

Inke Arns

No cleaning brigade will clean away this mess for you:

Why art is not making the world a less dangerous place

– and why it should not do so

I find the motto of this year's Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art rather irritating. I am not talking about the motto „the eye that never sees itself“, but rather the depiction of the artist as a sapper or pioneer who makes the world innocuous (meaning somebody who makes the world a less dangerous place). Here's what Iara Boubnova writes in her concept: „For us the artist is a sapper who makes innocuous from the dangerous; this figure is the central figure for the biennial project.“ – „This show is about how artists are using their vision to defuse the world from its dangers.“ – „We are interested in the potential and the ambitions of art to save the world, so to say, although this act of saving might be limited to only a small fragment of the world, a tiny danger zone being defused.“

Before I start my argument I should make sure that this is *not* a general criticism of Iara's exhibition (which I only saw yesterday night), nor is it a criticism of the biennale in general. I simply found the description of artists as the ‚minesweeping‘ or ‚cleaning brigade‘ a bit awkward, and therefore would like expand on this.

Let's ask ourselves: Why should art make the world a less dangerous place? It would of course be nice if it *had* that magic power – but then I guess politics would make sure it had a very tight control of culture. Also, let's look at it from another direction: Couldn't art with a ‚soothing‘ – or ‚healing‘ – effect be considered rather dangerous in itself, helping the ruling classes to cover existing problems (and thus ‚save the(ir) world‘)? Personally I think that art should not make the world a less dangerous place. It should rather address the dangers existing in the world, and it should do so by rubbing salt into our wounds. If artists are detecting „danger zones“ (and there are many of them all over the place), then they do this not in order to „defuse“ them, but rather to *expose* them, i.e. to make them even more visible. Art is about asking questions, not about giving answers – or providing solutions. In the best case artists can direct our attention to, or change our perception of existing problems (like, e.g., privatisation of public space, existing racism, and the secret logic underlying neoliberalism –

to name only a few). In a second step it is us, the public, the citizens, society as a whole who have to get active and act politically – and make the world a less dangerous place (if possible). I think it is necessary to make this distinction, because art is to be distinguished from political activism (which is campaigning for the good or just cause) – even if art uses a lot of activist strategies. I have been discussing this issue on various occasions with Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, the curator of this year’s Berlin Biennial. We quickly found out that we do not agree on „art = political activism“, however, our discussions proved to be extremely productive.

I recently found a great quote by Christoph Schlingensief (1960-2010), who was one of the most controversial German theatre and film directors of his time (in 2011 he represented Germany at the Venice Biennial): „In der Kunst können wir keine Probleme lösen, aber wir können sie so groß machen, dass man nicht mehr an ihnen vorbei kommt.“ („In art we cannot solve any problems; what we can do, however, is to make the problems so big so that you cannot ignore them any longer (i.e. that you cannot get past them).“). In this lecture I want to discuss some examples of how artists are addressing „dangers“, or „problems“ through the tactics of „subversive affirmation“, and „over-identification“, and how they make the problems they detect so big and expose them to such an extent that one – the media, politics, society – simply cannot ignore them anymore.

In 1986, New Collectivism (NK), the design department of the Yugoslav (or rather: Slovenian) artists collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK),¹ unleashed an internationally respected scandal when it submitted a design based on a Nazi poster to the competition for the *Day of Youth (Dan Mladosti)* celebrated each year on 25 May, Tito’s birthday. 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. NK’s poster portrayed a youth marching victoriously into the future equipped with baton, Yugoslavian flag, and other state insignia. NK received the first prize awarded by a highly official all-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. The committee praised New Collectivism’s poster and justified

¹ In 1984, the music group Laibach, together with the painters’ collective Irwin, the Theatre of the Sisters of Scipio Nasica (today called Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung), and the design department New Collectivism (NK), the group co-founded the artists’ collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). See *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, ed. by Neue Slowenische Kunst, Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1991.

the award by saying that the design “expresses the highest ideals of the Yugoslavian state.”² Following the exposure of the image’s source, just some days before it would be printed in hundreds of thousands of copies to be displayed all over Yugoslavia, it was all the more embarrassing when the Yugoslavian federal officials attempted to press charges against NK for “disseminating fascist propaganda” – mind you, a accusation that could put you in *very* serious trouble in a state founded on anti-fascism. And in the end it was the authorities themselves who voted for this particular poster design! Luckily for the artists, the Slovenian officials were able to prevent a trial in Belgrade, which certainly would have seen the artists in prison. Instead, the artists were put on trial in Ljubljana, and acquitted after some time (the artists were acquitted on the basis of “freedom of art”).

The tactic of NSK³ did not consist in an openly critical discourse of the state and its ideology; nor did it distance itself from 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,’ an adoption of existing ruling codes in order to – according to Laibach – “answer these languages with themselves.”⁴ As the Situationists said, the spectacle can only be subverted by being taken literally. With Laibach and NSK, we are dealing with a subversive strategy that Slavoj Zizek termed a radical ‘over-identification’⁵ 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 organisation that seemed “even more total than totalitarianism”⁶ – a provocative reference to the Yugoslav system.⁷

According to Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Zizek, overtly criticising the ideology of a system misses the point because today every ideological discourse is marked by cynicism. This means that the ideological discourse has become internalised, and thus anticipates its own critique. Consequently, vis-à-vis a cynical ideology, according to Zizek, irony becomes

² Cf. *The Economist*, London, 3/14/1987, p. 49 and *Profil*, Vienna, 4/13/1987, p. 56, as quoted by: Pedro Ramet, “Yugoslavia 1987: Stirrings from Below,” in *The South Slav Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3 (37th year), autumn 1987, p. 34.

³ On NSK see Inke Arns, *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) - eine Analyse ihrer künstlerischen Strategien im Kontext der 1980er Jahre in Jugoslawien*, Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg 2002.

⁴ Laibach, quoted after Claudia Wahjudi, „Zwölf Jahre musikalische Zitaten Schlacht zwischen zwei konträren Systemen.“ Interview with ‘Laibach’ in *Neues Deutschland*, 13 August 1992.

⁵ Slavoj Zizek, “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?” in *M'ARS - Casopis Moderne Galerije*, V/3.4 1993, p. 4.

⁶ Cf. Boris Groys, “More Total than Totalitarianism,” in *Kapital*, ed. Irwin Ljubljana 1991.

⁷ Cf. Alenka Barber-Kersovan, „‘Laibach’ und sein postmodernes ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’,“ in *Spektakel / Happening / Performance. Rockmusik als ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’*, ed. Helmut Rösing, Mainz 1993, pp. 66-80.

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.”⁸ 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.”⁹ Over-identification makes explicit the implications of an ideology and thus produces such elements that may not be publicly formulated in order for an ideology to reproduce itself. “By radicalising a 'plan' in its realisation, (over-identification) unveils the ideological concept underlying this plan.”¹⁰

In the event described here, NK very consciously 'laid the bait' for the state (and it bit). NK did so by taking the system more seriously than it was taking itself. NK appropriated and affirmed a certain political discourse, it allowed for participation, while at the same time undermining the very political discourse it affirmed. In Zizek's words, it brought to light the obscene superego underside of the system. Coming back to the topic of this presentation, NK did not *defuse* the perceived danger but *inflated* it, by literally playing with fire, and putting the fascination with totalitarian aesthetics into action. NK thus made the onlookers aware of the implicit fascination with Fascist aesthetics contained in the very body politic (and of course the closeness of Socialist Realist and Nazi aesthetics).

My second example is Christoph Schlingensiefel's contribution to the Vienna International Festival in June 2000, entitled *Ausländer raus - Bitte liebt Österreich* (Foreigners out – Please love Austria) – one of his most important interventions in public space. In this action, Schlingensiefel adapted the mass-media format of *Big Brother* to stage a live media-savvy deportation of foreigners from a container located next to Vienna's opera house. Twelve participants – introduced by Schlingensiefel as asylum seekers – were placed in the three containers. For seven days 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 who were deported

⁸ Slavoj Zizek, „Das Unbehagen in der Liberal-Demokratie,“ in *Heaven Sent*, No. 5, 1992, p. 49.

⁹ Slavoj Zizek, “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?” in *M'ARS - Casopis Moderne Galerije* V/3.4 1993, p. 4.

¹⁰ Georg Witte, „'Was ich mit wem vergleichen würde ...' Prigovs Poesie des totalen Tauschs“, in: *Kultur Sprache Ökonomie. Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, ed. by Wolfgang Weitlaner, Sb. 54, Vienna 2001, S. 201-215.

to their native country 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 as part of the ruling coalition since 2000), and the Austrian tabloid *Kronen-Zeitung*, 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 *Kronen-Zeitung*), the public applauded. Across the Herbert-von-Karajan-Square recordings of speeches by the FPÖ’s chairman Jörg Haider could be heard. Kathrin Rhomberg write about this action: “The public no longer knew how to distinguish between right-wing and left-wing ideology, between real asylum seekers and actors involved in the production, between Schlingensiefel the artificial character and Schlingensiefel himself. Gone too was the sphere of unequivocal morality to which observers would retreat in order to remain above the fray. *Ausländer raus* grew into a disturbance for everyone, affecting those involved no less than outside onlookers. It was a painful simulation of reality that reflected the observer’s disorientation and reluctance to take a stand, as well as the manipulability of the public and the culture of resentment in which xenophobia and racism were rampant.”¹¹

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 via the red ‘Nike Infobox’ information centre – a 13-ton high-tech container – located in the center of Karlsplatz, one of Vienna’s historic squares. On the outer windows a curious sign attracted 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 in the coming years!” A 3D project displayed in the *Infobox* gave information about a giant artwork to be placed in the *Karlsplatz* or *Nikeplatz* from the following year. It would be a giant sculpture of Nike's famous logo, a monument of 36 by 18 metres, supposedly made from “special steel covered with a revolutionary red resin made from recycled sneaker soles”.

¹¹ Kathrin Rhomberg, “Christoph Schlingensiefel: Fear at the Core of Things” in: *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Fear at the Core of Things*, ed. by BAK – basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht 2012, pp. 16-17.

The one-month campaign provoked reactions from 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.

I would like to give you yet another – a final – example. The Yes Men¹² have been appearing as the official representatives of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2001. Using faked websites that are the spitting images of official WTO sites, these artist-activists have received numerous invitations to appear as WTO-representatives at international conferences. Their overall goal is “identity correction”: they want to help enterprises and organizations to openly articulate aspects implicit to their business practices. For example, in the case of the WTO, the Yes Men bring the idea of free trade to its logical consequence, hoping to provoke a sense of dread in their audience. Most of the time, however, they succeed in quite the opposite, awakening pure enthusiasm in their listeners. Even the most radical suggestions are taken seriously on the strength of the WTO’s authority.

Since 2002, the Yes Men have also been correcting the identity of Dow Chemical. In 2002, they put a faked website online in which the corporation announced that it would not be able to provide compensation to the victims of the chemical accident that wreaked havoc on Bhopal in 1984, since neither the victims nor their families were shareholders (!). As a result, the Yes Men were invited to a live talk show on BBC World in November 2004, where the Dow-representative “Jude Finisterra” announced that the company had changed its mind, deciding to compensate all victims on occasion of the catastrophe’s 20th anniversary.¹³ The company denied this immediately, but the value of its stock went down considerably. In 2005, a certain “Erastmus Hamm” spoke on behalf of Dow Chemical at a conference on “Global Risk Management” in London. Here, he presented a computer program called the Acceptable Risk Calculator to an enthusiastic audience of bankers. Supposedly, the program was made to allow companies to fathom the risks they were willing to accept in favor of potential profits.

¹² Naomi Klein called The Yes Men „the Jonathan Swift of the Jackass generation“. They infiltrate the world of big business and smuggle out stories that are shocking and hilarious. The Yes Men have impersonated World Trade Organization, Dow Chemical Corporation, and Bush administration spokesmen on TV and at business conferences around the world. They do this in order to demonstrate some of the mechanisms that keep bad people and ideas in power, and because it’s absurdly fun. See Inke Arns, „The Jonathan Swifts of the Jackass generation: On the (net art) activism of RTMark, The Yes Men and UBERMORGEN.COM“, in: *Humboldt, Journal of the Goethe-Institute for Latin America*, No. 157, January 2012, pp. 56-58 [DE; ES; PT], <http://www.goethe.de/wis/bib/prj/hmb/deindex.htm>

¹³ In 2001, Dow Chemical bought Union Carbide, the chemical company responsible for the Bhopal catastrophe. But Dow continued to decline taking over responsibility for the events of 1984.

On occasion of this action, which was recorded with a hidden camera, the Yes Men unveiled Gilda, the golden skeleton. Delighted, the executives and managers attending the conference posed for photographs with this golden “skeleton in the closet” and exchanged business cards with the representative of Dow Chemical.

Let me now come back to the title of this presentation “Why art that is not making the world a less dangerous place – and why it should not do so“. Art – at least the kind of art that I find interesting and relevant today – does not make the world a less dangerous place. It does address the dangers existing in the world, and it does so by rubbing salt into our wounds. If artists are detecting „danger zones“ (and there are many all over the place), then they do this, as I tried to show, not in order to „defuse“ them, but rather to *expose* them, i.e. to make them even more visible. In this way, artists can direct our attention to existing problems. However, the projects and actions described above do not do this by directly pointing to the problems, like „the representatives of the (Yugoslav) systems are fascinated by totalitarian aesthetics“ (in the case of New Collectivism), „racism is bad“ (Schlingensiefel in Vienna), „privatization of public space is bad“ (Nikesquare), or „making profit at the expense of people is bad“ (the Golden Skeleton by the Yes Men). It’s easy, perhaps *too easy* to agree with these activist slogans (and they are easily forgotten). Art, however, functions in a different way. Art does not say „this is bad – and this is the way out.“ Art does not provide easy solutions, or give answers. Rather, art is about asking questions – and it does so by creating highly ambivalent situations in which those things that are being criticised are put to work – and are thus uncovered. The projects described here certainly make use of activist tactics – but there is always an element more to it that takes it beyond activism, something irritating, something excessive. The situations created by the examples I presented above are extremely ambivalent, „politically incorrect“, painful, unpleasant, and awkward, to say the least. They are highly questionable, and always create debate. They are definitely not easily forgotten. They are a thorn in our side. The artists who create these actions are not a cleaning brigade, rather, they are putting themselves at the center of the conflict, they go where it hurts, and we can say it straightforward: They are turning themselves into landmines that go off if you step on them. And, mind you, *no cleaning brigade will clean away this mess for you.*