10 2014

An Open letter in the Dark

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination

«Dark times lie ahead of us and there will be a time when we must
choose between what is easy and what is right.»
Professor Dumbledore to Harry Potter and the magician students of Hogwarts.

«Ethics and Aesthetics are one. »
Ludwig Wittgenstein, journal entry 1916.

Dear Tomas, Margit and the others reading this letter,

We are sorry it has taken so long to get back to you, but this letter has not been an easy one to write and things have been difficult here. We are also sorry that what began as a letter has perhaps become a long “manifestos against a world that we hate” (to quote one of the lines in your festival’s statement of purpose).

We are writing with a sadness that reaches to the tips of the fingers with which we type. This weekend the French Police, acting on the orders of the dictatorship of the growth economy, killed Remi, a young ecological justice activist. He was a year older than my son Jack who played the music in W*e Have Never Been Here Before.* A heavily armoured riot cop shot him in the back probably with a

concussion grenade, the explosion ripped his life away on the spot. The tragedy took place on La ZAD (Zone A Défendre) du Testet, a new autonomous zone of ecological resistance inspired by the original ZAD near our farm in france, where the struggle against a new airport for Nantes, has been successful. The ZAD du Testet where Remi was murdered is resisting the construction of a dam that is cutting down hectares of forest and destroying a richly bio-diverse wetlands eco-system just to water fields of industrial maize. Once again we are confronted with the fact that when people do more than symbolic action, when they place their bodies directly against the machines of the system, the response is violence, extreme violence. We write this letter with sadness, love and rage in our veins.

As you may know in Dec 2015, the COP21 UN climate summit will be held in Paris, there will be a huge global citizens mobilisation during the conference. All of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination's (Labofii) work this year will lead towards creative acts of disobedience during COP21 to pressure the worlds governments to be coherent between their words and acts. Despite the rhetoric, since the COP talks began and promised to do something about the climate, emissions have risen 61%. Science say that radical emission cuts must happen now if we are to stay within the safe zone of 2 degrees of warming. Meanwhile fossil fuel companies are planning to continue business as usual, they are banking on a 4 degrees rise which means runaway climate change, a warming could render this planet with an atmosphere between mars and venus. World climate expert and head scientist at the British Governments Tyndall centre for Climate Change Research, Kevin Anderson, says that: " If you have got a population of nine billion by 2050 and you hit 4C, 5C or 6C, you might have half a billion people surviving." This is why some people call it a climate

holocaust, pushed by an economy which puts money in front of life...

For 2015 the Labofii envisages a series of shows, mass public trainings in the choreography of protest and performative hackathons in London, Berlin, Hamburg and Paris, where we will develop efficient new tools of creative resistance to take out into the streets and conference halls at COP21.

We Have Never Been Here Before, the show that you invited us to present at the Donau festival, is explicitly about the personal and political obstacles in the fight against catastrophic climate change and the accompanying workshop for artists and activists, explores both psychological and strategic questions of how we can act in the face of such challenges[1]. But it is first time the Laboffii had done a piece that stays in the theatre and does not take to the streets, does not disobey, in many ways it was the kind of work we normally would call "pictures politics", *representations* of political action, art "about" politics, definitely not our "normal' practice. It's what we jokingly call our "holidays in representation" (our last "holiday in representation" was when we produced the book/film *Pfade durch Utopia*, Nautilus, 2012). *We Have Never Been Here Before* was an admission of weakness and a moment of reflection on the efficacy or not of the work we have been doing over the last decade.

A lot of the so-called "political art" in the art world *pretends* to do politics. At best it is purely symbolic protest, at worst it builds 'zoos' to observe the authentic 'real' activists. As you know the Laboffii believes that the role of art is not to show the world to people, but to transform it directly. We don't want to make political art but to render politics artistic. This is why most of our work involves bringing artists and activists together to create new

forms of civil disobedience which are then enacted in the public sphere. However this attachment to materially transforming social life, goes for both our art practice and our everyday life, for we cannot separate them.

In order to make art politically we have to pay attention not just to everyday life but to the mechanisms of reproduction in the world of culture. In a geek like way this means that every time we get an invite from a theatre or festival, museum or biennial before we accept, we look at the list of sponsors. You can imagine our faces when we saw on the front page of your festival site in big white letters, an advert for the "Preferred Carrier": Austrian airlines. "We fly your smile" is their motto.

Perhaps the smile refers to the fact that thanks to offsetting we can still fly without feeling guilty, Austrian airlines are proud that you can pay someone else to plant a tree or set up a windmill to assuage a climate crime. But offsetting is about as rational a response to the problem as was paying for absolutions to redeem your sins in the middle age. In the Dutch republic of the 15th century there was a price for each sin, to be payed to the church who would offset it through prayer. For example absolution for incest was afforded at 36 livres, three ducats, whilst if you poisoned someone it was a sixth of the price.[2] Kevin Anderson, refuses to fly and thinks that "Offsetting is worse than doing nothing. It is without scientific legitimacy, is dangerously misleading and almost certainly contributes to a net increase in the absolute rate of global emissions growth." Keep consuming, keep polluting, no need to change our behaviour, business as usual with a nice greenwash tint. But it's not just greenwashing that is useful to corporations at the moment, it is also artwashing, the magic slight of hand that transforms 'radical' art into a tool for upholding the status quo.

Many of our artists and intellectual friends fly from biennial to festival, from one city to another to make “radical culture”. It’s all part of the “rights” of the hyper mobile cultural class, a global generation that that has been uprooted from any material place, ripped from local communities, distanced from contexts where they might have some agency in transforming the material world. It suits the status quo that the radical thinkers and makers don’t have a territory, belong to nowhere and float in an abstract vapid world where no solution is graspable, where radical thinking has no anchor in action. But as John Berger says “to improve something, you really need to know the texture, the life story of that thing”, and knowing the story of somewhere takes a lot longer than a festival or a residency, according to some farmers it can take a thousand years to know a place.

The Tyndall Centre says residents of the UK need to cut their CO2 emissions by 90% by 2050 (others say by 2030) if we are to have a chance to avoid runaway climate chaos and to equitably distribute the right to emit CO2 globally. Its worth remembering that a single runway of a large european airport can emit more than the entire CO2 emissions of a large african country and that if it were a country air transport alone would be 7th on the list of largest present day CO2 emitters. At the moment the average Briton emits 9.5 tonnes per year (an Austrian 7.9) One flight from the UK to New York and back emits 1.2 tonnes, which equals, if we have to cut by 90%, the total amount of C02 a Briton could use per year to keep the climate safe and just. That would mean anyone really believing in climate justice who flew to New York, for instance to the recent People Climate March called by Ban Ki Moon, would use up their annual credit on the trip alone and that means for an entire year could not eat, take a train, use the internet, put the lights on… nothing.

What is it in our culture that makes some people think that their presence to such events is so vital that it trumps the need to reduce global emissions? The capitalist chasm between our beliefs and behaviour is spreading as fast as the desert...

Looking beyond the front page of the festival website we also went to the sponsors page, where we discovered not only Vienna International Airport, but also EVN which owns coal fired power stations and distributes gas across Europe. Coal fired power stations are not only directly responsible for taking our world to a place with temperatures similar to hell, but they also releases a constant stream of mercury, nitrous oxides, sulfur dioxide, and a range of other toxins that enter our bodies and inflict serious damage to our soft vital organs and those of every animal in its vicinity. Dirty money can't get more dirty than coal.

Then we saw that on the top of the list of sponsors is the distinct black and yellow logo of Austria's biggest bank *Raiffeisen*. In 2011 *Raiffeisen* won a financial "deal of the year" award for their funding of a Russian oil companies' new refinery and for setting up export infrastructure for siberian open cast coal! Like every bank it has a fossil fuels equity portfolio filled with oil, coal, gas and fracking companies from across the world.

Recent research shows that 21st century climate crisis has been caused largely by just 90 companies, many of them household names – BP, Exxon, Shell, Chevron, Gazprom – which between them produced nearly two-thirds of the greenhouse gas emissions generated since the dawning of the industrial age[3]. Half of those emissions have occurred in the last 25 years, the generation that has known about the dangers of climate change. But all of these companies are fueled by banks, without their capital no oil, gas or coal ever leaves the ground. If our culture perceived these banks as

part of the problem rather than as partners, perhaps the future would not be cancelled. If these companies were forced by popular social movements to shift their investments away from fossil fuels, maybe we would be winning.

It comes as no surprise that another cultural institution is providing the social approval and progressive sheen on companies whose toxic activities have nothing to do with a sustainable and just future. Your enthusiastic presentation of the festival says you desire “a paradigm shift in society”, but these companies continue business as usual and they are using art as the perfect mask of hypocrisy, a moral offset for their ‘sins’. In fact the best way to look at it is not that these companies are supporting the arts, but that the arts are supporting their lie that they care about anything other than making profits even though it means annihilating the life support systems of this planet. In fact this kind of sponsorship is an act of anesthesia, something that numbs us, stops us perceiving the reality that is at the root of our poisonous capitalist culture, it is quite the opposite of an aesthetic act, an act that enables us to feel the world, to sense it deep within our guts.

Of course, some will respond that “without flying the international art world cannot continue”, that in a climate of general budget cuts festivals desperately need money to put up shows that inspire, that we need to live in the “real world” and that sometimes compromises need to be made in order to survive...

Such logic seems absurd to us: do we really want to continue the survival of the international art world at the expense of the survival of our species on this planet. Or do we want an art world that provides models for other ways of living and behaving in this one ?

“Art is simply paying attention,” wrote Alan Kaprow, the american artist who was credited for creating the first “Happenings” – performances where the line between artists and audience, art and life were blurred. In this world where our attention is being bombarded by neurone stimulating semiotic goods 24/7, the Labofii finds this definition of art fitting. We are witnessing a non stop psychic war of images and information waged by capitalism over life, which is having a deep psychic affect on our lives. Like the burdening of our atmosphere with too much CO2, our synapses cannot keep up with the mass of information, our psychic landscape has been transformed by weapons of mass distraction in the war for profit and growth.

We no longer have time for attention, the overload leads us to paralysing panic, where changing our world feels as out of reach as true joy. “The economic crisis” Franco “bifo” Berardi writes, “depends for the most part on the circulation of sadness, depression, panic and demotivation.”[4] For the Labofii “paying attention” is an inherently political definition of art, because a moment of “attention” is an act of disobedience and desertion from the chaos of a society of mass attention deficit disorder.

The *Society of the Spectacle* is “unity in separation” said Guy Debord. Two generations later, this vision perfectly describes our present, the realm of extreme separation where we are violently separated from our needs and desires. It’s a world without worlds, where we are split from our food sources, from our soil, from our plants and our water. The worlds that sustain our life have become alien, unknown planets. We have forgotten how to make our shelter, how to heal ourselves, how to clothe ourselves. We feel alienated from the bacteria that makes up 10 percent of our body weight and yet keeps us alive. We witness 200 species being pushed to

extinction every day by the economy, and yet we think this will somehow not affect us.

This society of separation creates a world where we can think one thing and do another, where we can have a set of ethics that are totally separate from our actions, where we can engage in political ideas which are never lived in our everyday life. “Oh I know I shouldn’t buy these H&M jeans,” says the conscience consumer, “I know they were made in sweatshops… (sigh) but they suit me so well and I really NEED a new pair don’t I ?” Perhaps we don’t even know how to link how we feel to how we behave anymore. Last year a journalist revealed that apple godhead and guru, Steve Jobs, refused his children access to i-phones and i-pads, because he thought they would be detrimental to their psychological health; but it did not stop him marketing such devices to millions of other peoples children across the world.

“A certain discipline of attention”[5] is how The Invisible Committee describes communism, in their manifesto CALL, which celebrates a radical exodus from the metropolis. To “pay attention” to the world is *commun*icating with it, its a tool against separation and distraction, its a weapon of reciprocal relationship. It means observing the world in the same way an artists observes her material, the cook his ingredients, the dancer her gestures, the gardener her seeds, the hacker her code. Its an act of focused sensing, not just with the eyes, but with the entire sensible mind and body. Kaprow might have called this ‘art’, but Bhuddist call it “mindfullness”, neuroscientists “direct experience”, christian’s “contemplation” and in arabic it is know as “sabr” – a key practice of islam. This surrendering to the present moment that seems to be a central ritual practice of human society, bypasses the existential ego of the self and overcomes the anxiety of past and future. In such a state we can experience information coming into

our senses in real time, we pay attention to the world once again. If art is simply paying attention, then not only does it escape from the prisons of the art world and from the clutches of the creative classes monopoly on it, but it enables us to make conscious ethical choices free from the terrorising autopilot of consumer capitalism.

Far from some kind of spiritual retreat from the world, for the Labofii this "paying attention" leads us to making material decisions about our everyday life, it is an attempt to melt the boundaries between art and life. As artists and activists working towards a postcapitalist culture, we want to live the world we talk and dream about in the present moment, we want to have coherence between our thoughts and our acts. All our work involves non hierarchical processes, we have set up an organic farm and commune and we have not taken a flight for ten years. None of this is to be *pure* but simply to be coherent, to not separate our aesthetics from our ethics. And none of this is enough unless we are also engaged in dismantling the system of capitalism and domination that is at the root of the crisis.

We were excited to read your festival's statement entitled 10 YEARS REDEFINING ARTS. For us the redefining of art, or what Joseph Beuys would call "expanding the concept of art", is a central question in the age of the Anthropocene[6]. In such an age, the ancient distinction between natural history and human history, between culture and nature collapses and so must art must change radically. We must unshackle ourselves from representation, tear down the walls between art and life and re distribute creativity to everyone. Following Kaprow's vision of the future of art might help us: "We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly" he wrote "from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one."

In your statement we read that the aim of Donau festival is “to establish a radically new festival model, which, on the one hand, would correspond to the ideas and needs of emergent art forms and, on the other, of a paradigm shift in society.” You also say that the recent focus is on “central global themes such as the human-animal-nature relationship, exploitation, exclusion, repression, and migration” and “we will dream with our artists of societal counter models, of ephemeral anarchic world concepts; we will tend paradisiacal gardens in our minds and wed ourselves with plants and animals; we will proclaim vehement visual, sonic, and vocal manifestos against a world that we hate and draft fragile, tender declarations of love to a world that we dream of and believe can become reality.” The words are really beautiful, the ideas are courageous and we share them with you. But do they fit with the reality ? Or are they purely symbolic gestures thrown without paying attention into the winds of the coming storms.

When you write that you want “a paradigm shift in society” how do u imagine this change will take place ? How can a festival like this which props up the “old world that we hate” be part of the change ? Do you think capitalist culture will somehow undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane, equitable and sustainable way of living ? We think not, we think we have to undo this culture completely and rebuild entirely different ways of being and sharing of our worlds. No real solutions to this crisis will be put in place by those in power if it means them not profiting from it. As escaped slave Frederick Douglas knew so well when he was fighting the horrors of the slave trade and declared “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. “

For us at the Labofii the goal can be summed up in a sentence: *to remove the ability of the rich to steal from the poor and dismantle the ability of the powerful to destroy our biosphere.* The role of art for us is

to make this process as creative, desirable and effective as possible – to stop the war of money against life in the most beautiful way possible. Sadly we don't see how we can do this by being part of the Donaufestival without violently tearing our ethics from our aesthetics.

Perhaps in an age of extreme ecological and social crisis, the key questions artists and curators need to ask themselves are: Can these the institutions of culture be machines for amplifying our potential to transform the status quo, or are they palaces carefully engineered for us to play the fool in, whilst outside the kings and queens continue to play Russian roulette with our future whilst enriching theirs.

Initially when we saw the sponsors we decided we would come to the festival, do the show, redistribute our fees to activists on front line communities against climate catastrophe in the global south and organise an intervention against the very sponsors themselves. We would launch a kind of infiltrated undercover guerrilla action that bites the hand that feeds. We do not care about spoiling our reputation within the world of art, we don't care to not be invited back, we care about the political efficacy of art more than our careers. We have done this before, most infamously when the Tate Modern tried to stop us taking actions against their sponsors British Petroleum, during a workshop they themselves commissioned on disobedience[7].

We wrote to the Yes Men and Reverend Billy who were also invited to the Donaufestival, to see if we could set up a two day Hackathon in Krems with them to co-plan actions against *Raiffeisen*. But we soon realised that even if we did do this, the actions themselves would simply be symbolic, would not really have much of an effect, the fossil fuels would continue to be sucked out

of the ground and burnt and we would just be the fools in the palace once again, playing the old role of shocking the bourgeoisie and needlessly upsetting you the curators.

But we don't want to pretend to do politics in the art world. And so we are stuck. We did not know how to proceed, of course we wanted to come, we love making work, we love performing and we thrive off the creative ebullience of festivals. We have never seen the Danube river in its all its glory and we were excited to spend time with some of the art activists and friends we most admire, the Yes Men and Reverend Billy. But how to do so without becoming part of the machinery that we want to dismantle ? How do we avoid even an act of self sabotage being easily digested by the boundless appetite of the art world ? If we were cynical we would just accept the fact that we would be recuperated and go for it – it's the "shitty reality". But cynicism is simply another word for obedience to the system and we don't want to dwell in the shit of reality, thats why we make art.

And so we would like this letter, or manifesto, or whatever it is, to be a proposal for a dialogue about what a "radically new festival model" could look like rather than just a shut door that says sorry we can't take part. We would like it to be the start of something rather than the end, something more than symbolic words or acts we share together. Something that helps put bodies in the way of the machine rather than greasing its cogs.

Yours in solidarity John and Isa.
The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination
https://labofii.wordpress.com/2014/10/28/an-open-letter-in-the-dark/

[1] The blurb advertising the workshop begins: “Faced with the immensity and complexity of the catastrophic entwining of ecological, economic and social crises that threaten our entire way of life, in fact threatens life itself, we often feel paralysed. “We could do more”, our intuition nags at us, and yet something holds us back from actions commensurate with the scale of the problem.” The two day intensive workshop ends with a collective brain storm, using dozens of ping pong balls, to design actions of creative disobedience against the corporate take over of the UN COP processes in Paris. We hope to tour the show and workshop to mobilise for Paris and later in the year, to develop a series of Hackathons and theatrical mass disobedience trainings all aimed at preparing for the mobilisations in Dec 2015.

[2] George Monbiott, Paying for our Sins, 18th October 2006, The Guardian. http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/oct/18/green.guardiansocietysupplement

[3] http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/20/90-companies-man-made-global-warming-emissions-climate-change

[4] Franco “Biffo” Beradi, Precarious Rhapsody, Minor Compositions, 2009.

[5] CALL was the book that preceded their infamous “Coming Insurrection.” available for free http://www.bloom0101.org/translations.html

[6] The *Anthropocene* is a proposed new geological epoch where there are more trees growing in farms than in the wild, where more rock and soil is moved by bulldozers and mining than all ‘natural’ processes combined and where the climate is tipping out of control due to the burning of oil, gas and coal. Industrial capitalism is

irreversibly altering the natural cycles of the biosphere, nature is now a product of culture. It is not longer just asteroid impacts and volcanic eruptions that herald mass extinctions, it is us, the 20% of the world that is consuming 80% of it's resources.

[7] In 2009 the Labofii was invited to hold workshops in art and activism at Tate Modern, they entitled it 'Disobedience makes history'. The Tate curators wanted the workshop to end with a public performance intervention. When the Laboffii was told, in an email, by the curators that no interventions could be made against the museums sponsors (which happen to be British Petroleum) the Labofii decided to use the email as the material for the workshop. We projected it onto the wall and asked the participants whether the workshop should obey or disobey the curator's orders. Despite Tate staff trying to sabotage the discussion taking place, the participants ended up making an action against BP's sponsorship and afterwards set up a collective Liberate Tate dedicated to liberating the Tate from its oil barons. The collective has since made global headlines with its creative unauthorised interventions in the museum, often using lots of black molasses. Of course the Labofii will never be invited back to the Tate.