09 2002

Contradictory Images

Christian Höller

Translated by Aileen Derieg

When "globalization critique" is mentioned today, an implicit agreement is usually presupposed, and it is presupposed in several respects: in reference to what is precisely meant by globalization and its critique; in reference to the point, where this critique is supposed to begin; and finally in reference to how a political movement could build on this critique (or has already started to do so). Yet, what is presupposed here is usually not only an overly hasty understanding of terms, but also a very specific *visual code*, through which globalization and its critique apparently "naturally" communicate.

Exactly this code and the exact nature of it are to be addressed in the following. The central question here is how a conceptual definitiveness may be achieved at the levels of communicating and understanding, given that "globalization" is communicated – for most critical subjects – primarily through very specific texts and media reports and images, although it is obviously also inscribed into the life of every individual in a very real way. In this respect, it may be succinctly stated that there should be a certain unanimity to the criticism and protests at least with regard to the *targets*, if not at the level of the *issues* of the criticism of globalization.

"Globalization", as far as this buzz word can even be used in a general sense, is visually expressed in a series of images, particularly media images, which seem highly *incompatible* at first glance. In all the roughly five years that this topos has been circulating in popular media, and in the at least ten years that this has been the case in the field of theory, there has yet to be a unanimous agreement reached on the definition of the term. On the contrary: glancing at the media landscape of recent months and years, one notices on one side the protests in Seattle, Washington, Prague, Göteborg, Genoa and so forth, largely quelled with violence, whose "power of infection" (Klaus Theweleit) is only surpassed by the images that the events of September 11, 2001 have left in the memory of the world public. Virtually diametrically opposed to these are views of the entertainment industry complex, which represent an equally contemporary expression of "globalization": theme parks, malls, fast food and franchise chains, megaplex cinemas, and so forth, which all arouse the seductive appearance of a "post-historical, eternal peace".[1] Or to use a different example: the image of a Brazilian favela with a sparse infrastructural connection in contrast to a gated community that is linked to the outside world primarily through wireless telecommunication.

Contrasts of this kind are meanwhile circulating in the field of art as well: the painter Dierk Schmidt, for instance, picks up in his most recent works from a passage from Peter Weiss' "Aesthetics of Resistance" to speculate on the artistic furnishings of an (interior) ministerial salon in keeping with our times. In a series of three oil/acrylic paintings, he reinterprets Delacroix' painting "Liberty" and Gèricault's "The Raft of Medusa" for the global capitalist present: the well known Nike spot for the Soccer World Championship 1998 is superimposed on "Liberty", as the Brazilian team playfully overcomes the security checkpoints at an airport; "The Raft of

Medusa", on the other hand, becomes a refugee boat shipwrecked off the coast of Australia, and the contemporary form of subjectification that comes into effect in this is literally shrunken to "bare life" (Giorgio Agamben). At least here - as Schmidt's portrayal option may be contrasted with Agamben - the damaged sovereignty of the stranded subjects is still recognizable as a shadowy outline.[2] Although it is reduced to a minimum, it is still there.

All the images mentioned so far seem to express highly contradictory tendencies and, most of all, local effects of "globalization", but hardly a universal regularity. Auxiliary expressions are dominant and, not least of all, *makeshift images* everywhere you look: visual crutches like the Nike logo (or the subsequent "No Logo" demand), exploited workers in an Indonesian Nike factory (which are, in fact, hardly to be seen, but may be recalled mentally at any time), masked freedom fighters, the universal communication tool (the "hand-held communicator"), business class passengers and, to an ever greater extent, also economy class passengers, and not to be forgotten: the traveling intellectual or "experts flown in", as it was recently succinctly formulated.[3] In fact, it seems that the immaterial labor of contemporary production conditions is much harder to grasp in vivid images than was the case with the majority of manual laborers in industrial capitalism.[4] Or is there anyone, who does not immediately call to mind the countlessly reproduced photographs of a Lewis Hine, Walker Evans or August Sander at the mention of the key words "capitalist exploitation", "pauperization" or "poverty"?

Although there is no lack of impressive single emblems for "global capitalist exploitation", it seems that every single one only ever indicates partial or symbolic sides of what it is that makes up a

greater and less easily portrayable conjunction. These are partial aspects that each have a certain significance by themselves, but which do not put us in a position to be able to comprehend the "reality-producing" processes that are in effect today in a larger context and, most of all, in their multi-dimensionality. With respect to all this, transnational flows of capital or even "flows of ideas" (so-called "idea-scapes"[5]) remain captive in a strange *invisibility*. Global "flows", which contribute substantially to the formation of the aforementioned contradictions, seem to persistently elude the conventional forms of visualization - whether in mass media or in art. What we can see are usually just the effects of something, for which no binding view exists.

Perhaps it would be good to focus on the *constitutive lacunas* in the concept of globalization itself - which are sometimes very concisely brought to a head in art projects: in an audio project by the group Global *Dustbowl Ballads* (consisting of Clemens Krümmel, Rupert Huber, vocals Alice Creischer), this kind of "necessary failing" is transposed into sound. Texts by Woodie Guthrie are first fed into an Internet translation engine, and the output - deformed machine-German that still has some traces of a utopian American working classes socialism - is newly sung to melodious minimalist techno loops. What results is exactly what one would expect in light of the principal problems of translation in relation to the most diverse concerns of globalization critique: "The man workin gamblin man is rich and is poor and I no house in this world will more receive."[6] No house in this world more? How many migrants and displaced workers around the world could sing that song?

Perhaps then, it is precisely these kinds of cultural productions that are needed, for if there are no concepts, then they may produce images (visual, acoustic, etc.) of the processes that produce reality

and contradictions, which are generally reduced to the formula "globalization". Perhaps this is even where a primary function of the artistic cultural field (and, of course, I only speak of a tiny portion and marginal area of this field) may be found today, specifically in imbuing these processes with a visibility that is not only a superficial one, namely as a precondition for even being able to imagine forms of "resistive networking"[7], regardless of whether this is given a more cultural or more political emphasis. Just as "globalization from below"[8] - in contrast to "corporate globalization" that is seemingly ordained from above - is becoming an increasingly explosive research subject, a globalization-critical visual culture would be encouraged to produce images of these contradictory currents and tendencies, particularly those "from below".

Attempts at this kind of visualization are meanwhile found in the most diverse artistic media, from film, video and video installation - for instance, there is Chantal Akerman's multiperspectival work on the American-Mexican border region ("From the Other Side", 2002), to photography - such as Allan Sekula's extensive series "Fish Story" (1990-95) and "Dead Letter Office" (1997) - all the way to multimedia cartographies of transnational economic and political conjunctions. The latter has been compiled, for instance, by the Strasbourg project group Bureau d'études, based on French corporations and their international branches.[9] Another successful example was on display at Documenta 11 in the form of a multimedia installation "A Journey Through a Solid Sea" (2002) by the Milanese group Multiplicity, which attempted to portray the Mediterranean area as a migratory, economic, but also biological and criminological correlation. How the life of individuals at the lower end of the "globalization chain" is to be imagined today, is shown, for instance, in the reportages - also

shown at Documenta 11 - by the Indian photographer Ravi Agarwal (laborers in South Gujarat in India) or in the photo essays by Olumuyiwa Olamide Osifuye from Nigeria on street life in Lagos, Nigeria.[10] Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber address the architectonic and urban development dimension of this "chain" in their photo and video project "Live like this!" (2000), depicting a residential complex in Rio de Janeiro as a - slowly decaying - symbol of a globalized modernity. It is also the kind of theme that Florian Pumhösl presents in an exemplary and reflexive way in several video installation on individual "modernist ruins" in Madagascar, Uganda and Tanzania.

Graphically designed and politically interpreted "world maps" have been in existence partly since the early seventies, by such artists, for example, as Öyvind Fahlström or Aligieri e Boetti, who (literally) sewed a world map together from national flags in the shape of the countries they represent. This is supplemented today by an artistic hybrid form, which could be called neoliberalism sketches trimmed by the media, or graphical sculptural translations of what Patti Smith once sung of as the "WTO Blues".[11] Apt examples of this are Andreas Siekmann's contribution to the exhibition "du bist die welt" (Künstlerhaus Vienna, 2001), where a DIY-self-assembly sculpture made of small plastic toy figures depicts a world economic summit somewhere in the Swiss Alps, or Thomas Hirschhorn's installation "Wirtschaftslandschaft Davos" ["Economic Landscape Davos"] (2001), pursuing a similar concern, just in larger and more plastic dimensions. Siekmann most recently put yet another log on the fire in his exhibition "Die Exklusive: Zur Politik des ausgeschlossenen Vierten" ["The Exclusive: On the Politics of the Excluded Fourth"] (Salzburger Kunstverein, 2002): the exhibition stages the drastic policies of exclusion and evacuation that are meanwhile employed by security

forces around the world against demonstrations and assemblies at so-called "globalization summits". And finally Lisl Ponger's photo series "Sommer in Italien" (2001) - also presented at Documenta 11 - is devoted to the concrete security policy and police force notches carved into the urban landscape at the G7 summit in Genoa in July 2001.

Yet the question remains as to how adequately these visualizations can ever portray the aforementioned *larger* contexts; how comprehensive an overall cartography of "globalization" would have to be, in order to be able to portray not only partial effects - as drastic as these may be in individual cases - but rather the interweaving of causes and effects at very different levels. Back to what is visible at one glance and local, then? Or rather to the question of which dimensions an exemplary image of "globalization" would have to comprise, or would realistically be *able* to comprise. As we know, the scope ranges from the wholly concrete and local to that which is very broad-ranging and world-wide, and the crucial strategic trick probably consists of linking one extreme with the other in such a way that the numerous mediating steps or different "scales"[12] in between still remain comprehensible. In this context, Alexander Kluge once remarked that "globalization" begins for him at the point where a German factory worker shows a Chinese factory worker how to screw a bolt into a metal part correctly.[13] This ultimately brings us back to very concrete scenarios or *sites of exchange*, to which certain contradictions and countermovements inhere, which can in turn be read in a roundabout way as products of "globalization".

In fact, the *scale of the local* is often presumed as the determining framework of cultural, economic and social ways of production and reproduction.[14] At the same time, a special expressiveness is attributed to this scale with respect to transregional, transnational,

even transcontinental processes. And perhaps by meticulously covering *every single one* of these local constellations - which would, of course, imply a virtually endless task - it might actually be possible to gradually arrive at something like a "planetary view" or a "global consciousness". This is a fantasy that is echoed in constructions of the Internet as a dematerialized "Weltgeist" - "world spirit" - as well, but it is only a fantasy there, too.

In any case, a view of this kind, which would have a more mosaic-like than phantasmal composition, would have to evince a strong patchwork character. All the aforementioned visualizations would have to be included in it democratically, so that the actual conceptual extent of "globalization" could be revealed: images of Brazilian favelas along with those of Californian suburbias; McDonalds in Teheran along with the anonymous Persian grocery shop in some western city. This would have to be supplemented with the aforementioned "mappings", with the multimedia inclusion of flows of money, capital, labor and ideas (as difficult as this might be), and with film documentation of concrete living conditions under neoliberal economic and political conditions. And all of this would have to be related not only to the "typical" or well known sites of "globalization", but also to the most "untypical" and "hidden" ones - all the localities that are constantly being newly produced or newly "formatted" by the contrary processes of "globalization".[15] In this way, it might be possible to *slowly* arrive at a multipart, heterogeneous and - in the positive sense - disparate "image of globalization", which could form the epistemic foundation for the political mobilizations that build on it.

Finally, single images of the local could only claim a certain "validity" or "expressiveness" to the extent that they participate in reflecting on the superordinated, often temporary spheres of influence and the forces that the places represented are exposed to.

An example from a seemingly remote area: one of the most interesting and paradoxical aspects of recent electronic culture is that it appears to participate in producing new forms of localization, or even in establishing a strong tie to a certain location. The reason why this is paradoxical is that this culture - starting from techno, for instance, and its widely proliferating subgenres - was initially strongly associated with a very specific non-locatedness. Impelled by the "spirit" of utopian unboundedness or the overcoming of material (and thus also local) restrictions in the here and now with an orientation to the future, this music was sustained from the start by an ominous, amorphous global consciousness. This consciousness could be coded in a manner that was esoteric (in the form of a holistic world spirit), romantically inclusive (as a rejection of all ideas of exclusion) or simply pragmatic (as an accompanying sound to the unstoppable process of "globalization"). In comparison now, though, "recursive geographical ties" can be observed in this music in many places, even if only as attributions of certain "sound signatures". In short, the continuously expanding electronica culture is exposed to an inherently contrary process: on the one hand, the local differences, from which "global culture" substantially draws (at least at the level of consumption), play an increasingly important role, i.e. local differences entering into the so-called global; on the other hand, the economic gears behind the surface of this seemingly unified "global culture" are constantly producing new inequalities. In other words, the global is inescapably embodied in the local, too.[16]

A more comprehensive view (and visualization) of "globalization" starting from the local thus has no choice but to *expand* the frequently cited site specificity and to see it as a more complex interplay of superordinated forces. Or in the words of the geographer David Harvey, to regard globalization as a "process of

the production of dissimilar temporal and geographical development".[17] The notorious images of a cage, trap or prison are not sufficient. A more adequate way of making "globalization" comprehensible - which would still be far removed from a more binding *definition* of the term - would consequently have to start from its productive, processual character and attempt to demonstrate this "productivity" on the basis of the many small asynchronicities and dissimilarities in the present fabric of society (regardless of where). As a differentiating - and specifically not homogenizing - force, "globalization" inscribes increasingly drastic differences into geographies and temporalities, such as the differences between "tourists" and "vagabonds", as Zygmunt Bauman has said; or the differences between asylum-seekers and a new "debating class", which is usually only marginally concerned with such commonplace but fundamental problems as residence rights; finally between (us) "free people" and the "evil-doers" somewhere out there, as we have been hearing lately. "Keep on rockin' in the free world," is what Neil Young sang in 1989, the year of change, only to state self-reflectively then in the same breath: "Don't feel like Satan, but I am to them." In 2002, Young has done a "patriotic" turnaround in light of the events, and it may be - in a longer-term perspective - that his words apply to no one better than to himself: "Let's roll for Freedom / Let's roll for Love / We're goin' after Satan / On the wings of a Dove."[18]

In this last opposition, there is already a new visual and conceptual code at work - one in which "globalization" is given its most topical expression in the formula freedom vs. terror. This is a code that must be ceaselessly opposed, if we are to one day arrive at a more adequate image and perhaps even a suitable concept of "globalization".

[1] Cf. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2000, p. 133 ff.

[2] "Illegal migration is globalisation from below" (McKenzie Wark, Globalisation from Below: Migration, Sovereignty<, Communication, nettime mailing list, January 16, 2002, http://www.nettime.org/).

[3] Cf. Sebastian Lütgert, Die Nomaden des Kapitals, in: *Starship*, 5 (2002), p. 56.

[4] According to Sergio Bologna, for instance, in conversation with Klaus Ronneberger and Georg Schöllhammer, in: *springerin*, 4 (2001), especially p. 22.

[5] One of the most prominent forces/flows of globalization in Arjun Appadurai's theory; cf. his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis/London 1996, p. 33 ff.; see also Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, Nr. 1 (Winter 2000), p. 1-19.

[6] "Global Dustbowl Ballads", in the exhibition *Die Gewalt ist der Rand aller Dinge*, Generali Foundation, Vienna, January 16 to April 21, 2002, cf. the exhibition catalogue with the same title, Vienna/Cologne 2002, p. 87.

[7] Gerald Raunig in the conference outline for *Transversal*; cf. the printed version in: Malmoe, 04 (2002), p. 18.

[8] Cf. e.g. Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello and Brendan Smith, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity*, Cambridge, MA 2000, Maria Mies, *Globalisierung von unten: Der Kampf gegen die Herrschaft der Konzerne*, Hamburg 2001, and Arjun Appadurai,

"Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics", in: *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, Nr. 1 (Winter 2002), p. 21-47.

[9] Cf. Brian Holmes, "Kartografie des Exzesses, Suche nach Nutzung", in: *springerin*, 1 (2002), p. 18 ff.

[10] All Documenta 11 references, see also: http://www.documenta.de/.

[11] "Genius stalking in new shoes / Have you got WTO blues", from the song "Glitter in Their Eyes", on *Gung Ho*, Arista 2000.

[12] Cf. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 233 ff.

[13] Audience discussion at the Austrian Film Museum, April 6, 2002; cf. also Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, Vol. I, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 28 ff.

[14] As representative for this discussion, cf. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 178 ff.

[15] Cf. ibid., p. 188 ff.

[16] Cf. Christian Höller, "Around the World? Around the World! Global Electronica zwischen Differenzausbeutung und kultureller Demokratisierung", in: *springerin*, 2 (2001), p. 8-11; English version: http://www.springerin.at/en, >backlist, >issue 2/01, >net section; and Christian Höller, "Nicht-lokale Orte und lokale Nicht-Orte / Local Non-sites, Non-local Sites", in: *Sharawadgi*, Christian Meyer and Mathias Poledna (Ed.), Cologne 1999, p. 169-198.

[17] Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 60; cf. also: "Geografie der Ungleichheit. Interview mit dem Postmoderne- und

Globalisierungstheoretiker David Harvey", in *springerin*, 1 (2001), p. 18-22.

[18] "Let's Roll", on: *Are You Passionate?* Reprise 2002.