



Joseph Beuys' Me, Inc. and Neoliberalism

Alex Wissel and Jan Bonny in conversation with Noemi Smolik

Noemi Smolik: Your most recent joint film “Rheingold” is dedicated to the art advisor Helge Achenbach, from Düsseldorf, who was convicted of fraud in June 2016. Why did you choose him of all people?

Alex Wissel: Achenbach's story felt close to us as it took place in the Rhineland, where Jan and I live. In addition to that, his biography and those of his contemporaries proved to be excellent material: In terms of politics and art history, it makes for a great story.

Jan Bonny: We initially wanted to produce a short film about Joseph Beuys and studied him intensely. We saw a connection to neoliberalism in Beuys' famous quote “Everyone is an artist”: If everyone is an artist, it also means that everyone can be his/her own Me, Inc. That's how artists become the ideal figure for self-production. Via this scenario we came across Achenbach, who represents exactly that. Achenbach, who wanted to reach the top, who joined the big boys club, who went too far and fell. And all these absurd facts, for instance, how Achenbach got caught at the airport just after he had furnished the Campo Bahia, the accommodation of the German national football team in Brasil, with artworks. No one could have thought this up any better.

Smolik: Other than Achenbach and Beuys, your film also features the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his political party, the Social Democrats (SPD). What do the SPD and Schröder have to do with Achenbach?

Wissel: Schröder and Achenbach have a lot in common: They are part of the same generation and represent a similar perception of themselves. Both are social climbers, who started off with an ideology they could not sustain once they became successful. And if you believe Achenbach's autobiography, he also saw his actions as political - even social democratic. He supposedly joined the SPD because of Willi Brandt. Similar to Jörg Immendorff, who later painted the chancellor portrait of Schröder in gold. Achenbach later on published an edition of the portrait. We were interested in these entanglements of ideals, art and politics

Smolik: One of the key scenes in “Rheingold” shows Achenbach forging invoices, which he later uses to scam his clients for 20 million. All of a sudden Beuys' ghost enters the room. Achenbach turns to him and says: “Neoliberalism and the generation of baby boomers accomplished what you and the generation of '68 promised: Everyone can work whenever they want, no more hierarchies [...] You said it yourself, ‘Everyone is an artist’. Now that's become reality.” Are you serious about that?

Wissel: Beuys was a sort of father figure to Achenbach and also to Immendorff. Achenbach soppily describes this in his biography. He is serious about it and seems to actually believe in Beuys' idea of the social sculpture. As well as in the concept that every individual is an artist. We can rediscover this idea in Schröder's Me, Inc., which was the main component of the agenda 2010, that

brought the social upheavals we still have to deal with today.

Smolik: In their book “The New Spirit of Capitalism”, the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapella and the English cultural critics Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams in “Inventing the Future” accuse the liberal governments now of not only having facilitated neoliberalism but of having accelerated it. Isn't it astonishing, that it's especially the liberal parties that are getting blamed?

Bonny: Yes, right. But on the other hand it's Angela Merkel who pushed through the nuclear phase-out and not the Greens who advertised it while running for office. The Christian Democrats (CDU) could not have implemented the Agenda 2010, because the SPD would always have been opposed. But when the SPD got to power with Schröder and were put on the spot, they suddenly introduced such reforms. The CDU had to go along.

Smolik: In your film you do not only accuse the liberal parties, but also the artistic avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s of complicity in establishing neoliberal ideas. Isn't that a precarious thought?

Wissel: No, the artists were always part of this development, intentionally, or unintentionally. But I do think that, especially in relation to this day and age, over the last 20 to 30 years artists did not give much thought to the streams of cash and the part they were cast for as artists.

Bonny: Also, art was knowingly produced for commercial exploitation. And by the way, why should fault always lie with others but never with the avant-garde artists?

Smolik: You just mentioned something important: the question of guilt or innocence. Traditionally, the modern view sees the artistic avant-garde as a pure, innocent movement, taken over by the capitalistic market and thus victimised. The market is the offender, the artists are the victims. You turn this around in your film and ask if the avant-garde artists could also be the perpetrators? Boltanski and Chiapella observe a similar notion as they in addition to the liberal parties, blame the artistic avant-garde for the development of the capitalistic society towards neoliberalism. Could you explain that?

Wissel: Yes, that's beyond dispute. It is interesting to see though, how it will continue. I think that, partly because of the latest political occurrences, the attitude towards politics will change within the arts as well.

Bonny: If we think about society, capitalistic economy and art in relation to each other, art of course is not autonomous. There is no other economic sector today in which you get as much gain in value as in the art sector.

Wissel: That gain also affects its appreciation in society.

Smolik: I noticed for a while now, how the artists of the avant-garde questioned everything: Capital, capitalistic production, the moral concepts of the middle class, family, institutions... The

only thing they never questioned was their own relation to capital, the institutions and their own ideals. Why's that?

Wissel: That produced some strange effects. To think for example of the artists of institutional critique. Nowadays, institutions invite exactly those artists who critically view them, so that they can then bathe in that apparent self criticism. This practice leads to an immunisation of the institutions against any critical awareness.

Smolik: ... and thus strengthens the ruling structures.

Bonny: In addition to that, today's artistic production is ironclad by keeping everything open somehow, not interpretable, to be able to later say: "Well, I didn't mean it that way!" There always has to be a back door.

Smolik: Could this, "always having a back door," which in the end means, not wanting to take responsibility, relate back to the modern idea of artistic autonomy? So, to the idea of autonomy as unlimited freedom of the individual? For artists, this idea means to be freed from all social obligations and thus stand outside of society. Didn't this understanding of autonomy develop into a shelter for artists today?

Bonny: Yes. This also led to loads of art works today not relating to society but to art production.

Wissel: We should not forget that the present idea of the autonomy of the arts stems from post Second World War USA, during the cold war, when freedom was glorified. Just like the arts used to glorify religion, nowadays it's freedom, because it represents the epitome of the capitalist utopia. Freedom was seen as a contrast to the unfree socialist art. It's interesting that this whole insecurity concerning artistic autonomy started with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In that moment, art lost its original justification of freedom.

Bonny: Exactly! No one had to prove anymore, which art was better. At least not for a while. Maybe that's why art doesn't need to prove today that it has a societal significance.

Wissel: ... critical art on the other hand, doesn't know utopias anymore. Similar to the SPD, currently simply trying to maintain the status quo.

Bonny: Even so, this critical art also serves a certain corner of the market. Critical art actually produces luxury goods, since this type of art doesn't affect the general public. Going back to the 1950s and 1970s, art was still broadly discussed, because it was shocking and provocative. Which was exactly what it set out to do ...

Wissel: Whereas nowadays, everyone likes art.

Bonny: In the same way that everybody is nice. Critical art, with a societal aspiration, only happens in a distinguished set of people.

Smolik: Whilst the artists of the avant-garde - mostly men - coming from a position of ethical superiority, took on a critical stance to the market, some artists of a younger generation, like the DIS group, start to change their attitude towards the market. They don't want to continue to be stuck in a critical stance, but rather impact on the market through deliberate involvement. What's your opinion on this attitude?

Wissel: If you want to influence something you firstly need humor. Humor is a publicity means because it helps to understand situations without any previous knowledge. But we also consider local aspects as important. To act where you live. Because it does matter where something takes place. You can't export the actions. We were only able to tell "Rheingold" in this manner and do justice to the individual characters because we live here.

Bonny: What we do comes from our own biography, which makes it vulnerable, at times even wrong. But it grows organically. Whereas with critical art I often get the feeling that it searches for something somewhere in the world that is not claimed yet, to critically approach it.

Wissel: In that case it doesn't matter if you do the work yourself or let someone else somewhere in the world do it.

Smolik: Is this attempt to set something in motion then and there, within the personal context, maybe a solution for how to act in the future?

Bonny: This type of approach lends a palpably emotional level at least to our works, which would otherwise not be possible to achieve. And that's exactly what makes them accessible.

Wissel: It's important for us to transport the feeling that you can be a part of, or even take part in, what we are doing.

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