Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance
Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse

Since the second half of the 1990s we have been witnessing an increasing use of subversive affirmation in contemporary media and net activist contexts. Thinking about projects and artists like Heath Bunting, -Innen, Christoph Schlingensief, ubermorgen, etoy, 0100101110101101.org and The Yes Men it becomes clear that they have all (more or less successfully) made use of the tactics of resistance through apparent affirmation of — and compliance with — the image, corporate identity and strategies of their opponents. In February 2005 an entire conference dedicated to 'Strategies of (In)Visibility' explored the fact that effective (artistic/activist) actions can exist without exposure. [1] However, what is utterly remarkable is that on closer inspection a lot of these projects seem to draw, although this is never explicitly formulated, on artistic tactics of diversion developed in Eastern Europe, or more precisely, in various Eastern European socialist countries since the 1960s.

Our thesis is that the methods of subversive affirmation and over-identification that have developed since the 1960s, particularly in Eastern European art, were later — i.e. after 1989 — increasingly understood in the West, appropriated, and carried over to other areas, such as (media) activism. We are claiming that these tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification, initially adopted by way of necessity in socialist Eastern Europe and later deliberately chosen, led to an 'art of practice' and to forms of action and performance art that became an influential 'Eastern import' into the West throughout the 1990s.

Since the late 1920s, these artistic tactics have intentionally developed in so-called repressive political situations. It seems almost as if the genesis of such tactics could only have taken place in the face of a totalitarian machine. So, why then, one could ask, are these tactics that have developed in one, openly repressive context, today becoming important again, in a different — political, social, economic — context that is supposedly more liberal?

While in the context of openly repressive systems there were very narrow limits on what could and what could not be said, today we are confronted with a situation where everything (and thus nothing) can be said. The culture industry manages to co-opt and appropriate even the most critical viewpoints and render them ineffective. In both contexts, critical distance (an 'outside') proves to be an impossible or inadequate position. In this situation brought about by the strategy of total recovery and appropriation of critical viewpoints by the dominant political and economic system is rather the viral stealth tactics of subversive affirmation that still seem to hold a potential for resistance.

Subversive Affirmation: Affirmation as Subversion

Subversive affirmation is an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterised precisely by the fact that with affirmation there is simultaneously taking place a distancing from, or revelation of what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

Subversive affirmation and over-identification — as 'tactics of explicit consent' — are forms of critique that through techniques of affirmation, involvement and identification put the viewer/listener precisely in such a state or situation which she or he would or will criticise later. What the various tactics and parasitical practices have in common is that they employ the classical aesthetical methods of: imitation, simulation, mimicry and camouflage in the sense of 'becoming invisible' by disappearing into the background.

The term subversive affirmation appeared in the context of Moscow Conceptualism and described the literary practices developed by Vladimir Sorokin. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Sorokin wrote stories and novels in the style of the nineteenth century novel (*Roman*) or in the style of socialist realism (*Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny*). Ultimately, these novels and stories always collapse because of their own over-serious realism. [2] Here, the concept of 'imitative exaggeration' characterises a strategy with which — according to Hirt and Wonders — the 'post-avant-garde distills the implied violence and insanity out of the collective discourse and articulates it.' [3] In Sorokin's texts subversive affirmation is 'repetition' as 're-enactment' of totalitarian and ideological practices and 'at the same time their alienation, or estrangement (Verfremdung)'. [4] It is an exposure, a 'parroting' and 'rumination,' it is the 'discourse residing in the language of the discourse'. [5] But Sorokin was obviously not the inventor of these practices. Rather, in his literary concept he appropriated and accumulated different techniques of the late Russian avant-garde, early Moscow Conceptualism, Laibach and other groups that had been developing similar tactics independently.

Since the early 1970s affirmative elements have been present in all areas of unofficial art in the former Eastern Bloc. These strategies, initially adopted by way of necessity (i.e. underground) in socialist Eastern Europe and later chosen deliberately, led to a special 'art of practice'. Some examples of this Eastern European 'art of practice' in the 1970s, were, Anatoly Zhigalov's *Komandantskie raboty* (*Commander's Works*) (Russia), *Supporting the Country's Wheat Cultivation* by the Russian group Gnezdo and *Collector of Merits* by Paul Neagu (Romania). In the 1980s the strategies of self-collectivisation and over-identification on the part of the Slovenian group Laibach/NSK, the state-affirmative actions of The Orange Alternative in Poland, Muchomory's *Evenings Commemorating Lieutenant Rzhiveskij*, the *River Purifications* of Chempiony Mira (both Russian), and, in the 1990s, the participation in the election by the Governmentally Independent Control Commission in Moscow (by the Radek Group) or Rassim Krastev's work on his 'West Body' (Bulgaria).

Looking at these various forms of affirmative practice we can differentiate between an abstract, structural affirmation, and a more concrete citation of contents. Typical of Moscow Conceptualism, besides Sorokin, is a structural repetition of totalitarian practices. Ilya Kabakov for instance built 'total installations', in which he implemented the 'mechanism of "double" action work — the experiencing of the illusion and simultaneously the introspection of it.' [6] In their actions, installations and texts, the Medical Hermeneutics developed a specific 'ideo-technique'

1. 'Strategies of (In)Visibility', in Republicart, Goldsmiths College/Camden Arts Centre, London 2005

2. Michel Foucault, for instance, spoke of the 'possibility of a non-positive affirmation' that contemporary philosophy had discovered, an affirmation that affirms nothing, an affirmation without any transitivity — not a negation, but rather a direction to the border 'at which the ontological decision is made'. M. Foucault, 'Vorrede zur Überschreitung', in Michel Foucault, Von der Subversion des Wissens, Fischer, Frankfurt/Main 1991, p.33

3. G. Hirt, S. Wonders, 'Legenden, die nicht enden', in Schreibheft. Zeitschrift für Literatur 42, November 1993, p.35

4. S. Sasse, Texte in Aktion. Sprech- und Sprachakte im Moskauer Konzeptualismus, Fink (Wilhelm), Munich 2003, p.14

5. S. Sasse, C. Schramm, 'Totalitäre Literatur und subversive Affirmation', in Die Welt der Slaven LXII, 1997, pp.306-27

6. I. Kabakov, On the 'Total' Installation, Cantz, Ostfildern 1995, p.245

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**Pomaranczowa Alternatywa
(Orange Alternative)**
Wrocław, 22 February 1990
happening
Source: fototapeta.art.pl/fti-
dementi.html

**TOTART
(Natalia Abalakova,
Anatoly Zhigalov)**
*Subbotnik po zakladyvaniju,
'allei avantgarda'* (*Subotnik
for the foundation of the
'Avenue of the Avant-Garde'*)
Moscow, October 1982

(ideotekhnika) which they called the 'science of ideological production and ideological creation'.[7] As a result, the ideo-technique of every medical hermeneutical discourse shows its own 'ideodelik', its hallucinatory, irrational reverse. Exploring collective situations, the group Collective Actions involved the participants in precisely such a state or situation that she or he would later criticise. One of their most well-known actions is *Desjat' pojavlenij* (*Ten Apparitions*), 1 February 1981. It took place — like most of this groups actions — on a white, snow-covered field on the outskirts of Moscow. Ten participants were led near a construction holding ten reels of 200 to 300 metres of wire. Taking one end of the wire with them, they were told to walk away radially into the forest surrounding the field ('Comrades, start processing the space!'). When they reached the end of the wire they were instructed to roll up the wire until a small piece of cardboard attached to the wire appeared. On this cardboard the title of the action, the date and the time were given — nothing more. Left alone without any instructions of what to do next, some participants returned to the field, happily rejoining the collective (like Ilya Kabakov), while others simply went home but could not help thinking that everything they encountered on their way home was part of the plan/concept (an uneasy feeling). Conceived as estranged participation or involving alienation, this tactic reveals how the targeted discourse, the discourse of collectivity or collectivism, functions without distancing itself from it. Thus, when speaking of subversive affirmation we are not dealing with critical distance but are confronted with a critique of aesthetic experience that — via identification — is about creating a physical/psychic experience of what is being criticized.

While Moscow Conceptualism analysed the structure of totalitarian practices, other groups like TOTART (Anatoly Zhigalov and Natalia Abalakova), Gnezdo (Nest), Chempiony mira (World Champions) or Muchomory (Toadstools) worked with totalitarian practices, estranging their contents. Typical examples are the re-enactments of subotniks (since the early 1920s subotniks regularly took place on

Saturday as 'voluntary workdays' in which whole cities often participated). In 1982 for instance, Anatoly Zhigalov organised a *Golden Subotnik* in Moscow.[8] At that time he worked as a janitor (*kommandant*) in a housing block and was thus in the position to officially organise a voluntary workday. But Zhigalov's workday deviated slightly from the norm. He did not order the participants to remove weeds from the ground or rake beds, but called on them to paint benches with the colour gold. The residents, accustomed to following the commander's directives, obeyed this unusual task. Thus, the workday was being transformed into an act of pure wastefulness. (Consequently, Zhigalov was arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital).

The group Chempiony mira organised comparable acts of sabotage in 1987 – 8, for example, *Gigiena Poberezh'ja* (*Hygiene on the Shore*), *Bereg* (*Shore*), *Nostalgija po chistote* (*Nostalgia for Cleanliness*). All these actions were part of the series *Preventivnaja Geografija* (*Preventive Geography*).[9] In *Hygiene on the Shore*, for instance, they cleaned two kilometres of Koktebel's (Krim) shoreline by shampooing and wiping the rocks, and in *Nostalgia for Cleanliness* they transformed 'hygienic practices into the ecology of culture'. Obviously, all these 'subotniks' quoted the Stalinist idea of purification by giving it a new content. Through this systematical devaluation the purification became concrete, cute, and ridiculous.[10]

In all these actions artists worked with affirmative tactics which partly (in content or in structure) repeated socialist realist practices like purification, jubilation, and the creation of a collective body. Moreover it was the installations of Kabakov, the actions of Collective Actions and the texts by Vladimir Sorokin that, in addition, repeated the aesthetic conditions of totalitarian aesthetics; the elimination of any kind of outside viewpoint (i.e. outside the artistic work). This complete removal of the visitors', viewers' or readers' horizon is the central principle of totalitarian aesthetics and at the same time the only structural basis on which subversive affirmation can succeed as subversive affirmation. Subversive affirmation has to — almost physically — involve the listener or reader in the situation so that she or he can understand her or his involvement afterwards and reflect upon it.

The Orange Alternative, Voting Yes Twice
In Wrocław, Poland, the Orange Alternative based around Waldemar Frydrych practised a slightly different type of subversive affirmation. Operating in 1987 – 8, the loose group developed what George Branchflower calls 'socialist surrealism'.[11] Making no explicit demands at all (unlike Solidarity), it adopted the strategy of directly challenging the State apparatus' monopoly on Truth on the streets. Close to the Situationist practice of creating situations, The Orange Alternative managed to involve ordinary people in their 'happenings' (on occasions attracting the participation of up to 13,000 people). On 1 October 1987, the happening *Who's afraid of Toilet Paper* was staged, 'Focusing on one of the primary espoused functions of the State as one of redistributing the social product, the decision was made to aid the authorities in their task — redistribution begins at home.'[12] Members of The Orange Alternative solemnly distributed single sheets of toilet paper to passers-by.

> Let us share it justly. Let justice begin from toilet paper. Socialism, with its extravagant distribution of goods, as well as an eccentric social posture, has put toilet paper at the forefront of people's dreams. Are the queues for toilet paper an expression of (a) a call for culture? (b) the call of nature? (c) the leading role of the party in a society of developed socialism? Tick the right answer.

7. P. Pepperstejn, Slovar' terminov moskovskoj konceptual'noj shkoly, Andrej Monastyrsky, Moscow 1999, p.43

8. The action was part of the series Komandantskaja rabota (Commander's Work) performed in 1982.

9. The Chempiony mira group was founded in 1986 by G. Abramishvili, K. Zvezdochetov, B. Matrosov, K. Latyshev and A. Jachnin.

10. The Muchomory group (founded in 1978) performed similar actions. Wolfgang Weitlaner calls the understatement comprised in their work the practice of 'inverse sublime'. W. Weitlaner, 'Private Umsturzversuche. Zur Strategie des Umgekehrten Erhabenen im Werk des Moskauer Künstlers und Schriftstellers Konstantin Zvezdochetov', in C. Gölz, A. Otto, R. Vogt (eds.), Romantik — Moderne — Postmoderne, Frankfurt/Main 1998, pp. 352-86

11. G. Branchflower, 'Oranges and Lemons', in Here and Now, n°7/8, Autumn 1988, www.driftline.org/cgi-bin/archive/archive.cgi?list=spoon-archives/avant-garde.archive/papers/orange.txt

12. Ibid.

13. Inversely, during the early 1990s Russian Actionism imported Western tactics of political resistance into Russia. Alexander Brener, for instance, tried to invade the ministry of defence like a 1970s house squatter, or he invited Boris Yeltsin to engage in a boxing contest in Red Square. In 1993 Osmolovsky

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7 October was the official day of the police and security service in Poland. This time, Wrocław youth under the banner of The Orange Alternative decided to march to demonstrate their appreciation of these public servants for 'doing their duty with a smile', showering police officers and patrol cars with flowers. Attempts to embrace the police and thank them were met with reasonable force and some arrests. During the referendum on social policy held on 27 November 1987, The Orange Alternative demonstrated and called on Wrocław to be the city with a 200% turnout: 'Vote Yes Twice'. During the Nowa Huta strikes in 1988 a letter was read out to the workers giving support to strikes in the most fulsome terms. The author of the letter was Lenin. Stalinist hymns were sung by a crowd that gathered around the chimpanzee cage in the Wrocław Zoo. Such 'happenings' continued throughout Poland, in Wrocław, Poznań, Gdansk, Krakow and Warsaw during 1988. [13]

Over-Identification — The Ultimate Form of Subversive Affirmation

Completely independently from the developments in Russia and Poland, the Slovenian group Laibach that originally called itself Laibach Kunst developed the tactic of over-identification. In 1984, together with the painters' collective IRWIN, the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (today called Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung), and the design department New Collectivism (NK), the group co-founded the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). Founded in 1980 in Yugoslavia, Laibach became notorious for their 'hyper-literal repetition of the totalitarian ritual' (Gržinić 2004). The tactic of over-identification is, if you wish, subversive affirmation in its ultimate form because it manages to create an absolute totality. Nowhere is this as visible as in the work of the group Laibach (and NSK).

The tactic of NSK [14] did not formulate itself in an openly critical discourse of the state and its ideology; nor did it distance itself from ideology through irony or ironic negation. On the contrary, it was about a repetition, an appropriation of components and elements of the ruling ideology, a game with these 'ready-mades', an adoption of existing ruling codes in order to — according to Laibach — 'answer these languages with themselves'. [15] As the Situationists said, the spectacle can only be subverted by being taken literally. With Laibach and NSK, we are dealing with a subversive strategy that Slavoj Žižek termed a radical 'over-identification' [16] with the 'hidden reverse' of the ruling ideology regulating social relationships. By employing every identifying element delivered either explicitly or implicitly by the official ideology, Laibach Kunst and later Neue Slowenische Kunst appeared on stage and in public as an organisation that seemed 'even more total than totalitarianism' [17] — a provocative reference to the Yugoslav system. [18]

According to Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek, overtly criticising the ideology of a system misses the point because today every ideological discourse is marked by cynicism. This means that the ideological discourse has become internalised, and thus anticipates its own critique. Consequently, *vis-à-vis* a cynical ideology, according to Žižek, irony becomes something that 'plays into the hands of power'. In such a situation what is most feared by the ruling ideology is 'excessive identification … : the enemy is the "fanatic" who "over-identifies" instead of keeping an adequate distance.' [19] NSK 'frustrates' the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it — by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.' [20] Over-identification makes explicit the implications of an ideology and thus produces such elements that may not be publicly formulated in order for an ideology to reproduce itself. Georg Witte writes something similar concerning the

technique of subversive affirmation: 'By radicalising a "plan" in its realisation, subversive affirmation unveils the ideological concept underlying this plan.' [21]

In March 1989, Laibach played in the Yugoslav capital Belgrade. Before the concert started, Peter Mlakar of the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy of NSK delivered an explicitly and excessively nationalist speech partly in Serbian. This called on the audience to protect the purity and honour of the Serb people and defend the integrity of Serbian territory by all means. In order to emphasise the content of this speech the Laibach group employed all available means for the staging of a totalitarian aesthetics. All elements that would allow for a distancing or alienation were consciously excluded. The speech itself consisted of a direct appropriation and repetition of an address originally delivered by Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. [22] Mlakar's speech pinpointed the Serb nationalist rhetoric, which could already be heard in a Yugoslavia that had started to dissolve. There was, however, a slight danger that this appropriation might be misunderstood: in the worst case, Mlakar's speech would be taken for granted, i.e. it would be understood in a truly affirmative way. In order to avoid this, the group resorted to a provocative move: during the speech that was in itself consistent (it consisted of seamlessly interwoven Milošević quotations), central words and sentences would slip into German — a language that in Yugoslavia was synonymous with fascism. This move prevented any positive or affirmative reading. All in all, this speech proved to be deeply irritating to the audience because on all the other levels it was affirming Serbian nationalist rhetoric.

Another good example of this type of over-identification, i.e. a tactic that allows for a participation in certain political or social discourses, for affirming them, appropriating them, or consuming them while simultaneously undermining them, is the so-called 'poster scandal'. In 1986 – 7, New Collectivism (NK), the design department of the NSK, unleashed an internationally respected scandal when it submitted a design based on a Nazi poster to the competition for the *Day of Youth*

Novi Kolektivizem / NSK
Dan Mladosti
poster design, 1986/87

Chempiony Mira
Gigiene poberezhija
(*Hygiene on The Shore*)
Odessa, 1987

17. See B. Groys, 'More Total than Totalitarianism', in IRWIN: Kapital, NSK, Ljubljana 1991

18. See A. Barber-Kersovan, 'Laibach und sein postmodernes Gesamtkunstwerk', in H. Rösing (ed.), Spektakel/ Happening/Performance. Rockmusik als Gesamtkunstwerk, Stiftung Villa Musica, Mainz 1993, pp.66-80

19. S. Žižek, 'Das Unbehagen in der Liberal-Demokratie', in Heaven Sent, n°5 1992, p.49

20. S. Žižek, 'Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?', in M'ARS — Časopis Moderne Galerije, Vol.3.4 1993, p.4

21. Witte 2001

22. P. Mlakar 'would end by directly quoting British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the key architect of European pre-war appeasement of Adolf Hitler.' M. Benson, Predictions of Fire, film script, 1995

23. See The Economist, London, 14 March 1987, p.49 and Profil, Vienna, 13 April 1987, p.56, as quoted by P. Ramet, 'Yugoslavia 1987: Stirrings from Below', in The South Slav Journal, Vol.10, n°3 Autumn 1987, p.34

24. Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva. The Oberiu group existed between the end of 1927 and 1932, and is the last formation within the Russian or Soviet literary avant-garde before the abolition of all literary groups in 1932. For further information on Oberiu, see: J.P. Jaccard, Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avantgarde russe, Herbert Lang, Bern 1991; N. Cornwell, Daniil

(*Dan Mladosti*) celebrated each year on 25 May, Tito's birthday. NK promptly received first prize awarded by a highly official pan-Yugoslavian committee consisting of representatives from the Association of Slovenia's Socialist Youth, the Yugoslavian People's Army, and the Association of Yugoslavia's Communists. NK's poster consisted of a slightly altered version of the picture *Das dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums* (*The Third Reich. Allegory of Heroism*, 1936) by the German artist Richard Klein. This portrayed a youth marching victoriously into the future equipped with baton, Yugoslavian flag, and other state insignia. The committee praised New Collectivism's poster and justified the award by saying that the design 'expresses the highest ideals of the Yugoslavian state.'[23] Following the exposure of the image's source, it was all the more embarrassing when the Yugoslavian federal officials attempted to press charges against NK for 'disseminating fascist propaganda.' Luckily for the artists, the Slovenian officials were able to prevent this move.

Oberiu: An Almost-Forgotten Source of Subversive Affirmation / Over-Identification
It is interesting to ask whether the artistic practices of subversive affirmation and over-identification only appear in the second half of the twentieth century, or if they can be traced back to earlier forms, or even to their 'origins.' There appear to be largely unknown conceptual links to the absurdist practice of Oberiu of the late 1920s and early 1930s which has been called the last Soviet avant-garde (Oberiu is short for Association of Real Art[24] — Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky and others). Only a few researchers have so far linked contemporary strategies/tactics of subversive affirmation (esp. in Moscow Conceptualism) to Oberiu.[25]

In the context of totalitarian literature we can designate subversive affirmation as a 'literary strategy of the exterior' in an 'interior' (i.e. totalitarian culture) that presents itself as 'total'.[26] Within Oberiu's texts, this 'strategy of the exterior' is realised on the one hand through an articulation of falling silent — as in Kharms's *Blue Notebook n° 10* — which thus points to and articulates the border between permitted speaking and imposed silence. Subversive-affirmative expression 'completes the movement with which the construction of the total becomes a paradox project, thereby rendering it visible.'[27] It also makes visible the techniques 'which prevent the exterior from voicing itself.' On the other hand the texts of the late avant-garde copy, simulate and 'embody' the strategies of the interior (of the ruling ideology) and thus focus 'on their articulation.'[28] The absurd literary bodies literally embody the ideological reduction that radically deforms their anatomy as well as their ability to articulate themselves. A good example of this is Daniil Kharms text 'The Blue Notebook' (1937) in which he describes a redheaded man who, upon reading further, loses more and more body parts until nothing is left to talk about:

> There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He had no nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, he had no spine, and he had no innards at all. He didn't have anything. So we don't even know who we're talking about. It's better that we don't talk about him any more.
> Source: www.octopusmagazine.com/issue05/poets/Daniil_Kharms.htm

The writers of the late Soviet avant-garde thus turn themselves into what the ruling ideology expects them to be, without — and this is important — affirming that which they subject themselves to.[29] This is what identifies them as predecessors

of subversive-affirmative techniques. At the same time though, one can feel a latently present 'metaphysical fear'[30] and an 'aesthetics of panic'[31] which still locates them very clearly in the context of totalitarian literature, and not, as some scholars have claimed, in a kind of proto-postmodern attitude.

For Oberiu, repetition of already existing linguistic forms remains the only possible form of utterance. While the futurists focussed on the innovation of the code (thus on making words strange), the Oberiuty intended syntactical estrangements that would destabilise the entire semantic and pragmatic logic (while keeping the word units intact).[32] The futurist/formalist principle of 'not-understanding' (brought about by making words strange) is being replaced in the poetics of Oberiu by the dialogical-communicative principle of misunderstanding.[33] They are dealing with an 'empty' language which does not possess any positive notion with which to describe the world. This kind of speaking can articulate itself only through repetition of already existing formulas. This apophatic 'discourse-thinking' which relies on the techniques of talking literally while sticking to the correct syntactic and grammatical forms of utterances,[34] simultaneously points to something different through the 'internal alterity' contained within itself. The literary practices of Oberiu correspond to repetition, which, very unlike estrangement, effects a deletion or dissolution of distance. We are confronted here exactly with the disappearance of critical distance practiced with the subversive affirmation and over-identification described in the beginning.

In 1940, shortly before his own arrest, Daniil Kharms for instance wrote a fake confession of a nameless defendant entitled *Reabilitacija* (*Rehabilitation*) in which he makes use of affirmative practices. Obviously this very minimalist text is connected to the fake confessions and self-accusations of the show trials taking place from the late 1930s. For his own defence, Kharms's criminal chooses the Stalinist idea of inventing crimes. Undoubtedly, the idea of inventing crimes was a reference to the show trials. Kharms's inventions, or rather that of his protagonist, however, were much more fantastic and strange than the accusers ever expected. Thus, the accusers were confronted with the laying bare of their own strategy, which the accused had revealed with his confession. In this sense the confession was a confession about Stalinist techniques of truth production.

Beyond Oberiu we can find comparable tactics: four years earlier, in 1936, the writer Isaac Babel' was in a similar situation to Kharms's protagonist. At the (in)famous conference against formalism in art and literature Babel' had to confess publicly why he had not been publishing anything during the last years. Babel', too, defended himself in a way that seemed absolutely affirmative. However, he did not invent fantastic reasons, he simply said the truth: he claimed that he had not been able to write because of his extraordinary self-criticism. Babel' said that he was such a strong self-censor that he couldn't write anything. The reaction of the public showed that nobody understood his way of speaking. Furthermore, as nobody assumed in his speech a possible tactic of subversive affirmation, the majority of the critical audience condemned Babel' for his posing. They were convinced that he really had given an affirmative answer to the concept of self-criticism.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*
Is it possible to transfer these tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification developed in socialist Eastern Europe to other social and political systems? If so, how would these tactics function, which forms would they adopt? And what exactly would be affirmed? As stated above, we discovered a direct connection between

Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd, Macmillan, London 1991. Members of Oberiu were the poets Daniil Kharms (b.1905-d.1942), Aleksandr Vvedenskij (b.1904-d.1941), Nikolaj Olejnikov (b.1898-d.1937), the more philosophical author Leonid Lipavskij (b.1904-d.1941) and the music theoretician and philosopher Jakov Druskin (b.1902-d.1980). As there was no opportunity for the works of Oberiu to be published, the group organised theatrical recitation soirées which became notorious because of their eccentric concept. In 1928 at the Leningrad House of the Press Oberiu presented their first event, Three Left Hours, a mixture of poetry reading, propaganda lecture and concert during which Daniil Kharms's Elizaveta Bam was premiered. Towards the end of 1931 Oberiu became the target of political repression and severe attacks from the press. In 1932, like all the other literary groups in the Soviet Union, Oberiu was dissolved. In this way, 'the last remaining shreds of post-revolutionary Soviet modernism' (in the words of Samuil Marsak) were shattered again. The Oberiu group members were possibly the first to understand that 'state intervention into literature was increasingly pushing the author out of the text (Kasper 1995). Kharms and Vvedenskij became active in the field of children's literature, where they could express their 'natural thinking'. Olejnikov, Kharms and Vvedenskij were arrested at the time when Stalin's rule was most oppressive;

they died in a forced labour camp. Peter Urban calls Oberiu 'possibly the first genuinely free people of the Soviet time... in spite of the atrocious conditions of their life.' (Urban 1992, p.17)

25. Several authors have pointed to this relationship. See M. Epstejn, 'Iskusstvo avantgarda i religioznoe soznanie,' in Novyj Mir 12 1989, pp.222-35; A. Hansen-Löve, 'Zur Typologie des Erhabenen in der russischen Moderne', in Poetica, Vol.23 1991, 1-2, pp.166-216

26. S. Sasse, C. Schramm, op. cit., p.307

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p.313

29. Ibid., p.315

30. J.P. Jaccard, op. cit.

31. A. Hansen-Löve, 'Konzepte des Nichts im poetischen Denken der russischen Dichter des Absurden', in Poetica 26, 1994, p.317

32. The Slavicist Aage Hansen-Löve talks about 'apophatic' repetitions which he distinguishes sharply from the 'cataphatic' estrangement techniques of the avant-garde models I and II. See A. Hansen-Löve, 'Thesen zur Typologie der Russischen Moderne', in P. V. Zima, J. Strutz (eds.), Europäische Avantgarde, Lang, Frankfurt/Main and others 1987, pp.37-59.

33. See A. Hansen-Löve, op. cit., p.316

34. Ibid., p.320

35. M. de Certeau, Kunst des Handelns, Merve Verlag, Berlin 1988, p.13

36. Ibid., p.85

(if not adoption of) certain (media) activist projects and their subversive-affirmative predecessors. In his famous book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau provides convincing reasons for the appropriation of tactics developed in a totalitarian setting in an out and out capitalist context.

Subversive affirmation and over-identification are tactics — if we are to follow Michel de Certeau's definition — that allow artists to take part in certain social, ideological, political, or economic discourses, and affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. On the Western art scene, these phenomena appeared here and there among the *Lettrists* and the *Situationist International*.

When looking at affirmative practices in art we are interested in how far, in a situation of limited individual freedom of expression, the use or repetition of already existing forms, i.e. non-individual speaking or utterances, allows for critical, deviating or oppositional statements. Michel de Certeau talks about exactly these possibilities. He confronts the notion of passive consumption with the notion of active *usage* or *practice*. This 'different production' is almost invisible because it articulates itself 'not through its own products, but precisely in the way the products that are imposed by the ruling order are *used* or *practised*.'[35] The movements of this 'different production' happen entirely 'inside the enemy's field of vision, in a space entirely controlled by the enemy. That's why de Certeau calls this 'different production tactics' (as opposed to strategies). Tactical practices create blurry vectors that consist entirely of the vocabulary of known languages and are subject to a pre-existing syntax (this could also be their danger, or, rather, difficulty). However, despite their using the same linguistic or social material, tactics manage 'to stay heterogeneous (or alien) to the systems they invade,' and, once inside these systems, they 'wittily manage to deploy and formulate *different* interests and wishes.'[36] According to de Certeau, statistical analysis proves quite destitute facing this phenomenon. Statistics are extremely limited because they can only 'classify the lexical units of which the vectors [of tactics] consist, but to which they cannot be reduced.'[37] Statistics can only grasp the *material* of tactical practices (which is the same as the one used in strategies). It cannot, however, get hold of their *form*, which is what makes tactical practices alien to the ruling order.

Please Love Austria! by Christoph Schlingensief [38]
In the framework of the Wiener Festwochen in June 2000, Christoph Schlingensief organised the container action *Please love Austria! First European Coalition Week*. In this action, Schlingensief adapted the mass-media format of *Big Brother* to stage a live media-savvy deportation of asylum seekers from a container located next to Vienna's opera house. Twelve participants — introduced by Schlingensief as asylum seekers — were placed in the three containers. For seven days, from 11 to 17 June 2000, they were living in these containers under permanent video camera surveillance. The live images from the container were being streamed onto the Internet where anybody could watch them. Each day, people who called in by telephone could vote for two of the inmates who would have to leave the containers in the evening and who were deported the same night.

By advertising the whole event as an action of the FPÖ (i.e. the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria, in power as part of the ruling coalition since 2000), Schlingensief could count on the attention of the mass media. On the roof of the containers the blue flags of the FPÖ were mounted. When a signboard with the text 'Foreigners out of the country' was set up (together with the logo of the yellow press paper *Kronenzeitung*), the public applauded. Across the Herbert-von-Karajan-Square recordings of speeches by the then FPÖ chairman Jörg Haider could be heard.

With this project, Schlingensief wanted to 'play the impossible so hard that it would become the possible. There should be an end to speculating, an end to this stupid creation of distance through scepticism. On the contrary: it is impossible to contradict Haider. What is possible is playing the Haider card to its most extreme.' On the website a global audience could see what it means to take seriously the Austrian right-wing FPÖ politician Haider's suggestions concerning the solution of the 'foreigner problem'.

Those in the audience who wanted to participate via the Internet could click on one of the candidates' heads in the lower part of the website. There was a biography for each asylum seeker, and a further click on 'Vote' would increase the chance of that individual becoming one of the two people deported from the country that evening. The person who stayed longest in the container would be the winner and would receive 35,000 Austrian shillings and an airplane ticket to return to their home country. Alternatively the winner would be given the possibility to marry an Austrian via an online-proposal.

The project received a lot of attention. During the whole duration, the public and media asked the same questions again and again: are the inmates real asylum seekers, or simply actors? Is the daily deportation of two of them a fake, or is it indeed an element of European reality? Were the FPÖ banners on the containers authentic? And, a question that many enraged tourists asked themselves: is the event in the square near the opera house part of Austrian reality? Questions and irritations were so far-reaching that the city administration thought about putting up signs saying, 'Attention! This is a theatre performance!' Of course Schlingensief did not allow this to happen. But this attempt alone was proof enough that his theatre 'had reached a certain hyper-reality' once again.

Nike Ground by 01001011110101101.org
Only three years later, in September 2003, a news item again shocked the Austrian public: Karlsplatz, one of Vienna's main squares, would soon be renamed 'Nikeplatz'. This news was issued by representatives via the red 'Nike Infobox' information centre — a 13-ton hi-tech container — located in the middle of Karlsplatz, one of Vienna's historic squares. On the outer windows a curious sign attracted the attention of passers-by: 'This square will soon be called Nikeplatz. Come inside to find out more.' Inside the Infobox a charming couple of Nike-dressed twins welcomed curious citizens, and explained to them the revolutionary *Nike Ground* campaign: 'Nike is introducing its legendary brand into squares, streets, parks and boulevards: Nikesquare, Nikestreet, Piazzanike, Plazanike or Nikestrasse will appear in major world capitals in the coming years!' A 3D project displayed in the Infobox gave information about a giant artwork to be placed in the Karlsplatz or Nikeplatz from the following year. It would be a giant sculpture of Nike's famous logo, a monument of 36 by 18 metres, supposedly made from 'special steel covered with a revolutionary red resin made from recycled sneaker soles'.

Needless to say, it was all fake. The one-month campaign provoked reactions from Vienna's citizens (ranging from protest to approval), city officials (reassuring the public that street names cannot be changed so easily) and, of course, the Nike group. Nike denied any involvement and started legal action to put an end to this bizarre performance. The *Nike Ground* prank is the latest work from an organisation known as 01001011110101101.org, whose members state that they are significantly influenced by the work of Laibach / NSK.

37. Ibid., p.22

38. June 2000, Wiener Festwochen, www.schlingensief.com/auslaenderraus

39. theyesmen.org/

Christoph Schlingensief
Bitte liebt Österreich!
(*Please Love Austria!*)
Wiener Festwochen, 2000,
photo courtesy David Baltzer

0100101110101101.org
*Nike Ground, Fake
Nike Infobox*
various materials,
611 × 548 × 550 cm
installation in Karlsplatz,
Vienna, 2003, photo courtesy
Public Netbase

The Yes Men by The Yes Men
The Yes Men is a project by a group of culture jammers, artists and activists from the
United States called RT Mark ('arty mark,' a wordplay on 'trademark' and 'arty'). The
group has repeatedly irritated Internet users with fake websites that look confusingly
similar to the official websites of politicians and corporations. Amongst others,
GW Bush became the target of such a fake. On the fake website GWBush.com Bush
publicly recalled his alleged cocaine experiences. When asked about this during a press
conference, Bush said publicly in front of TV cameras 'freedom should have its limits.'

Further parody websites were those of the international trade organisation
GATT (Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) www.gatt.org and of the World Trade
Organisation wto.org (both 2001). Some people and other trade organisations
mistook the sites for the real thing and wrote in with questions about all sorts of
trade matters. The members of RT Mark (Mike and Andy Bichelbaum, or The Yes
Men) decided to play it straight and accept invitations to conferences to speak on
behalf of the organisation they opposed — namely, the WTO. As spokespeople for the
World Trade Organisation, the Yes Men delivered shocking satires of WTO policy to
audiences of so-called 'experts.' At an international trade law conference in
September 2000 in Salzburg, [39] Andy Bichelbaum (i.e. the WTO) proposed a free-
market solution to democracy: auctioning votes to the highest bidder. On the TV
programme CNBC Marketwrap Europe, [40] the WTO announced that *might equalled
right*, that a privatised education system would help to replace Abbie Hoffman with
Milton Friedman, and that there ought to be a market in human rights abuses. At
a textiles conference in Tampere, Finland, [41] the WTO unveiled a 3-foot phallus for
administering electric shocks to sweatshop employees. In May 2002, at a university

in Plattsburgh, New York, [42] the WTO proposed that to solve global hunger, the poor
should have to eat hamburgers — and then recycle them up to ten times. And at
an accounting conference in Sydney, [43] the WTO announced that in light of all its
mistakes, it would shut itself down, starting again as an organisation whose goals
were not to help corporations, but rather to help the poor and the environment.

This sensational announcement brought worldwide reactions, among them a
heated debate in the Canadian parliament. At this point the WTO headquarters in
Geneva exposed the alleged WTO representative: 'Although we appreciate the humour
of the impostor, we do not want prestigious news agencies such as yours to be tricked.'
'This time it's not about humour,' said Andy Bichelbaum who 'represented' the WTO
in Sydney. 'We really want to put an end to the WTO and change its charter, so that
the poor would profit, and not suffer from trade politics.'

The most recent action of The Yes Men is called *Bush Can*. This autumn, The
Yes Men are campaigning for the President of the United States, to explain Bush's
policies more clearly and honestly than the official campaign ever could.

Conclusion
What we are seeing in some of today's most interesting — and we would claim also
most powerful — media activist projects is something we have called the 'tactics of
explicit consent.' We have linked these 'tactics of explicit consent' to the so-called
3rd Soviet avant-garde, Oberiu. Talking about Oberiu as a potential predecessor of
subversive affirmation/over-identification, we were especially interested in the fact
that the language of Oberiu denies any kind of — as Jean-Francois Lyotard has
formulated it — consolation through 'appropriate form'. [44] Repetition as apophatic
denial of form locates the principle of difference not between notions, or opposites,
but discovers or places it inside them. We can thus speak of elements of 'proto-
subversive affirmation' that are already present in Oberiu. [45]

Today, in a situation characterised by the immediate and total recuperation
and appropriation of critical viewpoints by the dominant political and economic
capitalist system, the concept of critical distance proves to be completely ineffective.
We are thus confronted with a new totality which excludes any possibility of an
'outside' position or distance. However, it is important to stress that this new totality
is different from the totality of totalitarianism, although its effects are similar. In
this new totality, which is a totality of the market, consumers are either condemned
to remain passive (i.e. to actively fulfill the consumer's role assigned to them by the
totality of the market) or to develop practices that consist in creatively handling the
products pre-given by the ruling order. Today's consumers' tactics consist entirely
of ready-made products which — by way of creative consumers' practices (or tactics
if we are to follow de Certeau) — are consequently made to function in an entirely
different way.

Taken to a logical conclusion, a genuine tactics of subversive affirmation or
over-identification would ultimately refuse to be labelled as 'art', and thus to be
recognised as subversion at all. Laibach's refusal to issue any statement as to where
they 'really' stand and New Collectivism's poster scandal are possibly the instances
that get closest to these ultimate tactics of invisibility. These tactics provide, as we
have suggested in this article, possibly the most effective contemporary method of
subversion. It is, for sure, also the most risky and potentially dangerous tactic as it
can easily be misunderstood. In this constellation, it is the recipient to whom full
responsibility is being transferred. At the same time, if well-conceived, these tactics
are ultimately the most intensive for the recipient.

hijinks/salzburg/index.
shtml

40. theyesmen.org/
hijinks/cnbc/index.shtml

41. theyesmen.org/
hijinks/tampere/index.
shtml

42. theyesmen.org/
hijinks/plattsburgh/
index.shtml

43. theyesmen.org/
hijinks/sydney/index.
shtml

44. Jean-François Lyotard,
'Beantwortung der Frage:
Was ist postmodern?'
ed. Peter Engelmann
Postmoderne und
Dekonstruktion. Texte
französischer Philosophen
der Gegenwart, Stuttgart
1991, pp. 33-48, here: p. 47

45. However, the notion
of apophatic as used by
Hansen-Löve cannot
sufficiently characterise
the tactics of subversive
affirmation and over-
identification. These
'paradoxical' strategies/
tactics do not only consist
of affirmation, but are
precisely characterised
by the fact that with
affirmation there
simultaneously takes place
an 'unveiling' of what
is being affirmed. In
subversive affirmation it
is the public formulation
of formulas that
necessarily remain hidden
and the thinking to a
logical end of the official
postulate — possibly even
the violent affirmation —
that undermines
affirmation. An
archeology of subversive
affirmation would
therefore look for elements
of subversive affirmation
within Oberiu that does
not only affirm the
mechanisms of exclusion,
but simultaneously
undermines them.

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