

Hanne Seitz

Art as Social Challenge On the Practice of Art Interventions in the Public Realm

For around 200 years our society has used art to force every member of a social community into a communal state of shock.
(Peter Sloterdijk)

We have to return to seeing art as something that contributes to creating unity and commitment.
(Jochen Gerz)

The main task of art is to constantly confront us with other possibilities.
(Robert Jungk)

Taking stock

The discussions about the so-called bad bank triggered by the financial crisis illustrate how we deal with problems – be they dubious banking practices or disagreeable people – we push them away, move them elsewhere. According to the German weekly *Die Zeit*: “Useless people live in bad hotels, poor people are treated in bad hospitals, old people endure bad aging, the marginalised rot in bad schools, illegal immigrants are sent in bad airplanes to bad countries. Bad people from the underclass can look forward to even more bad TV (...) and the number of people living in the bad areas of German cities, where they will experience bad luck and bad vibes, is going to increase.”¹ This is no longer mere prophecy: today 35.5 percent of all children and young people in Berlin are dependent on social assistance payments; in the district of Kreuzberg, where many immigrants live, it is one child in two. No qualifications and no vocational training, resulting in impotent rage. It must also be noted, however, that given the lack of viable alternatives, a great deal of energy and skill are used to squeeze as much money out of the state as possible. The fact that financial support alone is not enough is becoming ever more evident; indeed it often has unexpected and undesired consequences. The problems are also social in character, linked to cultural differences as well as inadequate educational and cultural resources. Demographic developments also play a role here. Young people defend themselves against alleged injustice, using different (sometimes dishonourable) means in order to assert themselves against society. Teachers declare a state of emergency, believing they are losing control of the situation and demand that schools be closed, as was the case recently with the Rütli school in Berlin. Young people attending general secondary schools (where the qualifications they receive are of less academic value), who live in rundown housing estates, and who, on top of it all, are the children of immigrants, know that they are the dregs of society, that they are the “bad people”. A precarious situation. Existing youth subcultures, immigrants and other minorities are already framing their cultural identity beyond the mainstream, in a enormous variety of micro-cultures or so-called parallel societies. Here it is culture, of all things, that has become one of the most important resources available – for people, institutions, even cities and entire regions. Culture, not understood as a piece of art, as a material artefact that can be seen and touched (fine art, architecture, theatre, literature and so on), but instead as a performative practice, as active interaction with that which exists in society. “Doing culture” (Karl H. Hörning/Julia Reuter) is the new magic expression to describe this paradigm change and thus is connected to the increased interest in the power of people to “make their mark” and so create and change reality.

Participating in art and culture can have a major influence on exclusion and inclusion, on the space that a person occupies within a society. Nevertheless, against the background of the relations mentioned above, the title of this paper may appear polemic, even deceptive. How

¹ See Kümmel 2009

can art be a social challenge when the current social situation is one beset by great challenges? The issue is not that of pointing out this unhappy state of affairs; it is that of breaking through the disinterest regarding these problems and about creating critical, practical-minded public discourse. And if any social practice is to be successful in sensitising the perception of these issues, then it is art. And if anyone can direct our attention to specific circumstances, then – since they are well-versed in demonstrating processes – it is artists. How to achieve this, give or take; and furthermore, how to strengthen potential for action, will now be discussed and presented in detail using two examples from the art world. This will also illustrate the entities society has valued since art began to move away from high culture and an exclusive, educated middle-class public some time ago. Indeed, contemporary art is presently experiencing a well-nigh explosion in popularity.² This development in art elucidates clearly that the meaning of art cannot be determined once and once only; its social function is variable and negotiable.

Even though the question “Where is art going?” is currently doing the society rounds, anyone who views art from an anthropological standpoint, and who sees its social embeddedness, or who even asks about its usefulness,³ is unavoidably faced with a great deal of prejudice. It goes without saying that not every artist is interested in social or socio-political issues, in the socially disadvantaged or in victims of political persecution. The few artists who are interested, and even go as far as investigating where the boundary between art and life lies, earn – if they are lucky – the title “street workers for aesthetics” (Hanno Rauterberg), but are more likely to be mocked as dilettantes and traitors, along the lines of *Und das ist Kunst?! [And That’s Supposed to Be Art!]*⁴ On the other hand, these artists must deal with social, moral or pedagogical issues, along the lines of *Dürfen die das? [Are They Allowed to Do That?]*⁵

Contemporary art is no longer being exhibited in the usual art sites; it is being presented in urban districts, in public spaces, in underground stations and in prisons. Theatre is longer expected to provide the perfect illusion; now reality is preferred. Today, not only everyday objects – in the style of ready-mades (following Duchamp) – are removed from their normal context and placed into the art context, but also people. “Post-dramatic theatre” (Hans-Thies Lehmann) is performed by asylum seekers or the unemployed (*Marat/Sade*, Hamburger Schauspielhaus 2008), by young people with few qualifications from non-academic families (*Hauptschule der Freiheit*, Münchner Kammerspiele 2009), or even unemployed muezzins from Cairo (*Radio Muezzin*, Berliner Hebbel am Ufer 2009). In contrast to amateur theatre, these “ready-made actors” (Rimini Protokoll) do not act out any parts; they portray that which they know best: their own lives, sometimes in a way that is “more real than reality”.⁶

Artists react to concrete locations, events and problems, carry out field research and critical analyses, coordinate, network, make connections between people and demonstrate their knowledge in fields where previously art was not present. Their practice is less product-based and is instead concerned with process; it refers much less to itself and much more to a context. They make reference to the Situationists, site-specific performance, “new genre public art” or conceptual art and distinguish themselves via temporary interventions in the

² Of course, the democratisation and popularisation of art does not have the same effect on everyone – members of the working class (for example, men from the Ruhr region of Germany) might prefer to breed racing pigeons or watch football games to messing about with crazy artists. Within the context of a participatory art project *Mehr Licht* (2003–2006) in a social housing estate in the Brandenburg/Havel region I ran with students, a resident told me why he did not want to take part in the art project: he preferred more hands-on activities, like playing football, where he basically knew what to expect.

³ For more on this subject see Seitz 2007

⁴ See Rauterberg 2007

⁵ See Rolling/Sturm 2002

⁶ See Seitz 2008a

public realm, aiming to attract the attention of the public and to encourage them to participate. Using a kind of “temporary complicity”,⁷ artists demand that art be decoded, contextualised against the background of one’s own life, and that it turns the observer or viewer into an agent, co-author and ally. The interventions indicate the essential, are over-the-top, even humorous at times, without ever forfeiting their critical motivation. Artists create agencies for the unemployed (*Die glücklichen Arbeitslosen*, [The happy unemployed]) or find adoptive parents from the Third World for lonely Europeans (Gudrun Widlok). They take politicians at their word (*Rimini Protokoll*), make injections against intolerance and the disintegration of public opinion (*Apotheke Mitte*, [Berlin-Mitte Chemist]), and even request blood donations in order to get the moribund Berlin banks back on their feet (Roland Brus/Detlef Schneider).

Christoph Schlingensief: *BITTE LIEBT ÖSTERREICH* [PLEASE LOVE AUSTRIA]
Against this background of the steady diminishing of social space, artists animate the increasingly superficial nature of public opinion and challenge people to make a stand and act upon the courage of their convictions. One example is Christoph Schlingensief, director from Berlin, and his project *BITTE LIEBT ÖSTERREICH*,⁸ which took place during the Vienna International Festival (*Wiener Festwochen*) in 2000 and in my opinion is still groundbreaking. This is theatre of a different kind where there is not much to see, but a great deal to do and to negotiate – a theatrical event that did not take place on stage but instead in a container accomodating not actors but asylum seekers. The container was located on the *Opernplatz* [Opera Square] in Vienna with a disproportionately large sign on top of it: “*Ausländer raus*” [Foreigners out]. The events taking place in the container were broadcast twenty-fours a day onto the square. Not an unfamiliar situation: only one of the twelve would be allowed to remain in the country. As in the cult TV show *Big Brother*, the people watching decided who would be expelled next. The hue and cry was inevitable: the *Wiener Festwochen* did their best to provide explanations and make room for discussion, while the artist added more fuel to the fire: “They (the *Wiener Festwochen*, H.S.) claim that this is art.” Famous names, like Elfriede Jelinek, came to the container to write a play with the asylum seekers. Jörg Haider was also invited, who of course did not come. His campaign, “Schlingensief must go”, supported by the *Kronenzeitung* newspaper, hit the jackpot of outraged public opinion. Why had he not done this project in Berlin where he lived? “Because”, came Schlingensief’s prompt reply, “we don’t need it there.” A high-profile boxing match – on television, in the press, on the square. The members of the ÖVP and FPÖ coalition – at that time, the first right-wing populist party in Europe to participate in government, and indeed, the reason for the project in the first place – seemed paralysed. Forbidding the action would have been as revealing as tolerating it. The discussions were stormy, the outrage great. Ultimately, the participants of the weekly “*Anti-Coalition-Demo*” stormed the container and forced the project to come to a premature end. Weeks later, the Austrians were still in a state of shock and the German public (especially the readers of the tabloid *Bild*) were right in there with them. The accusation of racism stuck. As well as that which the artist “was inflicting upon” art. In Schlingensief’s reading, art becomes a training ground for political life – a grotesque spectacle, positioned between art and everyday life, between lies and truth, between theatre and political showbiz. Schlingensief’s theatre can be understood in two ways: as art and as an insurgent act. A social challenge without parallel. On closer observation, we realise he is not only a maker of provocative theatre, but also a clever homeopath. His tactics are similar to those of homeopathic practice, where like is healed by like (the “poison” that made you ill in the first place is used to cure you) and where the remedy is most effective when it is most diluted and most agitated, when the original chemical elements can no longer be detected. Schlingensief

⁷ See Seitz 2009

⁸ I have described and analysed this project in detail in an earlier article. (See Seitz 2003)

takes what is already happening, what is already there, and adds even more to the mix – an overdose whose poison works of its own accord and might even become its own “healing” counterpart. Art and life appear to merge. This is art of the everyday, art that is barely discernible from politics. Upsetting familiar modes of perception produces a culture of interruption that provokes communication and negotiation, parading our moribund society, with its racism to boot, right in front of us. Ultimately Schlingensief’s intervention illustrates that achieving (the state of) democracy is well-nigh impossible: it must be understood as a process accomplished via the act of doing, of execution and negotiation and thus needs to be constantly re-invented.⁹ Are they from the Left, the Right; is it art? That which seems self-evident is called into question, requiring both framing and contextualisation.

Like Andy Warhol who liked to “be the right thing in the wrong place”, Schlingensief switches formats and issues around, mixes politics and entertainment, puts asylum seekers in a *Big Brother* container or places unemployed people onto poles, as he did in *Church of Fear*, his project shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale.¹⁰ Unemployed people sat for days on end on poles and confessed their fears (looking and listening, enduring and suffering) in order to put to an end to the politics of terror (and at the same time, the politics of religion) and, on top of it all, to collect the winnings from the bets that had been placed as to who would be able to stay sitting for longest. “Frustration, unhappiness” is how one how of the sitters summed up the discussions of the passers-by: “Someone else is to blame, the lazy unemployed, the government, the job centre, the punks, the unwilling, the banks.”¹¹ The sculpture is made of a material that has been holding our society together for quite some time – fear. “Take control of your fear, do not let it terrorise you”, such are the maxims of the *Church of Fear*, still gaining members today, and which, according to the artist’s statistics, had well over 20,000 registered members – the so-called “unbelievers” – in 2009.

Joseph Beuys and his “social sculpture” with which he aimed to illustrate the potential of creative action to change society, inevitably comes to mind. However Schlingensief’s critique of society, unlike that of Beuys, is more indirect and subtle. His art does not have a strategic goal nor does it aim to bring about change; it is tactical in nature – it uses the opportunities that come up *en passant* within systems and negotiates them there.¹² Art cannot solve the problems and contradictions; it can however demonstrate the complexity of these. Here, the issue is not breaking with convention; it is about using it. Unlike the avant-garde of earlier times, this is neither concerned with enlightenment nor producing an alternative model for society. It is not even interested in subversion, but instead in inversion, bringing to the surface that which has been excluded by the (globalised and increasingly standardised) system: difference. Since art creates the “sting of the other” (Bernhard Waldenfels) and thus can produce difference, it cannot be identical to the system and ultimately can resist homeopathic “diffusion”.

A project like *BITTE LIEBT ÖSTERREICH* intensifies the crisis situation that people are already facing, thus enabling them to deal with insecurity and destabilisation, with exclusion and the violation of boundaries, with confusion and destruction and to cope with all this in a relatively risk-free environment. Furthermore something is achieved that otherwise seems doomed to disappear from our consumerist, globalised and information-based society: public acts taking place as part of public discourse. According to Hannah Arendt, this is the condition of the self, the presumption of individuation – a kind of second birth through which people involve themselves in events in the presence of other people, through which they renew their potential power, accept responsibility and change existing conditions: “In acting

⁹ See Documental1_Platform1 2002

¹⁰ I have also described this project elsewhere. (See Seitz 2004)

¹¹ For more on this subject, see the discussion forum at www.church-of-fear.net.

¹² For more on this subject, see Seitz 2005

and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”¹³

Since Schlingensiefel did not declare his action to be an art event, people cannot avoid using talking and acting in order to find their way around it, in order to attach meaning to what is happening, even if this positioning is only temporary and the end result is unclear given the uncertain nature of the action. The “revelatory quality of speech and action”, according to Arendt, is however only created “where people are *with others* (emphasis H.S.) and neither for nor against them.”¹⁴ Thus the question remains as to what the *communitas* needs and how the reliability of democratic modes of action can be tested by it. Impassioned people, radical claims and forceful pushing and shoving can be hard to bear, but without friction and difference there can be no democratic path. Disputes are an essential vehicle for the production of democracy – apart from the fact that (unlike everyday reality) the injuries received here are intellectual and emotional in nature.

Ulrike Möntmann: *THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE*

Ulrike Möntmann, an artist who lives in Amsterdam, chose a different route with her audio-visual project *THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE*. Using the abbreviation TBDWBAJ, she created portraits of female drug addicts living in Europe. Since the project began in 2004, she has produced twenty portraits; a kind of “European outcast registration”, which can be viewed on the Internet. After projects in Vechta, Unna, Amsterdam, Zagreb and recently in Vienna, TBDWBAJ will be shown in more European cities – the next destination is Istanbul. In this project, porcelain dolls bear the biography of a drug addict, examining the issue of violence and the abuse of power with regard to women. The work consists of several series of identical dolls: alabaster-like porcelain casts of traditional baby dolls with the photograph of a female drug addict branded onto their faces using a special silk-screen technique. The shadowy overlay of the face of an adult woman onto the chubby cheeks of the dolls baby face creates an alienation effect that is extremely disturbing and unsettling. The doll has eyes, and when you hold it, you hear sentences like: “At three years of age, my father forced me to watch him rape my mother / At eight my father kidnapped me and told me my mother was dead / At thirteen I was taking speed, tranquilizers, alcohol and methadone. / At sixteen I experienced paranoia and psychosis when I reduced the amount of drugs I was taking.” The dolls tell us the story of a significant event from the lives of the women. The words come out of a loudspeaker on the back of the doll, where the (changed) name and date of birth of the woman are shown in perforated text. There is a label on the doll’s wrist with the title of the artwork and the website link: <http://thisbabydollwillbeajunkie.com>.

The artwork comes into being via a complex process that includes four spaces. Möntmann calls these the “isolated”, “cultural”, “public” and “virtual” spaces. The artist not only speeds up “art’s break-out” (from the gallery into the public realm) but also “art’s break-in” into the personal stories (of the prison inmates) and into social institutions (prison) that are not accessible to the public. Furthermore she makes lives that are extremely shaped by taboo and prejudice visible and makes them a public issue.

THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE begins in the *isolated space* of the prison, an intuition that illustrates the macro-cosmos of society (and thus the structures of power and violence) like no other. This is where Möntmann finds the protagonists for her art practice.¹⁵ The participants use around 160 pre-selected words to construct sentences that recount important events in their lives. These are then produced in visual form on a poster: the so-

¹³ Arendt 1958: 179

¹⁴ Ibid. 180

¹⁵ This is not the first time that Möntmann has worked on an art project with prison inmates; see the *Kollektion Gefängnisleidung* project. (See www.ulrikemontmann.nl)

called matrix that makes it possible to deal with these diverse events in a rather unemotional way and displays the traumatic experiences in an interconnected, logical and temporal structure. An entire series is created for each biography, a baby doll for each sentence – the number of dolls per biography is directly linked to the number of sentences the woman needs to describe her life and to organise her experiences according to the years of her life. Under a pseudonym, a woman may lend her face and her life to at least twenty dolls. At the next stage of project, the artist places the baby dolls (and the relevant matrix) into the *cultural space* (for example, in a gallery or art museum) where the dolls find a temporary home. This temporary residence in an art location ends with a closing ceremony, the so-called “drop-off” of a series and a public meeting of experts. Politicians, curators, academics, artists, prison directors, doctors, as well as former prisoners and prisoners on day release, all discuss the specific issue of female drug addicts and examine whether art interventions can attract more attention to social and political issues, whether aesthetic actions can generate an ethical dimension, whether such “temporary complicities” can fire up political thought and action, and, above all, whether they can bring about change. When the podium discussion is over, the participants of the meeting take the dolls to the public space. In the case of the drop-off in Vienna, twenty-three baby dolls were taken in twenty-three taxis by some fifty “popular and unpopular citizens” (as the participants of the meeting were called by the press) to locations that were chosen by the respective prison inmate (and most likely connected to her early life). Here the dolls announced their unequivocal message: “This Baby Doll Will Be a Junkie.” The dolls are left in a kind of abandoned state in the *public space* to the random acts (or lack thereof) of whoever happens to pass by. Ultimately the series is entered – visually and acoustically – into the “European outcast community” of the *virtual space* of the Internet.

The link to the website, the announcement in the daily media about the panel of experts and the drop-off make up an important conceptual element of TBDWBAJ. In Vienna, a matrix advertises the project (usually at tram stops near the respective drop-off point) with large posters in City Light Board illuminated display cases. Therefore, people, who are aware of the project, can keep an eye on a doll if they wish. In unpublished correspondence Möntmann calls this the “Moses effect”. She writes: “The baby found in the street (...) creates an (instinctive) different reaction in the viewer/finder to that of the confrontation with a ‘horrible’ junkie, who is rejected in an equally instinctive way. The baby tells the story of unearned guilt. No-one has ever taken a baby to task for its status of ‘non-productive citizen’ (...). As mentioned above, the baby dolls incorporate the ‘Zoo Station drug-users observer scenario’, but do not mystify it. The baby does not lend itself to any mystification of the scene. The media reports on this in a number of ways: sensationally or tear-jerkingly, or even thoughtfully – I’ve experienced that too.”

The performative title *THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE* makes it quite clear what the future will bring and points out that drug addiction is accentuated by external conditions and that the baby has been refused the right to a free and self-determined life. The title questions the common stereotype that drug abuse is the result of personal inability, a situation that addicts bear the responsibility for alone. Indeed, and especially in the case of female drug addicts, this confession of guilt is made in unexamined acceptance. TBDWBAJ points out the subtle, but at times also open, violence, within the family, as well as the structural power of social space and its institutions. The theme of violence defines these biographical fragments and confronts not only the art world audience and passers-by, but also the women themselves – who are often involved in prostitution as well as drug use, and have at times also sold drugs. Dealing with power and the use of violence is a theme that runs through the entire project, ultimately also becoming evident in the random actions of the passers-by: some ignore the doll, some take it with them, some destroy it.

Möntmann radicalises one of society’s taboos. She unequivocally directs our attention to the social practices that hold families, neighbourhoods, even institutions together and to the way

that such practices encompass these like a strategic functional network. The TBDWBAJ project makes it clear to the female prison inmates that their “existence as a marginalised group” has a family and social function.

Public Art

Like Schlingensief, Möntmann (especially during the third phase of the project) is interested in producing public discourse, and in questioning democratic values and ethical responsibility. Both artists operate in the public realm, provoke action (even by the decision *not* to act) and stimulate public opinion via “inappropriate” behaviour. The “bad people” mentioned at the beginning of this paper (here represented by asylum seekers, drug addicts and prison inmates), are not only the subject but also the producers of the artwork. Yet the ways the protagonists are treated are extremely different: Möntmann’s drug addicts – unlike Schlingensief’s asylum seekers – get something back. They are able to observe themselves through the eyes of “others” (via the branded photographs on the doll’s face), listen to their own story in a new way (intensified via the prescribed choice of words) and thus re-evaluate the issue of guilt. The fragile, valuable (and also expensive) objects are memorials that represent the return of the prison inmates to specific locations; the esteem for the women they illustrate is probably something the women are experiencing for the first time in their life. The artist manages to infiltrate the seemingly figurative nature of her art performatively and to position it within the framework of everyday reality. The baby dolls, with their shadowy faces and incorporated voices, leave the prison and act as proxies at the art site, before being cast out. The drop-off is the conclusion of the project for the artist. The artist remains in the dark – literally – as to the fate of the dolls. This not-knowing opens up (in my opinion) a further, *imaginary space* where the potential variations of behaviour (of the participants and the prison inmates) are acted out.¹⁶ The dolls can be overlooked, ignored, or even moved into a *Candid Camera* context. They can be kept, dropped in disgust (when its sentence is heard), destroyed or even taken to a lost-property office; someone might even try to sell the doll on Ebay. However, the baby doll can also be taken home as loot in order (probably after removal of the loudspeaker) to function as a toy for a child or, if it is lucky, the doll is taken into someone’s care. The issues of whether the doll (in the private space of its finders) experiences a different fate to that of the woman whose story it tells, remains hidden from public view. In the case of Schlingensief, the way that the asylum seekers are treated is left completely up to passers-by and visitors. Möntmann, however, does not entrust everything to public opinion. The label on the doll’s arm refers to an artistic signature and frames the action within the context of art. The elaborate aesthetic form (including the matrix) intensifies the issue of the panel of experts being led by an unmistakable interest in disseminating information and bringing about change. While public discussions about the deportation of the asylum seekers (or about whether this event could be framed at all) were an essential element of Schlingensief’s artwork, finding a doll is not a public act; the (possibly horrified) finder must cope alone. However, regardless of how the passers-by react to TBDWBAJ, public discourse is also present, simply via the performative claim that positions the dolls in the world, and their inevitable future: “This Baby Doll Will Be a Junkie!” The radical nature of these art interventions (in as far as the baby doll is discovered at all) will continue, at the very least,

¹⁶ Möntmann is not interested in what happened to the dolls (a question that however could be relevant from a social science viewpoint). Therefore she asks the so-called “dropper” to take the taxi back after the drop-off. Apart from one occasion, when a baby doll was deliberately run over by a lorry, no-one knows what happened to the dolls. In any case, when the sites were checked the next day, they had all disappeared. In order to research the “social impact of the arts” (see Seitz 2009) one option would be to follow the finders “under cover” (in the style of action artist Sophie Calle) or openly as a “art detective”, and perhaps even to interview them as well.

however, the chance confrontation with these abandoned objects will endure in the stories (re-)told by the passers-by.¹⁷

By making the individual biographies and human stories visible and audible (in Schlingensief's container, via Möntmann's dolls) both artists question the role of public discourse, which attempts to reject any responsibility, and the way it reclaims its capacity for "positioning" and of agency. The artists provoke processes of understanding in civil society and a politicisation of the aesthetic, not in the sense of avant-garde utopias but by making difference and conflict visible. The interventions are successful largely because of their scandalous interweaving and overlaying of two worlds: entertainment and politics in *BITTE LIEBT ÖSTERREICH*; the baby and the drug addict in *THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE*.¹⁸ Power is connoted as a process-related and relational phenomenon that is expressed and brought into being via the wish to belong to and to create a sense of community. Regarding the uproar unleashed by Schlingensief, the issue is not always that of a productive creative power, but can be one that contains oppositional and radical potential with regard to power relationships and intolerable conditions and is a power that is created when people attempt to show solidarity and fight for reciprocal recognition.

Art as social work?

It is normally social workers who deal with asylum seekers, junkies and jailbirds. Artists like Möntmann and Schlingensief, who literally work in the realm of the social, never tire of stating that they are making art, at best a social sculpture, but are certainly not working on a social project. Conversely, social workers also often distance themselves from artists, accusing them of exploiting underrepresented groups for spectacular events that lead the participants up a dead end.¹⁹ "Artwork" is accused of being distanced from reality. Social work, according to the reverse critique, never takes a ludic approach to solving its problems. This apparently insurmountable gap is based, on the one hand, on the passé but still potent

¹⁷ To a certain extent, the abandonment of the dolls evokes the archaic custom of gift-giving, a social phenomenon that creates connections between the members of a society, integrates them and thus (in non-state societies) peacefully regulates and strengthens moral and psycho-economic communal life. (See Mauss 1990). A gift is an obligation; it must be reciprocated. As Mauss emphasises, not only is something being given, but also a part of the giver, through which the taker experiences the other. This is an interesting train of thought in regard to TBDWBAJ, which could be taken into consideration during further observations and research.

¹⁸ In order to document the uproar that interventions can unleash, another incident should be mentioned which took place during the implementation of TBDWBAJ in Vienna, where I was involved as a so-called expert. The dolls were stolen the evening before the expert meeting from *Kubus EXPORT* where they had been exhibited. The "kidnappers" disguised themselves as the transport team who were to move the dolls to the *KUNSTHALLE wien* project space, where the expert discussion was to take place. This did not raise any suspicions with the attendant, since the transport was expected (albeit for the next morning, but even so). The theft was registered with the police (required for insurance reasons). Möntmann did not want the discussion of experts to be taken over by the issue, nor make the theft of the dolls public right at the beginning of meeting, no doubt in the hope that it would just be a bad joke and the dolls would be returned in time. Which is what indeed happened: in good time (that is, after the end of the expert meeting and just before the planned drop-off at 6pm, when the artist would have had to announce the theft of the dolls) a taxi arrived and the twenty-three cases were unloaded. When I heard about this my first reaction was that Viennese artists who did not agree with state drug policy, must have wanted to pull off a small coup that would lead to a "ransom demand" being delivered to the city of Vienna for the return of the dolls (especially since politicians were not happy with the project and the way it highlighted the issue of drugs). The "ransom" money could then have been given to an anti-drug initiative (for prisoners on day release and released prisoners). Today, it is still not clear who was responsible for the theft. The legal proceedings have since been abandoned. Möntmann suspects that the action was carried out by students who did not agree with the presentation of social hardship in the form of art. The artist had presented the project the day before at the University of Vienna, provoking great controversy.

¹⁹ Schlingensief and Möntmann are not the only artists who provoke such calls of protest. In 2000, for example, Santiago Sierra paid asylum seekers to sit in closed cardboard boxes in KunstWerke in Berlin and Thomas Hirschhorn produced his "Bataille monument" with young people from a boxing camp in a district largely populated by immigrants during Documenta 2002 in Kassel. (See Seitz 2004)

preconception that art is only concerned with looking good and that social work is only concerned with containing misery, that artists are not interested in people, in intermediation (or in art education) and that social workers focus only on people and particularly on their deficiencies. Each respective discipline has been reviewing its understanding of itself: artists are interested, if only temporarily, in the reality of life and social workers are interested, if not in art, then at least in the ludic and in leisure-based aesthetic practice.²⁰ Yet their methods and attitudes could not be more diverse. They could be conceived as complementary parallel events, but any cohabitation of the two practices is obviously quite impossible. Although art, as the above examples have illustrated, can at least call its autonomy into question (but not in fact give it up), can remove the border between fiction and reality and, indeed, can be more real than reality, it still operates in the realm of the fictional.²¹ It demonstrates that fictionality means negotiating the world and makes clear that we all, per se, live in different realities.²² Although social work has also changed – from a charitable (ethical or religious) vocation to a profession – and despite community work, increased focus on living conditions and professional individual support, social workers are still viewed as “helpless helpers” (Wolfgang Schmidbauer) whose profession – unlike that of the artist – is barely accepted by society. Social work is linked to regulations and laws, to moral categories and humanitarian tasks, it acts and mediates, it is focused on consensus, agreement and understanding, defines borders and binding structures, lives from social contradictions and from the continuity of its antagonisms. “The actions of the artist take us away from the condition of being thrown into existence, away from the Lethe of the social, even if the artist manages to make that rare artwork that allows us, as far as it is possible, to escape from the prevailing everyday routine of the social.”²³ Despite other statements, claims and visions, despite diverse measures to promote cultural education and the hopes that still exist for the impact of the aesthetic,²⁴ the rift between artistic action (regardless of whether it is social or criticises society) and its non-artistic use, can probably never be bridged. We can try to do this – which is what art sometimes attempts – and we can sometimes achieve results. What is questionable, however, is whether the artistic nature is maintained, whether the radicalism and the acerbity of aesthetic forms of expression will then lose their edge.²⁵ Projects that, in the name of art, “go clubbing” against racism or light candles for peace may well help to build identities and produce feelings of belonging. Nevertheless, they risk losing meaning and being

²⁰ As a side note, the art competence that social workers or social educators can acquire in the (normally) few seminars dedicated to this during their studies, can develop communicative potential, can increase competence and strengthen identity, but with a view to the aesthetic level, however, this rarely leads to satisfactory results and not uncommonly displays artistic dilettantism.

²¹ With a few notable exceptions like the WochenKlausur group, which brings about social change and locates its projects in the art context, but are more specifically social sculptures without artistic character, in contrast to Schlingensiefel for example, whose art rests upon the interplay of fictional and real moments. The KUNST://ABSEITS VOM NETZ group understands art explicitly as a social sphere of activity that can change the lives of people living in precarious conditions (homeless people, for example). (See <http://www.wochenklausur.at> or <http://offsite.kulturserver-graz.at/projekte>)

²² See Seitz 2009

²³ The following quotation is taken from a letter from Ferenc Jádi. His untiring openness to dialogue and his unshakable spirit have taught me to open my eyes to the dissocial in art and to view social concerns with sympathy but also from a critical viewpoint: “Social work is a humanist category of charity with heuristic emotions and a teleological desire for action,” wrote Jádi. “A profession that is so forgetful of its being that its academic principles cannot even answer the question of what the “social” actually is, and which relies upon a right that is drawn more from the pathos of the human than from the fact that our collective subconscious awareness oscillates between impenetrable dissocial emotions, highbrow idealisations, conceitedness and boredom in order to give the necessary intensity to the existence to survive of life.”

²⁴ For more on this subject see Seitz 2008b

²⁵ In our research project (carried out at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam) we saw how quickly art can lose its radicalism and critical power. We investigated the effect of the artistic/aesthetic procedure in the “qualification projects” for young people without any qualifications or vocational training. (See Vogt 2009)

exploited as an event and an effective media moment. Potent conflicts are pacified in a populist way and the political power of such problems is processed in a folkloric or aesthetic way. There are even developments within social culture itself that have functioned in this way. But here there is a change of perspective. Ultimately, contemporary artists like Schlingensiefel and Möntmann come close to the fundamental concept of socio-cultural practice and community art. Since artists increasingly focus (along the lines of “doing culture”) on cultural practice and are interested not only in consumption, but also in utilisation, they make a contribution – or at least hope to do so²⁶ – to questioning the unmistakable focus of many socio-cultural centres on consumption and thus renewing the political and social concerns of social culture.²⁷

In an act of social collaboration, artists may indeed locate their studios in empty flats, their theatres in the public realm of desolate housing estates, speak with socially disadvantaged, politically oppressed, homeless people and people deprived of their rights, examine the issues of residence permits, help to create identity and support the right to vote,²⁸ but this does not mean they are better at the job than social workers or teachers, by any means. And often the contrary is the case. Artists are egomaniacs, radical and exclusive. They are obsessed and intoxicated by an aesthetic game played between form, colour and material, between rhythms, movements and bodies, between words and sounds, from that which art imports, from that which art feeds from and from that which makes it art. Therefore (in the strictest sense of the word) this is not an *artwork*, instead it is an activity that is responsible to itself, a creative process that is concerned with relations and not with norms, with the non-identical, with “the relationship to that which is foreign to each other or is alienated from each other or that which is forgotten about each other”.²⁹

Art interventions may indeed attempt to raise consciousness about the relativity (and variability) of social reality, to provoke *Aesthetic Thinking* (Wolfgang Iser) and the *Practice of Everyday Life* (Michel de Certeau); they may indeed give a voice to underrepresented people or groups (as they are often called) and so redefine the relationship between art and public, what Marius Babias and Achim Kötter might define as “the art of the public sphere”. If art is involved, it will always be more than just factual and its aesthetic radicalism will overlay any social, pedagogical or political implications. We can also ask whether art interventions promote the power of making one’s mark and of agency and thus support people’s potential for change and also ask how the social work aspect can benefit from this. What seems more important, in my opinion, is that art makes it easier to understand and experience what it means (and this indeed in the meaning of Heidegger) to be existentially excluded like the women in *THIS BABY DOLL WILL BE A JUNKIE* or the asylum seekers in *BITTE LIEBT ÖSTERREICH*. We can only learn from this – as can social workers in particular. We can question art, indeed despair of it and shake our heads at its loud declarations; nevertheless, artists can illustrate the desire for freedom, the wish to take your own life in your own hands, to shape it and to transform it. It is exactly this desire that art practice and action is concerned with, and it is this desire that is attractive to the “clients” of social workers.³⁰ Ultimately and paradoxically, in art we encounter the lost spirit of the social.

²⁶ See Dachwald 2001

²⁷ A concern that will also doubtlessly be examined in this book.

²⁸ See Babias/Kötter 1998

²⁹ Quotation from the previously mentioned correspondence with Ferenc Jádi.

³⁰ Young people from this “boxing camp” were still speaking with enthusiasm about the “Bataille monument” a year later: in their experience, a milestone of vitality and the intensity of being. (See footnote 19)

Quoted literature and further reading.

- Arendt, Hannah (1958): *The Human Condition*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Babias, Marius/Achim Könneke (eds.) (1998): *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen*. Dresden
- Dachwald, Matthias (2001): Frischer Wind für ein altes Paar. Kunst und Soziokultur. In: *Informationsdienst Soziokultur* no. 43, 1/2001 (see also: http://www.soziokultur.de/_seiten/infodienst43/bayern.htm)
- Documenta11_Platform1 (2002): *Democracy Unrealized*. Ostfildern-Ruit.
- Kümmel, Peter (2009): Es lebe die Bad Bank! In: *Die Zeit*. Hamburg. 05.02.09
- Mauss, Marcel (1990): *Die Gabe. Form und Funktion des Austauschs in archaischen Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt am Main [1923/24]
- Rauterberg, Hanno (2007): *Und das ist Kunst?! Eine Qualitätsprüfung*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Rolling, Stella/Eva Sturm (eds.) (2002): *Dürfen die das? Kunst als sozialer Raum*. Vienna.
- Seitz, Hanne (2003): In konTexten. Potsdamer Erprobungen zur Site-Specific Performance (Co-author: Ute Pinkert). In: Ulrike Hentschel/Reimar Stielow (eds.): *Fragen. Jahrbuch 5 der HBK Braunschweig*. Cologne.
- (2004): no title. In: Joachim Kettel/IGBK (eds.): *Künstlerische Bildung nach Pisa. Neue Wege zwischen Kunst und Bildung*. Oberhausen.
 - (2005): Tastbewegungen im Zwischen. Von taktischem Geschick, kunstvollen Handlungen, kniffligen Kooperationen. In: E.P.I Zentrum Berlin (ed.): *13. Performance Art Konferenz. Die Kunst der Handlung 3. Kooperation*. Catalogue. Berlin.
 - (2007): Kunst zwischen Poiesis und Praxis. Eine anthropologische Spurensuche. In: Adriana Büchler/ Jürg Jaberg/ Elisabeth Karrer (eds.): *Schule muss schön sein. Facetten des ästhetischen Bildungsauftrags*. Munich.
 - (2008a): Alles nur Theater oder Wirklicher als die Wirklichkeit? In: Christoph Wulf /Jörg Zirfas (eds.): *Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie. "Das menschliche Leben"*. Vol. 17/Issue 2. Berlin.
 - (2008b): Kunst in Aktion. Bildungsanspruch mit Sturm und Drang. Plädoyer für eine Performative Handlungsforschung. In: Ute Pinkert (ed.): *Körper im Spiel. Wege zur Erforschung theaterpädagogischer Praxen*. Berlin/Milow/Strasbourg.
 - (2009): Temporäre Komplizenschaften. Künstlerische Intervention im sozialen Raum. In: Maria A. Wolf/Bernhard Rathmayr/Helga Peskoller (eds.): *Konglomerationen. Produktion von Sicherheiten im Alltag*. Bielefeld.
- Vogt, Christine/Martina Pfeil/Hanne Seitz (2009): *be unique be open be art. Urban Culture and Youth in Berlin and Beyond or How To Do Things With Art*. (online at: <http://sozialwesen.fh-potsdam.de/ucay.html>)

<http://www.church-of-fear.net/deutsch/index.html> (5.10.03)

<http://www.ulrikemontmann.nl> (20.4.07)

<http://thisbabydollwillbeajunkie.com>. (10.10.09)

<http://www.wochenklausur.at> (10.2. 05)

<http://offsite.kulturserver-graz.at/projekte> (10.10.09)

Unpublished Translation from German: Eileen Laurie (Lund, Sweden)

Published in German:

Messner, Bettina/Wrentschur, Michaels (Hrsg.): *Initiative Soziokultur. Diskurse. Konzepte. Praxis*. Lit-Verlag: Münster 2011. S. 69-88