

Berlin 1990ies, along the work of Florian Zeyfang

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One also always reduces dimensions in order to systematize, to bring something before the eye, or to document. The translation of sociality to the level of representation and image is a similar reformulation and reformatting, the various performative portions of which provide information on its capacity to reconstruct complex meanings. To make the social aspect the basis of this text is therefore part of a jointly developed method and not a reflection from the outside.¹

In Zeyfang's biography one encounters quite a number of names that refer to longer or shorter cooperations: Botschaft, A-Clip, Hungry Minds Think Alike, Rain, Lokal TV, Parasite. Of course these projects are not only names but stand for different approaches to a joint production often called collective and without the description of which Florian Zeyfang's artistic work could not be sufficiently explained. This applies not only to his practice but also to his subjects. Collective working processes – here meaning the conditions for producing collectivity and the alignment of social processes in jointly realized projects – not only form the basis for his own production but also interest him in regard to the images that are created and their modes of reproduction and documentation. One of the thematic strands in this context is how collective processes were involved in creating new social spaces. On the thematic level, one can observe this artistic examination in his investigations of Dziga Vertov's films, Godard's working method (especially his TV work together with Anne-Marie Miéville... one must be two), or of Latin American murals. On the level of practice, it was initially the circumstances of the 1990s in Berlin that had an influence on Florian Zeyfang's working method, something I will briefly go into here.

(There is an ambiguity in the term collective production. What is meant here – more than the notion of a joint production, the creation of joint works – is the production of a space, of a social space in which a different form of one's own production could become possible.)

In retrospect, the 1990s in Berlin appear just as special in the field of art, as they have often

¹ Opening and closing spaces. A big mistake – at least as was formerly claimed – is that nobody keeps or expands anything. Not even documents anything. So old things are continuously reinvented. That's what one thinks. But in reality, there is no repetition in this. Everything made by humans can be reproduced by humans, Walter Benjamin writes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*. But nobody needs it, or if so, not in the exact same way. So it is neither produced again nor remembered in the exact same way. Yet it remains a basis for those who produced in it. From inside, it then sticks to one, like something slimy into which one stuck one's hand and still feels on the fingers after it has long been washed off. Or from outside, because even if it's long forgotten, it is by far not forgiven, and once it is long forgiven, it is by far not forgotten.

A certain form of production won't be forgiven for a long time, even if the reasons for wanting or having to produce in such a way or the necessity is long forgotten. Some don't forgive themselves in this either. All this could be drawn up in schemes, pressed into 2D worlds. Something could turn into a picture in this manner. That could be it, a picture.

been presented in accounts on the urban space. Florian Zeyfang had studied in Berlin and was a Berliner, so to speak, before the dawn of the “new” Berlin. However, I would like to focus on the time after German unification here. On the one hand, there was a marked curiosity about the city in the art field, and on the other, almost no institutional infrastructure in the city in which artists could exhibit their works within a commercially secure framework. Everything seemed to be aimed at the export of art along with an urban identity that was just beginning to define itself. In regard to the respective historical situation, this urban identity was always characterized by loud and blustering ‘German-ness’ which was sold along with the art. Very few people felt like getting involved in this. The promise of an outside did not appear that attractive in face of the huge number of vacant buildings which the city itself offered. In comparison, the “established” art business seemed to be the less attractive option.

In the incredible institutional void of Berlin, there was enough space and also means that could be generated from this space to build up structures on one’s own. During this period, group structures evolved that could hardly be avoided. In order to not only produce art, but also to create the required framework of attention, space, and time, a number of people are needed, and the environment that produces one had to be established in the first place.²

In this situation, for example the Botschaft e.V., a group in which Florian Zeyfang worked, came into existence. As opposed to the perhaps well-known model of artist groups who mainly produce joint art, the Botschaft chiefly produced a social structure, exhibitions, bars, spaces, magazines, Internet options, and archives. It remains to be proved that these self-invented structures were better than their well-established counterpart, and this would be difficult via their institutional sustainability. A negative proof, like the misery of the hegemony of a hierarchical concept of art, or the today to a large extent averse and sometimes denouncing attitude towards established and capital-utilizing art structures is not viable either. One indication may be the, though not newly invented but at the time at least again remembered, way of dealing with the theme – the method and the knowledge of how

² A short remark in Theodor W. Adorno’s introduction to the Suhrkamp edition of Walter Benjamin’s letters pinpoints what is generally assumed of collective projects.

Misunderstanding the debate on such projects in the letters, Adorno claims Benjamin is desperately and certainly vainly searching for collectives, even in his mature days.

I am surprised by Adorno’s denunciation of investing in that which produces one, that is the others in a working context, and his blindness in regard to the moment of – perhaps vain – class betrayal, which to me lies in this rejection of the notion of producing alone and out of oneself, a notion in line with his education and class. Precisely this attempted class betrayal, however, seems significant to me for collective practices in the field of art. I also find that in the consideration of the mentioned group contexts and collectivizations of one’s own questions, this attempt at a class betrayal, that is the gesture of transgressing the space assigned to one, which by the way constitutes art, is taken too little into account.

art is integrated in the entire social realm that establishes itself around one. This knowledge (or the assumptions) in regard to sociality should not, however, only be expressed in the work but also in all commitments that are engendered around art and in the field of art. It was about the relations that exhibiting brings with it, the responsibility towards what became one's theme, all the way to describing and thus designating the intolerable social interaction in the field of art intolerable in social interaction in the field of art, the aims of which are grasped as art, but apart from that strongly diverge.

Seen from today, one has the impression that the Berlin artists were in an evasive daydream for a while; besides, the void had been filled by Berlin Biennales and art fairs, although the meagerness of Berlin's "established" exhibition season remains remarkable.

It would be embarrassing, though, if everything that was spoken about and done during this time were nowhere to be found anymore. I don't believe this is the case. In my opinion, the method developed for art at that time is constitutive for Berlin. Yet, or perhaps for this reason, it is important to exhibit this method and use it for exhibitions or to talk about it, meaning converting it into time.

The term correctness is a difficult one. On the one hand, it doesn't sound nice in German, it had to put up with quite a bit in the feuilletons, and instead of standing for what it should – namely an indispensable stance – it designates a moral attitude that has at times been called elitist or presumptuous. But the concept of correctness is also the issue when describing the method developed during that time. Except that next to "what's so funny about anti-racism", feminism, and the fact that one does not regard the world simply as material, the specificity of fine art is added, the dimensional leap from reproduction to image, something which can perhaps be compared to the process of translation into an incomprehensible language plus the translation back (whereby the translation into incomprehensibility is often already exhibited). This is what the Berlin artists were concerned with in the 1990s. For many (Katja Eydel, Judith Hopf, Andreas Siekmann, Amelie von Wulffen, Klaus Weber, Christian Flamm, Alice Creischer, and others), the debate has become the method in various translations, or at least the background against which they produce.

This process of translation also means that one detaches oneself from the literality in regard to the subject. Yet the commitment and the responsibility for the subject is to be retained. This led to questions such as: What do I want from these pictures? How do I use material? How does one speak? Under which conditions will this be shown? How was this topic dealt with before? How explicitly does one speak? And especially: What becomes (my) theme and what responsibility lies in it in regard to its exhibition and possible exploitation, also by third parties? These are questions that were discussed by the Botschaft in the 90s and were of central importance for the projects mentioned above.

Hovering above as a threat was always the verdict of drowning in mediation, something which those involved were also aware of. In contrast to a widespread assumption, it was not

about didactics. But this translation had to be tested, often to the disadvantage of the image level; sometimes a complexity of the individual work of art evolved that was not easy to comprehend and that could not be resolved by the mere presence of the viewer. At any rate, the viewers were not faced with a complicity, and by no means with simplifying unambiguousness on the level of jokes that were not admitted and therefore shifted to others. But on the image level not only jokes are made but there is also a discourse, and with Florian Zeyfang who has contributed to this discourse on various levels as an artist, a writer, as someone who conceives exhibitions and invites others, a whole series of conversations and debates forms the basis.³

The topic here is art. Artistic action that viewed the sociality that produces it as the basis of production was not a strategy of inscription into art-sociality, as was often said, and also not its collective. It was an artistic method that had to be developed (or further developed), if one did not want to insist – blind and deaf towards the world – on other models. Developing of a formal language for this purpose undisputedly stands in a tradition. The further development perhaps consisted in the transfer from manifestos and proclamations to complex action; not focusing on the artist as someone asserting activities as art qua his or her authorship, but linking social modes of action, such as responsibility, with existing forms of representation that claim this and finding new ones.

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What is to be pointed out here is that during the time of debate within these structures, a method was developed that implies a general anchoring of heteronomy in art. The responsibility that a commitment to this method includes would be an extension of sociality into time, which I find necessary. A 5D work of Florian Zeyfang.

³ This in turn possesses a lot of humor, e.g. by including running gags inherent to these debates as well, without which this conversation could not be continued either. I always had the impression that wherever art was produced with the aloofness of political commitment, one could also encounter more self-aware, critical and funny pictures than at places where such a debate was rejected as too boring, too serious, or too correct. For example the investigation of the picture that can be experienced with the senses – something always desired in the field of art. Not that this wish in itself was totally negated, quite to the contrary: it is taken up and juxtaposed with other methods of abstraction, like in Zeyfang's video work *Fischinger treffen*.