

## **The totalitarianism of open systems**

Some talks were held with F.W. on the subject of "Now I am one of you". The art project is about images that relate to peer group pressures, power and the rituals of marginalisation.

The subject soon switched to his "Pre-deportation detention" project. He spoke about the twenty months he spent accompanying the detainees' advisor on his visits to Innsbruck prison.

**H.S.:** What gave you the idea for the "Pre-deportation detention" project?

**F.W.:** My involvement began when the ARGE Schubhaft<sup>1</sup> advisors showed me some of the detainees' letters. I deal with the subject in more than documentary form, however; it is

integrated in an artistic field of action. In the letters, subjects are raised which I am interested in and which also played a role in my earlier work.

**H.S.:** The organisation of objects, including letters, in exhibition spaces is an indication of the aesthetic and communicative quality of the offering and not just since Nelson Goodman. The best thing is of course to use "social" as the theme and keep the actual subject out of it. It is also best to refuse to give the work a title and thus a label. Without a subject, there can be no basis for communication; that has to be destroyed so that as absolute a power as possible can be established. After all, it is one of the functions of all controllers, artists, curators and politicians to protect themselves from criticism.

**F.W.:** When I deal with a subject, it has to get under my skin. My procedure is action art. It is involvement with the subject that I seek to transport into the public space. For me art is a publicising gesture. My artistic work is preceded by what I share with other people, what I experience physically, what I collect and remember, what I stand up for and accept responsibility for as an individual, what I reveal to the public as an artist focussing on the subject. For me it is important to combine discursive and formal revelation and display strategies.

**H.S.:** But that calls for a more pragmatic and aesthetic approach. For reasons of autonomy, art and the institutions that exhibit art must keep a certain distance to local society. For example, one can invite some big names to talk about a problem without translating it directly into the social context. This distance increases the aura of the 'noble intention' of art in the framework of the 'noble institution' of the exhibition space. If the topic is noble, the work cannot be bad, can it? I can criticise globalisation or social conditions in general, provide myself with a certain focus and like administrative detention for asylum seekers and offer art as a solution. You also have to remember not to go into too much detail or become entangled in the complexities. Otherwise the noble effect and the 'moral', for example, doesn't work. Is it a good idea to include personal problems, questions of the diaspora or the ethnographic background?

**F.W.:** That can be done at the exhibition level, but beyond that?

**H.S.:** ...it works particularly well. Let me give you an example. Just before 1989, when he suggested holding an exhibition of contemporary works on paper from eastern Europe at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, a curator was told, "Eastern Europe has no market for art and therefore has no art, either." On his field trips to the countries of eastern Europe, however, it was repeatedly emphasised to him that those artists were most worthy of exhibiting who offered the most active resistance. In the West we seem to have decided to adapt the former conformity of the East at the institutional level in the style of an "Art Compass for Curators".

**F.W.:** Yes, it looks as though the roles have been reversed. It seems to me that in the West we have a theory that propagates a form of soft resistance, i.e. resistance that cannot actually hurt the economy, society or the political establishment and yet confers a liberal, critical, committed aspect on art and its institutions. This is a sentimental attitude that I cannot share. My projects contain no material as a salve to the conscience of the institutions. They are a product of respect for and attention to the process of art, an attempt to establish special relationships between things. Art as a tool, and usually as mere illustration to boot, is always a blunt instrument focussed with such moving helplessness on its status as art. The risk in adjusting an artistic situation and the willingness to be vulnerable undermine all forms of calculability, reliability and definitiveness.

**H.S.:** Well, that is in marked contrast to current policy in the field of art. The institutions have to protect themselves against the trials and tribulations of risk. I invite as many famous colleagues and artists with an affinity to the local political scene as possible and implicitly commit them to behave. The various invitations to speak or attend dinners are always on the basis of reciprocity, of course and are just as helpful as support for artists with regard to grants and scholarships. The important thing in this context is to blur as far as possible the different calls of the office and function of the head of the institution, PR worker and journalist by focussing on the individual.

**F.W.:** But one can't delegate the process of interpretation of what is art so entirely to the institution. That would be tantamount to a situation in which the specimens needed to illustrate a given aesthetic theory are assembled from a limited group of artistic positions. In such a case the exhibits, i.e. the artists, have to undergo a process of theoretical approval before they qualify for exhibiting.

**H.S.:** The pre-eminence of theory is useful for conferring a profile on the works shown. It bundles the levels of meaning and defines the perspectives in advance. The most effective instrumentalisation of theory is to work with complete openness, without any framework or connection between the systems. Thus I can only recommend that you employ as vague a title as possible or preferably no title at all in order to emphasise the difference and the incompatibility of the contexts.

**F.W.:** I establish a natural proximity to the protagonists of the subject and root them in the public space. Only where participation and interaction are assured can the social plastic exist, even though it need no longer be interpreted as it would have been at the time of Beuys. In an art project like "Pre-deportation detention", the posters, the tents and the mobile home are all combined. In the run-up to the project I exchanged T-shirts with the detainees in the prisons, including artists who were also awaiting deportation, as well as drawings and a head modelled in clay.

**H.S.:** The mutual act of giving is primarily physical; there is nothing aesthetic about it. This voluntary exchange between the artist and the detainees turns the surveillance cameras to our unnatural, strained behaviour and the involuntary comedy of the situation. The problem is reflected in our commitment to the rituals of mutual assurance in art. So please, if at all possible, leave out the disconcerting proximity to the protagonists.

**F.W.:** The motifs for my posters were provided by the detainees in the form of their T-shirts and quotations from their letters. They were then combined with images and slogans taken from the mass media. The montages call for a response on their part and on the part of the people who see the posters. The posters are primarily images communicated to large numbers of passers-by. The mobile home is the next step in creating an image of and metaphor for a safe haven for people obliged to seek refuge. Through its journeys it can draw immediate attention to the borders created for certain people in and around Europe. Since I see myself not as a social worker but as an artist, I am interested in the question of the positions adopted in the exhibition facilities. The gallery run by the Tyrolean regional authority has a courtyard that is actually part of the Tyrolean Regional Assembly building. It is located at the intersection of art and political power, whether it wants to be or not, whether it seeks to underline or to blur that situation.

**H.S.:** That is why you should show some consideration and not pitch your tents in the gallery courtyard. When the Director a sorry, I mean the team a selects an artistic position to exhibit, for example, it turns out to be an artist who is also involved in the team of the Undersecretary of State for the Arts. That shows how little room for manoeuvre there is, and of course everyone should get their exhibition financed. Apart from that, it is the more central positions that should be shown in an official gallery. Ultimately after all, we represent Austria's cultural profile with the appropriate protagonists.

**F.W.:** That probably explains another little incident in the same gallery in which a poster by a young Tyrolean artist was taken down not so long ago. During the war in Yugoslavia one of her posters showed an aerial photograph of a town that had been bombed, and the town seemed to have a certain resemblance to Innsbruck.

**H.S.:** Can you say something about the various aspects of your uninvited presentation on the premises of the Tyrolean regional authority's art gallery?

**F.W.:** There are documentary and social aspects to the externals of the action. In formal terms my approach is to ensure that the subject I am concerned with, in this case administrative detention for asylum seekers, is developed at various levels in the public space in aesthetic and discursive terms and that interrelationships are established. The actionist element, i.e. its service-providing or political effect, is a consequence of the action, i.e. the development of the "Pre-deportation detention" project. Formal structures of individual experience and collected objects are combined in a montage with a selection of slogans to form a generally accessible pictorial canon. Mediatization is important for both the source materials and the dissemination and interpretation of the images. Interaction with the public remains documented and continues the process of the work: transforming and transmitting.

**H.S.:** You seem to have had the good fortune to have at least a small number of colleagues willing to express their solidarity with the action. Nevertheless, you have to understand that a squat is not really acceptable. After all, it is really quite a good thing that security continues to be the typical condition of the Tyrol. Where would we be if... I prefer to relate to a language of exclusion and refer to the relevant discourses. There are some very full catalogues comprising one circle with their vocabulary, a second with the choice of words and a third with the linguistic form. They are there for everyone to use as a source of information if I turn my attention to such a discourse. For me, an artist who addresses clearly defined tasks and seeks to develop a special perception and a density of experience in events that get under one's skin is simply counterproductive, is "retro". The work should enter into the discourse. What is one to make of this alternation between functional and phenomenological determination, between formalistic and discursive argument?

**F.W.:** My goal is to communicate the experience of everyday objects in a process of reflection, supervision and feedback. It is not a problem if the content and the facts of life cause faults and shortcomings in the artistic process. The illusion of perfection is permitted to recede so as to explicitly avoid a totalitarian result. What is important in my art is not what opinion I happen to have but what I happen to notice, what I come across while working on the subject, as in the case of the tents in the "Pre-deportation detention" project made from lorry tarpaulins with the slogan, "Welcome to the Olympic Ski Area".

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