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Notes on Antarctica. A Symposium on Alienation

AT/#/BLOG) CHRISTOPH CHWATAL, ([HTTP://WWW.KUNSTHALLEWIEN.AT/#/BLOGSEARCH/USER/66](http://www.kunsthallewien.at/#/blogsearch/user/66)) 12/10 2018

1. Alienation and Appropriation

According to philosopher Rahel Jaeggi, "living one's own life means identifying in a certain way with oneself and the world" as well as, "being able to 'appropriate' the world".¹ Alienation, as opposed to successful relations with the outside world, signifies both an inability to appropriate and a separation between the world and oneself. This double structure was reflected in the symposium's starting point:

Consul and Meshie is a durational piece, which occupied one gallery of the Kunsthalle on two consecutive days. Over three hours, Antonia Baehr and Latifa Laâbissi performed a series of tableaux vivants, postures, and seemingly absurd games. Dressed as chimpanzees, they played the card game Pairs or, at other moments, screamed the names of famous French philosophers,

from Louis Althusser to Jacques Rancière. While wearing sandy and brown-coloured fitted suits, they sat on a silver vehicle (an oversized foam mattress with integrated zip bags) which evoked the spacious interior of a sedan. According to the narrative, *Consul and Meshie* lived among humans in the early twentieth century, at the same time aware and unaware of their otherness. Throughout the performance, the “chimpanzees” handled props such as notebooks, books, an iPad or a miniature gramophone. Displaying the friction in playing apes that play humans (appropriating movements, utterances, and actions), *Consul and Meshie* offered a preview of the thematic of the coming symposium.

The three-day series of lectures, conversations and the performance *Consul and Meshie* took place under the joint initiation of Kunsthalle Wien and Tanzquartier Wien. Nestled in TQW's Halle G and the lower exhibition space of the Kunsthalle, the setting was somewhere between a theatre, laboratory, and a lecture hall. As such, the host's roles seemed partly reversed, the stage transformed into a lecture hall and the gallery space into a theatre. A research lab workshop led by choreographer Claudia Bosse and held in the TQW Studios (in the form of a performative “presentation”), expanded the series further and also served in essence as a prelude to explore the theme of the Kunsthalle's upcoming eponymous exhibition on alienation.

2. For a “Politics of Temperature”

The concept of alienation has been used to designate both individual estrangement and a structural question of distance, for example, the modern worker's separation from the product they produce. From Karl Marx to Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, the term has been subjected to manifold ambiguities, making it both a catchword and a multi-layered diagnosis of human existence. The symposium took the modernist concept of cold and icy estrangement as its point of departure, as encapsulated by the title, *Antarctica*. The diversity of contributions, however, underlined that under contemporary Post-Fordist labour conditions, alienation manifests itself with even greater ambiguity both structurally and individually. In what seems to be the transformative power of this concept, the diagnosis of an alienated society can serve as a backdrop and a motor for social imagination and (possible) transformation.

In Halle G, the philosopher Nina Power presented her paper, *Who is the Subject of Alienation?* Since Marx, alienation (or the German: *Entfremdung*) has been conceptualized as a type of estrangement from production, from ourselves, and from our species. As Power recounted, alienation was also once associated with insanity or deprivation from reason. As well as a science fiction character, the “alien” is also a being that is radically other and as such may provide us with some insight about ourselves. Power contextualized contemporary post-human, anti-human, and trans-human discourses, moving from Immanuel Kant to Marx, through to Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner. Her paper also introduced current discourses that embrace alienation. These scholarly positions often refer to Marx's *Maschinenfragment* in *Grundrisse der politischen Ökonomie* (1857–1858). One popular and affirmative, pro-alienation manifesto is *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2015), written by the collective Laboria Cubonicks and pertinently subtitled *A Politics for Alienation*.

Against this backdrop and opposing a simple abolition of the subject, Power proposed a “politics of temperature” and of “warmth” drawing on Alexandra Kollontai’s 1923 essay *Make Way for the Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth*. In agreement with Kollontai, she argues for de-alienation through comradeship and a “communism of feeling”, especially in capitalist society where affection, superficial warmth, and generic customer-oriented friendliness are imperative. For Power, the debate around alienation focuses excessively on the question of the human and hence on the “essence” of Man. In thinking about de-alienation, she proposed a shift towards the question of the collective.

3. Alienation and Work

Power’s presentation was followed the next day by two presentations (in German) and accompanying discussions, which thematically dealt with work and its spatial-political organization. The philosopher Michael Hirsch intensified Nina Power’s call for radically different outlooks on the political and the social. Expanding upon this, the architect-theoretician Andreas Rumpfhuber focused on a historical case study of German, post-war office landscaping. He related this to cybernetics and pointed to the post-war’s possible legacies in today’s work environments such as tech-industry campuses (e.g. contemporary landscapes as designed by star-architects Frank Gehry or OMA/Rem Koolhaas).

Hirsch’s paper, *Emancipatory Alienation Critique: Reflections from the Perspective of a Humanist-Feminist Neo-Marxism*, filled a gap that Nina Power’s contribution had left. He provided insight on neo-Marxist critiques of alienation in the mid-20th century, notably by Adorno and Marcuse, and equally expanded by the writings of Pierre Bourdieu.

Hirsch opened his talk with a piece on the dialectics of coldness and heat. While he associated the former with Fordism in the 1960s, he found correspondence in the latter with present-day Post-Fordist work. He found coldness in the image of the actress Monica Vitti in Michelangelo Antonioni’s films (Antonioni, to recall, presented a motif for the symposium, in his sketch for a film on *Antarctica’s* coldness). Hirsch argued that the contemporary paradigm of heat lacks an image and manifests itself only through clinical reports, for instance that of the burnout. He claimed the German terms, *Überhitzung* (over-heatedness) and *Überidentifikation* (over-identification) are paradigmatic flipsides of contemporary labour and the myth of the “entrepreneurial self”.

Hirsch’s argument, (comparable to Nina Power’s advocacy of love and comradeship) was in favour of visibility for already existing alternatives and forms of living. In the form of a new social contract, this could (while not empirically demonstrable) lead to a reassessment of existing forms of life outside of the prevailing economy, which is currently oriented towards full-time employment and excessive work. Expanding upon this, Hirsch argues that contemporary life is increasingly about “coherent narratives” of oneself, producing biographies that are left with little

“reversibility”. (Such other forms of living exist, as Hirsch argues, but face numerous disadvantages in contemporary society.) A “reformist strategy”, as proposed by Hirsch, is better able to instigate social change than a radical type of imagination.

During the discussion, Vanessa Joan Müller (Head of Dramaturgy at the Kunsthalle Wien), pointed out the problem of confusing real alternatives in work and life with “Lifestyle Angebote” (commodified lifestyle offers). She illustrated this using the trope of a freelance couple’s entrapment in the circle of capitalism as described in Georges Perec’s 1965 novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties*. This raised the concern that, beyond work, perhaps nothing else is waiting for us.

In his paper, *The Incorporation of Dissent: Office Landscaping and its Contemporary Legacy*, Rumpfhuber examined contemporary office landscapes. He argued that open-plan office space is a post-war German project spearheaded by Wolfgang and Eberhard Schnelle’s company, Quickborner Consulting. Their best-known office-planning project is the Bertelsmann Campus (1959–1961) in Gütersloh, North Rhine-Westphalia. This office had working space for over 270 people and took the dynamics of modern work into account alongside the technical means to monitor and guide the spatial layout.

The Schnelles understood the modern employee as a “creative worker” and were inspired by the idea of imminent total automation. Expanding upon this alteration in how the working subject was understood, Rumpfhuber pointed out that the internal organization of the space (e.g. structuring units into consensus-based teams) was a strategy that reduced potential antagonisms. With present-day constraints on consensus, this type of control seems to be a central historical vector. The presentation provided one source for this participatory, consensus based model of organisation and spatial layout: the Schnelle’s use of cybernetics and the idea of a “cybernetic-direct democracy” with its seemingly flat hierarchies.

4. Art and Alienation

While the first two parts of the symposium presented outlooks on individual action, politics, and legal regulations – and the necessity to rethink them, the third part and the symposium’s closing events, navigated aesthetic responses to alienation. Kerstin Stakemeier and Angela Dimitrakaki discussed recent examples of aesthetic, artistic, and curatorial practices, sharing their take on the concept. Marina Vishmidt’s paper *Relatable Alienation: The Logic and History of an Idea* expanded the symposium with substantial discussion on accelerationist and xenofeminist theories.

Against the backdrop of contemporary refashioning of alienation as a mode of experience and theoretical device, Vishmidt questioned the rejection of immediacy in these claims. According to her, Laboria Cubonik’s *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, and certain strands of Accelerationism embark too easily on “solutionist thinking” and “simple abstraction”.

Kerstin Stakemeier's contribution, *The Aesthetic Properties of Alienation*, investigated alienation from the viewpoint of the modern "nationalisation of human life", exploring questions of the nation state and capital. Discussing Anne Imhof's *Faust*, at the German Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), Stakemeier proposed that Imhof was enacting an "anti-national aesthetic" and a shared space of alienation. Both audience and the subject occupied complex positions that were subjected to constant shifts (the artist herself, for instance, was present during the performances, yet occupied the position of a spectator).

In her paper, *Left with TINA: Alienation and Anti-communism*, Angela Dimitrakaki departed from *Generation X's* "you might not count in the new order", as cited from Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel. Moving on to post-2011 politics of the street and the "politics of opposition", Dimitrakaki approached a problematic symptom of alienation in this "anti-politics". Dimitrakaki found recent examples of such *anti-ness* in the controversial, upcoming 7th Athens Biennale (October 26 - December 9, 2018) and in the recent removal of artist Olu Oguibe's, *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* (2017) from Kassel's Königsplatz, coinciding with German Unity Day earlier this October. This critical stance was grounded in Dimitrakaki's contempt of the debatable notion of "art as ideal democracy". Dimitrakaki supported this argument by citing a certain strain of Accelerationism, which has nefarious ties to Neocreationist movements. TINA, an anagram of ANTI (There Is No Alternative), stood for an anti-fascism advocating a politics of proposition instead of relying on an "anti-stance".

5. Alienation as Verfremdung

Choreographer Claudia Bosse's four-day laboratory, *on aesthetic strategies of alienation* took Berthold Brecht's *Verfremdung* (defamiliarization or estrangement) as both motto and form. The seven participants (among them artists, choreographers, and philosophers) enacted their findings in a Brechtian *Lehrstück* (teaching-play) at the TQW Studios. Chairs and dark mats were arranged freely on the studio floor. The audience were asked not to move the chairs and the performers walked around them without a noticeable pattern, creating a sense of disorientation and inquietude.

The group appropriated the roles of one another during the performance, spoke with each other's words, and invited the audience to match the biographic details recounted with (reductive) physical characteristics of the performers. While the performers narrated individual stories, disjointed episodes that seemed to relate to the specific biographies of the group, it was never clear who was speaking. Alienation resurfaced here as both *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*, alienation and defamiliarization. The presentation addressed the conditions of theatre and art production, working conditions in artistic labour, and the stakes of intervening in the public sphere: Whom do we want to address and how? Mixing and blending roles and viewpoints, the piece inserted some of its own propositions into the act.

In Brechtian manner, the audience was both addressed and integrated, invited to collaborate in setting up paragraphs for a manifesto yet to be written. However, the manifesto itself did not seem that relevant. It was the numerous propositions made during the presentation (ranging from direct urbanism and psycho-geography to anticipatory fiction) that gave practical ideas, which might eventually "interrupt the circles of capitalisation". Foregrounding transformative ideas and possible modes of de-alienation was a recurring feature throughout the symposium and posed a productive position in-between a negative critique of alienation and an affirmative embrace that stood at the base of more recent theoretical stances.

Text: Christoph Chwatal, Art historian and critic

1) Jaeggi, Rahel. *Alienation*. Transl. by Frederick Neuhoser and Alan E. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press 2014, xxi.

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