

“Art as a productive breakdown”

literature and (performance) art in the public space

As chance would have it, a group of students invited Thomas Meinecke to Innsbruck to read from his works (in the framework of a discussion on “Displaced persons & identity as a source of exclusion”) on 19 December 2001, i.e. at the same time as Franz Wassermann’s art project on “Administrative Detention for Asylum Seekers”. The author began with the following excerpt from his latest novel “Light Blue”.

“The man is tied hand and foot. He has a plaster over his mouth. That’s because he tried to resist deportation. Once on board the aircraft, he is placed in the last row behind a curtain. He is absolutely quiet now, and so the officers accompanying him remove the plaster from his mouth. The man immediately starts shouting so as to attract the attention of the other passengers. During a stop in Cameroon some twenty passengers pull the curtain aside, hit and kick the police officers and liberate the young asylum seeker.” (Thomas Meinecke, Light Blue)

The combination of a public reading and an art project in the public space devoted to the same subject is a striking example of the exciting results that can be achieved through media linking (even when unintentional). An author of the young generation described in words what the artist presented in a visual medium. Meinecke’s text supplemented Wassermann’s project with its various components (poster campaign, consecration of a mobile home as a church sanctuary, art gallery squat); indeed it seemed almost to describe it. The text and the project entered into a dialogue, which & although it was only indirect & had a lasting impact on those who heard the reading and saw one or more of the project components. The processes of reception initiated continued well beyond the end of the performance, which lasted until the end of January 2002. Today one can still find posters or their remains in various locations as a reminder of this period of interaction, and the debates themselves are still ongoing.

“Heinrich’s press cuttings: A forty-year-old Algerian woman seeking asylum hung herself three weeks ago in the notorious refugee tract at Frankfurt airport. She had spent seven months trapped in the airport’s transit zone. According to her statement, she had fled from Algeria because her husband was wanted as a terrorist there (terrorist in inverted commas in the Frankfurt newspaper). Also, she had been raped several times by the Algerian police.” (Thomas Meinecke, Light Blue)

One of Wassermann’s posters, with a T-shirt sporting a message from a detained asylum seeker (“I am in administrative detention because I was tortured and raped”), confronts the public with a situation similar to the one described in the press cutting inserted into Meinecke’s novel. Through a twist of logic Wassermann turns reasons for flight into reasons for detention, which are so absurd as to emphasise the absurdity of detention itself. As already mentioned, in addition to this provocative poster campaign, the “Administrative Detention” project created by Wassermann in collaboration with ARGE Schubhaft (Working Party on Pre-deportation Detention) also included a number of other activities in the public space. In the context of Wassermann’s artistic involvement to date, it is clear that these activities are not to be seen in isolation; his work has always related to the subject of marginalisation and exclusion. “It was a T-bone steak” (1997), for example, is another example of social commitment in art. In that case Wassermann’s work took the form of a simultaneous performance in a concentration camp, a church and in Parliament. In a production entitled “Barbie and Ken are HIV-positive” (1996), the sculptures were presented simultaneously and without spatial constraints throughout Austria for thirteen days, transforming the whole of the country into a kind of public exhibition space. Wassermann’s intention has always been to confront the public, the system (the church, the political

establishment, the world of art, the public space) with its immanent laws, to offer food for thought to the general public, to encourage people to consider the arguments and become involved. This is not mere actionism; it is about triggering re-action through a “productive breakdown” (O. Jahraus).

“www.deportation-alliance.com: ‘No human being is illegal’ a campaign against the vulgarity of doing business with the forcible expulsion of refugees. Tens of thousands of helpless persons are thought to have been flown back to the source of their misery in the comfort of Lufthansa’s Deportation Class. With increasing frequency, tourists on the aircraft carrying them to their holiday destinations are complaining of the psychological burden of flying in the company of bound and weeping passengers whose application for asylum has been mercilessly rejected in affluent Germany.” (Thomas Meinecke, Light Blue)

Meinecke addresses the brutality of the act of deportation with the help of press cuttings and electronic data, which he inserts into his text so as to interrupt the line of the narrative and encourage the reader to react. Similarly, with a media mix that includes posters, photographs, advertising slogans, TV stills, lorry tarpaulins, a mobile home, and photographs with texts provided by detained asylum seekers, Wassermann assembles a battery of materials that are given a new dimension of meaning through a process of combination, alienation and various activities in support of cross-signification so as to provoke a response on the part of the audience. In both cases it is all inventory, not invention. Wassermann works with the tool of combination (like Meinecke in his novel), with performance a representation and presentation in the public space a with networking and counterpoint to charge the items in the inventory, to give them power. To that extent the public reading and the art project are complementary and together illuminate additional facets.

Meinecke’s reading in Innsbruck finished as it began with a passage on the subject of pre-deportation detention. Interestingly enough, there are only three sections in the whole novel that address the problem of asylum, but the author finds them so important that, as he says himself, he tends to select them for public readings “so as to open and close, as it were, the whole complex of exclusion mechanisms, which in fact form the baseline of the text”. But whereas the consecutive list of information presented by Meinecke a not unlike the radio and television news reports which may include a deportation item but only as one of several items of equal importance a means that those items ultimately are inundated and go unnoticed (even in the reviews), Wassermann’s art project relates explicitly to the problem of pre-deportation detention and the situation of aslyumseekers, and he creates a strong message by focussing on individual aspects through a process of isolation and reinforcement, alienation and recombination. As a result Wassermann disturbs and breaks with the conventional patterns of perception in an attempt to encourage a new exegesis. To that extent his “Administrative Detention” project causes not only a productive breakdown for the recipient a a positive effect in line with the artist’s intentions a but also a disturbance within Innsbruck’s art scene.

Text ©Klaus Zerinschek
Translation: Chris March

Thomas Meinecke: Hellblau. Roman. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 2001.

Oliver Jahraus: Die Aktion des Wiener Aktionismus. Subversion der Kultur und Dispositionierung des Bewusstseins. München: Fink 2001 (=Das Problempotential der Nachkriegsavantgarden. Grenzgänge in Literatur, Kunst, Medien, Bd. 2).

Rezensionen aus dem Zeitungsarchiv der Abteilung für Literaturkritik und Rezeptionsforschung am Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Literatur und Literaturkritik an der Universität Innsbruck.