

*Notes for an Art School*

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# SayNoProduction

In front of the gallery stands a 7-series BMW. It has been parked with care and the parking tickets are clearly visible, squeezed between the large rubber mats under which the vehicle is hidden. The title: *Erlkönig* (Erl-King). Every two hours, new parking tickets are bought and added to the existing collection. After two days, the vehicle is towed away and parked in the police compound in exactly the same state as it was in front of the gallery—in other words, buried underneath rubber mats. The reason it was towed away? Overstaying short-stay parking. For the two days it was there, a surveillance camera installed inside the gallery regularly took photos of the wheels.

Next to the computer on the desk in the gallery there is a coffee cup containing some leftover coffee and a spoon. The spoon is tinkling softly as the cup slowly rotates anticlockwise on its saucer. The title: *Schwarz und süß* (Black and Sweet).

On the wall opposite there is a huge felt-pen drawing, three by five metres in size. A mildly abstract depiction of people fighting. Title: *Oktoberfest Abend* (Oktoberfest Evening).

Fifteen small photos that would normally be kept in a photo album have been mounted in a row along the gallery corridor. They show a family enjoying a picnic. In the background are columns and the silhouetted skyline of Kabul. After a few more family snaps of this nature, the series ends with another picnic, this time on the Olympiabergr in Munich. In the background are the columns of the BMW Tower. This time the women are not veiled. Title: *Der 30. Geburtstag meiner Schwester* (My Sister's Thirtieth Birthday).

'I'll lick the surface that you'll just scratch, if you scratch each other. Scratch the wounds that you'll open, if you open each other. Open the box that you'll buy, if you buy each other. I'll sell the work that you'll want, if you want me. I'll want the fame that you'll reap, if you reap...' This was the beginning of a video that, like the other works described here, was on display at the show called 'SayNoProduction'.

Back in the seventies, Donna Summer's big hits ('Love to love you' etc.) were produced in Munich by a man called Giorgio Moroder with a label called 'A Say Yes Production'. In no time at all they established a music scene set for global success. The talk was suddenly of the 'Sound of Munich'. All this has long since become cult, just as pop culture has become standard fare and artists born in the seventies and eighties—whether in the music business or in the fine arts—have more questions than answers. The distinctions between the various media were becoming blurred long before globalisation. The result? Crossover and anything goes.

One purpose of the 'SayNoProduction' show at Galerie Klüser 2 in June and July 2005 was to highlight the wide range of thematic approaches and sheer complexity of the working methods that have developed in Munich during the past few years. The exhibits included murals, sculptures, installations, objects, video and photography. 'Just because they shout "action", that doesn't mean you actually have to do anything,' Marlon Brando is alleged to have said. That may be true, but if an art scene is to retain its vitality, then it has to be constantly renewed and reinvented. Whether the conditions of production or society itself have changed (or not), whether in line with a trend (or not), whether swimming against the tide (or not). No self-financed art projects. No off domain. And definitely no

institutions. But rather a gallery where contemporary artists from Germany, Austria, Romania, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Iran and Afghanistan can show their work. What all these artists have in common is that they all studied—or in some cases are still studying—in Munich. The exhibition consisted of two parts or rather—to extend our musical metaphor—of an A-side and a B-side, although it is often difficult to decide which is the better of the two.

‘Ne travaillez jamais’ said a slogan on a wall in Paris’s rue de Seine in 1953.

The Situationist International took this up—expressing a particular way of life that tried to put down roots there. Christopher Gray’s comments were characteristic: ‘Total despair was never far away. Guy Debord described one evening when they were in an apartment somewhere, all completely stoned and drunk. It was almost morning and nearly everyone had crashed. Debord alone was still smoking a joint when suddenly he smelled gas. He went down the corridor to the kitchen at the far end of the apartment. There, two friends were sitting at a table and drinking in silence. All the windows were closed and the gas was turned on full blast. They had hoped the whole lot of them would die painlessly in their sleep.’ Productive ‘saying no’? ‘Say: no Production’ or ‘say no—Production’? Defiance or active resistance? Social and/or political activism? Certainly not advice in the sense of ‘don’t say yes when you want to say no!’ Or ‘say no by default’ from the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins ... and ‘Feel free to say no’ need not belong to the script of an anti-smoking campaign.

Whether the participating artists had a bachelor’s or master’s was not a criterion when we pieced together this show, by the way. No grades, no points, no system, no rules and no political correctness either. Art cannot be taught.

During the preparatory phase we went up to the Walchensee, which is the coldest mountain lake in all Bavaria. The whole class—all twenty-eight students. And painted watercolours! Oh yes and we bathed too, of course, and barbecued and drank a bit as well. The watercolours later went on show at a different gallery and some of them even sold. ‘That’s how delightful studying can be,’ the newspapers said later.

The same students organised a parallel project. They put the Art Academy under observation using cameras, bugging devices, transmitters, computers, mattresses, potato crisps and plenty of drink—all installed behind the blinds of an empty office unit on the opposite side of the road. The photographs were then published in the press. Fluid transitions—what does it mean to be inside or outside the academy—was it deinstrumentalised?

It must have been late 1970 or perhaps early 1971—the first album from Kraftwerk. Although denigrated as junk in some quarters, I still decided to buy it. With such legendary tracks as ‘Ruckzuck’ and ‘Megaherz’, an original album these days can fetch as much as a thousand euros. Somehow, it seemed to be just the right music to go with the book I was reading back then—a book called *Keiner weiß mehr* (No One Knows Anymore). I had just enrolled at university and had decided to study art—mainly because I could not come up with anything better.

Whereas Kraftwerk became an international success, the author of my book, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, would write only two more books. He was killed in a road accident in London in 1975 and thereafter forgotten, although

those who loved the three books he did write still consider him worth reading. Classic pop culture.

*Keiner weiß mehr* was published in the late sixties and according to the blurb describes ‘the feeling of a new generation that has yet to make its mark’. By the end of the book, the author is so jaded he seems to find everything ‘lousy and phoney’. After all, no one knows anymore. It was with these bleak thoughts in mind that I opened ‘personne sait plus’ in 1998 at the Villa Arson in Nice, a show in which the featured artists reacted to this situation with a variety of strategies. A form of grassroots activism, perhaps?

‘Our tendency,’ writes Bazon Brock, ‘to identify institutions with the buildings they occupy [...] demands that we view them simultaneously from both the inside out and the outside in.’

When I first entered the Munich Art Academy in 1990, I walked straight out again backwards. I would prefer not to be reminded of the musty atmosphere that hit you upon entering, or the decrepit state of the building. What cannot be denied is that compared with other art schools, it was certainly one of the worst. So why would anyone want to accept a professorship there, still less to be the rector of such an institution? Was it just an experiment? The appeal of grassroots activism? Before long, the newspapers were decrying the ‘anarchy at the academy’ and what they called ‘intellectual hooligans’. In other words, the compliments came raining in! One thing was clear, the academy was suddenly in the spotlight. Even just our non-hierarchical apprehension of art was enough to get people’s hackles up.

My doubling as artist and rector could certainly be described as a contextual situation or perhaps even as Conceptual art. It was therefore only natural that my work should address this issue head on: *Basisarbeit* (Grassroots Activism), for example, was the title of an installation I created about the art academy itself. In addition to a conference table (‘It’s all been said before, but not everyone has said it yet,’ as Karl Valentin once said), the installation also featured voting booths (because we just love democracy), a chaotic assortment of files, a paperweight—in this case a miniature of the academy—and a book. Actually a reader, published in 1999 at the end of my stint as rector in hopes of making the situation at Germany’s art academies more transparent—or at least of facilitating discussion on this subject.

In the foreword, I suggested that an art academy should in fact function much like a supermarket in which the students are free to help themselves to what they want from each department—be it in photography or philosophy, in groups, workshops or seminars, whether with just three students or with thirty. Everyone is at liberty to fill his or her trolley, but no one has to pay. The art academy itself as an experiment—well, that need not remain a pipe dream. With sufficient conviction, it is indeed possible to support such work and projects as promise to venture into new terrain and to nurture the creativity of the younger generation. The focus must be on both the artistic production process itself and the theory of the same in an interdisciplinary context—the learning situation as shaped by the national and international art scene. Artists, art historians, critics, curators and gallerists must of course be willing to engage in free and frank discussion, for only an academy that is at the centre of such exchange can truly be present.

No matter whether the grassroots activism is from the top down or vice versa—these days, art can be produced everywhere and anywhere and in all circumstances. It is simply a question of organisation, infrastructure and flexibility. The transitions are fluid. And that there will always be a periphery is actually just as well, for that is how the social spectrum is broadened. William Copley once said that, ‘Only when you know what art is not is the whole world open to you.’ Perhaps that is why I sometimes felt like an intensive student. ‘Personne sait plus’, no one knows anymore. Ultimately, there are more questions than answers. The introduction of tuition fees here in Germany will turn students into paying customers. Higher education as a glorified shopping trip? The university as a provider of consumer services? ‘The change of roles from student to paying customer ... will lead to social exclusion’ warns Katja Jedermann. The rich have to become richer—so that the poor can become richer too? If you read between the lines of Karl Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, even he was in favour of tuition fees: ‘If in some states [...] higher education institutions are also “free”, that only means in fact defraying the cost of education of the upper classes from the general tax receipts.’ So what now? *Realpolitik*, New Deal? Or is it time to subvert the whole system?

‘Anyone who these days is concerned with drafting or implementing curricula is bound to run up against the demand of officialdom that he or she take a stand on profitability profiles, teaching principles, teaching results, grading criteria and such like. Management jargon is eating its way into our institutions ...’ (Charles Harrison). The university as a public-private conglomerate with bureaucratic barriers. The *Bologna Reader* of the German Standing Conference of University Rectors contains a sample teaching unit called: ‘Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Societies’. Thank you very much. Horses I can see, but horseness not. Studying literature, meanwhile, students dip into Büchner, Dante or Racine in the manner of armchair tourists, highlighting a few lines here, copying a few pages there—but no more than that. Learning outcome: five credit points. Enough to join the Jehovah’s Witnesses selling the latest issue of *Watchtower* in front of the railway station or why not go straight to the Salvation Army? Who needs a second wave of European-style colonialism? Not fast track—wrong track.

‘The teacher is now no more than the gatekeeper of a legitimisation process ruled by the logic of equivalent value [...] Today’s freshmen students seem to be miles away from the elitist professionals on the international biennale circuit [...] they are non-professional newcomers who are merely striving for this elitist status.’ (John Miller) What should be taught? Should we teach at all? Does teaching simply mean galvanising students into ‘networking, self-organisation, self-positioning, self-management, the courting of sponsors and even project management?’ (Ute Meta Bauer) Should it be geared to the art market? What function do artists have in a globalised world? ‘In the US education system, driven as it is largely by consumer interests, it is usually the part-time teachers who are most dependent on their students’ grades [...] and it is here that the main weaknesses of the system reside. For how can teachers subject to such constraints act courageously? Only those tensions that are part of the real learning process generate real friction.’ (Trebor Schulz)

‘The question of the extent to which art can be taught and learned—like the issue of the role of our academies and art colleges—takes us back to the mythic apprehension of creativity [...]. as a means of explaining how transgressing the rules of the prevailing orthodoxy in the name of creativity has become the norm.’ (Beatrice von Bismarck)

There is something rather stale, inhibited and self-pitying about nineties-style discursive institutional analysis and critique. The most common grievance is the loss of the critic’s own significance and in some cases that of the legitimacy of his or her own scholarship. Much of what is written about our academies and art colleges is completely lacking in subtext and amounts to little more than the cognitive equivalent of running on the spot. After the third art theory lecture, hardly any students want to attend the seminars, which all too often merely repeat what has been said before or degenerate into a tour of the professor’s card index. If attendance is high, then only because it is a requirement for admission to the exams. Rather less esoteric self-fulfilment and rather more genuine exchange would certainly not come amiss. The art academy is there for its students, after all, and Germany still has open and liberal educational opportunities. Perhaps that is why so many German artists are successful abroad? Perhaps that is why so many foreign art students choose to study here? Of course plenty are needed if at least a few of them are to be any good.

*Erst rechts, dann links und dann immer geradeaus* (First right, then left and then straight ahead)—the title of one of my early installations, a work made of crash barriers, the idea being that of a roundabout. And it was meant literally too. You do not have to bully your way into the fast lane right away, but the fast lane should still be what you are aiming at. ‘When you’re doing something, you should play your own game and not spend your time looking over your shoulder at where your own game is not,’ says Friedrich Kittler.

‘The work is bearable for as long as it is unfinished,’ wrote Mario Merz in 1983 in *Von den Erfindungen zu den Aussichten*.

No more concepts that are promptly discussed to death, but actions, happenings or—better still—exhibitions. ‘SayNoProduction’ is the latest in the series that began with ‘Küssen und Fahrradfahren’ (Kissing and Cycling, 1996) and continued with ‘personne sait plus’ (1998), ‘Basisarbeit’ (1999) and ‘Rote Zelle’ (Red Cell, 2004–05).

A recent UN survey of big conurbations concluded that one of the salient characteristics of a city is its consumption and production of culture and demonstration in an urban setting of how cultural output can be consumed. Of particular importance here are what are known as ‘Creative Urbans’, a term that doubtless includes artists for whom, being a kind of urban-cultural ornament—to quote Marius Babias—society at least offers the prospect of self-fulfilment, albeit a fulfilment subject to certain financial constraints. There can be no question that the functionalisation of art and culture serves above all economic interests. What is at issue is the image of space as a commodity, the city itself as a commodity. Public space these days is occupied by private enterprise and politics, each of which—whether in the form of a folk dancing society or national league

football club, to say nothing of arts and culture—has a share in the value-added production of the city as a commodity. Art is both a means of expression and a platform for the fictional variable of public space. I am thinking here not so much of mega-events disguised as art shows, but rather of ambitious exhibition projects. It need not be another biennial, nor does it have to be visionary or propose a different attitude to the public in the ever-changing city. The attractiveness of the art scene with its fluid borders could easily be demonstrated in larger exhibitions. The onus now is not just on the numerous institutions, but on those executive bodies that organise such shows and on curators and artists themselves. These are the ones who can best document and illustrate the complexity of the world in which we now operate and who together with the media can forge ahead with such projects.

Urbanity in the form of row upon row of empty blocks of flats—the ruins of superfluous investment, to say nothing of superfluous architecture?—On the positive side, though, it can at least be said that property speculators are not doing as well as they would like either and that soon there will be still more office space standing empty, which may well cause commercial rents to fall below housing rents, thereby opening up some interesting and exciting new venues. This is one subject that is certainly not confined to any one particular city.

‘Leicht kommt man ans Bildermalen, schwer an Leute, die’s bezahlen,’ (‘Painting itself is easy enough; what is hard is finding someone to pay for it’) quipped Wilhelm Busch in *Maler Klecksel*. Artists, and especially young artists, need opportunities to show their work and to make contacts—not just to galleries, but to colleagues, collectors and curators as well.

The mid to late nineties saw a plethora of exciting student projects—among them *Café Helga*, *Galerie Goldankauf*, *Club lebomb*, *Seppibar*, *Chicks on Speed*, *Kein Mensch ist illegal*, etc.—developed on academy premises. As cities have changed their image, so there has been a change of strategy in favour of temporary, self-financed, self-organised exhibitions and other spontaneous activities in leased premises.

Last year saw the opening in Munich of the *Rote Zelle*, a small red building in the courtyard of a residential block, the purpose of which was to add to the range of available art venues and in doing so to increase public awareness of the quality of the work being done by students at the academy. The project was co-founded and is still being run by a firm of book designers on the ground floor of the block in front and enjoys the support of the building’s owner; my own role is more that of advisor than curator. Certainly a cellular structure in which everyone is involved and in which new perspectives can be explored under changed conditions is bound to be an inspiration for such young artists as already have some experience of exhibitions and have already had their debut in public. What makes this project so out of the ordinary is the way in which both landlord and tenants are working together to facilitate the production and exhibition of spatial art in what is actually a very ordinary setting. What also makes it a model worth copying is that it has been limited to two years, if only to prevent it turning into yet another institution. A detailed report on the project is to be published early next year.

At a show in Denmark in February 2000, Chilean artist Marco Evaristti exhibited an installation consisting of a Moulinex mixer filled with water and live goldfish. The appliance was hooked up to the mains and was in perfect working order. Although most museums have a rigorously enforced 'Do not touch' policy, a number of visitors apparently took a different view and countless fish were pureed. The show provoked a scandal. The artist himself described it as a 'social experiment'. An instance of art undergoing a metamorphosis? A short time later, the museum bought the installation and since then, instead of swimming around in water, the fish have been preserved for all eternity in synthetic resin.

It is actually very simple. Someone who has no key to unlock the door and who is not strong enough to kick it in might just as well call a locksmith and claim to have locked him or herself out. This is more or less what is happening to our art colleges too. Art is always a reflection of the times in which it is created and will always be associated with those times and viewed in that context. At some point, however, production takes on a life of its own and becomes an end in itself and in doing so crosses the Rubicon from surplus to superfluous—the never-ending remix better known to us as pop culture.

Jane Birkin once said that when she recorded 'Je t'aime' with Serge Gainsbourg, she had no idea that even then, that was already a utopia. Unfortunately, things like that tend to dawn on us only much later.