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Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance

Since the second half of the 1990s we are witnessing an increasing use of subversive affirmation in contemporary media and net activist contexts. Thinking about projects and artists like Heath Bunting, -Innen, Christoph Schlingensief, ubermorgen, etoy, 01.org, 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. In February 2005 even an entire conference dedicated to “Strategies of (In)Visibility” was exploring the fact that effective (artistic/activist) actions can exist without exposure.¹ 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.

Our thesis is that the methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification that have been forming since the 1960s, particularly 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. We are claiming that these tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification, initially adopted by way of necessity 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” in the West throughout the 1990s.

Not accidentally these artistic tactics have developed in so-called repressive political situations since the late 1920s. It seems almost as if the genesis of such tactics could only have taken place in face of a totalitarian machine. So, why then, one could ask, are these tactics that have developed in one, openly repressive context, today becoming important again, in a different – political, social, economical – context that is supposedly more liberal?

While in the context of openly repressive systems there were very narrow limits on what could and what could not be said, today we are confronted with a situation where everything (and thus nothing) can be said: The culture industry manages to recuperate and appropriate even the most critical viewpoints and render them ineffective. In both contexts, critical distance (an “outside”) proves to be an impossible or inadequate position. In this situation

brought about by the strategy of total recuperation and appropriation of critical viewpoints by the dominant political and economic system it is rather the viral-like stealth tactics of subversive affirmation that still seem to hold a potential of resistance.

Subversive affirmation: affirmation as subversion

Subversive affirmation is an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterized precisely by the fact that with affirmation simultaneously there is taking place a distancing to, or revelation of what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

Subversive affirmation and over-identification – as “tactics of explicit consent” – are forms of critique that through techniques of affirmation, involvement and identification put the viewer/listener precisely in *such* a state or situation which s/he would or will criticise later. The various tactics and parasitical practices have in common that they employ the classical methods of aesthetics, imitation, simulation, mimicry, and camouflage in the sense of ‘becoming invisible’ by disappearing into the background.

The term subversive affirmation appeared in the context of Moscow Conceptualism and described the literary practices developed by Vladimir Sorokin. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Sorokin wrote stories and novels in the manner of the 19th century novel (*Roman*) or in the style of Socialist Realism (*Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny*). Ultimately, these novels and stories always collapse because of their own over-serious realism.² Here, the concept of “imitative exaggeration” characterizes a strategy with which – according to Hirt and Wonders – the “post-avant-garde distills the implied violence and insanity out of the collective discourse and articulates it.”³ In Sorokin’s texts subversive affirmation is “repetition” as “re-enactment” of totalitarian and ideological practices and “at the same time their alienation, or estrangement (*Verfremdung*)”.⁴ It is an exposure, a “parroting” and “ruminantion”, it is the “discourse residing in the language of the discourse”.⁵

But Sorokin obviously was not the inventor of these practices. Rather, in his literary concept he appropriated and accumulated different techniques of the late Russian avant-garde, early Moscow Conceptualism, Laibach and other groups that independently had been developing similar tactics.

Since the early 1970s affirmative elements are present in all contexts of unofficial art in the former Eastern Block. These strategies, initially adopted by way of necessity (i.e. underground) in Socialist Eastern Europe and later chosen deliberately, led to a special “art of practice”. Some examples of this Eastern European “art of practice” were, in the 1970s, Anatolij Zhigalov’s *Komandantskie raboty (Commander’s works)* (Russia), *Supporting the Country’s Wheat Cultivation* of the Russian group Gnezdo, *Collector of merits* by Paul Neagu (Romania), in the 1980s the strategies of self-collectivisation and over-identification on the part of the group Laibach/NSK, the state-affirmative actions of the *Orange Alternative* in Poland, Muchomorj’s *Evenings Commemorating Lieutenant Rzhiveskij*, the *River Purifications* of Chempiony mira (both Russia), and, in the 1990s, the participation in the election by the *Governmentally Independent Control Commission* in Moscow (by the Radek Group) or Rassim Krastev’s work on his “West Body” (Bulgaria).

Facing various ways of affirmative practices we can differentiate between an abstract, structural affirmation, and a more concrete citation of contents. Typical for Moscow Conceptualism, besides Sorokin, is a structural repetition of totalitarian practices. Il’ya Kabakov for instance built “total installations”, in which he implemented the “mechanism of ‘double’ action work - the experiencing of the illusion and simultaneously the introspection of it.”⁶ The Medhermeneutics developed in their actions, installations and texts a specific “ideo-technique” (ideotekhnika) which they called the “science of ideological production and ideological creation”⁷. As the result, ideo-technique of every medhermeneutical discourse shows its own “ideodelik” (ideodelika), its hallucinatory, irrational reverse. Exploring collective situations, the group Collective Actions involved the participants precisely in such a state or situation that s/he would criticize later. Conceived as estranging participation or involving alienation, this tactic reveals how the targeted discourse, the discourse of collectivity or collectivism, functions – without distancing itself from it. Thus, when speaking of subversive affirmation we are not dealing with critical distance but are confronted with a critique as aesthetic experience that – via identification – is about creating a bodily/psychic experience of what is being criticized.

While Moscow Conceptualism analyzed the structure of totalitarian practices, other groups like Tot-art (Anatolij Zhigalov and Natalia Abalakova), Gnezdo (Nest), Chempiony mira (World Champions) or Muchomorj (Toadstools) rather worked with totalitarian practices estranging their contents. Typical examples are the re-enactments of subotniks (since the early 1920s subotniks regularly took place on Saturday as ‘voluntary workdays’ in

which often whole cities participated). In 1982 Anatolij Zhigalov for instance organized a *Golden Subotnik* in Moscow.⁸ At this time he worked as a janitor (kommandant) in a housing block and was thus in the position to officially organize a voluntary workday. But Zhigalov's workday slightly deviated from the norm. He did not order the participants to remove weeds from the ground or rake beds, but called them to paint benches with golden color. The residents, accustomed to follow the commander's directives, obeyed this unusual task. Thus, the workday was being transformed into an act of pure wastefulness. (Consequently, Zhigalov was arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital).

The group Chempiony mira organized comparable subotniks in 1987/88, for example *Hygiene on the shore* (*Gigiena Poberezh'ja*), *Shore* (*Bereg*), *Nostalgia for Cleanliness* (*Nostalgija po chistote*). All these actions were part of the series *Preventive Geography* (*preventivnaja geografija*).⁹ In *Hygiene on the shore*, for instance, they cleaned two kilometers of Koktebel's (Krim) shoreline by shampooing and wiping the rocks, and in *Nostalgia for Cleanliness* they transformed "hygienic practices into the ecology of culture". Obviously, all these 'subotniks' quoted the Stalinist idea of purification by giving it a new content. In this way of a systematical devaluation the purification became concrete, cute, and ridiculous.¹⁰

In all these actions artists worked with affirmative tactics which partly (in content or in structure) repeated socialist realist practices like purification, jubilation, and the creation of a collective body. But it was only the installations of Kabakov, the actions of Collective Actions and the texts by Vladimir Sorokin which, in addition to that, also repeated the aesthetic conditions of totalitarian aesthetics: the elimination of any kind of outside viewpoint (i.e. outside the artistic work). This complete vanishing of the visitors', viewers' or readers' horizon is the central principle of totalitarian aesthetics and at the same time the only structural basis on which subversive affirmation can succeed as subversive affirmation. Subversive affirmation has to – almost physically – involve the listener or reader in this situation so that s/he can understand his/her involvement afterwards and reflect upon it.

Orange Alternative: Voting Yes Twice

In Wroclaw, Poland, a slightly different practice of subversive affirmation was practiced by the so-called Orange Alternative around Waldemar Frydrych. Operating in 1987/88 the loose group developed what George Branchflower calls "Socialist Surrealism"¹¹. Making no explicit demands at all (unlike Solidarnosc), it adopted the strategy of directly challenging on the streets the State apparatus' monopoly on Truth. Close to the Situationist practice of creating situations, the Orange Alternative managed to involve ordinary people in their

,happenings' (on occasions attracting the participation of up to 13,000 people). On October 1, 1987, the happening *Who's afraid of Toilet Paper* was staged: „Focusing on one of the primary espoused functions of the State as one of redistributing the social product, the decision was made to aid the authorities in their task - redistribution begins at home.“¹² Members of the Orange Alternative solemnly distributed single sheets of toilet paper to passers-by.

"Let us share it justly. Let justice begin from toilet paper. Socialism, with its extravagant distribution of goods, as well as an eccentric social posture, has put toilet paper at the forefront of people's dreams. Are the queues for toilet paper an expression of (a) a call for culture? (b) the call of nature? (c) the leading role of the party in a society of developed socialism? Tick the right answer."

October 7th was the official Day of the Police and Security Service in Poland. This time, Wrocław youth under the banner of Orange Alternative decided to march to demonstrate their appreciation of these public servants for "doing their duty with a smile", showering police officers and patrol cars with flowers. Attempts to embrace the police and thank them were met with reasonable force and some arrests. During the referendum on social policy held on November 27th, 1987, Orange Alternative demonstrated and called for Wrocław to be the city with a 200% turnout: "Vote Yes Twice". During the Nowa Huta strikes in 1988 a letter was read out to the workers giving support to strikes in the most fulsome terms. The author of the letter was Lenin. And Stalinist hymns were sung by a crowd that gathered around the chimpanzee cage in the Wrocław Zoo. Such "happenings" continued throughout Poland, in Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk, Kraków and Warsaw during 1988.¹³

Over-identification – the ultimate form of subversive affirmation

Completely independently from the developments in Russia and Poland, the Slovenian group Laibach that originally called itself Laibach Kunst developed the tactic of over-identification. In 1984, together with the painters' collective Irwin, the Theatre of the Sisters of Scipio Nasica (today: Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung), and the design department New Collectivism (NK), the group co-founded the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). Laibach, founded in 1980 in Yugoslavia, became notoriously known for their "hyper-literal repetition of the totalitarian ritual" (Grzinić 2004). The tactic of over-identification is, if you wish, subversive affirmation in its ultimate form because it manages to create an absolute totality. Nowhere it is as visible as in the work of the group Laibach (and NSK).

The tactic of NSK¹⁴ did not formulate itself in an openly critical discourse of the state and its ideology; nor did it distance itself to ideology through irony or ironic negation. On the contrary, it was about a repetition, an appropriation of components and elements of the ruling ideology, a game with these “ready-mades,” a taking on of existing ruling codes in order to – according to Laibach – “answer these languages with themselves.”¹⁵ The spectacle can only be subverted by being taken literally, as the Situationists said. With Laibach an NSK, we are dealing with a subversive strategy that Slavoj Žižek termed a radical “over-identification”¹⁶ with the “hidden reverse” of the ruling ideology regulating social relationships. By employing every identifying element delivered either explicitly or implicitly by the official ideology, Laibach Kunst and later Neue Slowenische Kunst appeared on stage and in public as an organization that seemed “even more total than totalitarianism”¹⁷ – a provocative reference to the Yugoslav system.¹⁸

According to Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek, overtly criticizing the ideology of a system misses the point because today every ideological discourse is marked by cynicism. This means that the ideological discourse has internalized, and thus anticipates its own critique. Consequently, vis-à-vis a cynical ideology, according to Žižek, irony becomes something that ‘plays into the hands of power’. In such a situation what is most feared by the ruling ideology is “excessive identification [...]: the enemy is the ‘fanatic’ who ‘over-identifies’ instead of keeping an adequate distance.”¹⁹ NSK “*frustrates’ the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it* – by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.”²⁰ Over-identification makes explicit the implications of an ideology and thus produces such elements that may not be formulated publicly in order for an ideology to reproduce itself. Georg Witte writes something similar concerning the technique of subversive affirmation: By ‘radicalizing a ‘plan’ in its realisation, subversive affirmation unveils the ideological concept underlying this plan.’²¹

In March 1989, Laibach played in the Yugoslav capital Belgrade. Before the concert started, an explicitly and excessively nationalist speech was delivered partly in Serbian by Peter Mlakar of the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy of NSK, calling the audience to protect the purity and honour of the Serb people and defend the integrity of Serbian territory by all means. In order to emphasize the content of this speech the Laibach group employed all available means for the staging of a totalitarian aesthetics. All elements that would allow for a distancing or alienation were consciously excluded. The speech itself consisted of a direct appropriation and repetition of an address originally delivered by Serbian

president Slobodan Milosevic²². Mlakar's speech pinpointed the Serb nationalist rhetoric, which already could be heard back then in a Yugoslavia that had started to dissolve. There was, however, a slight danger that this appropriation could possibly be misunderstood: In the worst case, Mlakar's speech would be taken for granted, i.e. it would be understood in a truly affirmative way. In order to avoid this, the group resorted to a provocative move: During the speech that was in itself consistent (it consisted of seamlessly interwoven Milosevic quotations), central words and sentences would slip into German – a language that in Yugoslavia was synonymous with fascism. This move prevented any positive or affirmative reading. All in all, this speech proved to be deeply irritating for the audience because on all the other levels it was consequently affirming nationalist Serbian rhetoric.

Another good example for this kind of over-identification, i.e. for a tactic that allows for a participation in certain political or social discourses, for affirming them, appropriating them, or consuming them while simultaneously undermining them, is the so-called Poster Scandal. In 1986/87, New Collectivism (NK), the design department of the NSK, unleashed an internationally respected scandal when it submitted a poster design based on a Nazi poster to the competition for the *Day of Youth (Dan Mladosti)* celebrated each year on Tito's birthday on May 25th – and promptly received the first prize awarded by a highly official pan-Yugoslavian committee consisting of representatives from the Association of Slovenia's Socialist Youth, the Yugoslavian People's Army, and the Association of Yugoslavia's Communists. NK's poster consisted of a slightly altered version of the picture *Das dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums* (The Third Reich. Allegory of Heroism, 1936) by the German artist Richard Klein and portrayed a youth marching victoriously into the future equipped with baton, Yugoslavian flag, and other state insignia. The committee praised New Collectivism's poster and justified the award by saying that the design “expresses the highest ideals of the Yugoslavian state.”²³ Following the exposure of the image's source, it was all the more embarrassing when the Yugoslavian federal officials attempted to press charges against NK for “disseminating fascist propaganda,” which the Slovenian officials were able to hinder – luckily, for the artists.

Oberiu: An almost forgotten source of subversive affirmation/over-identification

It's interesting to ask whether the artistic practices of subversive affirmation and over-identification only appear in the second half of the 20th century, or if they can be traced back to earlier forms, or even to their 'origins'. There appear to be largely unknown conceptual links to the absurdist practice of Oberiu of the late 1920s / early 1930s which has been called

the last Soviet avant-garde (Oberiu is short for Association of Real Art²⁴ – Daniil Charms, Aleksandr Vvedenskij and others). Only a few researchers have so far linked contemporary strategies/tactics of subversive affirmation (esp. in Moscow Conceptualism) to Oberiu²⁵.

In the context of totalitarian literature we can designate subversive affirmation as a “literary strategy of the exterior” in an “interior” (i.e., totalitarian culture) that presents itself as “total”.²⁶ Within Oberiu’s texts, this “strategy of the exterior” is realized *on the one hand side* through an articulation of falling silent – like in Charms’ *Blue Notebook No. 10* – which thus points to and articulates the border between allowed speaking and imposed silence. Subversive-affirmative expression “completes the movement with which the construction of the total becomes a paradox project, thereby rendering it visible.”²⁷ It also makes visible the techniques “which prevent the exterior from voicing itself”. *On the other hand side* the texts of the late avant-garde copy, simulate and ‘embody’ the strategies of the interior (of the ruling ideology) and thus focus „on their articulation“²⁸. The absurd literary bodies literally *embody* the ideological reduction that radically deforms their anatomy as well as their ability to articulate themselves.

The writers of the late Soviet avant-garde thus turn themselves into what the ruling ideology expects them to be, without – and this is important – without affirming that which they subject themselves to.²⁹ This is what identifies them as predecessors of subversive-affirmative techniques. At the same time though, one can feel a latently present “metaphysical fear”³⁰ and an “aesthetics of panic”³¹ which still locates them very clearly in the context of totalitarian literature, and not, as some scholars have claimed, in a kind of proto-postmodern attitude.

For Oberiu, repetition of already existing linguistic forms remains the only possible form of utterance. While the futurists focussed on the innovation of the code (thus on making strange words), the Oberiuty intended syntactical estrangements that would destabilize the entire semantic and pragmatic logic (while keeping the word units intact).³² The futurist/formalist principle of “not-understanding” (brought about by making strange words) is being replaced in the poetics of Oberiu by the dialogical-communicative principle of misunderstanding.³³ They are dealing with an ‘empty’ language which does not possess any positive notion with which to describe the world. This kind of speaking can articulate itself only through repetition of already existing formulations. This apophatic “discourse-thinking” which relies on the techniques of taking literally while sticking to the correct syntactic and grammatical forms of utterances³⁴, simultaneously points to something different through the “internal alterity”

contained within itself. The literary practices of Oberiu correspond to *repetition*, which, very unlike estrangement, effects a deletion or dissolution of distance. We are confronted here exactly with the disappearance of critical distance practiced the subversive affirmation and over-identification described in the beginning.

In 1940, shortly before his own arrest, Daniil Kharms for instance wrote a fake confession of a nameless defendant entitled *Reabilitacija* (Rehabilitation) in which he makes use of affirmative practices. Obviously this very minimalist text is connected to the fake confessions and self-accusations of the show trials happening since the late 1930s. For his self-defence, Kharms' criminal chooses the Stalinist idea of inventing crimes. Undoubtedly, the idea of inventing crimes was a reference to the show trials. Kharms' inventions, or rather that of his protagonist, however, were much more fantastic and strange than the accusers ever expected. Thus, the accusers were confronted with the laying bare of their own strategy, which the accused had revealed with his confession. In this sense the confession was a confession about Stalinist techniques of truth production.

But also outside Oberiu we can find comparable tactics: Four years earlier, in 1936, the writer Isaak Babel' was in a similar situation like Kharms' protagonist. At the (in)famous conference against formalism in art and literature Babel' had to confess publicly why he had not been publishing anything during the last years. Babel', too, defended himself in a way that seemed absolutely affirmative. However, he did not invent fantastic reasons, he simply said the truth: He claimed not having been able to write because of his extraordinary self-criticism. Babel' said that he was such a strong self-censor that he couldn't write anything. The reaction of the public showed that nobody understood his way of speaking. On the contrary, as nobody assumed in his speech a possible tactic of subversive affirmation, the majority of the audience condemned Babel' for his posing. They were convinced that he really had given an affirmative answer to the concept of self-criticism.

Michel de Certeau: *Practice of Everyday Life*

Now we can ask ourselves: Is it possible to transfer these tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification developed in Socialist Eastern Europe to other social/political systems? If so, how would these tactics function, which forms would they take on/adopt? And what exactly would be affirmed? As stated above, we discovered a direct connection between (if not adoption of) certain (media) activist projects and their subversive-affirmative predecessors. In his famous book *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau provides

convincing reasons for the appropriation of tactics developed in a totalitarian setting in a through and through Capitalist context.

Subversive affirmation and over-identification are tactics – if we are to follow Michel de Certeau’s definition– that allow artists to take part in certain social, ideological, political, or economic discourses and affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. On the Western art scene, these phenomena appeared here and there among the *Lettrists* and the *Situationist International*.

When looking at the affirmative practices in art we are interested in how far, in a situation of limited individual freedom of expression, the usage or repetition of already existing forms, i.e. non-individual speaking or utterances, allows for critical, deviating or oppositional statements. Michel de Certeau talks about exactly these possibilities. He confronts the notion of passive consumption with the notion of active *usage* or *practice*. This “different production” is almost invisible because it articulates itself “not through its own products, but precisely in the way the products that are imposed by the ruling order are *used* or *practised*”.³⁵ The movements of this “different production” entirely happen ‘inside the enemy’s field of vision, in a space entirely controlled by the enemy. That’s why de Certeau calls this “different production” *tactics* (as opposed to strategies). Tactical practices create blurry vectors that consist entirely of the vocabulary of known languages and are subject to a pre-existing syntax (this could be also their danger, or, rather, difficulty). However, despite their using the same linguistic or social material, tactics manage “to stay heterogenous (or alien) to the systems they invade”, and, once inside these systems, they “wittily manage to deploy and formulate *different* interests and wishes”³⁶. According to de Certeau, statistical analysis proves quite destitute facing this phenomenon. Statistics are extremely limited because they can only “classify the lexical units which the vectors [of tactics] consist of, but to which they cannot be reduced”.³⁷ Statistics can only grasp the *material* of tactical practices (which is the same as the one used in strategies). It cannot, however, get hold of their *form*, which is what makes tactical practices alien to the ruling order.

***Please love Austria!*³⁸ by Christoph Schlingensief**

In the framework of the Wiener Festwochen in June 2000, Christoph Schlingensief organised the container action *Please love Austria! First European Coalition Week*. In this action, Schlingensief adapted the mass-media format of *Big Brother* to stage a media-savvy deportation of asylum seekers live from a container located next to Vienna’s opera house. Twelve participants – introduced by Schlingensief as asylum seekers – were placed in the

three containers. For seven days, from June 11 – 17, 2000, they were living in these containers under permanent video camera surveillance. The live images from the container were being streamed onto the Internet where anybody could watch them. Each day, people who called in by telephone could vote for two of the inmates who would have to leave the containers in the evening and were then being deported the same night.

By advertising the whole event as an action of the FPÖ (i.e. the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria, in power since 2000), Schlingensiefel could count on the attention of the mass media. On the roof of the containers the blue flags of the FPÖ were mounted. When a signboard with the text “Foreigners out of the country” was set up (together with the logo of the yellow press paper *Kronenzeitung*), the public applauded. Across the Herbert-von-Karajan-Square recordings of speeches by the FPÖ’s chairman Jörg Haider could be heard.

With this project, Schlingensiefel wanted to *„play the impossible so hard that it would reach the possible. There should be an end to speculating, an end to this stupid creation of distance through scepticism. On the contrary: It is impossible to contradict Haider. What is possible is playing the Haider card until its most extreme.”* On the website a global audience could see what it means to take seriously the Austrian right-wing FPÖ politician Haider’s suggestions concerning the solution of the “foreigner problem”.

Those of the audience who wanted to participate via the Internet could click on one of the candidates’ heads in the lower part of the website. There’s a biography of the asylum seekers, and a further click on “Vote” raises the chance of the elected to become one of the two people who are thrown out of the country in the evening. The person who would stay longest in the containers would be the winner and would receive 35,000 Austrian Shillings and an airplane ticket to return to their home country, or alternatively would be given the possibility to get married to an Austrian via an online-proposal.

The project received a lot of attention. During the whole duration of the project, the public and the media asked the same questions again and again: are the inmates real asylum seekers, or just simply actors? Is the daily deportation of two of them a fake, or is it indeed an element of European reality? Were the FPÖ banners on the containers authentic? And, a question that many enraged tourists asked themselves: Does the event on the square near the opera house meanwhile belong to Austrian reality? Questions and irritations were so far-reaching, that the city administration thought about putting up signs saying: *„Attention! This is a theatre performance!”* Of course Schlingensiefel did not allow this to happen. But this attempt alone was proof enough that his theatre “had reached a certain hyper-reality” once again.

Nikeground by 01.org

Only three years later, in September 2003, a news item again shocked the Austrian public: Karlsplatz, one of Vienna's main squares, would soon be renamed "Nikeplatz". This news was issued by representatives of the red "Nike Infobox" information center – a 13 ton hi-tech container – placed right in the middle of Karlsplatz, one of Vienna's historic squares. On the outer windows a curious sign attracts the attention of passers-by: «*This square will soon be called Nikeplatz. Come inside to find out more*». Inside the *Infobox* a charming couple of Nike-dressed twins welcomed curious citizens, and explained to them the revolutionary *Nike Ground* campaign: «Nike is introducing its legendary brand into squares, streets, parks and boulevards: Nikesquare, Nikestreet, Piazzanike, Plazanike or Nikestrasse will appear in major world capitals over the coming years!» A 3D project displayed in the *Infobox* gives information about a giant sculpture to be placed in the *Karlsplatz* or *Nikeplatz* from next year. It is a giant sculpture of Nike's famous logo, a 36 meter long by 18 meter high monument supposedly made from «special steel covered with a revolutionary red resin made from recycled sneaker soles».

Needless to say, it was all fake. The one-month campaign provoked the reactions of Vienna's citizens (ranging from protest to approval), city officials (reassuring the public that street names cannot be changed so easily) and, of course, the Nike group. Nike denied any involvement and started legal action to put an end to this bizarre performance.

The *Nike Ground* prank is the latest work of an organization known as 01.org, whose members are known to be significantly influenced by the work of Laibach/NSK.

The Yes Men by The Yes Men

The Yes Men is a project by a group of culture jammers, artists and activists from the United States called RTMark („arty mark“, a word game with „trademark“ and „arty“). The group has repeatedly irritated Internet users with faked websites that look confusingly similar to official websites of politicians and corporations. Amongst others, G. W. Bush became the target of such a fake. On the fake website GWBush.com Bush publicly recalled his alleged cocaine experiences. When asked about this during a press conference, Bush said publicly in front of TV cameras that "freedom should have its limits".

Further parody websites were those of the international trade organisation GATT (Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) www.gatt.org and of the World Trade Organisation WTO.org (both 2001). Some people and other trade organisations mistook it for the real thing and wrote in with questions about all sorts of trade matters. The members of RTMark (Mike

and Andy Bichelbaum, or: The Yes Men) decided to play it straight and accept invitations to conferences to speak on behalf of the organization they opposed – namely: the WTO. As spokespeople for the World Trade Organization, the Yes Men delivered shocking satires of WTO policy to audiences of so-called “experts.” At an international trade law conference in September 2000 in Salzburg³⁹, Austria, Andy Bichelbaum (i.e. the WTO) proposed a free-market solution to democracy: auctioning votes to the highest bidder. On the TV program CNBC Marketwrap Europe⁴⁰, the WTO announced that might equalled right, that a privatized education market would help replace Abbie Hoffman with Milton Friedman, and that there ought to be a market in human rights abuses. At a textiles conference in Tampere⁴¹, Finland, the WTO unveiled a 3-foot phallus for administering electric shocks to sweatshop employees. In May 2002, at a university in Plattsburgh⁴², New York, the WTO proposed that to solve global hunger, the poor should have to eat hamburgers—and then recycle them up to ten times. And at an accounting conference in Sydney⁴³, Australia, the WTO announced that in light of all its mistakes, it would shut itself down, refounding as an organization whose goals were not to help corporations, but rather to help the poor and the environment.

This sensational announcement caused world-wide reactions, among them a heated debate in the Canadian parliament. At this point the WTO headquarter in Geneva exposed the alleged WTO representative: „Although we appreciate the humor of the impostor, we do not want that prestigious news agencies like yours are tricked.” “This time it’s not about humor,” said Andy Bichelbaum who ‘represented’ the WTO in Sydney. „We really want to put an end to the WTO and change its charta, so that the poor would profit, and not suffer from trade politics.“

The most recent action of The Yes Men is called *Bush can*. This fall, The Yes Men are off campaigning for the "president" of the United States, to explain Bush's policies more clearly and honestly than the official campaign ever could.

Conclusion

What we are seeing in some of today’s most interesting – and we would claim also most powerful – media activist projects is something we have called the “tactics of explicit consent”. We have linked these “tactics of explicit consent” to the so-called 3rd Soviet avant-garde, Oberiu. Talking about Oberiu as potential predecessors of subversive affirmation / over-identification, we were especially interested in the fact that the language of Oberiu denies any kind of – as Jean-Francois Lyotard has formulated it – consolation through “appropriate form”⁴⁴. Repetition as apophatic denial of form locates the principle of

difference not between notions, or poles, but discovers or places it inside them. We can thus speak of elements of “proto-subversive affirmation” that are already present in Oberiu.⁴⁵

Today, in a situation characterized by the immediate and total recuperation and appropriation of critical viewpoints by the dominant political and economic capitalist system, the concept of critical distance proves to be completely ineffective. We are thus confronted with a new totality which excludes any kind of possible “outside” position or distance. It is, however, important to stress that this new totality is different from the totality of totalitarianism, although its effects are similar. In this new totality which is a totality of the market, consumers are either condemned to remain passive (i.e. to actively fulfill the consumer’s role assigned to them by the totality of the market) or to develop practices that consist in creatively handling the products pre-given by the ruling order. Today’s consumers’ tactics entirely consist of ready-made products which – by way of creative consumers’ practices (or tactics if we are to follow de Certeau) – are consequently made to function in an entirely different order.

Thought to a logical end, a genuine tactics of subversive affirmation or over-identification would ultimately refuse to be labelled as „art“, and thus to be recognized as subversion at all. Laibach’s refusal to issue any statement as to where they „really“ stand and New Collectivism’s poster scandal are possibly the instances that get closest to such an ultimate tactics of invisibility. These tactics provide, as we have suggested in this article, possibly the most effective method of subversion as of today. It is, for sure, also the most risky and potentially dangerous tactic as it can easily be misunderstood. In this constellation, it is the recipient to whom full responsibility is being transferred. At the same time, if well-conceived, this tactics is ultimately also the most intensive for the recipient.

Endnotes:

¹ „Strategies of (In)Visibility“, conference organised in the framework of *Republicart*, Goldsmiths College / Camden Arts Center, London, February 3-4, 2005

² Michel Foucault, for instance, spoke of the “possibility of a non-positive affirmation” that contemporary philosophy had discovered, an affirmation that affirms nothing, an affirmation without any transitivity – not a negation, but rather a direction to the border “at which the ontological decision is made”. Foucault, Michel: Vorrede zur Überschreitung, in: Foucault, Michel: *Von der Subversion des Wissens*, Frankfurt/Main 1991, p. 33.

³ Hirt, Günter / Wonders, Sascha: Legenden, die nicht enden. In: *Schreibheft. Zeitschrift für Literatur* 42 (Nov. 1993), p. 35.

⁴ Sasse, Sylvia: *Texte in Aktion. Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus*. München 2003, p. 14

⁵ Sasse, Sylvia/Schramm, Caroline: Totalitäre Literatur und subversive Affirmation. In: *Die Welt der Slaven* LXII (1997), pp. 306-327, here p. 308 / 317.

⁶ Kabakov, Ilya: *On the "Total" Installation*. Ostfildern 1995, p. 245.

⁷ Pepperstejn, Pavel, in: Monastyrskij, Andrej (Ed.): *Slovar' terminov moskovskoj konceptual'noj shkoly*. Moskva 1999, p. 43.

- ⁸ The action was a part of the series *Komandantskaja rabota* (*Commander's Work*) performed in 1982. The action *Subotnik po zakladyvaniju 'Allej avangarda'* (*Subotnik for the foundation of the 'Avenue of the Avant-Garde'*) performed in 1983 also belongs to this series.
- ⁹ The group Chempiony mira was founded in 1986 by Georgij Abramishvili, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Boris Matrosov, K. Latyshev, and A. Jachnin.
- ¹⁰ The group Muchomory (founded in 1978 by Sven Gundlach, Aleksei Kamenski, Sergei and Vladimir Mironenko, and Konstantin Zvezdochetov) performed similar actions. Wolfgang Weitlaner calls the maximum understatement comprised in their work the practice of „inverse sublime“. Weitlaner, Wolfgang: *Private Umsturzversuche. Zur Strategie des Umgekehrten Erhabenen im Werk des Moskauer Künstlers und Schriftstellers Konstantin Zvezdochetov*. In: Götz, Christine, Anja Otto, Reinhold Vogt (eds.). *Romantik – Moderne – Postmoderne*. Frankfurt a.M. 1998, pp. 352-386.
- ¹¹ On the Orange Alternative cf. Branchflower, George: Oranges and Lemons. In: *Here and Now*, No. 7/8, autumn 1988, <http://www.drifline.org/cgi-bin/archive/archive.cgi?list=spoon-archives/avant-garde.archive/papers/orange.txt>.
- ¹² Branchflower, op. cit.
- ¹³ Inversely, during the early 1990s Russian Actionism imported Western tactics of political resistance into Russia. Aleksandr Brener, for instance, tried to invade the the ministry of defence like a 1970s house squatter, or he invited Boris Jelzin to engage in a boxing contest on Red Square. In 1993 Osmolovski and the group Nezesüdik celebrated the 100th birthday of Mao Tsedung in the Moscow department store GUM. Dressed in black overalls and with dollar bank notes in front of their mouths they tried to roar in vain, 'war' and 'dictatorship'. In the mid-1990s several political parties were created: The gallery owner Marat Guelman organized the project "Instant party", Anatoli Osmolovski invented the "panic party", Aleksandr Brener the "party of the unguidable torpedos", Oleg Kulik the "party of the animals". Later they organized demonstrations and barricades in the style of 1968. But soon a general aversion against simulative and affirmative practices became apparent. However, Brener and also Osmolovski recognized that if one wants to leave the artistic playing field one must break out of the "quotation skin".
- ¹⁴ Cf. on NSK Arns, Inke: *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) - eine Analyse ihrer künstlerischen Strategien im Kontext der 1980er Jahre in Jugoslawien*. Regensburg: Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie 2002.
- ¹⁵ Laibach, quoted after: Wahjudi, Claudia: Zwölf Jahre musikalische Zitatenschlacht zwischen zwei konträren Systemen. Interview mit 'Laibach'. In: *Neues Deutschland*, August 13, 1992.
- ¹⁶ Zizek, Slavoj: Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists? In: *M'ARS - Casopis Moderne Galerije V/3.4* (1993), p. 4.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Groys, Boris: More Total than Totalitarianism. In: *Kapital*. Ed. by Irwin. Ljubljana 1991.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Barber-Kersovan, Alenka: 'Laibach' und sein postmodernes 'Gesamtkunstwerk'. In: *Spektakel / Happening / Performance. Rockmusik als 'Gesamtkunstwerk'*. Ed. by Helmut Rösing. Mainz 1993, pp. 66-80.
- ¹⁹ Zizek, Slavoj: Das Unbehagen in der Liberal-Demokratie. In: *Heaven Sent*, No. 5 / 1992, p. 49.
- ²⁰ Zizek, Slavoj: Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists? In: *M'ARS - Casopis Moderne Galerije V/3.4* (1993), p. 4.
- ²¹ Witte 2001.
- ²² Peter Mlakar "would end by directly quoting British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the key architect of European pre-war appeasement of Adolf Hitler." (Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire*, film script, 1995).
- ²³ Cf. *The Economist*, London, 3/14/1987, p. 49 and *Profil*, Vienna, 4/13/1987, p. 56, as quoted by: Ramet, Pedro: Yugoslavia 1987: Stirrings from Below. In: *The South Slav Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3 (37th year) (fall 1987), p. 34.
- ²⁴ *Ob''edinenie real'nogo iskusstva*. The Oberiu group existed between the end of 1927 and 1932, and is the last formation within the Russian or Soviet literary avant-garde before the abolition of all literary groups in 1932. For further information on Oberiu, see: Jaccard, J.-P.: *Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avantgarde russe*, Bern 1991; Cornwell, N.: *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, London 1991; Oberiu: *Vereinigung der realen Kunst - Topographie einer literarischen Landschaft*, part I: *Schreibheft 39* (1992), pp. 11-123; part II: *Schreibheft 40* (1992), pp. 7-109; Grob, T.: *Daniil Charms' unkindliche Kindheit. Ein literarisches Paradigma der Spätavantgarde im Kontext der russischen Moderne*. Bern u.a. 1994; Roberts, Graham: *The Last Soviet Avant-Garde. Oberiu: Fact, Fiction, Metafiction*. Cambridge 1997.
- The group existed during the time of the first five-year plan (1928-32) and its end thus met the forced end of the literaray-artistic avant-garde in the Soviet Union (see on this: Urban, Peter: *Chronik Oberiu 1925-1932*. In: Oberiu. *Vereinigung der realen Kunst – Zur Topographie einer Literarischen Landschaft*, part II. *Schreibheft 40* (1992), pp. 67-83). According to Peter Urban, Oberiu is the „aesthetically most advanced position“ among all the tendencies, movements and isms in Russia between 1890 and 1930 (Urban, Peter: *Oberiu, Vereinigung der Realen Kunst*. Editorische Vorbemerkung. In: *Schreibheft 39*, Mai 1992, pp. 16-18. here: p. 17). Oberiu formulates, „a last time before 1934 and thus for decades, an aesthetically left notion of art – as opposed to the

politically left which subordinates art to demands of daily politics“ (op. cit.). Oberiu created its own literature of the absurd and „for contemporary Russian literature (...) it is by way the most influential movement of the ‚modernist‘ tendencies.“ (op. cit.).

Members of Oberiu were the poets Daniil Charms (1905-1942), Aleksandr Vvedenskij (1904-1941), Nikolaj Olejnikov (1898-1937), the more philosophical author Leonid Lipavskij (1904-1941) and the music theoretician and philosopher Jakov Druskin (1902-1980). As the works of Oberiu had no chance to get published, the group organised theatrical recitation soirees which became notorious because of their eccentric concept. Oberiu presented itself on January 24, 1928 in the Leningrad House of the Press with their first event „Three left hours“ during which Daniil Charms' *Elizaveta Bam* was premiered. „Three left hours“ was an action that was typical for Oberiu in its mixture of poet's reading, propaganda lecture and concert. On the walls of the hall posters were hung with slogans like „verses are not piroggs, we are not harrings for you“ and „our mum is not your mum“. In order to illustrate Oberiu's thesis that „art is a cupboard“ („iskusstvo kak shkaf“) Charms proclaimed poems while standing on an actual cupboard. The absurdist slogan obviously refers to Viktor Shklovskij's formalist article's title „Art as Procedure“ („iskusstvo kak priem“), or of the futurist credo of „the word as such“ („slovo kak takovoe“). (In how far Ilya Kabakov's *Vshkafusidjashchij Primakov* – Sitting-in-the-closet-Primakov – from the 1970s is referring to Charms has until now not been researched).

At the end of 1931 Oberiu became the target of political repressions and severe attacks in the press. In 1932. like all the other literary groups in the Soviet Union, Oberiu was dissolved. In this way, „the last remaining sherds of postrevolutionary Soviet modernism“ (Samuil Marsak) were shattered another time. The Oberiu were possibly the first to have understood that „state intervention into literature was increasingly pushing the author out of the text“ (Kasper, Karlheinz: Oberiutische und postmoderne Schreibverfahren: Zu den Relationen von Prätext und Text bei Vaginov und Sorokin. In: *Zeitschrift für Slawistik*. Nr. 40 (1995) 1. pp. 23-30. Here 30.). Charms and Vvedenskij became active in the field of children's literature where they could express their „natural thinking“. Between 1928 and 1941 Vvedenskij wrote more than 30 children's books. Olejnikov, Charms and Vvedenskij were arrested at a time when Stalin's rule was most oppressive; they died in a forced labour camp. Zabolockij was the only member of Oberiu who survived Stalinism (he died in 1958). However, Peter Urban calls Oberiu „possibly the first genuinely free people of the Soviet time“ – „in spite of the atrocious condition of their life.“ (Urban 1992, 17).

²⁵ Concerning Moscow Conceptualism, several authors have pointed to this relationship. See on this Epstejn, Michail: *Iskusstvo avantgarda i religioznoe soznanie*. In: *Novyj Mir*. 12 (1989), pp. 222-235; Hansen-Löve, Aage: Zur Typologie des Erhabenen in der russischen Moderne. In: *Poetica*. Bd. 23 (1991) 1-2, pp. 166-216; Hansen-Löve, Aage: Zur Periodisierung der russischen Moderne. Die „dritte Avantgarde“. In: *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 32 (1993), pp. 207-264; Hansen-Löve, Aage: Konzepte des Nichts im Kunstdenken der russischen Dichter des Absurden (OBERIU). In: *Poetica*. Bd. 28 (1994), pp. 308-373; Kasper, Karlheinz: Oberiutische und postmoderne Schreibverfahren: Zu den Relationen von Prätext und Text bei Vaginov und Sorokin. In: *Zeitschrift für Slawistik*. Nr. 40 (1995) 1, pp. 23-30; Sasse, Sylvia/Schramm, Caroline: Totalitäre Literatur und subversive Affirmation. In: *Die Welt der Slaven* LXII (1997), pp. 306-327; Sasse 1999.

²⁶ Sasse/Schramm 1997, 307.

²⁷ Sasse/Schramm 1997.

²⁸ Sasse/Schramm 1997, 313.

²⁹ Cf. Sasse/Schramm 1997, 315.

³⁰ Jaccard 1989.

³¹ Hansen-Löve, Konzepte des Nichts, 1994, p. 317.

³² The Slavacist Aage Hansen-Löve talks about „apophatic“ repetitions which he distinguishes sharply from the „cataphatic“ estrangement techniques of the avant-garde models I and II. See on this Hansen-Löve, Aage: Thesen zur Typologie der Russischen Moderne. In: Zima, Peter V./Strutz, Johann (eds.): *Europäische Avantgarde*. Bern, New York, Paris 1987, pp. 37-59. Hansen-Löve, Aage: Zur Periodisierung der russischen Moderne. Die „dritte Avantgarde“. In: *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 32 (1993), pp. 207-264. In our opinion, the notion of apophatic, used by Hansen-Löve to describe the language of Oberiu, is not enough to sufficiently characterize the tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification.

³³ Cf. Hansen-Löve, Konzepte des Nichts, 1994, p. 316.

³⁴ Hansen-Löve, Konzepte des Nichts, 1994, p. 320.

³⁵ de Certeau, Michel: *Kunst des Handelns*. Berlin 1988, p. 13.

³⁶ de Certeau 1988, 85

³⁷ de Certeau 1988, 22

³⁸ June 2000, Wiener Festwochen, <http://www.schlingensief.com/auslaenderraus/>

³⁹ <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/salzburg/index.shtml>

⁴⁰ <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/cnbc/index.shtml>

⁴¹ <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/tampere/index.shtml>

⁴² <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/plattsburgh/index.shtml>

⁴³ <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/sydney/index.shtml>

⁴⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François: Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist postmodern? In: Engelmann, Peter (ed.): *Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion. Texte französischer Philosophen der Gegenwart*. Stuttgart, 1991, pp. 33-48. here: p. 47.

⁴⁵ However, the notion of apophatic as used by Hansen-Löve cannot sufficiently characterize the tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification. These ‘paradoxical’ strategies/tactics do not only consist of affirmation, but precisely are characterized by the fact that with affirmation there simultaneously takes place an ‘unveiling’ of what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation it is the public formulation of formulas that necessarily remain hidden and thinking to a logical end of the official postulate – possibly even the violent affirmation – that undermines affirmation. An archeology of subversive affirmation would therefore look for elements of subversive affirmation within Oberiu that does not only affirm the mechanisms of exclusion, but that simultaneously undermines them.