

Collateral Damage or Emancipation

Prometheus laughs up his sleeve, and continues working on perfecting his machines, utilizes them to rule the world and spends his time off in the sun every Friday, relaxing from the strain and monotony of his high-tech society.”¹

The use of the term “unplugged” as a theme is not without a hidden agenda. Even a normal state of affairs defined via negation condemns that which is not as a rule so to the status of what is at best a permissible exception. The conceptual pair “plugged-in” and “unplugged” inscribes itself all too easily into the predominant consensus for it readily to become a source of friction or to open up vanishing-lines. We have indeed been warned: “real freedom of thought means the freedom to question the prevailing liberal-democratic ‘post-ideological’ consensus—or it means nothing.”² Nevertheless, before the theatrical backdrop stretched out between “plugged-in” and “unplugged,” scenes become visible that contain stories making a statement about human life. On the stage of an art festival, we are confronted by the “World of Situations”³ that has been reduced to dramatic images whose mise en scène prevents us from getting bogged down in quotidian clichés. On the other hand, observations serve to keep us from sinking into the images.

Current and Driving Force

The world of imagery evoked by “unplugged” is one of electricity. In the opening scene, Thomas Alva Edison and Nicola Tesla stand face to face; it’s night and an electric storm is raging, lightening feeding their electrical apparatuses. One of them, the man standing over the corpse of the electrocuted elephant cow Topsy, is on his way to inventing the electric chair, to patents, fame, and the modern-day corporate giant General Electric; the other, after the renunciation of his claims in the electrical war that is about to begin, will ultimately see himself cheated out of the realization of his vision of electrical energy covering unlimited distances, and witness his emancipatory approach driven into oblivion. Even today, 1.6 billion people have to walk several hours each day to gather firewood or cow dung to cover their energy needs. The Amish communities in Pennsylvania use electric power but refuse to get hooked up to the public grid. The self-imposed inconvenience of energy production by means of generators and fuel delivered via horse and buggy serves an emancipatory purpose: the conscious utilization of resources strengthens their autonomy. Howard Rheingold characterizes the Amish as people who are “far from being technophobic; rather, to a much greater extent, they [are] very adaptive ‘techno-selectives.’”⁴ In the “plugged-in” parts of world society, this need for autonomy manifests itself in the ad campaigns for TÜV-guaranteed atom-free eco-current in customers’ light bulbs.⁵ At the same time, according to an as-yet-unpublished study by the International Energy Agency, approximately 1.6 billion people are not in a position to use modern forms of energy, but instead must walk miles to collect firewood or cow dung.⁶

Culture as Raw Material

Consider the game of getting plugged-in and unplugged in pop culture. The TV channel MTV added the wish to be able to pull the plug to the connotations of this terminology with the invention of “unplugged” as a brand name for the re-evocation of the authenticity of repertoires that were actually long since worn-out by repeated playing. Bob Dylan, after hooking up his guitar to an amplifier, was branded a traitor to the authenticity of the folk scene by certain segments of the ‘60s protest movement because, by doing so, he was plugging himself into the international rock business. Three decades later, Kurt Cobain, after making reference to the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in this situation, had recourse to a shotgun to permanently unplug himself and thus make it clear that it had been just a big mistake when the electric amplifier had catapulted the musical “power plant of the feelings” into the football stadiums of the world. Ironically, the MTV unplugged session recorded by Cobain’s group Nirvana shortly before his death has proved to be one of the few such recordings of lasting value.

Axelle Kabou wrote in 1991: “This self-satisfied Africa has to finally come to the realization that the principle of all cultures being of equal value—incontestable in area of aesthetics, customs and traditions—does not automatically apply to the economy and the armed forces, and that economic life and defense are just as much cultural products as, for example, cleverly devised systems of family relationships, dances and masks.”⁷

Today, at the dawning of the knowledge-based society’s New Economy, it is clear that the game—as far as dances and masks are concerned—has been opened up in at least one direction: networks are content-hungry and users’ attention spans are fleeting. They need constant change and variety in order to relax. “The sun every Friday” becomes the perfect rock quarry of an entertainment industry that has reached its limits and that, due to a shortage of possible distinctions in its own narrow canon of forms, has long been suffering a lack of fresh input. What could be a more obvious solution than to keep on colonizing, to attach oneself like an enormous parasite to that which is still unplugged in order to commodify and cash in on it in the currents of universal exploitation?

The unremittingly one-sided fashion in which the resource drain of colonialism continues to function is illustrated by the fact that products have to be specially created for the high-grossing US and EU “world music” market that rejects authentic productions because their keyboard sounds and dialect forms rooted in their own language are perceived as tawdry by the target audience.

In light of the Western cultural achievement of a global, capital-accumulating economy, Immanuel Wallerstein poses the following question in his analysis of the current crisis of this system: “If it is true, as I have maintained, that we actually are currently in an long and difficult transitional phase from our existing world system to one or more new ones, and if the outcome is uncertain, then we are confronted by two big questions: What kind of world do we actually want; and: With which means or on which paths are we most likely to reach it?”⁸ Along with Axelle Kabou, we must now ask: What kind of translation activity would be necessary in both directions in order for the plugging in of so-called lesser developed countries to offer an emancipatory horizon in the already crisis-beset plugged-in systems beyond the “digital divide”?

In light of this question, the strategic goals of the Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity that UNESCO⁹ proclaimed in its plan for the years 2002–2007—namely, “to

engender respect for international copyright regulations” and “to promote more effective mechanisms to prevent piracy”—must also be seen from two points of view. The methods selected by UNESCO are predicated on the creation of those structural fundamentals that also constitute the foundation of the one-sidedness not only of postcolonial merchandise flows. Michael Hardt says of this: “The best-known NGOs collaborate in a certain way with the leading forces of globalization. Some go so far as to characterize the aid organizations as the smiling face of neo-liberalism—alleviating the damage that neo-liberalism has caused and thus making it acceptable. I don’t think that one can say that. It sounds as if one held the members of such organizations to be intentional accomplices, which of course they are not. Nevertheless, there are ideological correspondences in some respects between many NGOs and the powers of globalization.”¹⁰

Art, Images and the Media

Doing bureaucratic planning instead of envisioning political solutions is expressed in the significance of institutions on a collective level just as it is on an individual level in the world of the products of Microsoft: “Stalin is the icon of such imperialistic-technological, planning, manipulative politics. He’s the one who embodies this quiet, scheming violence like no one else in the 20th century. If Hitler personified, so to speak, the danger of Rock Culture as a lifestyle,¹¹ then Stalin represents the danger of Microsoft as a way of life. You cannot rule out the possibility that this peril might perhaps be perceived much more clearly in the next generation ...”¹² The conception of self of media art that is struggling to come to terms with this danger—as also expressed in the legitimation of *Ars Electronica*—was, on the basis of its approach, never free of politics.

Nowadays, indeed, art and politics seem to behave toward each other like contestants in a game of musical chairs in which there is always precisely one chair too few. The weight of significance is in the process of shifting between aesthetics and politics.¹³ The disempowerment of its representatives in the dogma of economics seemingly paved the way for the position of politics to be opened up for occupation by art, whose legitimation had likewise been placed in jeopardy by the loss of its monopoly on the manifestations of the aesthetic in Information Society. In any case, there’s no seating available for genuinely formative political action.¹⁴ Okwui Enwezor had this to say about the current state of art: “Today’s avant-garde is so highly disciplined and domesticated within the world order of the Empire that totally new models of regulation and resistance have to be found in order to counter the Empire’s claims to totality.”¹⁵

Niklas Luhmann describes the emergence of the function of European art in these terms: “The individual himself actually exists merely as a fragmentary self that only forms itself into a depictable identity under the pressure of others’ expectations. ... In this setting within the scope of the history of culture, art has discovered a new subject for itself—the theme of ‘authenticity.’ To the extent that the viewing of works of art becomes routine as an observation of the second order, shifts in the opposite direction set in. They essentially target the problem of authenticity.”¹⁶ But what authenticity is depends on the preconditions of the system of art. Just like in the kitchen, the concept of “freshness” does not represent the taste but rather the degree of connectedness to a society in the truest sense of the word—either as an unbroken, refrigerated chain of international food manufacturers in their application

of hygiene regulations, or as an apparently living creature, and regardless of whether this means frogs and snakes at Chinese markets or chickens in Morocco.

Art remains connected to the society and the culture whose function it is. If it addresses an issue from outside, it indeed provides it entrée into its own society; absent the involvement of a political institution, though, its radius of effectiveness remains limited to mere "politicization."

The simple arrogation of the political—and not by the art but rather by the artist—will not suffice as a model of resistance as long as it is impossible to leave the realm that has been allocated to art in the social division of labor. "The outlook that sees art AS ART, as an independent realm of creative output—thus, an attitude whose one-sided distortion can be seen in the much evoked motto "L'art pour l'art"—reveals itself when the wish is expressed to connect the name of the master with his work."¹⁷

In the political sphere, if no democratic process of determining a position and a mandate is specified in connection with the name-work linkage, it refers to the role of the autocrats, monarchs, and dictators. In the absence of previously acquired legitimation, the impotent gesture of the artist as a political actor remains, in the best case, a matter righteous self-pacification; at worst, it degenerates to marketing.

Politics

The drastic drop in the number of permits granted to enter Europe since the Schengen Agreement went into effect in 1990 has not only transformed Europe into a fortress; it has also given many young people in the neighboring Maghreb the feeling of being imprisoned.¹⁸ Among grown men there, the desire to leave the country becomes so overpowering that, in spite of an uncertain outcome and the risk to life and limb, they are prepared to pay organized gangs of smugglers a fortune to reach the Promised Land—the plugged-in West. The myth of wealthy Europe is disseminated by successful migrants returning home for a visit as well as via satellite TV. "The spread of satellite dishes since the late '80s has irreparably shattered the world view held by many inhabitants of the Maghreb. As the Tunisians began to learn Italian thanks to RAI, and the Algerians started getting used to French news broadcasts, the Moroccans as well slowly began to open up to new horizons."¹⁹ Moroccan society's plugging in to the global current of images was followed by the plugging in of mostly male Moroccans to the global human flow of migration.

The scene of thousands of corpses of these economic martyrs washed up on the shores of Morocco and Spain would be incomplete if one's thoughts did not simultaneously turn to those persons without papers who—making their way, in the final analysis, from the frying pan into the fire—run to their deaths in the tunnel at Euralille, and the countless others that have gotten tangled up in Schengen's net. The confrontation of Western societies with "the unplugged"—actually less of a condition than a designation for groups of people—very quickly and eloquently takes conventional Western concepts of tolerance to their limits. An uprising of marginalized groups—like the demonstrations of the "sans papiers," the break-out of those being held at the Woomera, Australia detention camp, or the struggle of the Roma (Gypsies) for recognition as a non-territorial state—illustrates the democracies' deficiencies in creating new spaces and preconditions for the manifestations of the upheaval now underway. Reports suggest that the images of the world of consumption disseminated via satellite TV raise the awareness of their own sad economic situation to such an extent that the gap between wish and reality appears to be unbridgeable by means

of emancipatory action within their own territorial and political framework. If this is so, then the economic martyrs dying in this abyss are “collateral damage” of the visual attacks on the attention of the media-consuming public carried out with every means of seduction available.

Effective counteroffensive strategies on the symbolic level—though seldom the creations of art—are possible if they are ultimately connected with a mandate. Somalian supermodel Waris Dirie, at first an actor with a role in this game of seduction, is using the spotlight that has been focused on her to speak openly about her personal history of mutilation via clitoral circumcision and thus to call attention to the culturally-justified violence that women are subjected to in many lands. In her job as ambassador of the United Nations Populations Fund, she is now working on-site in Africa to try to help the victims themselves to bring about an improvement in this situation.²⁰

Communicating Plateaus

It is impossible to get around the modern question of the emancipatory content of technological development. In contexts of development, this has to do with not only projections and expectations but also the concrete power to change conditions. Axelle Kabou describes the interplay of Négrisme and Tiers-mondisme (Third World buffs’ fervent pursuit) in the confirmation of the postcolonial status quo in Africa as an essential impediment to development, and calls for the peoples who have been victimized by this to take matters radically into their own hands. The debate surrounding “plugged” and “unplugged” is being held before the backdrop of colonialism and post-colonialism; it takes place in the context of a failed process of de-colonization, and a continuation of colonialism with other means and modified protagonists, whereby multinational corporations and NGOs have taken the place of colonial powers.

Comprehensively subordinating economic activity to the rationale of capital accumulation and thus acting in accordance with the paradigm of “pluggedness” as normalcy, however, would also mean concurring with the triumphal rhetoric of “the end of history” formulated by Francis Fukuyama in the wake of the decline of Soviet power and concluding that democracy linked to the global market economy represents the ultimate stage of human ideological evolution.

The question of keeping distance from “pluggedness” that has not merely remained unplugged by mistake but instead stands for freedom and alternatives was perhaps answered by Michael Hardt in setting off his position from that of certain ‘80s protest movements that took an extremely moral stance in demanding to keep distance from power and seeking to remain untainted by its seductions: “I believe it is more productive to recognize that we are all contaminated and live in a global power structure, but this by no means implies that we can’t create anything else.”²¹

Debating the case of “plugged” and “unplugged” also means posing the question of the form and the venue of the discourse. One is tempted to add another two types to Vilem Flusser’s catalog of communications structures: the administration of the fortress and the open-air confrontation.²² While the neo-liberal circle and Western societies barricade themselves into fortress-like situations, emancipatory discourses—like the one recently held in an African village near Bamako, Mali in June 2002—take place alfresco. The final scene shows, on one side, the hosts of heavily armed bodyguards providing security at the talks of the G-8, WTO, etc.,

and the open-air “summit of the poor” at a symbolic location in Mali²³ on the other. Not the least important of the factors upon which the success of a dialog of communicating plateaus of different energy levels in the context of art depends is whether it is overarched by the bulwarks or takes place as an “open-air discourse,” and whether we—with the admission of our ignorance and contamination—set aside a perspective that believes itself able to separate rule from exception. The inscribing of differences into the art system alone will not suffice. The situation demands the same preconditions for all.

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald

- 1 Axelle Kabou, *Weder arm noch ohnmächtig (neither poor nor powerless)*, 1991. Even a decade after its publication, this controversial and much-discussed book still cuts a wide swath through the debates, which might suggest that a great many things had indeed undergone transformation during this decade both in Africa and in the “Western world,” but, in fact, as far as the core of its critique and thus its relevance is concerned, little has changed.
- 2 Slavoj Žižek, *A Plea for Leninist Intolerance*, from Documenta 11, Platform 1, cited in www.documenta.de/data/german/platform1/abstracts-vienna.html
- 3 Vilém Flusser, *Die kodifizierte Welt aus Medienkultur*, Frankfurt am Main 1997, p. 24. Of course, in this passage, Flusser was speaking about a magical worldview, but it is precisely the reference back to such a thing that, in the argumentative mêlée of assorted clichés and particularly in dealing with current situations in Africa, seemed to possess a certain allure.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Also see the current campaign by EON: [www.eon-energie.com/frameset_german/main_frameset_reloader.phtml?top = http://www.eon-energie.com/Ressources/frame_head.jsp&bottom = http://www.eon-energie.com/frameset_german/press/press_press-release/press_press-release_records/press_press-release_paper_43.htm](http://www.eon-energie.com/frameset_german/main_frameset_reloader.phtml?top=http://www.eon-energie.com/Ressources/frame_head.jsp&bottom=http://www.eon-energie.com/frameset_german/press/press_press-release/press_press-release_records/press_press-release_paper_43.htm)
- 6 *The Economist*, Vol. 364, No. 8280, p. 11
- 7 Axelle Kabou, *Weder arm noch ohnmächtig*, 1991, p. 143
- 8 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistik*, Historische Alternativen des 21. Jahrhunderts, Vienna, 2002, p. 76
- 9 www.unesco.org/culture/alliance/
- 10 Michael Hardt interviewed by Ralph Obermaier in *brandeins* 04/02, p. 37
- 11 This temptation of power in the excessive pose of the rock star (“Rock God”) was perfectly formulated in the song “In the Flesh” on Pink Floyd’s 1979 album “The Wall,” (and also in works by The Residents, Third Reich and Roll, Laibach et al.): “Are there any queers in the theatre tonight / Get ‘em up against the wall / That one looks Jewish / And that one’s a coon / Who let all this riff raff into the room / There’s one smoking a joint and / Another with spots / If I had my way / I’d have all of you shot.”
- 12 Boris Groys in conversation with Thomas Knoefel, “Politik der Unsterblichkeit,” Edition Akzente/Hanser, 2002
- 13 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.” Now that hardly anyone cites communist doctrine as an authority anymore, we are naturally alarmed by this shift of emphasis.
- 14 Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, 1845, cited from Marx and Engels, *Works*, Vol. 3, Berlin 1978, pp. 533–5: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”
- 15 Okwui Enwezor with reference to Hardt/Negri in *Dokumenta 11, Platform 5*: exhibition, Kassel, 2002, p. 45
- 16 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p. 145
- 17 Ernst Kris, Otto Kurz: *Die Legende vom Künstler*, Frankfurt am Main 1995 (1934)
- 18 Pierre Vermeeren, Schiffbruch der Illusionen in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 2002.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 www.unfpa.org/news/pressroom/1997/dirie.htm Waris Dirie, Nomadentochter, Munich, 2002
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, Bollmann / Mannheim, 1996.
- 23 Naturally, in selecting this site for the conference, great consideration was given to its impact in the international media. The village of Siby is where Sundiata Keita, the founder of the West African Empire of Mali, worked out a constitution in the 13th century.