

# ***Arts of Doing / Politics in the Making***

*Christian Töpfner, Manoa Free University*

*From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.<sup>1</sup>*

## ***Setting one: performative cartographies***

— A scenery that evokes the impression of a temporal in-between: new developments, sites of ongoing renovations and the desolate, old building of the former university of veterinary medicine. A campus in transition. The film crew flocks around the perimeter, conducting interviews with invited guests and friends whilst in-/curiously, aimlessly strolling in and out of building sites and the overgrown, deserted backyards. The members of the crew fluctuate and change roles every now and then, an interviewee becomes camerawoman, a sound man continues by doing still photography of the venture and so on.



*Manoa Free University: Performative cartographies. September 2005, Vienna.*

What I am describing here is the staging of a heterotopic film set, the attempt of a *performative cartography* by the Manoa Free University, a self-institution based in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> Having just refurbished and moved into a studio on this site, we issued an invitation for three open days where people would participate in an endeavour of performative knowledge production on the grounds of the area and a prepared list of questions (a.k.a. walkable catalogue of questions). The vectors of departure were the finished studio, the *terrain vague* of the surrounding area, Michel Foucault's text on heterotopias<sup>3</sup> and a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's movie *One plus One*.<sup>4</sup> In that scene of the movie we see a film crew following an actress and her interviewer wandering aimlessly through the woods whilst she

hesitantly answers only yes or no to multifaceted political questions of the movie's time (1968). This scene was restaged with changing roles, a prepared set of questions<sup>5</sup> and performed on the shared transitional territory of educational (self-)institutions. Framing the situation by re-enacting a scene from Godard's *One Plus One* opened up several lines of flight for us, several possible movements and navigations through the *terrain vague* of the real space and the spaces opened up by the body of questions. This way the setting came to be a performative event, some subject positions took on rather pre-scripted roles whilst others were offered to throw themselves into an empirical mode of becoming. This is probably where references to the concept of heterotopias comes into play, by constructing a temporary time-space configuration in which the participants/voyageurs are asked to work on and experience ways of doing and thinking in a different way. Opening up such a heterotopic space seems to us as an inherently political gesture as it connects performative subject constitution to potentials of political change.

— One of the subjective affects that many of us shared in the aftermath of *performative cartographies* was a certain discomfort with the interview situations, specifically about the binary way answers had to be given. The situation generated a certain tension by forcing one to only give yes/no answers to a set of complex questions. Nonetheless, it felt that there was a productive force behind this constraint of not being allowed to explain one's choice or to take another stance than a purely affirmative or oppositional one. Perhaps this came about by a transitory act of internalisation of the conflict, which urges less to be solved but rather to be acknowledged as such. This experienced uneasiness felt to translate into a point of departure for thought by rendering tangible the discontinuities in one's own reasoning, opening gaps between who we thought we are and who we came to be, between our self-assumed position and the *différance*<sup>6</sup> introduced by the performative event of this specific situation. Tensions in this context can be thought to surface through experimental (re-)staging, when we empirically put constraints on – or more generally: alter – the modes of experience as forms of producing and relating to knowledge. At the same time, the navigation of the *terrain vague* in the sense of both, the scenic area and the narrative *dérive* through dozens of predefined questions, opens up lines of flight that work less by purely playing with constraints than with inconsistent repetitions, via possibilities of resignification and performative slippages. Slippages and discontinuities shift our perception of the world and our perspective on it, they are experiential modes of and starting points for relating to the world otherwise.

— When it comes to the question of discursive framing and conditions of our experiences of such discontinuities, *différance*, tensions, and so on, asking for their relation to power seems to be not only important but indeed very worthwhile. Turning to Michel Foucault's concept of discourse or Jacques Rancière's term of the distribution of the sensible, both comprehend power not as a monolithic bloc of oppression (e.g. the state apparatus) which forces itself upon its subjects (e.g. the people, citizens). Rather, it is more productive to think of power as a net of relations and as modalities of perception that are rooted and to be maintained deep in the social nexus.<sup>7</sup> It is a form of power that "applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, ... a form of power which makes individuals subjects."<sup>8</sup> When we then conceive power as at the same time a set of actions upon other actions<sup>9</sup> and as a relational structure which has to be reproduced by its subjects, it becomes clear that power is not at all external from the subject but rather that the subject is the very locus of reproduction of power. Therefore, when it comes to opposition to power it is not so much to be sought after in a direct confrontation with its institutions – the latter could be thought of as crystallisations of power relations over time –, than on the level of its technique, its form.

This is why slogans such as "Power to the people" are inherently misleading as they assume power to be something that can be owned, held and therefore also be taken by (revolutionary)

struggles and transformations, whereas it is always already embodied in ‘the people’, the subjects who are at once subjected by power (the condition for becoming subjects in the first place) and constantly reproduce it. Such existing configurations of power have to be incessantly re-produced, re-performed and re-enacted by its subjects along prevailing norms, in creating them afresh by the way things are ‘commonly’ done and made. As a productive structure of becoming, power depends on repetition, on citation of its established norms and modes of conduct. And it is precisely in the citational act that we find potentials for establishing relations of power in different ways than they were before, even in different ways than we could have intended them to become. By linking repetition with alterity in his notion of *iterability*,<sup>10</sup> Derrida gestures towards ways of resignification, to the inherent mechanism of reconfiguration found in the workings of repetition and citation. This way, the potential for resignification of existing power structures can be seen to lie at the very heart of reproduction of power.

*The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.*<sup>11</sup>

### **Setting two: “Does art have anything in particular to do with democracy?”**

— I would like to continue the exploration by taking up the above question that provides the framework of this book. Although I find this question challenging to think about, I would like to give it a different twist, to pose it anew in a different way. My interest is more to take it as starting point to think about aesthetic practices that relate to both (analytical) categories of art and democracy. When we ask about particular relationships between art and democracy, how do we think and relate the terms of ‘art’ to ‘democracy’? Is there not an at least implicit assumption of essential disparity introduced by asking for or constructing relations between these terms? What could be gained when we approach the subject matter less in terms of such an opposition but to think them as relational or as aspects of a more general notion, i.e. aesthetic practice? This is not to say that there are no such categories like ‘art’ and ‘democracy’ or that they would have no value at all. On the contrary they are extremely useful as analytic categories, whereas as practices such categories should necessarily be blurred, transgressed or sometimes even disregarded. To nonetheless begin by investigating these terms, I want to problematise first of all the notion of democracy and briefly sketch out its contextual use for the following paragraphs.

To consider democracy in its modern, formal implementation as parliamentary representation (or: the democratic state) would mean to focus mainly on its institutionalised forms, to discuss it as crystallised, frozen forms of power rather than as affective practises and forms of experiences. Such an approach would tell us much about how we are subjected by (disciplinary) institutions, which is indeed an important precondition for discussing political agency in general. What it tells us little about is how to escape precisely such configurations of subjection and ways of doing and making. It seems valuable at this point to consider the following lines by Foucault: “... the state, no more probably today than at any other time at its history, does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality, nor, to speak frankly, this importance; maybe, after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think.”<sup>12</sup> Also, democratic practice can be read as turning against itself, when it takes on a consensual operation, which is what Rancière suggests by the term *postdemocracy*, denoting “the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasises the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action.”<sup>13</sup> Consensus, therefore, can be considered as yet another mode of politics

that foregrounds stasis instead of becoming. Democracy, read with Rancière, is “less a state of being than an act of contention that implements various forms of dissensus.”<sup>14</sup> Here, dissensus and disagreement are driving forces of politics, and for Rancière it is democracy that embodies this political gesture of disruption of the common distribution of the bodies as a community,<sup>15</sup> an opposition and disruption of the order that he called elsewhere the police.<sup>16</sup>

It is in the sense of this democratic impulse as rupture that I would knit together democratic politics and artistic operation into aesthetic practice. Art gains such a political momentum when it introduces discontinuities or tensions in the distribution of the sensible, when it produces fissures in our conceptions of political life and political agency or in modes of subjectivation more generally. Both, art and democratic politics – the distinction here is again understood as an analytic one – seem to enforce an *ethos*, a way of being that finds its empiric setting in aesthetic practise.

*(...) it turns out that critique is a practice that requires a certain amount of patience in the same way that reading, according to Nietzsche, required that we act a bit more like cows than humans and learn the art of slow rumination.*<sup>17</sup>

— In directing the emphasis away from the dead centres of institutionalised power and towards political practices which put the subject at their centre, I also like to propose a move away from our everyday and by no means less dead and institutionalised forms of practice in which we manifest our relations to the world and ourselves. By that I do not mean to merely suggest another set of rules, routines or behaviours that I consider as – in some dubious way – better than the ones we perceive as constituting the common ways of dealing with the world. Rather, we need at the same time to reject the common sense that governs our lives and to open up a field for investigations into the possibilities of new subjectivities and modes of subjectivation in general as well as uses and practices of democracy in particular. I draw here on Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *profanation* – referring to the act of returning what was sacred and religious into the realm of general use – which is not only a dissociation of use from its traditional context but far more an act of playing, of finding new ways of employments for the things and their usages.<sup>18</sup> It is the playful, ludic approach of finding new usages which should be stressed here as one possible method of transforming the known ways of doing and making. It promotes an empirical approach to (re-)establish our relations to the world and ourselves. In another twist, we can think this also in the sense of a *perfunctory* stance,<sup>19</sup> which aims at a somehow absent-minded attitude towards things and usages. This way, an attitude that promotes at once a critical distance to democracy’s institutionalised forms (a healthy ignorance towards how democracy is usually carried out) and an experimental approach of how to do politics would come close to a notion of democratic politics as an ethical means of becoming.

*As such, the kind of ethical work that he [Foucault] suggests we engage in is politics, for it is through this work that the largely invisible, silent discourses that form our subjectivity/subjectation might be altered.*<sup>20</sup>

— What could now constitute aesthetic practice, this term that I suggest to be a common vector for artistic and political practice? Again, and as the structure of this text so far might suggest, I will not postulate a schema for ‘proper’ practice but rather draw on a diverse and subjective set of approaches and concepts that refer to a certain *ethos* – in the sense of a way of being – that focus on experimental inventions of a *savoir faire* rather than to adhere to given rules or norms. Therefore my intention is not to conclude this text with an analysis or proposition of what artistic and democratic practices ‘are’ or should be and how these so defined entities relate to each another. Rather I want to take the impulse of that question as a line of flight to explore artistic-political practices that can be called aesthetic. The focus here shifts away from judgement, from subsuming particulars under

already constituted categories – e.g. what can be called art, which practices can be accepted as democratic ones – towards a mode of critique, a “perspective on established and ordering ways of knowing which is not immediately assimilated into that ordering function.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense critique connects to a reflected non-compliance, it is at once a rejection of the common ways of doing and making as it is an empirical gesture, a “saying something (...) in the wondering.”<sup>22</sup> The experiment as driven by a wondering manifests a political ethos that, as Foucault puts it, “could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.”<sup>23</sup> As an aesthetics of existence, this effort aims at a stylisation of the self in the way that we constantly un- and re-work our relations to the world and to ourselves. Not to align them as closely as possible to whatever predefined schema of subjectivity or given identities but rather to develop a critical, ethical distance to the ways we are made subjects by existing norms, prevailing ways of doing and moral values. Such an ethical questioning necessarily comprises a risk, a risk that comes in the willingness to put one’s subject at stake over and over again, to open it to an aesthetics of existence. Or, as Foucault puts it, “... it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault: “On the Genealogy of Ethics” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume One*. Edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 262.
- 2 For the notions of self-institution and Free Universities, see the MFU’s website: [http://manoafreeuniversity.org/about\\_engl.html](http://manoafreeuniversity.org/about_engl.html). The project on performative cartographies is documented online: [http://manoafreeuniversity.org/oh\\_know!/index.php/PerformativeKartografie](http://manoafreeuniversity.org/oh_know!/index.php/PerformativeKartografie), [http://manoafreeuniversity.org/oh\\_know!/index.php/WeRunThisxxxxx](http://manoafreeuniversity.org/oh_know!/index.php/WeRunThisxxxxx).
- 3 Michel Foucault: “Of Other Spaces. Heterotopias”, (Internet document: <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>).
- 4 Jean-Luc Godard: *One Plus One* (UK, 1968).
- 5 The questions could be said to have started with enquiries into one’s positioning towards and entanglement with names, places, currents of thoughts, or more generally vectors around which subjects evolve or align themselves to (e.g. “And where were you born: Genua? – Manhattan? – Hollywood? – Neue Mitte? – Alphaville?”). Further on, the questionnaire continued to loosely interweave and (dis-)associate issues around subject positions and their formation, political agency, forms of (dis-)organisation, capitalism (e.g. “Do you have an easy-going love affair with capitalism?”), post-fordism, the body, sexuality (e.g. “Do you agree that every dick is a dildo?”), drugs, and so forth.
- 6 The notion of *différance* was coined by Jacques Derrida and circumscribes the gesture of at once a difference and deferral of meaning.
- 7 Michel Foucault: “The Subject and Power” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow: *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 222.
- 8 Ibid., p. 212.
- 9 Ibid., p. 220.
- 10 Derrida combines the Latin *iter* (once again) with its Sanskrit *itara* (other) into the concept of iterability. See “Signature Event Context”, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 315.
- 11 Foucault: “The Subject and Power”, p. 216.
- 12 Michel Foucault: „Governmentality“ in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.): *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 103.
- 13 Jacques Rancière: *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 101-2.

- 14 Gabriel Rockhill's formulation in the glossary of Jacques Rancière: *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), trans. Gabriel Rockhill, p. 84.
- 15 Rancière: *Disagreement*, pp. 99-101.
- 16 Ibid., p. 28.
- 17 Judith Butler: „What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue“ in Sara Salih and Judith Butler: *The Judith Butler Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 307.
- 18 See Giorgio Agamben: “Lob der Profanierung” in *Profanierungen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 85.
- 19 Ibid., p. 72.
- 20 Lisa King: „Subjectivity as Identity: Gender Through the Lens of Foucault“ in Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer and Cameron McCarthy (eds.): *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 350.
- 21 Judith Butler: „What Is Critique?“ p. 308. Butler here summarises Foucault's takes on critique in his lecture “What is Critique?” published in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997).
- 22 Taken from Sara Salih's introduction to Butler's “What is Critique?”, p. 302.
- 23 Michel Foucault: “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow (ed.): *The Foucault Reader. An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 42.
- 24 Ibid., p. 50.