

Less guilt, more shame please!

Or: How cultural producers deal with – or precisely *not* deal with – conflicts in this self-proclaimed age of the end of history

BAVO

Published in Omagiu

Summary

This essay offers a critique of the different modes in which cultural agents today deal with, or precisely *not* deal with, the many problems they encounter in their practice. With the latter, we mean problems that haunt our so-called age of the end of history such as street riots, acts of meaningless violence, vandalism, graffiti and so on. Our basic thesis is that *cultural producers today neutralize the radical nature of these phenomena either fetishistically or cynically* – both being equally damaging to their political impact off course. We'll argue that *if they act at all, they do this for the wrong reasons*, i.e. out of guilty feelings for the deeper societal causes that lead to these conflicts – which makes of their actions *compensatory gestures* for society's antagonisms. At the end we hold a plea for a radical, politicized cultural activism that produces a deep sense of shame and disgust in the public at large – disgust both about current affairs as well as the dominant, cynical attitude towards them. Here we'll refer to Hirschhorn's Swiss Democracy and Schlingensiefel's Church of Fear.

The embedded cultural activists

Today it seems as if one of the key ambitions of the twentieth century cultural avant-garde: to transcend or 'overcome' the boundaries between art and life, is finally on the verge of being realized – at least in the so-called post-industrial countries. Never before, so many explicitly socially engaged cultural interventions are being produced. Never before, so many cultural agents – of all kinds – are engaged in societal processes, be it political, economic or urban. Several studies even point to a 'cultural turn' of contemporary society with creative experts fulfilling key positions in the production and consumption process. Especially with regards to large-scale restructuring processes in Western cities, it is common practice to employ cultural agency for managing the delicate process of urban renewal. An interdisciplinary selection of cultural producers are invited to organize workshops, debating programmes, do-it-yourself guides, events, goodbye rituals, poster campaigns, urban safari's, expert meetings, participatory programmes or pilot projects in which the problems and issues that are engendered by the restructuring process can be unloaded and worked through.

This merging of cultural production with real-life social processes seems to contradict Fukuyama's prediction about the end of all socially useful art. In his infamous *The End of History and the Last Man*, he claims the following:

Due to the utilitarian tradition of the United States it is even there difficult for the high arts to become purely formal. Artists *would like to believe* that they operate in a way that is not only artistically, but also socially responsible. But the end of history means, among other things, the end of all art that can be regarded as socially useful and the regression of art practices to the empty formalism of traditional Japanese art.¹

How should we interpret this apparent contradiction? Should we see the proliferation of socially engaged cultural practices as proof of the fact that we are still very far removed from the realization of Fukuyama's vision of the end of history? If we take the post-historic society as it 'actually exists' as a point of reference, the contradiction between an upsurge of socially useful art and its 'death' dissolves very quickly. In practice, the thesis of the end of history is supplemented by an ideology that constantly reminds us that the prize society has to pay for entering its final stage of development, is a constant 'plague' of terrorist acts. It is further said that this terrorism will never be eradicated totally, however successful the struggle to contain it might be. In short, although we are constantly reassured that although the 'big' ideological struggles are over for good – which would mean the end or 'death' of politics – a constant micro-politics would be necessary to manage the many micro-conflicts that are said to plague us until the end of the end of history.

Today, socially engaged cultural practices are caught up in a similar scheme. With the death of politics, also the possibility or even desirability of a radically political cultural production has withered away. However, rather than the un-heroic end of all socially useful art, it paradoxically engenders an incessant demand towards cultural agents to manage the leftover of individuals and groups in society that are not yet integrated in the win-win combination of representational democracy and the free market – a leftover moreover, that will always to some extent exist, just like terrorism. Precisely the stubborn and eternal existence of this margin asks for an alternative, creative approach, which cultural producers are ideally suited to organize. With this, the cultural producer is firmly locked in Fukuyama's system as a 'vacuum cleaner' – as the one who – due to his or her creative know-how – serves as the ultimate problem solver.

Fukuyama's prediction of the end of all socially useful art is thus both right and wrong: *it is incorrect if we take Fukuyama's text to the letter, yet correct if we relate it to the 'actually existing' end of history.* Today's so-called engaged cultural practices are but a diluted form of the radical cultural avant-gardes of the twentieth century. It is more correct to see them as *the cultural equivalent of the embedded journalists in the coalition army in Iraq.* Within today's large-scale updating of society into the Fukuyamian mould – of which the massive restructuring of our city's is one of the manifestations – they equally serve as an internal, built-in critical moment. Even with regards to groups that are structurally 'out of place' in our big cities, cultural agents believe that their deplorable situation can be helped with the necessary reforms or creative micro-solutions within the current economic and political coordinates. Even though they argue that both key components of the current order – democracy

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Hamilton 1992, p.344, my emphasis.

and market – still need to be ‘calibrated’ better, there is a broad consensus that ‘they will have to do it with these two elements’.

Illustrative for this dominant attitude amongst cultural agents is the project ‘Urban stock exchange’ of the IT company Suite 75 and the Maze Corporation – a cutting edge research office for urban renewal. With this project they wanted to offer an alternative for the current situation in which project developers of real estate groups value parts of the city mainly on the basis of investment technical criteria. This often results in neighbourhoods with a lot of low income groups or foreigners getting very negative evaluations which causes these areas to be even more deprived of investments, which in its turn causes a downward spiral with property values dropping further and further. To break this monopoly, Suite 75 and the Maze Corporation developed an alternative stock exchange in which neighbourhoods are valued using other, more unconventional qualities such as the liveliness of its street culture, its sub-cultural dynamics, the amount of informal activities and so on. On the website they formulate their goals as follows:

First SAM is a transaction system for urban shares. It is both a reward and rating system that commits people to the planning of their own town in the form of a game. Second SAM is a platform for retrieving relevant information on urban planning issues. The input provided by the players is valuable for determining the driving forces and key issues of urban planning as seen by the people themselves. By using the format of an online trading game, we're aiming to generate a Smart Mob effect.²

From this passage, it is not difficult to deduce the fundamental presuppositions of this project. First, you have the idea that people only commit themselves to their neighbourhood or, in other words, only behave as active, participating democratic citizens *if they can possibly profit from it – if there's something in it for them*. Second, this description testifies to the belief *that the rates of stock exchanges tell something about what people really want with, or how people really think about, their neighbourhood*. In short, in this so-called alternative project we are asked to believe *that the market is not merely an excellent instrument, but also an ideal indicator, for the democratization of society*. The main merit of the project is thus that through an online game environment, the subject learns that there's nothing wrong with the capitalist competition principle and that it on the contrary stimulates differences as well as democratic participation. In its ambition to get more people to have a say in the urban market, it at best holds a plea for a better balance between the workings of the market and democracy. What remains however, is the belief in the democratic potential of the market itself – in the notion of the market democracy. This project is illustrative for a dominant attitude among cultural producers: the deep conviction that there are no social problems that cannot be fixed through either representative democracy, or the free market, or a good mix of both.

Cultural activism after the end of history

This optimism amongst cultural agents is however all but total or un-ambivalent. Apart from the fact that things can often go totally out of hand, even in so-called post-industrial countries – the recent riots in a First World city like Paris are an uneasy reminder of the fundamental imbalance of post-historic society – we can think of the much heard complaint of cultural producers that the creative solutions they develop for certain problem situations or gaps in the system, are frustrated or manipulated again and again by the market, politicians or

² See website: <http://sam.suite75.net/>

neighbourhood groups. Symptomatic in this regard is the one hundred-and-eighty-degree turn made recently by Wouter Vanstiphout, an influential and trend-setting figure within the cultural vanguard of the Netherlands. For years he was known as a true optimist who affirmed cooperation with public bodies, housing corporations and investment companies as a unique opportunity for cultural agents to augment the effectiveness of their proposals for the city. Vanstiphout put the latter in practice by setting up a huge cultural program surrounding the upgrading of a problem neighbourhood in Rotterdam, in which he co-operated actively with project developers, municipal authorities and surrounding industrial conglomerates.³ In a recent statement however, he on the contrary cynically claims that housing policy in the Netherlands has regressed into a strategy of Big Capital, in which even the government is reduced to nothing more than a local, financial partner.⁴ He further complains that nobody listens to architects any more and pronounces the dissolution of urban planning. It is hard to believe that this is the same Vanstiphout who only a few years earlier labelled every critique on the capitalist nature of the recent restructuring of the Dutch cities in McCarthyite fashion as ‘communist’.

Manifestations of disappointment and disillusion that – so we can claim in Lacanian fashion – ‘do not lie’, betray that however strong cultural producers are locked into the ruling ‘constructivist’ ideology of post-historic society, *they also* are not without fundamental feelings of discontent with this society. The crucial question is of course how the subject can stay true to this disappointment, how it can unload it into a true act as opposed to, as happens most of the time, an acting out: i.e. a hyperactive, constructive co-operating with the current system to enhance it, that is actually fed by the fear for, or believed impossibility of, a real act. The problem with today’s embedded cultural activism is thus not so much that cultural agents are not ‘active’ enough with regards to social problems. It is rather *that they are too active: their over-activity is a defensive formation against their internal urge to pose a true act*, or to put it into a slogan: they are ‘*too active to act*’. The first step to disentangle this defense formation is to isolate the libidinal ambivalence of the complaints of cultural forces and to force them to clearly choose a side with regards to the object of discontent. If they really accept the so-called new conditions, if they honestly believe that the market democracy is the ‘least bad’ system, why then waste energy by complaining about it? If you subscribe to the idea that history has shown that there is no better system available, what do you hope to achieve by these protests?

Two scenario’s are possible here. In a first scenario, the cultural producer sticks to his belief in the win-win of the market and democracy. In that case, he has to accept that his complaints or acts of resistance are completely empty or, better put, that they have degraded into what Fukuyama – referring to Japanese art – calls a purely formal game, a ‘content-less activity’ that serves no other purpose than to organize an escape out of the comforts of his petit-bourgeois existence. One can also think here of the recent trend of reality adventure television programs in which a group of people are momentarily subtracted out of their everyday existence and put somewhere on a deserted island. It allows them, as well as the viewers, to dream of alternative forms of society that are not driven by status, prestige or monetary gains but, in the end, are all about money and competition anyway.

³ Wouter Vanstiphout et al., *WiMBY! Welcome into My Backyard! Internationale Bouwtentoonstelling Rotterdam-Hoogvliet*, Rotterdam: NAI 2000. See also the Wimby! website: <http://www.wimby.nl>

⁴ Wouter Vanstiphout, ‘Dirty minimalism’. In: *Archis* nr.5 2004, pp. 76-79

Within this scenario, the only consistent choice for cultural producers – at least, if they want to remain a minimum of authenticity – is to get over their hysteric complaining or content-less trouble making in the margins and fully and unreservedly devote their practice towards catering for the needs of the last men. In cultural circles there exists a term for this: *heroic realism*. With this notion, one indicates artistic practices that heroically embrace the so-called reality of the end of history and work *with and within* this reality.

There are few cultural actors that have the courage to go this far. In most cases, there occurs a fetishist denial of their belief in the end of history. Borrowing from Slavoj Žižek's formula of fetishism, we can formulate the prevailing argumentation-line of cultural producers here as follows: *I know very well that we reached the end of history, nevertheless there is no harm to every now and then sniff around in the margins of society, to look at it from an alternative angle.*⁵ This attitude results in the endless stream of 'artertainment' projects with which the last men are bombarded: from urban safari's to art festivals, creative workshops and so on. This fetishist position is so designed that cultural producers can remain in the relaxed position in which they on the one hand reap all the social benefits that come with affirming the ideology of the end of history – grants, government assignments, subsidized study trips abroad – while on the other cultivating an aura of doing something 'different', something that challenges the hegemony of the market democracy.

The thin line between cynicism and idealism

Luckily so, there are also cultural agents whose denial is not *so* radical that they are no longer open towards an honest and logical analysis of the consistency of their feelings, of the recurring frustration over the fact that their well intended, innovative proposals are always watered down due to politician's lack of courage, or put on the market in an unrecognisable, commercial form by the market partners. In this second scenario, it would be consequent of cultural actors to withdraw their libidinal investment in the existing order and plead for the necessity of a *radical* alternative – one that goes beyond simple reform or damage control in the margins of society.

The danger that lurks here, is not so much that of fetishism but that of cynicism. Slavoj Žižek formulated the central logic of cynicism as follows: "[t]hey [the cynical subjects] know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know".⁶ Other than in the previous scenario, cultural producers here have a very sharp insight into the situation, they know very well that the continuous proclamation of the post-ideological or post-capitalist age is but a clever strategy for making any opposition against maximizing profits impossible, that all innovative cultural projects to get citizens to interactively participate in the construction of society are but cunning ways to eliminate all friction against capital, etc. Nevertheless, and this makes of cultural agents a cynic, they act as if they can enhance the situation by means of creative micro-solutions, reforms, compensations, corrective cultural events and so on. In short: the illusion is here, as Žižek puts it, 'in the doing', *in the activity itself*. He also calls this a 'fetishism in practice'. Theoretically speaking the subject knows very well that there's something fundamentally wrong with the existing order that necessitates a radical intervention, this doesn't impede him or her however from optimistically and creatively proposing solutions *within the ideological co-ordinates of the ruling societal project*.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime Object of Ideology*. London and New York: Verso 1989, p.28

⁶ Idem, p.29

This cynicism is harder to detect than the fetishism we spoke of earlier. We're confronted with this cynicism in unexpected places, in people that are commonly viewed as heroes or idealists. We shouldn't be tricked by this appearance however. The cynical processing of the feelings of disappointment with which the cultural activists is plagued constantly at the so-called end of history, robs their interventions as much from any revolutionary potential as its fetishist counterpart. It equally hinders cultural actors to posit a true act with regards to the many scandalous phenomena they encounter in their practice, and their own deep feelings of dissatisfaction with the current run of things.

A splendid case of this cynicist mode amongst today's cultural producers is the infamous architectural design competition for the redevelopment of the Ground Zero site in New York, for which the 'deconstructivist' architect Daniel Libeskind won the public's prize.⁷ Since the end of the competition a dirty power game developed concerning the execution of the project. Project developer Larry Silverstein – who was given carte blanche by the government to develop the site because he claimed to be able to finance the redevelopment solely by using the money of the insurance companies – put forward the pragmatic American architecture office Skidmore Owings & Merrill for the design and execution of the project. The latter however refused any fundamental input from – the public's prize winner – Libeskind. Eventually, a compromise was reached that allowed Libeskind to supervise the execution of the masterplan of the site as well as 'to be present' at the concept and draught phase of the project. This half-hearted construction predictably led to a diluted, merely ornamental use of Libeskind's known deconstructivist style.

In the first place it is hard to believe that Libeskind, from all his years of experience, doesn't know that his eccentric, deconstructivist style doesn't do so well with market partners and that the end result – with the occasional museum as an exception – often amounts to a farce. Each artist or architect in the Netherlands knows the infamous billboard by Libeskind in Dordrecht.⁸ Of the deconstructivist style nothing more can be seen than a couple of poles sticking through an advertisement column in somewhat random fashion – very similar to the way Japanese women wear sticks in their hair. In short, it is rather unbelievable that Libeskind could ever honestly think that his daring design would actually get build in the pragmatic, no nonsense United States, even if it won the first or public's prize. It is more realistic to posit that Libeskind *knew all too well* that his design didn't stand any chance to be effectively built, *but nevertheless put it forward as a realistic alternative*. This cynical position undermines his victimization in the entire vaudeville, or the elevation of Libeskind into a fighting idealist who stubbornly defends the architectural gesture in the midst of all kinds of *realpolitische* manipulations and calculations by project developers and bureaucrats. It is more correct to see him as *a cynic 'in the form of an idealist'*. If Libeskind was really serious about doing the design of Ground Zero, he would've come with a realistic proposal. In the latter case, it would've been less easy for his opponents to put him aside as an exponent of the 'Old Europe'.

The danger with such seemingly idealist actions is that even though the cultural agent is *him- or herself* very sceptical about the effective application of his or her proposals, *the latter themselves believe in it in his or her place*. Libeskind's design is for instance constantly

⁷ The original title of Libeskind's project was 'Gardens of the world'. It was renamed into 'Memory foundations'. The project was chosen as people's choice in July 2003.

⁸ This project was executed as the winning design of the competition 'Dordrecht city identity' that took place in 1992.

shown in the media by the same project developers who checkmated him. In an infamous reportage of the dirty power games behind the scenes of the redevelopment of Ground Zero, it is shown how Libeskind himself, in spite of his obvious frustrations, at every press conference smilingly poses aside his opponents while expressing his optimism with regards to the possible co-operation. The cynical denial here is obvious: even though he no longer believes in the good ending of the adventure, his mere physical presence at public relations events feeds the belief that ‘something good’ will arise on the symbolic location of the Twin Towers. This fetishism in practice can be seen as a general character trait of cultural agents that have grown cynical about the possibilities to make a difference within the current order. The mildly critical activities they initiate in spite of their deeper scepticism, and that are driven by an often optimist spirit to ‘make the best out of the situation’, *believe in their place that all kinds of things are still possible within the existing, post-historic order.*

If, with this, they don’t keep this belief alive *for themselves*, they certainly do it for other groups in society. The crucial point is *that everything stands or falls with keeping up the appearances. The market democracy can only exist because of the denial of the subject that ‘all is not lost’ – it is dependent for its reproduction on the belief of creative agents and acts – however empty – that the market can be democratized from the bottom up.* The crucial point is thus to see how the existing order cannot survive without its ‘critical appendix’, without the constant streaming of creative projects that try to critically appropriate the market. *The fact alone that there are creative minds who deal critically with the concept of market democracy – in the full conscience of the latter’s limitations – allows other groups in society to continue their business along the existing paths.*

Staying true to the revolutionary knock within

How can cultural actors stay *do* true to the constantly recurring sense of frustration over the fact that they’re always ‘taken from behind’ by the market or conservative neighbourhood groups, that in the end they always get the short end of the stick. It should be clear that this feeling is but the negative form of a more fundamental feeling of revolutionary enthusiasm, that overpowers cultural actors – however firmly they stick to deontology of constructive co-operation – on those moments that they run into the brick wall of commerce or bureaucracy. How can cultural actors be brought to the point *at which they no longer protect themselves against what they want on those fundamental, often existential moments: i.e. to resist the current run of things merely for the sake of resisting it* or, as Slavoj Žižek recently put it, ‘to break eggs solely for the purpose of breaking them’.⁹

It is obvious why cultural producers protect themselves at all costs against this internal, revolutionary urge. With this, the cultural actor would no longer play the role of creative expert and thereby lose the protection and privileges of cultural professionalism. In the eyes of the status-quo as well as many of his or her colleagues, the cultural agent would slide in mere, irrational madness since the standard attitude today towards such a moment of revolutionary enthusiasm is that only somebody who is not in his or her right mind, rejects or negates something without suggesting a more valuable alternative. For the same reason, the cultural actor who ‘goes through the roof’, would lose all esteem in the eyes of society. In a climate in which a deontology is preached to and by cultural forces that commands them to ‘keep up with the good work’ at all costs, to persevere in their creative activity for the sake of

⁹ He said this during the conference ‘State of Emergency’ in the Metropolitan Museum CS in Amsterdam, 23/9/2004.

professional dignity and this regardless of the fact that the market isn't interested in good alternatives, the moment in which the cultural actors 'looses it' cannot appear otherwise than as professional suicide.

One of the dominant ways to resist this revolutionary outburst is the 'road of guilt': i.e. *by turning it into the object of a moral prohibition*. A clear-cut case of the latter is the attitude of Western architects towards extreme urban developments in Third World countries. A recent study of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas is symptomatic in this regard.¹⁰ In his reading of the Nigerian megalopolis Lagos, he stresses the fact that although there might not be a clear master plan or concept behind this chaotic city, it nevertheless 'works' perfectly in practice. He argues that Lagos developed an entirely own functional mode for coping with its position in the global division of labour. Rather than a Third World city threatening to collapse under its own weight, Koolhaas describes the city as "a form of collective research, conducted by a team of eight-to-twenty-five million", and further as "a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity", which brings him to claim that "Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather we may be catching up with Lagos".¹¹ There is definitely some truth in detecting in these third world megalopolises a revolutionary potential – to regard it as an urban event unprecedented since the rise of the industrial cities. All this 'affirmative action' shouldn't distract us however with the underlying message: i.e. *that Western planners shouldn't intervene with the aim of actualizing of this potential*. It is implied that, by doing this, we risk 'disturbing' their 'collective experiment' with our dogmatic, 'all too Western' views. The moralizing nature of this advice is obvious, even if it is an '*inverted*' moralism. We are no longer dealing with architects or urbanists who claim that one should plan cities in this or that way – as it was common practice during the hay day of modernism/colonialism. A professional ethics is now propagated towards architects that urges them not to be enthused too much by radical urban phenomena and to keep their hands off. In short, a reversal has occurred from a planning practice based on commandments – i.e. the planner has to do this or that – to one that is ruled by moral prohibitions – i.e. the planner is no longer allowed to do this or that.

This change is symptomatic for the more general conviction of cultural actors that *if one gets too enthusiastic about something, all kinds of catastrophic consequences will occur*. The standard example in the field of architecture is the case of Le Corbusier. His untamed enthusiasm for the revolutionary potential of modern architecture finally led him to his 'Plan Radiouse' in which the entire historical inner city of Paris was wiped off the map. The flip side of this moralistic aversion for such an architectural revolutionary enjoyment is that all objects of fascination of contemporary architects are cases of what one can call 'architecture without architects' or even 'architecture against architecture'. Think of recent songs of praise on the incessant rise of generic tower blocks in cities in South-Asia, the slum architecture in third world cities or, closer at home, the hype of what is known as 'do-it-yourself'-architecture. We can deduce from this that today *the passion for architecture or urbanism is only tolerated in the Other*, i.e. insofar its subject is an non-architect, non-urbanist or, in short: *a non-expert*.

This generalized prohibition on giving in on one's revolutionary desire, causes cultural agents to get caught into an *economy of guilt*. Cultural actors are constantly haunted with doubts whether they haven't been carried away too much by their enthusiasm. If the answer is

¹⁰ Rem Koolhaas, *Mutations*. Barcelona: ACTAR ; Bordeaux: Arc en Rêve Centre d'Architecture 2000, pp. 650-720

¹¹ Idem, p.652

positive, they'll feel all the more guilty and in the future be even more careful to give the floor to the 'revolutionary within', to prevent the revolutionary feelings to unload in a real act. In her brilliant reading of Lacan's seventeenth seminar, Joan Copjec claims the following with regards this dynamics of guilt:

Guilt is less an escape from anxiety than an evasive transformation of it, for guilt does not successfully release the 'accumulated tension' of anxiety in a true act – writing or avenging one's father, for example – but accumulates more tension and indentures the subject as a permanent apprentice to the superego.¹²

And further that: "While the superego is hidden mechanism of this blockage, its agent, according to Lacan, is accumulated knowledge".¹³ We can understand the latter on the basis of our previous examples. Based on their education, cultural actors possess an enormous knowledge of all the moments in the history of their discipline in which their predecessors have 'fallen for the revolutionary temptation'. References are constantly made to degenerated, perverted situation like the faith of the Russian Constructivist avant-garde that ended up by giving up all creativity and merely serving the Stalinist propaganda machine.

This doesn't however mean that cultural actors renounce all forms of enthusiasm. As Copjec poignantly demonstrates, the superego is not merely the one who prohibits, *it also at the same time urges us to strive after our ideals*, but then within the limits set by the superego. About this, she states: "Do not forget... that this idealized father is also the father who prompts us the pursuit of ideals, which are nothing more than the surplus jouissance we were forced to sacrifice [that is] now sacralized and projected onto a receding horizon."¹⁴ A good example of the latter is the phenomenon of the organization Architects Without Frontiers: the belief in radical change of the system has been sublated and sublimated in a commitment towards humanitarian architectural questions. In short, although the superego frustrates the internal drive for radical change and intervenes as a sanctioning organ that inhibits revolutionary enjoyment, the cultural actor can get into the good books of the superego by enjoying in the way it prescribes: i.e. *in a productive way*. The latter is today's dominant attitude towards revolutionary enthusiasm amongst cultural agents: 'Revolutionary enthusiasm? No problem, as long as it is constructive!'

Towards a cultural production of shame

However unthinkable it is for a cultural actor to posit an act that doesn't let itself be caught in such feelings of guilt or controlled forms of idealism, such acts *do* happen regularly. Think of Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition *Swiss-Swiss Democracy*.¹⁵ As a protest against the recent move to the right of the political consensus in Switzerland – well disguised, according to Hirschhorn, underneath democratic processes – he organized an exhibition in which he attacked Swiss politics head on. Through all kinds of media – collages, video, lectures and so

¹² Joan Copjec, 'Shame: May '68, a most emotional month'. Lecture on the international colloquium: 'La dimensión de los afectos en la constitución de las identidades socio-políticas', that took place in the Goethe Institute in Buenos Aires, Argentina 6-8/10/2004. See <http://www.goethe.de/mmo/priv/918003-STANDARD.pdf>

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ The exhibition took place in the Centre Culturel du Suisse in Parijs from 4/12/04 until 30/1/05.

on – he relentlessly uncovered the obscene underside of Swiss democracy. In a recent interview Hirsschorn claims:

An artist must be allowed to make a wild gesture, to be brave. Art offers resistance. Art is active nor passive, art attacks, through my artistic work I will struggle with reality in all its complexity, massiveness and incomprehensiveness... I will be brave, I will not be lulled into sleep, I will continue to work and be happy.¹⁶

The exhibition led to a political row in Switzerland, which in turn led to the halving of Swiss subsidies for culture. For onlookers – or even the majority of his colleagues – it will probably seem as if Hirsschorn is shooting into his foot or, to put it in Lacanian terms: as symbolical suicide. Without doubt, one will here mobilize the commonplace that one ‘shouldn’t bite the hand that feeds you’.

In Hirsschorn’s act we can see a cultural application of the Lacanian strategy of producing shame in the subject. He developed this strategy during his infamous seventeenth seminar – a seminar he gave during the riotous period of May ’68. One of Lacan’s basic criticisms on the student’s protests was that they had turned their dissent into a joke or farce. According to him, the students lacked a fundamental sense of shame of, or contempt for, the current state of affairs – for the many fundamental miscarriages of the existing political and economic regime. For Lacan, the task of the analyst was to produce this ‘shame’ in the revolting subjects. He even ended his seminar by saying that if he had hoped to achieve anything with regards to the student’s protesting, it was to have made them ashamed or disgusted so that they’d be pushed beyond the point of merely ridiculing the status-quo. We can understand the political impact of Hirsschorn’s *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* within Lacan’s plea for ‘shame-based’ resistance. On the one hand Hirsschorn puts the silent majority of the Swiss population to shame about their lack of resistance against the current political affairs in their country. On the other hand he also disgraced many of his colleagues in the cultural sector who, in exchange for government subsidies, censor themselves with regards to any explicit or unmediated criticism on home politics. Valid here, is what Lacan said, namely “... to die of shame is the only affect of death that... deserves it...”, and further that “... if it doesn’t happen [i.e. dying out of shame], which... is bad luck, then you are left with life as a shame you have to swallow because it is not worth dying for.”¹⁷

Within cultural production, such open expressions and productions of shame are needed more than ever. Apart from Hirsschorn’s confession of shame about the political developments in his own country, we can also be inspired by Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Church of Fear*.¹⁸ Schlingensiefel founded a church in which people could openly express their fear over current societal phenomena. According to him, this would be systematically repressed in a society that on the one hand manipulates fear for political and commercial purposes, while on the

¹⁶ Hirschhorn said this during episode 25 of the television programme RAM on Dutch television broadcasted on 1/5/2005.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan Livre XVII: L’Envers de la Psychoanalyse*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1991, own translation of “... mourir de honte est le seul affect de la mort qui... qui la mérite” (p. 209) and further “[s]i ça n’arrive pas, ce qui est ... fait malchance, alors il vous reste la vie comme honte à boire, de ce qu’elle ne mérite pas qu’on en meure” (p.210).

¹⁸ Within this scheme Schlingensiefel erected a church during the Venice biennale in 2003 Schlingensiefel and hosted a pole-sitting competition.

other hand dismissing any radical solutions for those fears as reactionary, outmoded responses that are based on a denial of the fact that we live in a Risk Society now. About this Schlingensief says:

Politics only needs fear to be able to say: ‘Don’t worry, we’ll look after it’. That fear is a potential to fight... against the system that sells, cheats and betrays – this can be talked about and acted upon in the Church of Fear. ‘I am afraid’ – that can be said openly... And it is noticeable that the social surroundings are becoming more and more nervous when people say that.¹⁹

Schlingensief here refers to an incident at an airport in which one of the members of the Church caused a huge panic. While boarding his flight, he had confessed to the stewardess that he was scared because nobody had searched him. The ambiguity of the confession – were they for instance dealing with a man who suffered from fear of flying or a terrorist who got scared and gave away his identity? – caused an immediate panic which led to the closing down of the entire airport for six hours. Maybe it is high time for cultural producers to stop suppressing their feelings of shame about contemporary developments in society such as the cleansing of problem neighbourhoods, the hypocritical attitude towards immigration and so on. As we saw, this repression often leads them, out of a sense of guilt, to start working on these issues in a constructive mood and within the boundaries of the possible and acceptable. Cultural agents should on the contrary, following Hirsschhorn and Schlingensief, confess *en plein public* how they are ashamed. I am sure such a ‘Church of shame’ will not be lacking in popularity.

All of this does not imply however, *that artists or designers have to become political activists* or that they should start to operate and speak *like politicians*. We can here quote Hirsschhorn’s infamous statement that he does not produce political art, but *makes art politically*, i.e. in a political fashion. Even though a politicized cultural practice is clearly driven by an intention to intervene in political matters, it does so, as is clear from both Hirsschhorn’s and Schlingensief’s actions, in a way that is foreign to the political game or say, the *politique politicienne*, the politics of politicians. Its type of politics makes it more into a placeholder and proponent of the contemporary political philosophical notion of ‘the political’. It is no coincidence that this difference or tension is elevated by Jacques Rancière, one of the godfathers of the concept of the political, as the essence of political art. He theorizes the latter in terms of a third way between two tendencies: on the one hand the desire of artists to merge with ‘real life’ – in this case: the reality of democratic politics – on the other the striving for an autonomous, specific place of its own next to, or outside of this reality. As Rancière puts it: “critical art is... a specific negotiation... [...] ... [t]his negotiation must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience towards the reconfiguration of collective life and something of the tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensibility from the other spheres of experience”.²⁰ Precisely this grey zone – what Rancière calls ‘zones of indistinctions between art and life’ make of a politicized cultural praxis such an uneasy presence. On the one hand it prevents society from neutralizing the disturbing questions the artist poses about current affairs by relegating it to the aesthetic sphere – i.e. by turning them into the individual, artistic ‘opinions’ of a creative mind. On the other, it makes it impossible

¹⁹ Christoph Schlingensief, *Church of fear*. Keulen: Museum Ludwig 2005, p. 21

²⁰ Jacques Rancière, ‘The politics of aesthetics’, Lecture 5/5/2006. See <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877.php>

for the status-quo to dismiss these questions in the usual way, i.e. by using the standard political arguments or way of arguing.