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A Few Thesis about the Art(ist) as Government

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State and Art

DIE REGIERUNG ALS KÜNSTLER

1
Für den Bau von Palästen und Stadien
Wird viel Geld ausgegeben. Die Regierung
Gleicht darin einem jungen Künstler, der
Den Hunger nicht scheut, wenn es gilt,
Seinen Namen berühmt zu machen. Allterdings
Ist der Hunger, den die Regierung nicht scheut
Der Hunger der andern, nämlich
Des Volkes.

2
Gleich dem Künstler
Verfügt die Regierung über allerhand übernatürliche Kräfte
Ohne daß man ihr etwas sagt
Weiß sie alles. Was sie kann
Hat sie nicht gelernt. Sie hat
Nichts gelernt. Ihre Bildung
Ist eher mangelhaft, jedoch zauberhafterweise
Ist die fähig, bei allem mitzureden, alles zu bestimmen
Auch was sie nicht versteht.

3.
Ein Künstler kann bekanntlich dumm sein und doch
Ein großer Künstler sein. Auch darin
Gleicht die Regierung dem Künstler. Wie man von Rembrandt sagt
Daß er nicht anders gemalt hätte, ohne Hände geboren, so kann man
Auch von der Regierung sagen, sie würde
Ohne Kopf geboren, nicht anders regieren.

4
Erstaunlich beim Künstler
Ist die Erfindungsgabe. Wenn man der Regierung zuhört
Bei ihren Schilderungen der Zustände, sagt man
Wie sie erfindet! Für die Wirtschaft
Hat der Künstler nur Verachtung übrig, ganz so auch

Verachtet die Regierung bekanntlich die Wirtschaft. Natürlich
Hat sie einige reiche Gönner. Und wie jeder Künstler
Lebt sie davon, daß sie
Sich Geld pumpt.

Bertolt Brecht, aus: *Deutsche Satiren*[1]

[1.
A lot of money is spent on building
palaces and stadiums. In doing so, government
acts like a young painter, who is not afraid
of hunger, if this is what he should do
to celebrate his name. In any case,
the hunger that the government does not fear
is the hunger of others ,of the
people.

2.
Like a painter,
the government possesses various supernatural powers,
and although it is told nothing,
it knows everything. What government can do,
the government has not learned.. It has not learned
anything. Its education is actually
poor, an yet it can take part
in every discussion and determine everything.
Even the things it knows nothing about.

3.
An artist, as it is well-known, can be stupid and still
be a great artist. In this as well
the government is like an artist. What is said about Rembrandt,
that he would not have painted differently even if he had been born without hands,
could also be said about
the government, that it would not rule differently
even if it were born without a head.

4.
What amazes us in an artist is his
imagination. When we hear the government
describing the present situation, we simply say
that it has imagination. An artist can only show
loathing for the economy and it is well-known
that the government detests the economy as well. Of course,
the government has a few prosperous patrons, and like every artist
tries to wangle the money.

B. Brecht, *from the German Satires*]

This new Lenin has yet to be studied in the East - in English of course, and in the same package with Lacan, Badiou and Negri, the *Documenta*, *Manifesta* and all of the *Biennales*.

Boris Buden, *Re-Reading Benjamin's "Author as Producer" in the post-communist World*

What happened to me some years ago was the typical anecdote concerning the relations between the West and the East: my left-oriented Belgian friends were astonished to hear how books in Socialist Federative Republic Yugoslavia used to be sold by the yard, and how working people used to buy books, with the assistance of salesmen, by the yard and more of blue, yellow, green – or of some other nuances that would fit with the 'rest' of the carpets and curtains at home. Hearing this, one of my friends concluded straight away: "*The books were, of course, the speeches of Tito and the Party*". I had to disappoint him: "*The books were, of course, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, Zola…*"

All this happened, of course, before the post-cold war era of cultural studies and visual arts exhibitions dedicated to Karl Marx, Carlo Giuliani, and Tito's partisans of which Boris Buden writes recently in his extremely humorous text[2], which is the reason why my progress-oriented Belgium friend has not read Lenin yet: *"In order for a victory to be total and final we need to seize everything of worth from capitalism, the entire science and culture. And how do we do that? We will have to learn their school, the school of our enemies."*
Lénine T XXIX, pg. 66-72.[3]

Accurately, the last book that Vladimir Ilich read two days before his death, in January 1924., was Jack London's collection of stories "The Love of his Life", named after one of the stories in the book. Lenin's wife, Nadezda Krupskaja describes, after Lenin had died, the interest of the dying man for "the beautiful story about a man and a wolf in the ice desert in which the exhausted man tries to reach the river, and while trying, he becomes involved in the battle of life and death". Ripped and half-blind, the man is succeeding to win over the starving wolf, to win over his death itself. He reaches his aim. Impressed, Lenin asked Nadezda for more reading. However, the story that followed ,suitably titled "Accommodation for one Day", a mixture of bourgeois morality and a trivial plot based on a hot love triangle (man-wife-lover) that takes place under the ice tent in an ice desert "received only Lenin's frowning and waving of his hand in dissatisfaction". That was his last contact with "culture".

Even 100 years later, within a global political context that has noticeably changed from the Bolshevik's time, the aforementioned note can be interesting in two ways: firstly, it reflects the need of the genuine revolutionary to read (bourgeois-) literature, which demonstrates the still actual and intriguing issue concerning the relation of art (ideology) *and* politics. The second reason will be more analyzed in the text that follows; it pertains to the question of how during the galloping triumph of the bourgeois ideology today, and with abundance of 'radical, left-oriented, active' political praxes on the other hand, is still even possible to produce art as an act of rebellion, non-acceptance, break OR crash. And if this is possible, what kind of art it would be. Let's us stick for a moment with the metaphor of Lenin's favorite book. The art that for its subject has a portrait of a future revolutionary (the story about the man and a wolf), in which the power of man's bare hands and will triumphs over the cruel reality and makes "the impossible" possible? Or should it be, contrary to cruel reality, the escape art of new 'nomadism' (1001 fictions destinated to the contemporary exploited subject being ready for consoling self-oblivion: ethno and no-border mithology, rave; ecology, fashion, gender, alter-mondialism, alter-tourism i.e. all types of transgressive realism?) Let's immediately start with the hypothesis that this second type of art, the art that creates its effect by the waving of a dying hand (of the father of revolution) as a reply to a superfluous act, would be exactly the type of art despised by the contemporary progressive, commonly called, "radical artist".

What is left to be done for us is to keep on questioning this 'second type of art', type that Alain Badiou, witout fear of tendency, defines through his 15 theses of contemporary art as *'non-imperial'*.

Non-imperial art, according to Badiou, "should not be democratic if democracy implies accordance with the imperialist idea of political freedom", it has to be "surprising as an ambush in the night, and elevated as a star"; "as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration"; capable of "rendering visible to everyone, the visible that, according to the Empire (and so by extension according to everyone, though from a different point of view), doesn't exist".

Final thesis no.15 represents a kind of universal instruction of Badiou's Affirmation manifest (of the new) art: "It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering 'visible' that Empire already recognizes as existent".

Complying with the urgent need of making room for new practices of (re)presentation, for the beginning even applied to art, let us try to see what the possible practical limits of the aforementioned theoretical approach are.

Art and State

The play "Holes or When We Were Not Aligned", in whose creation the author of this text took part , recently opened in Belgrade and Brussels. The play was made between 2001 and 2005 as a joint project of one collective, one company from Brussels, two Belgian National Theatres and the National Theatre (Opera/Ballet) from Belgrade. Conceived as a radical theatre act, the play gathered refugees, internally displaced persons, the Roma (employed in communal services, that is, the Roma with no secondary school education and those who are trying to continue their education), the unemployed, the deported civilians, representatives of missing and kidnapped persons committees, former army members and civilian participants in the wars that took place in ex-Yugoslavia, in one word, the play gathered the INVISIBLES, erased individuals of one system, as well as professional actors, singers, dancers and designers. What preceded the creative process itself was the precise attempt of locating the subjects that could symbolize large(r) potential exclusion (from all States and societies), and not the logic of casting. In this way, "misery competitiveness", which would contribute to aestheticizing the misery itself, was avoided. The slogan of the un-existing cast (considering the invisibles) was "anyone or everyone who ...". The work methodology – from our point of view[4] – was based on the following:

- work *with* the invisibles, and not work *in the name* of them

- subjects are talking from the places from which the others are talking usualy about them (public presentation spaces, *the stage)*

- transformation of documentary material through poetical procedure

- poetical procedure as precondition of universality

- poetical procedure as a precondition for distancing the subject from his/her particular, personal, "private" conditions and circumstances

- opening the situation representing singular exclusion that stands for the narrative situation that is potential for everyone (placed in the same life situation)

- the attempt of rigorous universality that stands for emancipation for EVERYONE (based on the statements that can be created or verified by everyone)

- questioning of the consensus and communication limits

- conscious questioning of the limits postulated by the Schengen politics of exclusivity (while keeping in mind that Brussels's premiere perhaps represents the only possibility for some of the participants to obtain a Schengen visa, that is, the only possibility to reach the other side of Schengen's barricades)

- conscious questioning of the (re)presentation limits (the attempt of presenting the un-presentable, showing of the un-seeable...)

Even without need for a great rationalization, created in a period of more and more radical restrictions of every thinking differing from the 'logic of human rights' and abstract multiculturalism, the aforementioned play was an attempt of presentation of an emancipatory act par excellence in which, differently from the epochs of representative, parliamentary democracies, "the victims are talking themselves", the space and the image are given to the INVISIBLES, the ones who in the eyes of government (Empire) do not exist. The victims are helped by the professionals ("the specialists" in Lenin's terminology) to (re)present what cannot be presentable, that is, to (re)present their traumatic political exclusions, allowing to the actors on the stage while representing them, that is, while acting them, while making them visible, to be "thought", there, in front of everybody, from the same invisibles as the only "specialists" for giving indications about their "life roles".

In this way, in the scene where an actress plays a refugee driving in a city bus, and a refugee herself performs "unpleasant look" that reminds her of her everyday (refugee) status, the actress (found in an impossible situation, trying to act *a refugee to a refugee*), exclaims at one moment: *"I can't, I want to go out of this role!*". The Chorus, which in Ancient Greek tragedy has the status of truth and in "Holes" has the status of universal, collective tie of different particular experiences of exclusion, replies: *"It is easy to leave the stage, but how to leave the role given to you over and over again by the State(s)?"*

Unfortunately, to this question, the author of this text has not found an answer, not even after the "radical artistic act".

State Art

Due to the transmission of consensus-based, "democratic" processes onto the work process itself (which means that one should never agree on essential issues!), to the attempt of equalizing the statuses of "professional" and "non-professional" participants in the play (under the circumstances where the this claim, even in its basic form – that is, basic equality de facto, and de iure as well – is not even close to the solution!), and, as a final concern, to the colossal problem in the functionality, economy and the selection of priorities and the place of utterance of both "equal" partners (the "visible and the invisible"), the project soon faced insoluble internal contradictions.

Different contexts of participants, including the presence of numerous and diverse "maecenas": complex, slow and "non-questionable" logic of massive (state) institutions vs. to a mobile, maneuverable - "for every field" suitable, although for this project non-functional (poor) disposition of the authors' partners, all of the aforementioned added to the internal contradictions during the play preparation. At last but not at least, it is important to mention the risky fact that no (institutional) continuity of any kind of work with the "INVISIBLES" was provided and possible after the premieres.

However, the subject of our analysis, as mentioned, is not the functionality of an artistic "radical (theatrical) act", but questioning of the effects that art in general – and especially the self-proclaimed "active, radical" art – has in the present "Zeitgeist".[5]

Apart from the special position of the theatre which is by nature directly dependent on the State (its historical maecena), the subject of analysis are also today's endless attempts to directly support "the case of the excluded " through *independent* films and videos (work with "non-professionals), happenings, installations, numerous exhibitions of "social" photographs or sociologized "concerned literature".

And here we come to the place from where we have the best view of the problem that we would like to point out. Is not all art and especially the kind of art that deals with the excluded, the invisibles, those who do not exist for Empire and the State, actually the confirmation of their non-existence, but from a different position, from the position of art as an ideological state apparatus?

Using Marcel Duchamp's well-known example, let us once again try to confirm the validity of the thesis that art (any art, including the "progressive" one) owes the materiality of its status directly to the State.

Starting from the assumption that a work of art does not have any substance by itself, or that it owes its substance to another kind of materiality, the materiality of an ideological apparatus, Duchamp exhibited a pissoir in a gallery and "proved" that anything can be a work of art.

In other words, what Duchamp proved is that the truth of an artwork is not contained in the artwork or that an artwork does not exist without the materiality of the ideological apparatus (here a gallery). The raw presence of an object (ready-made) actually proves the absence of the artwork, or the reality of simulation.

In that sense, it becomes clearly visible that the substance of art, or that which makes a work of art a work of art, in our case, what makes a pissoir a work of art, is the effect of the ideological state apparatus in its materiality. This also means that what we call a work of art can only gain its materiality in the ideological state apparatus, that which Althusser would call "a cultural, ideological state apparatus, SIA (literature, art, sports etc.)".

If we turn this thesis upside down, we may say that it is not the pissoir that does not belong in the gallery, or that the pissoir is not in the right place, but that the gallery itself is not in its right place.

In fact, the pissoir does not bring into question its place in the gallery but the place of the gallery itself.

Is it not true, then, that Duchamp's experiment proved that ideology has material existence and that, strictly speaking, the state determines the very being of art, that art owes its being to the state, **or that there is no art outside the state.**[6]

Isn't there a following formula underlying Duchamp's experiment as its final result: Every art is state art and every artist is a state artist.[7]

The conclusion of this stenographic inquiry, that surely leads to a more detailed analysis, is that radical political act, which establishes a new order, is opposite to the traditional act of art.

The question is not whether there is to be or not to be art, but where the struggle that the (engaged) art announces and other forms of art ignore, should take place ?

Let us repeat, this time with Badiou: "It is not certain that there is a clear artistic solution, nor that there has ever been such a solution to the problem of art. One of the reasons for today's difficulties in art is the incredible fragility of invention in contemporary politics..."

The danger of turning those excluded from society ,the invisibles, into *ready-made subjects* that contemporary-"radical" art temporarily includes in its apparatus (for as long as an exhibition, performance or a film is displayed or shown) after other ideological state apparatuses have taken care to exclude them, is only one side of the problem. The other side is that it is not the ready-made or the invisibles that do not belong in the theatre, it is the theatre that is "out of place". Lenin determined the real place of "culture," as mentioned in the introduction to this text. "Culture" is on the other interest side; we learn from it, we participate in it, however knowing its limits and restrictions and with no aspirations to radicalize what cannot be radicalized.[8]

While Chekhov was trying to find a new kind of ending in literature (apart from death, departure and marriage), we say that the question of *beginning* is the real question of any change today; not the beginning of new art but the beginning of a struggle from the point of excluded and the struggle with them. The invention of new forms of solidarity with the excluded, the creation of new spaces for the politics of emancipation and politics by the people is the question of art outside art, outside the State, which, contrary to parliamentarism (defined as the art of the possible) is "the art of the impossible."

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[1] Bertolt Brecht, *Svendborger Gedichte*, V. Deutsche Satiren, in: ders, *Werke*, Bd. 12, Berlin/Frankfurt a.M. 1988, S. 77/78

[2] Boris Buden, Re-Reading Benjamin's "Artist as Producer" in the post-communist world

[3] Editions du Progrés - Moscou
Consequently, Lenin's comment on today's era of "left-oriented" art should be: Not only that our enemy, the bourgeois ideology, has learned our school, but it has also introduced our politics in their own (art) school.

[4] The author of this text together with the director of the play is part of the project team.

[5] The Political Combinate's text "On State and art" whose fragments are used here, deals with the relation between art and state in regimes other than parliamentarism, such as socialist and fascist state.

[6] Our research has shown that in other regimes, outside parliamentarism, i.e. in socialism, art is not innovative (cannot innovate), but reproduces state patterns in many aspects. The complex place of Brecht and his artwork within this issue is the subject of a separate research we are doing at the moment. Nevertheless, the aim of our quotation of Brecht's poem from the beginning was to emphasize similar problems that also occur in different regimes, including the state socialism of Brecht's days.

[7] One of the theses of our text "On State and Art" reads: The state is the truth of art. Or, art is the lie of the state in the sense that the state denies its involvement in a work of art. This is especially evident in the case where the state gives "freedom" to the artist.

[8] We would like to quote here a great contemporary French writer of political novels, Natacha Michel who says: "We live at the time of horrible obscurantist ignorance whose commandment is: be egalitarian in ignorance. The contra-revolutionary obscurantism is such that if you mention anything that happened before the removal of the Wall, is what I discussed at length in my latest book, people do not have a clue what you are talking about. The seige of the Winter Palace is a walk around the skating rink, while the war in Spain must be precisely dated or we risk going back to the Middle Ages. But apart from all this, if the plot of your novel is political in the sense that it belongs to its interior, it is only a part of the novel and not a part of politics. **Politics is NOT a novel.**"