croatian artist **Sanja Ivekovic**, consists of 62 pairs of pictures depicting each a female representation taken from advertisements of the time confronted with photos of the artist herself. The public and the private scenes uncannily resemble each other – even paradoxical as soon as one realises that the private photos have been shot days, months, or sometimes even years before the scenes in the advertisements. *Double Life* thus accomplishes a double movement: Similar to Cindy Sherman's well-known *Untitled Studies for Film Stills* from the 1980s Ivekovic very clearly denounces mimicry through mimetic strategies. Craig Owens has called this an "impossible complicity": the "necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced *precisely in order to denounce it.*" But while Sherman's works are photographic re-enactments, created *after the fact*, Ivekovic's photos carry signs of an 'impossible belatedness' which, uncannily, surfaces *before the fact*.

In their dialogue "The Slogans of the 'Collective Actions' Group" **Sabine Hänsgen** and **Andrej Monastyrskij** talk about the development of Collective Actions' art practice and the formal and semantic changes it underwent during the 28 years of its existence. In 1977 Collective Actions placed their first slogan, *Slogan-77*, between two trees in a forest nearby Moscow. While *Slogan-77* still made use of the Soviet slogan's form, the *Slogans* developed since then increasingly develop into a "complete formalization", a "nullification" of any ideological discourse and ultimately turn into a formal citation, an "abstract composition, a chromatic structure" with completely new contents.

Slavoj Zizek poses the rhetorical question "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" In his seminal text he describes the tactic of over-identification developed in the early 1980s by the group Laibach which in 1984 became one of the founding members of the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst. "Over-identification" works precisely through (over-)identification with the transgression or rather, with the "obscene superego underside of the system". By pronouncing in the open that which normally remains hidden, this strategy strikes more deadly a blow to the ruling ideology than any other form of critique.

As early as in the 1960s **Bazon Brock** started to use the terms "negative affirmation" and "yes revolution" to describe affirmative practices which he discovered in different contexts, in art, philosophy and political practices. In Brock's definition, "negative affirmation" is not only a 100% affirmation of what is being criticised, but the 150% exaggerated radicalized formulation of this demand. We selected the article "Radicalization of Difference: Strategy of Affirmation" and some (extracts of) other articles in order to give an overview of Brock's seminal theses on affirmative resistance.

Starting from Ralph Ellison's novel „Invisible Man“ (1958), **Dagmar Buchwald**, in her contribution „Agree, em to death and destruction – Subversive Affirmation and the Para-Site in Afrofuturism“, describes various strategies of „non-oppositional subversion“ and viral recoding in Afrofuturism. Using Michel Serres' concept of the parasite and Hakim Bey's concept of T.A.Z. she draws an intriguing panorama of „affirmative resistance“ reaching from the reaction to the invasion of Jamaica by British troops in 1655 to Underground Resistance and their „remix of invisibility“ as part of the Detroit techno scene.

Focussing on the so-called WTO actions of the American artists' group 'The Yes Men', **Martin Doll** describes in his article different fake interventions and their impact on 'reality'. Taking Michel Foucault's theses on power as a philosophical framework, Doll discusses how the 'The Yes Men' succeed "in speaking on behalf of others" and, besides, show, i.e. make

visible or audible, “under which signs the WTO defines a field of possible economic action and trade”.

In his article „Corporate Situationism – The Last Utopia and its Fake“ **Friedrich von Borries** detects intriguing parallels between the critique of the city formulated in Nike’s campaigns and visions of a „different city for a different life“ advocated by the Situationists. Von Borries who is the author of „Who’s afraid of Niketown? Nike-urbanism, branding and the city of tomorrow“, provocatively asks whether Niketown is the affirmative (although now commercialised) fulfillment of the vision of a Situationist city.

As a satirical prank, **Kembrew McLeod** trademarked the phrase "Freedom of Expression" with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and in 2003 gained notoriety when he sent a telecommunications giant a cease and desist letter for using the phrase without his permission. By adopting a corporate practice widely in use today leading to the growing commodification of language, McLeod poignantly shows how intellectual property law potentially and effectively restricts freedom of expression®.

Mark Siemons' essay "The Moment, in which the Real Shows itself. On Self-Provocation and Emptiness" is dealing with Christoph Schlingensief's action "Ausländer Raus (Bitte liebt Österreich)," (Foreigners out of the Country - Please love Austria) performed in Vienna in 2000 as part of the Wiener Festwochen. Asking how nowadays, when any criticism is immediately being incorporated into the system, it is still possible to formulate a critique of "System 1", Siemons finds a possible way out in what he calls the concept of "self-provocation". While provocation is about teaching others from the position of the enlightened, the tactic of "self-provocation" places oneself in a (fictional) situation that is being criticised and thus essentially serves to find out something about oneself. How can a fiction possibly generate the real?

For one day in May 2002 **Rimini Protokoll** inverted Germany’s system of political representation, and invited over 200 citizens of Bonn to copy, or re-enact, the session taking place at the same time in the German Parliament in Berlin. The speeches of the "protagonists" were transmitted live from Berlin, prompted through earphones, and simultaneously pronounced by the citizens of Bonn - including the heckling, voting, and applause. Each participant in Bonn took over the role of one delegate. But what happens when you copy such a session, when the voters represent their politicians? The text includes extracts of the script that Rimini Protokoll arranged for a radio play after the theatre project.

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