

The “content” of any medium is always another medium.

—Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

Politics of the Medium

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The relationship of art and politics is now—once again—being discussed intensely and controversially. Often it is about the power of art—that is, about the questions of whether art can leave the institutional framework and intervene into the public, political sphere and whether it then remains art, becomes politics, or what other status it might then be said to have.

The Polish artist and curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale, Artur Żmijewski, saw himself confronted with this question when he concluded his introductory statement in the *Biennale Zeitung* by expressing the desire that the exhibition might ““open access to performative and effective politics that would equip we ordinary citizens with the tools of action and change.” p. 7.”(1) Although the format of an exhibition is not called into question completely here, it is expected to have an effect on the “real” world. What shines through from behind this provocative exaggeration is dissatisfaction with the common practice of exhibitions, which may have all sorts of political themes but ultimately can only represent those issues that await a response in the political realm itself. It is correct that art loses its acuity if it limits itself to illustrating or documenting the important issues of our time. It has to adopt a stance toward them. The level on which this engagement can take place is, however, not just that of political subjects but is also crucially a question of the medium.

Seemingly based on a similar motivation, Dora Garcia’s talk show *Klau mich* (Steal me) (2012) has recourse to events whose creative strategies followed a real effect on the political reality: in 1967 a series of leaflets by *Kommune 1* were addressing an accidental fire in a department store in Brussels in which three hundred people died. The authors took the image of burning bodies that had been published in newspapers and broadcast on television out of its original context and used it as a signet for their political agitation against the Vietnam War. They encouraged their readers to start fires in department stores in German cities in order “to evoke a feeling for what is happening in Vietnam.” (2) The public prosecutor’s office read this text literally and charged the authors with “disseminating texts to commit criminal acts.” (3) Legal actions in reaction to student provocations were by no means rare at the time. This case obtained the iconic significance it did only as a result of the subsequent trial, which the public followed with great attention, in which the communards stirred up the “musty smell of a millennium” (4) in the machinery of justice and exposed its inflexible structures:

Schwerdtner: You now have an opportunity to make a statement on the matter.

Langhans: Well, what do you want to hear?

Schwerdtner: I don't want to hear anything; I'm giving you an opportunity to make a statement on the matter. How and where did you distribute the leaflets?

Langhans: You already know that, so why are you asking? I've already said all of it before, back in May '67! (5)

The book *Klau mich*, (6) published by Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans immediately following the trial in 1968, is now considered a textbook for subversively undermining social conventions. The strategies it documents are now a matter of course in the vocabulary of any vocational educational for managers; at the time, however, they radically question the approach to state institutions and were consequently perceived as scandalous. The ruling was unique in the history of the student movement, since the leaflets were declared to be art, thus keeping their authors out of prison.

The book *Klau mich* could easily be seen as a model for this action: As a direct allusion to the bestseller *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany gets rid of itself), (7) by Thilo Sarrazin—a former Social Democratic minister of finance for the State of Berlin and the member of the board of the Federal Bank of Germany—the Czech artist Martin Zet initiated the project *Deutschland schafft es ab* (Germany gets rid of it) (2012) as part of the aforementioned Berlin Biennale. (8) Zet appealed via the media for sixty thousand of the roughly 1.5 million copies of the book—which was severely criticized for its reactionary and racist theses on, among other things, the debate over the integration of immigrants in Germany—that have been sold thus far to be returned as part of a tour through Germany on which he wanted, like a politician in an election, to discuss his concerns with citizens. On conclusion of the tour, he intended to create an installation at the 7th Berlin Biennale featuring all the returned books. After the press release had been sent, however, a wave of indignation arose, triggered above all by formulations that evoked, apparently unintentionally, associations with National Socialist book burnings by using terms such terms as “collecting point” and “recycling.” Although Zet had indicated that the theme of his action was to come to terms with Sarrazin's theses and their effects on xenophobia in Germany, he also made it clear that the action was really intended to create an effective image in the press:

At a certain point it is no longer important whether a book is of high quality and what its real intention is but only what effect it has on German society. The book stirred up and encouraged anti-immigration and above all anti-Turkish tendencies in this country. I propose to use the book as an active tool that enables people to declare their own positions. (9)

The reactions of “people on the street” are part of the conception of the work because they demonstrate to exhibition visitors the work's potential for setting social processes in motion. The

Swiss art historian Peter Schneemann has shown that it is particularly important for political art that laypeople can seemingly still perceive what they see “directly,” whereas professionals know the complex codes of the system of art and always see works of art and exhibitions against the backdrop of art history and its discourses. He writes that especially “when coming to terms with art that is concerned with social themes [there is] a tension between the claim to potency and the measurable attention that an artistic gesture is in a position to generate.” The more one follows the model of broad social effect, the more important the reaction not be limited to the protagonists of the art scene.”(10) What other artists such as Hans Haacke (*Der Bevölkerung* [To the population], 2000) and Gregor Schneider (*Cube*, 2007) have been able to use to their advantage was too much for Zet. The action *Deutschland schafft es ab* was canceled.

There is a third case with the same general subject matter as the book and the show *Klau mich* and a similar scandal in the press as with Zet’s work: the project *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung / Regarding Terror: The RAF-Exhibition* at Kunst-Werke in Berlin in 2005. (11) The planned exhibition, which had the internal working title *Mythos RAF* (The myth of the Red Army Faction), was already turned into a scandal by the media during the preparations for it. Through the deliberate indiscretion of a right-wing populist politician, the exhibition planning was communicated to the widow of an industrialist murdered by the RAF, who in turn passed the information to the press. The tabloid BILD thus ran the headline on July 22, 2003: (12) “Warum zahlt Berlin 100.000 Euro für Skandal-Ausstellung über RAF?” (Why is Berlin paying 100,000 Euros for a scandalous exhibition on the RAF?). Making the accusation that the exhibition was “glorifying” terrorism, BILD compared the hundred thousand Euros that had been unanimously approved by the jury with the monthly income of children living below the poverty line in Berlin. Within a few hours, other media jointed in, and just a day later the “scandalous exhibition” had become a “terrorist exhibition.” In the end, there were more than a thousand print, radio, and television reports on the show. The consequences were far-reaching: the planned historical review that was to have been part of the project was called off by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (Hamburg Institute for Social Research), a partner in the endeavor; under strong political pressure, the KW had to pay back the public funding. As a result, the institution postponed the planned opening by a year and obtained independent financing by auctioning on eBay ten works by artists close to the institution. As announced programmatically in its title, the show concentrated on the image—that is, on how the public—influenced by the media—regarded the RAF and the symbolic function of these images with respect to important political themes in West Germany after 1945. That is to say, it was about demonstrating that the confrontation between the RAF (and at least initially the left wing generally) and the state as well as the media entailed conflicts that went far beyond current quotidian debates and touched on fundamental issues regarding how the society saw itself. Among other topics of discussion was the general uncertainty about the relationship between the state and the individual, between West and East Germany, the connection between the legal system and justice, working through the traumas of the Second World War, the historical significance of the year 1968 (and its protagonists), and, last but not least, the role of the media.

(13) Excerpts from press reports and other archives were deliberately integrated into the exhibition and works of arts and films from more than three decades were juxtaposed. It was no longer about the original or current power of the events; rather, with the distance of time, the historical narratives into which the RAF had inscribed itself, and into which it was inscribed, became visible.

What had already been evident in the uproar over the working title *Mythos RAF* was confirmed in the show as it was realized: In 2005 the exhibition was analogous to the Fall of Man for the domestic German debate over leftist terrorism. Although there had been decades of books, films, and even artworks that addressed, each in its own way, the RAF in West Germany, internationally created and shown publicly, they had not caused anything like the public stir triggered by the sheer existence of the exhibition. As an exhibition, *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors* was apparently attributed a more enduring visibility than these other formats and was thus able to leave a trace behind in the public discourse. It broke a taboo and made the RAF part of popular culture. The attempt to come to terms with an RAF aestheticized in this way was necessarily changed in the process.

These examples are intended to show that even the content of a political medium cannot be decided on the level of political content but only on the level of another political medium (Marshall McLuhan). In this view, talk about the Vietnam War, about the xenophobia of the Germans, or even about the RAF is not political per se. The trial in 1968 was neither about children burning in Vietnam nor about arson in department stores in large German cities. These themes were used to help a young generation find its own way of expressing itself and its own relationship to society. Likewise, the RAF exhibition was not about a historical reevaluation of the history of West Germany; rather, it explored what could be exhibited in a museum and what social function an exhibition can take on. In this viewer, Zet was working on a very contemporary set of problems: What really matters is not addressing everyday events but rather the question of what still makes sense to discuss at all today (in art).

The aspect of *Klau mich* that remains most effective today is not the successful attack on the legal system, since it would be necessary to repeat that again today under completely different political and cultural circumstances. What Langhans and Teufel probably understood primarily intuitively was that it was about a change of medium: they conducted a performative act that did not address the reactionary attitude of many West German courts as much as it replaced the language of the latter with their own and thus created, from one moment to the next, a new reality that no one could no longer leave behind. That is where Zet failed, and that is where the RAF exhibition succeeded by its mere existence. The talk show *Klau mich* did not result from the impulse to abandon art, to pursue politics, or to talk about politics, since the *Klau mich* show is an art project that chose the form of a talk show in order to negotiate the medium and language of politics.

It may sound depressing but what we talk about is, in a sense, irrelevant. It is certainly indispensable to use art as a space to question our relationship to the world in the manner of “understanding one’s own culture.” (14) The medium is what decides whether that space becomes a political one.

Notes

1 Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, eds., *Berlin Biennale Zeitung* (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2012), p. 6.

2 Rainer Langhans and Fritz Teufel, leaflet no. 7, May 24, 1967, in Langhans and Teufel, eds., *Klau mich* (Munich: Trikont, 1977; orig. pub. 1968), n.p.: “A burning department store with burning people communicates in a large European city for the first time the crackling feeling of Vietnam (being there and burning along) that we in Berlin have had to go without.”

3 Ibid.

4 “Beneath the robes—musty smell of a millennium” was the text of a banner unfurled on November 9, 1967, at the Universität Hamburg by the students and former Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss (AstA; General students’ committee) chairmen Detlev Albers and Gert Hinnerk Behlmer at the public ceremony for the new rector. The text of their banner has become one of the best-known core slogans of the German student movement. It alludes to the “thousand-year Reich” proclaimed by the National Socialists and to the partial takeover of structures of the Third Reich in West German institutions.

5 Langhans and Teufel, *Klau mich* (see note 2), n.p.

6 Ibid.: “Those were the major actors. We felt like we were audience members who occasionally got involved when we found it fun. And that happened a lot. We do not often see such a play; no writer of theater of the absurd could have conceived anything better. We were not usually actors because it was not our play. It would never have occurred to us that you could write such plays. We only got involved, and then more as directors, when we recognized the possibilities that were being offered us.”

7 Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 2010).

8 <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/projects/germany-gets-rid-of-it-by-martin-zet-23851>.

9 Press release from the Berlin Biennale, January 12, 2012.

10 Peter Schneemann, “Zeugen gesucht,” Caroline Anri et al. eds., *Der Eigensinn des Materials: Erkundungen sozialer Wirklichkeit; Festschrift für Claudia Honegger zum 50*.

Geburtstag (Basel: Stroemfeld, 2007), pp. 395–409, esp. p. 396. See also “Die Frage nach der Relevanz von Kunst wird zunehmend gemessen am Umfang der emotional zu bewegenden Menschenmenge.” Peter Schneemann, “Ich bin keine Zielgruppe! Zur Konstellation von Produktions- und Rezeptionstypologien in der Gegenwart,” in Hubert Locher und Peter Schneemann, eds., *Grammatik der Kunstgeschichte: Sprachproblem und Regelwerk im 'Bild-Diskurs'; Oskar Bätschmann zum 65. Geburtstag* (Zurich: Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, 2008), pp. 78–91. esp. p. 84.

11 Kunst-Werke Berlin, January 30–May 16, 2005, cocurated by Klaus Biesenbach, Ellen Blumenstein, and Felix Ensslin.

12 Mainhardt Graf von Nayhauss, “Warum zahlt Berlin 100.000 Euro für Skandal-Ausstellung über RAF?,” *Bild-Zeitung*, July 22, 2003.

13 See Ellen Blumenstein, “Zu Vorstellungen des Terrors und Möglichkeiten der Kunst,” *taz*, January 27, 2005: “Without the attention and intense present as a result of and by the mass media, which instrumentalized the exhibition as a display of the self, the RAF as subject would not have been able to influence so intensely either the society as a whole nor the art as a specific branch within it. The specter of the RAF was born in the media. The works that are concerned with iconographically appropriating images from the media, bring them back from the level of cultural visual memory, and either deconstruct their affective overdeterminacy or reconstruct their context of stripping public phantasms of their meaning.”

14 “Exhibitions should be the medium of cultural self-understanding.” See Ellen Blumenstein and Daniel Tyradellis, “Das Museum der Grausamkeit: Ein Ausstellungsmanifest, hervorgegangen aus einem Ausstellungs-Seminar zur Identität des Museums,” *Salon Populaire*, April 11–25, 2012, <http://www.salonpopulaire.de/?cat=12#post-1537>.