Subversion

as

Strategy

Today?

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The connotations of the term 'subversion' have changed radically. The term was once negatively loaded in a destructive sense; it stood for undermining mores, morals, and laws, and was also used by the secret service as a method to battle its enemies. For example, anarchists and so-called critics of the system were often the objects of blanket suspicion. However, subversive acts were performed by the enemies as well as the representatives of the system. Even the Stasi in the

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GDR used subversive methods of disruption against non-conformist artists, who for their part were labelled subversive elements even though the artists would have never called themselves such. From the 1960s and especially the 1970s onwards, the associative spectrum changed and turned it into a positive concept. Subversion was then used as a political, strategic, artistic, and programmatic term.[1] The subversive infiltration or reversal of cultural and social structures in 20th century art – from situationism to punk – is seen as a characteristic of political resistance art.

A unique form of subversive art – and its control via surveillance – emerged in totalitarian systems such as the GDR, Soviet Union, China, or South America. In contrast, the old subversive artistic strategies of détournement, appropriation and culture jamming have now become universal cultural techniques in mass media. They are all based on a distortion or exaggeration of existing claims. In the web 2.0, these strategies are used in both a subversive political or affirmative commercial way. For example, commercial applications can be found in advertising campaigns that operate with so-called viral marketing.

A similar ambivalence prevails in strategies for political control. Organizations such as Anonymous and Wikileaks are fighting with self-developed techniques of subversion for information sovereignty in the Internet. Simultaneously, the revelations about

1 See Ernst, Thomas et al. (eds.): Subversionen. Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik. Bielefeld 2008. Above all Martin Doll's essay: Begriffsgeschichte: Für eine Subversion der Subversion. Und über die Widersprüche eines politischen Individualismus, pp. 47 ff.

the gigantic surveillance programs run by the US secret service NSA have turned latent insecurity about the private sphere in the Internet into certainty about state control. The state, or rather the NSA, also uses subversive methods, as the targeted employment of hackers by the secret services, among other things, has shown. "The social situation itself has become subversive" in the sense of unsettling or precarious, says the German cultural scientist Mark Terkessidis. This is why he poses the question "whether resistance in this era shouldn't be building something up instead."[2]

Opening Question

The opening question for this text is thus: can subversion still be a positively connoted artistic strategy today? And what happens when the original negativity of the term subversion resurfaces, when the charm of artistic limit transgression dissipates? Or, in other words: isn't the concept of subversion based on the option of positioning oneself outside of the "system" that is supposed to be infiltrated? But in what cultural or political context does this place outside of the system of "the real" – the state, the economy, the institutions, etc. – still exist?

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes: "There is no real world that is outside of art. […] The real is always a subject of fiction."[3] However,

2 Terkessidis, Mark: Karma Chamäleon. Unverbindliche Richtlinien für die Anwendung subversiver Taktiken früher und heute. In: Ernst (2008), pp. 27 ff.

3 Rancière, Jacques: Der emanzipierte Zuschauer. Vienna 2009, p. 91.

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many subversive strategies operate precisely with this difference between the real and art; they manoeuvre along this border and provoke questions about the justification for this differentiation. In some cases, this may come very close to playfully dissolving this difference. But in other cases, conflicts arise that, in contrast to Rancière's theory, make the inexorable nature of the border between art and the real especially tangible. The Critical Art Ensemble's Steve Kurtz was accused of bio-terrorism by the FBI because of artistic research in his bio-laboratory, and the artist duo UBERMORGEN's "vote-auction" project was pursued by the FBI, NSA, and CIA and swamped by so many law suits that UBERMORGEN was able to exhibit approximately 700 kilos of legal files as a "sculpture". A performance and music clip sufficed to get Pussy Riot a two-year prison sentence. And whether or not Jonathan Meese's Nazi salute is deemed an act of artistic freedom had to be established in a Kassel courtroom in 2013. In this list of examples, which can be lengthened with ease, the issue at hand is not *whether* there is a border between art and the real, but rather *where* it is located and *who* can draw it.

Methods and Strategies

There are numerous subversive methods and strategies that have been practiced and discussed since the mid-20th century.[4] These sometimes related terms can be named here in a cursory and chronological listing:

4   Short definitions of these terms can be found in the glossary.

- détournement/recuperation (Guy-Ernest Debord/Gil J. Wolman, from 1956)
- semiological guerrilla (Umberto Eco, 1967)
- disinformation (Mindfuck/Fnord, Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea)
- appropriation/recontextualization
- subversive affirmation/over-identification
- counter publicity/activism/tactical media
- culture hacking/culture jamming (adbusters, subvertising/antipreneurs)
- communications guerrilla (multi-use name/ open reputation; Luther Blisset, Sonja Brünzels)

This collection, which makes no claim of being comprehensive, is meant to uncover the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of these concepts. They escape distinct categorization into the fields of art, politics, business, or media. Some of the terms can be traced to famous authors (e.g., Debord, Eco), others have an anonymous source or are even embodied by fictional people (Luther Blisset, Sonja Brünzels). This ambivalence is precisely their potential; at the same time, it represents a problem that will be examined on the basis of the following cases.

Two Impact Vectors of Subversion: Stocks in the Revolution or Tools for the Revolution?

The usual target for artistically subversive interventions is global capitalism. Here, the "nikeground" action can be seen as exemplary; it was organized by the Italian artist duo Eva and Franco Mattes

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(0100101110101101.ORG) in cooperation with the Austrian Public Netbase. This fake advertising campaign in Nike's style, which proposed to rename Vienna's Karlsplatz into "Nike Platz" and decorate it with an oversized Nike logo, was so believable that it caused an enormous public outcry directed against Nike as well as the city of Vienna. This public debate then led Nike to react with a lawsuit to stop the project.[5] Nike was an obvious target because the company's ads already had "recuperated" an unconventional, latently subversive or even revolutionary touch for their advertising. A concrete example is Nike's viral slogan "Just do it!"; it is meant to symbolize a spontaneous, self-determined lifestyle. However, with its attempt at banning the event, Nike stepped into a trap in the economy of attention. This effect is well known and is often called the "Streisand effect".[6] Nike thus generated immense publicity for the subversive project and eventually gave up its legal intervention.

Despite this triumph of subversion, many questions remained unanswered. Doesn't "Nikeground" and the Nike company use related strategies in the economy of attention and the viral dissemination of information? Despite its critical intention, didn't the attention generated by the project also function as advertising? These questions became all the more an

5   See Arns, Inke / Sasse, Sylvia: Subversive Affirmation. On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance. In: East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe, ed. by IRWIN, London 2006, pp. 444–455.
6   In 2003, Barbra Streisand attempted to legally prohibit the publishing of an aerial photo of her house. The result was an exponential increase in attention for these images.

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issue on the occasion of the "Just do it – Die Subversion der Zeichen von Marcel Duchamp bis Prada Meinhof" exhibition, which also used the Nike slogan as a title. The curators Thomas Edlinger, Florian Waldvogel, and Raimar Stange produced, with the appropriation strategy, a catalogue of extended text excerpts that originated from authors who had not been informed beforehand – and their names weren't even mentioned. One of the authors, Inke Arns, reacted in an open letter with a self-explanatory title: "Just do it – be neoliberal! Intellectual theft as curatorial practice. Or: how capitalist exploitation occurs under the guise of 'leftist' strategies".[7] A controversial debate ensued.

A further turn of the screw is shown in Levi's "Go Forth" ad (2011), which is clearly based on Nike's approach. It shows a young man, wearing jeans, standing up to an overwhelming mass of riot police; lines from Charles Bukowski's poetry are spoken in the background. The original scenes were shot at the May 1st demonstration in Berlin.[8] As a culmination of these seemingly inescapable dialectics, the artist Friedrich von Borries is trying to integrate the recuperation within the act of appropriation in his current project

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7 Inke Arns, Offener Brief (open letter), July 3, 2005. Published online at Rohrpost: http://post.in-mind.de/pipermail/rohrpost/2005-July/008336.html (accessed September 30, 2013).

8 www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT16DcHcjRA (accessed October 18, 2013). See Laura Weissmüller: Schick des Radikalen. In: Die Süddeutsche, September 29, 2011; www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/mode-und-revolution-schick-des-radikalen-1.1151854 (accessed September 30, 2013).

RLF, thereby anticipating the reappropriation by the system before the expropriation or appropriation occurs. Its slogan reads "Become a Shareholder of the Revolution!". A text on the website states: "A rebellious *Zeitgeist* sets the discursive context and activist standpoint for RLF. RLF is an enterprise that strives to overcome Capitalism with the means of Capitalism: protest is manifested in luxury products and their consumption is transformed into a revolutionary act."[9] The project is made up of a novel published by Suhrkamp and luxurious design products that are presented in Johann König's "hip" gallery. And when the whole thing makes it onto the cover page of the Spiegel's cultural magazine, well, then nothing can go wrong – unless the real success overwhelms the project and makes it implode.[10] Among all of the examples mentioned here, the RLF project works on a playful dissolution of the border between the inside and the outside, art and "the real" – precisely in the sense that Rancière describes in the quote above.

A second common goal of subversive artistic methods is the political control of information and censorship. Artistic intervention primarily visualizes power apparatuses (dispositifs) by instrumentalizing gaps in public information policies. This is why no self-amplifying feedback loop between the inside and

9 www.friedrichvonborries.de/neues/rlf, see also the obligatory participation in Berlin's May 1st demonstration: http://rlf-propaganda. tumblr.com/tagged/1may (accessed September 30, 2013).
10 Tobias Becker, Distinktion de luxe. Kulturspiegel 8/2013, July 29, 2013;www.spiegel.de/spiegel/kulturspiegel/d-104234073.html (accessed October 18, 2013).

outside of art emerges, as is the case in subversive capitalist critique. Here, art repeatedly enters into a conflict with "the real", wherever it may be located. A prominent example is the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who clearly ran into the walls of artistic freedom with his critique of the Chinese regime in his blog and his art. Worldwide solidarity – proclaimed after his arrest, his injuries caused by the police and the closing of his blog – was based primarily on his position as a political activist. However, there was a controversial discussion, similar to Joseph Beuys' case, about whether this attention also has to do with his artistic work, whether art and politics can be separated in this case or whether they support or veil one another. The critic and curator Hou Hanru sees typical misunderstandings in Ai Weiwei's case: "In the world of art, intellectual commitment, debates and theories are all thrown together and misused as tools. […] As an artist, he [Ai Weiwei] doesn't interest me in the least, but he is important as a social symbol."[11]

At Least the Chinese Authorities Classify Ai Weiwei as Being Subversive

In contrast, Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud are not subversive in this sense and also don't use the term in their self-presentation; they live in a free country. Still, many of their artistic projects and the tools they have invented could certainly develop a subversive effect. This potential is strategically implemented by

11 Als Künstler ist er völlig uninteressant", Hou Hanru on Ai Weiwei. Interview with Sebastian Frenzel. In: Monopol, July 27, 2011.

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Wachter and Jud in their "qaul.net" project video (slogan: TOOLS FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION) when they, for example, splice in scenes from the Egyptian demonstrations in Cairo at a time when the Internet and mobile networks were shut down in January 2011.

The term "revolution" is then immediately relativized in the commentary; it remains open whether it is meant to be political, technological, social, or aesthetic. As in their "picidae" project, which is directed against Internet censorship in China and elsewhere, Wachter and Jud assume that the symbolic (artistic) and real (technical) function of their tools are congruent. Technical inventions, products, software and tools are not bound to their authors' intentions; they develop their own incalculable lives. In this sense, Wachter and Jud's works are potentially even more subversive than Ai Weiwei's blog: its effect was essentially rooted in his authority as a person. In contrast, Wachter and Jud speak of a viral propagation of their projects that they can't even trace – neither technically (because it's open source) nor artistically (because it's used without their copyright).

The argument against Ai Weiwei – that his recognition as an artist profits from his work as an activist – doesn't apply to Wachter and Jud, because a clean division between art and activism is possible in their projects. As long as their works "function" so obviously in the art context, the often-repeated question – why they place these works in the art context instead of working as activists in a political context – remains irrelevant. It would be far more interesting to learn what kind of lives these tools lead in reality, and what

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potential misuse for purposes of criminality, pornography, or terrorism they are subject to. But for the reasons named above, both artists can't answer these questions. In relation to the question raised at the onset, it has been shown that the methods and techniques of a true and effective subversion maintain their ambivalence – whether or not they originate from the art context or any "reality" – wherever this may be.

Not an Answer, but a Theory

In political and subversive art, a "reality effect" often sets in: art not only becomes an autonomous aesthetic field, but also an intervention in the "real". On the one hand, this is the fascination; on the other hand, we are – after all – dealing with an "effect" that is equally a part of an aesthetic and social impact. The attempt at separating these levels is doomed to failure, since they are mutually dependent. In the process, politics and aesthetics can get in each other's way, or strengthen each other's effects in a kind of feedback-loop – until an almost painful escalation takes place that then calls for disengagement. But a "division of the sensual" between art and politics does not occur in these projects without frictional losses.[12] They remain in an indecisive ambivalence; they are not a wrong synthesis of art and life and no self-dissolution of art – instead, they have parallel existences in both worlds that are partially connected and partially disen-

12 See Rancière, Jacques: Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen.
     Berlin 2006, pp. 25–26.

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gaged. This indissoluble ambivalence also stands for what art and subversion share in common – and what forms the foundation for the conspiratorial and perilous sympathy they share for one another.

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