

## **Searching for the Universal Umbrella. A script for a prologue of an utopian play.**

*common spring collective*

*We hear sounds of waves and wind. The Benjamin specialist, the theorist and the artist enter the stage. They bring a table to the front of the stage, sit down and begin to write their professionalized labels on papers they then put in front of them. The sound ends.*

Benjamin specialist: One Month ago, we visited Port Bou, a village in the borderlands between France and Spain, a city so small that it consists mainly of a train station and a harbour. And it is famous for almost only one reason: It was here that the jewish german philospher Walter Benjamin committed suicide while he was fleeing from the Nazis in 1940. There is small graveyard in Port Bou build on the rocks by the sea and right there you can also find a memorial for Benjamin. It consists of stairs that seem to lead into the ocean but are suddenly stopped by a wall of acrylic glass. You can see the sea but you can not reach the ocean. What we just heard, are our steps down these stairs and our steps on the way up to the cemetery.

Theorist: There is a first epigraph on the memorial saying "It is more arduous to honour the memory of the *nameless* than the renowned", which feels strange given that it is on the memorial of Walter Benjamin, someone who clearly has a name. And there is second epigraph directly on the gravestone saying that there has never been a document of culture without simultaneously being a document of barbarism. Which feels very right given the ugliness of the gravestone. Behind the grave we found a little black box wich we opened. In it there was a notepad and some obscure devotional objects. We expected the note pad to belong to Benjamin nerds but could not understand the meaning of the little keychains and toys that came along with it. Did we find the famous message in the bottle that the Critical Theory has be talking about so often? We opened the notebook and read:

Artist: If you found this container by accident, great! You're welcome to join us. We ask only that you: - please do not move or vandalize the container. The real treasure is just finding the container and sharing your thoughts with everyone else who finds it. If possible, let us know that you found it by visiting the website listed below. Geocaching is open to everyone with a Gps and a sense of humour.

Benjamin specialist: In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin

distinguishes between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics. The first is the fascist program which implies not to change the property relations but to give the masses a chance to express themselves. With respect to Futurism Benjamin concludes that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war“. Because war was the only possibility to set a goal for a mass movement without changing capitalist property relations. To politicize art on the other hand was, as Benjamin put it, the response given by communism.

Theorist: As communists we want to ask, if this definition is still valid or if it has a time kernel and needs further differentiation. Is every aestheticization of politics a reactionary or even fascist program, a mere ideological operation with the goal to conserve the basic social forms of domination? With which notion of aesthetics do we work here and, more important, with which notion of politics? Might both have changed over the last century? And what does the politicization of art mean which Benjamin claims to be communist? Is this a communist program for the art world or for the world?

Artist: It might have been Jean-Luc Godard who first divided the field of political art into two antagonistic parts: political art and doing art politically. Political art is focussed on the product, the art itself, which is supposed to be political, critical of different forms of social domination, enlightening, scandalizing, deconstructive and so on. Doing art politically focusses less on the product but more on the production process, less on the art but on the process of doing art. Here, the questions raised are: is it an individual or a collective process? How are the relations organized between the artists, between artists and gallerists, producers, publishers, printers, technicians, traders? Is the gendered and classist division of work being reproduced or subverted? And – last but not least – how much work is done and how is it paid for? In other words: how does the rate of exploitation look like?

Theorist: Let's have a closer look on here. Am I ashamed to admit that for this short lecture we met on seven afternoons and five evenings, we wrote six or more different scripts, cooked three dinners, ate more than twice in restaurants and drank several soft as well as hard drinks in different bars of Berlin? During this process we lost 4 of 5 performers due to illness, burn-out prevention, project-management failures. All together seven persons worked a total of 316 hours, not counted the hours of travelling as well as the hours of social work, every collaboration makes necessary. To sum up for every working hour we received a wage of, let's say, 70 cent.

Benjamin specialist (with calculator): No, it's 2,34 Euros. Not too bad for a product that has no use-

value whatsoever.

Artist: But being here has an imaginary surplus value for our careers as political artists or theorists. That's fine. And we meet people who have the same interests, and we can exchange and connect and organize and have fun. Or speaking with Benjamin: It's not proven that steirischer herbst is a production apparatus able to assimilate revolutionary issues without questioning itself as an institution. Maybe it really does intent to change the apparatus itself ----

Benjamin specialist: What class of postmodern workers is this, that gets paid a symbolical surplus value without getting paid a material value? We live in a credit based economy, and at least since the financial crisis, we shouldn't give it any more credit.

Theorist: But here, every artist and theorist, no matter how famous or needy she is gets paid 250 euros. Isn't this the definition of socialism? That everybody is equal – equally poor.

Artist: When I worked in Argentina in 2002 I met many cultural workers who had become active in the movement. But every time I asked them: Do you do political art? The answer was a strict: No. And every time I asked them: Do you make politics? The answer was No as well. Political art was a No-Go. Everyone was a militant, no one an artist or a politician. When I asked them what it was that they did then, they gave concrete answers. They were organizing a demonstration, designing a poster, it were practical actions in a practical process.

Benjamin specialist: These artists refused to be artists doing politics. Instead, they were simply doing politics. But they were doing it in a different – in an artistic – way. I think we could take this as an example for applying artistic techniques to the field of politics or even think about what Benjamin said about the possibilities of art changing the production apparatus instead of serving the apparatus.

Theorist: What does this mean? First art could be understood as a sensitivity for and attention to the question of form. The artistic discourse transforms form into a content. And this discours about form has been in my opinion very productive for leftwing political movements. For example in the concept of Pop Antifa. Here antifascist movements tried to get rid of the image of aggressive male fighters connected very much to specific subculture of hardcore/punk. Instead they used the iconography of Pop in order to reach a broader public, to give antifascism a new sex appeal.

Benjamin specialist: When I was part of a group of radio activists, our concern was to exploit the possibilities of the form – radio – in order to make different policy. We made a broadcast about male dominance in the anti fascist scene. In the radioshow, the speakers could speak quite anonymously, which is why more people dared to report from their own experiences. Nevertheless, not everyone wanted her or his voice to be broadcasted. So we lent them our voices.

Artist: And second, art is not only a sensitivity to form, it is also a creative praxis that is often faster to make things practical, to experiment, to create. Art then is able to construct new forms of sociability that are not yet established because art can go beyond tradition and convention. It has in itself new forms of sociability – collective working, interdependency, participatory and process oriented working etc. This creativity is very much needed when a new form of tender, plural micropolitics shall be constructed.

Benjamin specialist: But all these nice ideas have not changed the production apparatus.

Theorist: Why are so many leftists hanging around in the art world? I believe it is an effect of lost struggles in other social spheres. When the sphere of reproduction was politicized in the 1970s and 80s – squatting, proletarian shopping, rent strike and so on - this was a progressive shift in social struggles. At the same time it was a consequence of lost struggles in the factory. Simultaneously, I think, the conquest of culture by leftists - progressive subculture, political parties, dancedemonstrations, communication guerilla and so on - was partly a result of the lost struggles in the so called political sphere. In short: Leftists are in the art world because they have nowhere else to go.

Benjamin specialist: Then you would agree with Geerd Wilders that art is a leftwing hobby?

Theorist: Absolutely. Art is a leftwing hobby because the left is irrelevant in society and so is art. But if we don't accept the social division of labour into distinctive fields (of politics, culture, the private and so on) something else becomes far more interesting. The politicization of the sphere of reproduction was the effect of a defeat in the factory, but it had its positive effects. It enlarges the concept of politics. A part of life that had not been politicized before became politicized very strongly. And in this process also new forms of politics had to be invented. This was not a centralized act of mere application but a transformation of politics as well. And the same thing happened when culture or art became a centre of leftwing political attention. Did leftwing artists make better art? I don't care. But did they help to make better politics? I think so, yes. Those

segments of the left that opened themselves up to art developed a different understanding of political form. They did no longer reduce politics to to a male subectivity and its existential relation to the truth, to the performance of strength and so on. I think for example in Radical Cheerleading, Reclaim the City, Die Ins and other forms of protest that have been developed.

Artist: And today? Aren't political artists very much featured in the art market right now? I'd say this is a result of the crisis. Institutions are interested in political art because they hope that art might find creative solutions for that crisis. That it can develop methods to treat with new realities. Make them accesable. That is of course a strategy of integration, because capitalism needs to exploit dissident movements for its surviving.

Theorist: I guess we should not care so much about what capitalism needs, we should focus more on what we need.

Benjamin specialist: Let's come back to the differentiation of Benjamin's dialectical approach to art and politics. We think that doing art politically that means politicizing the process of production points in the right direction. But we suggest a widening of perspectives, informed by the struggles of second and third wave of feminism and queerfeminism.

Theorist: Feminism told us that everything was political and, of course, it was right. But it has been said that the politicization of the private, the personal, the emotional, of nature as well as of art might lead to the dangerzone of totalisation. A totalisation that means the subordination of every aspect of life under the specific rationality of political discourse, of universalisation, legitimimacy, public discussion and so on.

Artist: That's why we're not looking for the politicization of art, but for the artificialization of politics. We don't ask how to apply the forms of politics to the artfield, but how to apply the knowledge, the forms of the artworld to the political field. Applying the tactics and sensitivity to form achieved in the art would change the notion of politics. This is not about artists doing politics but about widenig the vocabulary and grammar of politics as such. Politics then can be imagined differently than the fascist mass demonstration, or bourgeois democracy, the spectacle of representation or the stalinist terror of conscience. The political must extend itself.

THE END

*common spring collective* is a Berlin based group of artists, theorists and activists (Bini Adamczak, Mathilde Clemens, Konstanze Schmitt). It's only aim is to change the global weather in order to overcome the common capitalist cold precipitation (cccp) and to start a sunnier future (n.n.). At the moment, they are searching for the unbelievable universal umbrella.

The script was first performed at the "truth is concrete" festival at steirischer herbst in September 2012 by Konstanze Schmitt (as "Artist"), together with Nora Sternfeld (as "Theorist") and Federico Geller (as "Benjamin Specialist").