

Aporias of Subversion

Branka Vujanovic

Abstract:

Based upon case studies from the fields of media production, literature, theatre, film and television, visual arts, and fashion, this volume questions the political meanings of subversive aesthetics today. Through the exemplary analysis of diverse strategies and aporias that surround them, the authors offer proposals for redefining the notion of subversion. This redefinition includes pluralization of the notion of subversion, focusing on its productive rather than disruptive dimension, and self-critical engagement with subversive tropes.

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Ernst, Thomas; Cantó, Patricia Gozalbes; Richter, Sebastian; Sennewald, Nadja; Tieke, Julia (eds.): SUBversionen. Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik in der Gegenwart. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008. 404 pp., paperback €30.80. ISBN 978-3-89942-677-9

Aber ich würde es nicht machen, wenn ich nicht glauben würde, dass es funktioniert.

Hans Bernhard

Dealing with the question of subversive aesthetics today involves a critical engagement with the aporias that surround subversive strategies within a neo-liberal society of control and global capitalism. In discussing these aporias from different theoretical perspectives, the authors in this volume focus on the subversive strategies of communication, self-presentation, and de-canonization.

Manipulation and fabrication of facts are often employed as subversive strategies within the aesthetic practice of hacktivism, culture jamming or guerilla communication in order to arrest the public's attention. To what extent do fake ads or ad busters succeed in subverting the advertising industry, which relies on the same strategies for its own purposes? This is the question addressed by Hans Bernhard and Mirko Tobias Schäfer in their text "Subversion ist Schnellbeton! Zur Ambivalenz des 'Subversiven' in Medienproduktionen" (Subversion is a Quick Fix: On the Ambivalence of 'Subversion' in Media Productions). The authors propose more radical and self-reflective engagement with the consequences of employing manipulation and fabrication of facts in the actual political reality. As one of the alarming cases, they point to the Iraq campaign launched by public relations company Hill&Knowlton, which made use of a false testimony. As an artist who took part in the actions of Ubermorgen.com, Hans Bernhard finds the subversive potential of media production by addressing the important political issues, in particular the contradictions of a democratic representational system and its problematic relation to the aspirations of global capitalism. Dangerous compatibility between 'subvertising' and the values of consumer capitalism are also addressed in Martin Doll's text "Für eine Subversion der Subversion. Und über die Widersprüche eines politischen Individualismus" (For a Subversion of Subversion. And on the Contradictions of Political Individualism).

Internet artists Rena Tangens and padeluun open up a hopeful perspective in their text "Informationen sind schnell–Wahrheit braucht Zeit. Einige Mosaiksteine für das kollektive Netzgedächtnis" (Information is Fast–Truth Needs Time. Some Mosaic Tiles for Collective Net Memory). Since the 1980s they have realized a number of projects that evolve around creating a virtual space for the exchange of ideas as a counterpoint to the powers of cultural industry

(FoeBuD e.V.). During the 1990s, they were also engaged in establishing a transnational network, ZaMir (in Serbo-Croatian, "za mir" means "for peace"), that enabled people from war-torn former Yugoslavia to communicate with each other and the rest of the world. In their contribution to this volume, they propose a subversive concept of "Rahmenbau" (building a framework) inspired by Erik Satie.

In the world characterized by the fast flow of information through the new media, is it possible for a "slow" medium such as literature to still carry a subversive power as it did in the past? In his text "Text-Hybrid, Transvestism, and Terrorism: Subversive Concepts in German Contemporary Prose Exemplified by Thomas Meinecke's Novel Tomboy," Thomas Ernst finds this possibility in literary experiments that function as "archives" of different concepts of subversion, in which these concepts are not only collected, but also problematized from within. The author distinguishes between four conceptual fields of subversion: a deconstructive, political-revolutionary, artistic-avantgarde, and minority-underground.

Several contributors discuss political meanings of subversive self-presentation. Based upon specific case studies, Karen Wagels and Patricia Gozalbes Cantó deal with forms of self-presentation in photography as a way to subvert the hegemonic binary logic of gender. The hypothesis that fashion can have a political edge is pursued in Helga M. Treichl's text "Maskierte Identitäten: Verhüllen und Präsentieren als Ästhetik des Politischen" (Masked Identities: Disguising and Showcasing as Aesthetics of the Political). Drawing on the critical theory of visibility, Inga Betten considers masking to be an aesthetic form of political fight. The Zapatista mask *pasmontaña* as a symbol of political invisibility is the object of analysis in her text "Visual Resistance. Die Bilder der Zapatistas als Subversionen des Blickregimes" (Visual Resistance. Images of Zapatistas as Subversions of the Gaze Regime).

Any account on subversive aesthetics would be incomplete without a consideration of the complex relation between subversion and institutionalization. Two authors in this volume deal with this issue. Gregor Schröder discusses "Avant-garde and Postcolonial Strategies of De-Canonization. On Meschac Gaba's Museum of Contemporary Art." The point of departure is the analysis of the museum as an institution of canonization, and the consideration of the avant-garde critique of it in Marcel Duchamp's and Marcel Broodthaers's mobile museums. Museum mechanisms of representation are then problematized from a postcolonial perspective, considering the project of African artist Meschac Gaba.

From a sociological perspective, Tanja Bogusz poses the question whether subversion can function in an institutionalized form as a basis for public intervention. Her case study is the Volksbühne Berlin, which, after the uniting of Germany, opened up a space for various forms of subversion previously associated with subculture. In this case, an institution functions as a place to save the "secrets of subversion" in a market-based cultural field.

Through these considerations, SUBversionen offers a practice-based diagnosis that bears import for the relation between subversive aesthetics and politics in a contemporary situation.

If the "secrets of subversion" are to be saved, the authors emphasize, the importance of self-reflection and self-criticism of artistic and media productions in relation to their own subversive efficacy must be acknowledged.