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Wolfgang Sützl, Theo Hug (Eds.)

ACTIVIST MEDIA AND BIOPOLITICS

**Critical Media Interventions
in the Age of Biopower**

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ACTIVIST MEDIA AND BIOPOLITICS

**Critical Media Interventions
in the Age of Biopower**

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BIOPOLITICAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE URBAN DATA SPACE

by Clemens Apprich

Taking as a point of departure the acknowledgement that tactical media work has lost in importance over the past ten years, this paper addresses the question of divergent political, artistic, and cultural practices as they relate to the overall themes of activist media and biopolitics. Against this background, it is the modern city and its hybrid of physical and digital space that potentially offers new fields of action. With its architectural form overlaid by a large number of data streams, it could be the site of an entirely new aesthetics of crisis, criticism, and resistance. Vienna's Public Netbase has been among the pioneering institutions in Austria and Europe who made the digital world accessible for critical media work, taking issue with surveillance and control in this data *space*. Looking back, it is possible to identify positions of interest and outline their relevance for a future artistic and cultural practice. This paper will focus on the art project Zellen Kämpfender Widerstand/Kommando Freiheit 45 (ZKW) as an exemplary intervention into symbolic spaces of dominance. This project was created as part of a critical engagement with the Austrian Year of Anniversaries 2005, where the biopolitical utilization of public space went hand in hand with historical representations of statehood. Looking back upon the work of Public Netbase makes it possible to create a context for the activist deconstruction of official imageries and biopolitical sign systems, while contributing to the debate on possible points of connection for tactical media work.

Virtual Street Theatre

"Those who don't fight will die step by step. We therefore must attack the current strategic projects of the symbolic formation of Austria's revisionist system!" (ZKW, 2005A). This is a passage taken from the claim of responsibility released by Zellen Kämpfender Widerstand/Kommando Freiheit 45, the group that on the night of 9 May 2005 forced its way into the gardens of Vienna's Belvedere Palace with the intention of kidnapping a cow. The cows grazing in the palace's meadows were part of the series of government-commissioned commemorative installations called Twenty-five Peaces. The celebration was initiated during Austria's Anniversary Year 2005, commemorating the sixty-year

mark after the end of WWII, fifty years of Austria's State Treaty, and ten years of EU membership. The series of events and installations included light and sound installations illustrating the destructive force of warfare; McCare parcels provided in collaboration with a global fast food chain; and Vienna's historically charged Heldenplatz presented as a vegetable field. Thus, the cows in the Belvedere gardens represented only one among twenty-five 'pieces' of the one-year historical spectacle created by Wolfgang Lorenz, director of the Graz 2003 Cultural Capital, and Georg Springer, head of the Austrian Federal Theatres.

According to ZKW, the cow was to be a political prisoner whose fate would depend on the Federal Government's recognition of deserters and partisans during the War. This seemed necessary in as much as questions that might be politically sensitive were excluded from the official programming for the Austrian Anniversary Year 2005. For example, one might ask what is wrong with a country where a member of the Federal Council may freely and publicly slander deserters as "murderers of their comrades" during this Anniversary Year, and, arousing little protest, repeat the statement on one of Austria's state broadcasting channels. Siegfried Kampl, the mayor of the Carinthian town of Gurk (and member of the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, and its later breakaway formations Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ, and Freiheitliche Partei Kärntens, FPK) delivered a speech in the Austrian Federal Council on 14 April 2005 in which he referred to Wehrmacht deserters as "in part murderers of their comrades" and spoke of a "brutal persecution of Nazis" after WWII.

Another sensitive question might have been about the importance of partisan struggle in freeing Austria from Nazi rule. However, such questions would stand in the way of the frictionless 'identity search' towards which the Austrian government's pageant was geared. Indeed, it seems easier to drive cows onto palace gardens in order to remind the public of the latter's use as grazing meadow when food supplies were scarce after the end of the war.

Contrary to the government-prescribed perspective on history, which builds on a victim-myth widespread in Austria, the 'kidnapping' was meant to encourage a critical engagement with official representations of history. The Austrian 'victim thesis' goes back to a passage in the Moscow Declaration of 1 November 1943, in which the Allied powers refer to Austria as the "first victim of Hitler's typical politics of aggression", declaring the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 "null and void". While this declaration was originally intended as a gesture of support for the Austrian anti-Nazi resistance, it later became the motto of the Second Republic, resulting in a collective suppression of Austria's shared responsibility in the crimes of the Nazi regime. It was not until 1991 that Federal Chancellor Franz Vranitzky became the first representative of the Austrian state to apologize for the crimes committed by Austrians during the Nazi period. This official recognition of Austria's shared responsibility in war crimes and the Holocaust was

relativised by the later Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (of the conservative People's Party, ÖVP) in an interview with the Jerusalem Post on 9 November 2000 (pogrom commemoration day), who once again referred to Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany. It was in keeping with this view that the right wing government's commemoration programme focused on the signing of the State Treaty in 1995, rather than the liberation from Nazi rule in 1945.



figure 1: The political prisoner in the hands of her kidnappers, <http://zkw.netbase.org/>

In contrast to the million-Euro history spectacle commissioned by the Federal Government, the activists used only a few well-placed images and information to carry out a one-week kidnapping drama (<http://zkw.netbase.org> and <http://netbase.org/t0/zkw>). The four communiqués published by the activists attracted attention on blogs, television, and in the print media, providing a place for dissident opinions to be voiced. Aesthetic codes borrowed from the urban guerrilla, and an oblique visual language reminiscent of the nineteen-seventies opened a discursive space from which an attack against the symbolic rule of the 'system' was to be launched. When on 15 May 2005, Austrian Chancellor Schüssel and Monika Lindner, Director General of the Austrian Public Broadcasting Corporation ORF declined to publicly admit to having "mislead and nationalistically incited the people with historical lies in 2005" (ZKW, 2005 b), the ZKW saw themselves forced to slaughter Rosa, using 1.5 kilograms of Semtex explosive.

The virtual street theatre was a fake action from the very beginning, masterminded by Public Netbase, the Viennese media culture platform (1994–2006). Assuming an ironic distance, the activists questioned Austria's victim myth as well as the role that biopolitical history writing played in constructing a hegemonic sense of everyday reality. In times when a critical engagement with the past is relegated by the spectacle, and political gestures are belittled as individual opinions, there is a need for tactical tools capable of attacking cultural hegemonies. Re-articulating symbolic spheres and deconstructing official imagery through dissonant practices have proven themselves to be effective forms of media-activist interventions. The virtual cow kidnapping action performed by Kommando Freiheit 45 may therefore serve as an example of how far media activism is capable of questioning, at least in the short term, that which is taken for granted within these hegemonies. Against the background of the Anniversary Year 2005, the fake kidnapping appeared to be a powerful means of countering the remaking of the Austrian victim myth, and of highlighting the relationship between the power of interpretation of history on one side, and governmental claims to power on the other.



figure 2: ZKM, <http://zkw.netbase.org/>

Such a strategy of ‘armed propaganda’, put into place in order to reflect upon the victim myth that had come back to life in popular opinion and the media, is a conceptual heir to the communication guerrilla of the 1990s. Motivated by disappointment about their own political projects, and by a desire to develop a non-essentialist social critique, some sections of the left began to develop forms of political action appropriate to the current situation. Because of these efforts, a non-dogmatic approach beyond old-style activism emerged, with tactical media as the most innovative idea. Consequently, activism became more global, connecting many different struggles with one another. However, this type of activism often seemed strangely detached from people’s everyday life, given that the new

space of media technologies remained largely untouched by the nitty-gritty details of political controversies. But strategies that claim to guide action must not remain stuck in a virtual parallel space—they have to be diffused not just in activist media, but also in the mainstream media, if they aim to achieve a counter-public, however short lived. The frontal attack against Austrian everyday consciousness carried out by Kommando Freiheit 45 was therefore not just a “semi-humorous media guerrilla concept” (Weber, 2005, p. 3), but also an attempt to intervene into the parameters of official politics.

Symbolic Hegemony

In view of a comprehensive, computer-supported *dispositif* of control and security present in the core of liberal societies, it is necessary to look for new forms of dissent. However, ever since Foucault demonstrated that power relations are of an immanent nature (1983), this issue cannot be addressed by a resistant outer sphere; instead, it has to be negotiated within the forms of current media. Channelling virtual streams of data into the material scenery of (urban) life turns urban space into a possible field of action where an entirely new aesthetics of crisis, criticism, and resistance might develop (Debord, 1980, pp. 41–56). It is the modern city, then, that constitutes itself as a (virtual) space of potentialities, with biopower acting as a regulatory technology of the (urban) populace. The political form corresponding to biopolitics is the liberalism that developed in conjunction with the modern state, itself tightly connected to the ancient dream of the governable city. The question, then, is what are the possibilities, but also the dangers, of using the ‘new media’ for critical media work, and how might they influence a new kind of artistic practice. Today, the term ‘new media’ in its wider sense is generally applied to information and communication technologies that use data in digital form. In its more narrow sense, it refers to services accessible through the internet (such as email, the WWW, and video streaming). However, the term itself is not as new as it might seem. Over the past decades, it kept reappearing wherever media technologies promised to transform people’s everyday life in a revolutionary way (radio and TV broadcasting were termed new media, as was *Bildschirmtext*, an interactive videotex system that seems to have disappeared from our collective memory). The term has served various business models in promoting their technologies as absolutely new and indispensable. In spite of this rightful criticism of the term, it is used here in order to carry forward the 1990s debates and make the origin of current practices of resistance visible. Twenty-five Peaces, with its events such as simulated nightly air raids and its occupation of entire squares with advertising media, could be disrupted by playful interventions, and the symbolic landscape reclaimed by strategies of re-appropriation.



figure 3: Kommando Freiheit 45 in action, <http://zkw.netbase.org>

Today's city contains a hybrid of physical and digital space and an architecture that is overlaid by multiple data streams. In addition to mobile communication technologies, this "urban data space" (Jaschko, 2007) is made-up of an ever-expanding array of surveillance systems as well as advertising media penetrating the urban visual space more deeply each day. The symbolic dominance of the spectacle is based on a cultural grammar that may be understood as an ensemble of socially accepted codes. These codes represent particular systems of symbols, and their definition ensures the dominance of symbolic hegemony over common sense. Thus, the urban data space offers a more or less open screen for individual and social practices, ways of life, cultural patterns, knowledge, and power, including the aforementioned structures of dominance. Given the rapid advance of the new culture technologies in all areas of social life, artistic practices that work with electronic media are gaining in importance. Urban space represents the field of action upon which new publics can be created through confrontation, agitation, and intervention.

Media activism represents only a specific segment within a wider spectrum of strategies used by the communication guerrilla (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe, 2011, pp. 8–9.). Everyday forms of face-to-face communication and societal behavioural patterns that produce and reproduce power relations are at least as relevant as the technical means of communication. What they all have in common is an understanding of the semiological guerrilla as outlined by Umberto Eco in the late 1960s (Eco, 1985). From this perspective, the guerrilla serves as a metaphor for questioning dominant discourses with means other

than argumentation. Accordingly, the subversive character of the communication guerrilla rests in its capacity to disrupt power relations on the level of social discourse, undermining the supposed naturalness of the existing order. According to the autonomous a.f.r.i.k.a. group's manual, "[the communication guerrilla's] project is the critique of the non-questionable character of what exists; it aims to transform hermetic discourses into open situations, where in a moment of sudden confusion any naturalness is put into question" (2001, p. 7). A cow as a "political prisoner"? And why not.



figure 4: The bloody end of the kidnapping drama, <http://zkw.netbase.org/>

Kommando Freiheit 45 utilized the subversive energy of the absurd in order to intervene critically into the symbolic order of dominance, in this particular case, the biopolitical exploitation of public space connected to a historical display of statehood. In relation to the latter, the cow kidnapping seemed to be less false than the display of the Austrian victim myth. In a country in which historical oblivion forms a significant part of its vital power, and which continues to mystify the *wirtschaftswunder* of the post-war years while negating any continuity from the Nazi period, it makes sense to turn the politics of history itself into the central location of biopolitical claims to dominance. In as much as this is the case, Kommando Freiheit 45 may be an example of a practice of resistance that provides a connection to the tactical media activism of the 1990s. We may expect that engaging symbolic representation and hegemonic sign systems will in the future not be less, but more frequent. Consequently, the new forms of action will be

required to adopt a historically conscious perspective and learn from previous forms of protest in order to be able to develop effective strategies. In Austria, the struggle around the politics of symbols is not over. The sacred cows of the Austrian victim myth have yet to be blown-up—if only symbolically.

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