

VIOLENCE IS VIOLENCE IS NOT FREEDOM

A Commentary on the Panel *Critical Curating*

— by Sabine Kock

As part of the symposium *Art Reception — Strategies for Future Exhibiting* organized by the editors of this volume at the Volkskunde Museum Wien, the mentioned panel turned out to be an volatile one with positions of curators and museums. Stella Rollig (General Director Belvedere Vienna), Angela Stief (Chief Curator Albertina Modern Vienna), Rainer Fuchs (Chief Curator MUMOK Vienna) discussed under the moderation of Susanne Wernsing (art historian, curator). In the audience, the group MATHILDA followed the discussion attentively and intervened critically.¹

MATHILDA describes itself as a “fluid group of contemporary witnesses and artists, of cultural workers and academics, whose work has as its starting point the experience of the children in the so-called ‘Mühl Commune,’ which was marked by violence and abuse. Although the children’s experience was legally recorded and made public through the trial of Otto Mühl and his conviction for child abuse and rape in 1991, consistent recognition remained largely absent. Instead, since the 1990s, attempts have been made — with the cooperation of many well-known cultural institutions — to consolidate Mühl’s work on the international art market and to propagate him as an Austrian national artist within an Actionist canon. And although the patriarchal and authoritarian traits of his sect and his art are openly apparent, art historical discourses repeatedly speak of him as a nonconformist and anti-fascist artist and human being. Based on the history of violence inherent in his work and the broadly affirmative social treatment of the same, our work aims not only at the reception of Mühl, his sect and his art, but equally at the understanding of abuse in art and abuse of art as an instrument of power and manipulation.”²

1 A transcript of the central excerpts of this conversation is included as a text contribution to this volume.

2 See the MATHILDA group website: <https://aboutmathilda.com/about/>, last accessed

Having in mind this complex double bind or blind spot in art historical discourse and curatorial practice, the PEEK project formulated advanced questions as a starting point for the symposium in the hope and assumption of self-reflexive argumentation and discussion practice:

“What if art was created in contexts of violence? How do violence and aesthetics relate to each other? How are ‘artistic value’ and violent production to be weighed against each other? How to deal with art that breaks laws, and artistic works by criminals? Who curates or speaks about this art: past — present — future?”³ To this end, the symposium was designed in an attempt to maintain the most sensitive awareness for the group MATHILDA and to honor their courage in exposing themselves to a public discussion process — in the knowledge that the conditions of the public space, even with great attention, can only guarantee a defined protective space to a limited extent.

However, what now happened at the podium partly repeated the affirmation described by MATHILDA and thus conditioned a renewed exposure of those whose biographical experience of violence and position(s), sensitively published in the protection of the group, were the starting point of the discussion. In the affirmation of the arguments, these were in part again questioned, rejected, or ignored — in the name of the freedom and autonomy of art; in an affirming normative canonization of actionism as genuinely anarchic, anti-fascist, anti-authoritarian; in the attempt to compare the existence of violence in the context of Otto Mühl’s justification of art with Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno/Horkheimer 1987) as an unintentional, disastrous transformation of an advanced intention into its opposite.

This is where the critical commentary comes in and would like to take up precisely the argumentations invoked for (affirmative) help, and deconstruct them on a meta-level, because: It is not that simple.

First of all, there is the attempt to show that Otto Mühl, as a central representative of Viennese Actionism, cannot be detached and considered separately from it. What is presupposed here is an alleged emancipative

2023/7/30. Quote translated by Elisabeth Schäfer and David Ender.

3 See the information about the symposium on the website of the cooperating partner of the FWF PEEK project, Volkskunde Museum Wien, for a critical reappraisal of the history of the Mühl “Commune”: https://www.volkskundemuseum.at/symposium_kunstrezeption, last accessed 2023/7/30.

critical work context of Viennese Actionism, which was admittedly unmasked and deconstructed on the panel as the normative construct of an attempted historicizing canonization, and vehemently questioned. Nevertheless, the anti-authoritarian, anarchistic moment of Viennese Actionism which shakes up society in a gesture of provocation was repeatedly invoked on the podium and thereby brought into context with the concept of artistic autonomy, while at the same time this argumentation in paradox with the claimed fluid boundary between art and life in the work of Otto Mühl. Rainer Fuchs: „I think the problem is also that one always identifies the work with the person — and it's true: Mühl himself forced this identification by wanting to make life into art and art into life. But there is still a way of looking at art history in which the work has a certain autonomy ...“⁴

A historicizing understanding of autonomy in the sense of an independence of the work of art and its viewing is attempted here in order to assert a detachment from the artist's biography, and thus an independent status of the work.

Historically, however, the concept of autonomy primarily signifies a new differentiated form of reception in the context of the establishment of different spheres of validity: The premiere of Schiller's play *The Robbers*, for example, still caused a scandal, but it could be shown in the theater because theater was perceived as theater — in a new kind of reception, as a space of (aesthetic) play in the mode of “as if” and not directly as a sphere of validity and space of action of politics. This differentiation of spheres of validity stands in the context of the development of a bourgeois public sphere, as Habermas sketches it in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas 1986) and later conceptually expands it in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Habermas 1988). In the historical concept of the Enlightenment, autonomy of art thus means first and foremost a differentiation and, as a consequence, particularity of the spheres of validity in perception. If it is asserted here on the podium in a “classically” abbreviated form as (formal or structural/substantial) separation of the

4 See in this volume: “CURATORS IN CONVERSATION. Susanne Wernsing talks with Rainer Fuchs (mumok), Stella Rollig (Belvedere) and Angela Stief (Albertina Modern) about critical curating”, p. 76.

work from the person of the author, this argumentation clearly stands in the intention to split off the criminality (also of the artistic acts or works) of the artist and to remove it from perception in order to assert a supposed neutrality of the work. A decontextualization takes place. In Mühl's case, however, this is not appropriate. Rather, his art shows and references violence as well as power and abuse of authority. In the film *Back to Fucking Cambridge*, for example, children and adolescents who experienced violence and sexual assault in the "commune" are again staged in figurations in which they are exposed to sexual accusations and assaults. Under no circumstances should such a document be shown without critical contextualization. However, the film is publicly accessible in the Austrian Mediathek without critical commentary or a contextualizing embedding under the label avant-garde film. For those affected, this means that they are (once again) presented to an anonymous public with the potential for re-traumatization through this uncritical form of presentation, which makes a naïve/uncritical reception of the content just as possible as a voyeuristic perspective on what is shown. There is no justification here. This concrete concern about re-traumatization is an essential impulse of the group MATHILDA — with a comprehensive lack of understanding of how a critical public can ignore its concrete concern so insensitively, as has happened in the past in the art-scientific discourse about Mühl and — as the discussion in the Volkskunde Museum showed — has not yet been cleared up.

At the same time, in the context of Viennese Actionism, there is also a completely different form of voyeurism combined with an inverted argumentation of conservative and right-wing persuasion: The violent context in the Mühl "commune" is instrumentalized here in order to discredit politically disagreeable anarchism and the rebellion against norms as an attitude per se in reference to the incriminated sexualized violence and the abuse of authority in the "commune" at Friedrichshof. The short-circuit of such an argumentation is: anarchism and anti-authoritarian rebellion can lead to nothing but abuse of authority, criminality and "moral ruin", as is supposedly exemplified by the factual reality of the "commune" at Friedrichshof. In this argumentation (which was not the subject of the panel discussion), politically advanced and libertarian positions are subject to generalizing prejudgement and, with reference

to the reality in the “commune” at Friedrichshof, are negated in total as a utopian opportunity of a reality of life.

Rainer Fuchs attempts a mental apology in reference to the *Dialectic of enlightenment*: “For me, Mühl’s art and his actions as an artist represent something similar to what we find in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. One starts with a goal of an anti-authoritarian mediation of a society and ends in the total terror of the authoritarian. Incidentally, we at mumok have also noted this as a commentary on the work “Zock Exercises”. As a curator, however, I cannot start a differentiated discourse in the exhibition on the object. I can only point out these contradictions sharply and decisively.”⁵

I would like to question this statement: Why should a differentiated discourse on one particular object not be possible in an exhibition? Is it not once more (see above) that the incriminated artist is “neutralized” and intentionally protected in this supposed neutrality, and that the violence inherent in his artistic works is hidden in the context of the works of the other artists of Viennese Actionism?

With Adorno and Horkheimer it is like this: The impulse of the discourse of Enlightenment was (with Kant) the emancipation of the enlightened (bourgeois) subject from the immaturity of religion and the devotion to authority, to a new form of enlightened rationality. Adorno and Horkheimer now demonstrate in various social fields historically and for their present that simultaneous with the emergence of this new form of enlightenment, a narrowing of the concept of rationality takes place from which in the emancipative movement of the subject, direct access to nature as well as driving forces are excluded. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the consequence is a paradoxical figure of thought: On the one hand, due to the narrowed concept of rationality, the epistemological power of thought is thwarted and is thus insufficient to “grasp” the phenomena of the world and society intellectually — thought stops, as it were, in front of reality, it does not penetrate to the substantial of the object. At the same time, in a paradoxical countermovement, there is a tendency to fill exactly this void of an unfulfilled thinking movement with projections, which are subsequently superimposed on the reality

⁵ See in this volume: “CURATORS IN CONVERSATION. Susanne Wernsing talks with Rainer Fuchs (mumok), Stella Rollig (Belvedere) and Angela Stief (Albertina Modern) about critical curating”, p. 71.

that is not understood in its core as a supposed knowledge about it, but in reality overlapped by a context of delusion. This is the gateway for the transformation of the impulses of enlightenment into contexts of delusion, which include a possible (and in 1944 in the Nazi reign of terror factual) development to terror and violence. “In reflecting on its own guilt, therefore, thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends, and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery.” (Adorno/Horkheimer 2002: xv)

In this fateful double movement lies the tendency of the figure of a dialectic of enlightenment. It is formulated in Adorno and Horkheimer as an epistemological problem and “played out” in various fields of the social up to its radicalization; in the argumentation of Adorno and Horkheimer, it is always closely connected with the narrowing of the concept of rationality in the discourse of Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the systematic exclusion of the moment of a productive imagination as a capacity to break through this narrowness, on the other hand. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* while still in exile in America during World War II. It is their attempt to counter the Nazi reign of terror, which was real at that time, in a radical textual form. At the same time, they also criticize, from the perspective of their exile in the U.S., what they see as the terrifying, democracy-surpassing delusions of American culture industry.

The described figure of a dialectic of enlightenment is only conditionally compatible with the Mühl case, and if you will pardon the expression, the comparison is lame. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not about the level of a practical-political “anti-authoritarian mediation of society”, but (epistemologically) about a concept of rationality that does not cut off imagination as a productive social capacity and effective power. The reference to the dialectic of enlightenment in the context of Mühl’s work here again carries the implicit intention of an apology. In the concrete case of Mühl, there are, after all, criminal acts condemned by the judiciary. The guilt is clear and can be named — the figure of the

dialectic as a kind of fatal envelope distracts from this clarity. To use this figure here is to implicitly instrumentalize a canonized philosophical figure with high acceptance for a plea for apology and not to discover the figure of dialectic in the phenomenon and to be able to think something with it and make it articulable, communicable, understandable. The question of the extent to which symptomatically unprocessed (post-) fascist authority moments of the Mühl generation pave their way in the anti-authoritarian “communes” context requires its own investigation and cannot be evaluated in this brief commentary. Angela Stief also quotes Adorno: “I think that on the one hand, the idea of the frame left empty is beautiful, but on the other hand equivalent to not showing something. And also equivalent to a ban on showing and to censorship. It’s the same line of argumentation as, for example, Adorno, who said that you can’t write a poem after Auschwitz. Behind that, of course, is the shock of the trauma that leads to not being able to write anymore and not being able to show. I think it probably also needs distance and detachment.”⁶

I consider this comparison dangerous. Adornos dictum, no more poems after Auschwitz or more generally: “All culture after Auschwitz, together with the urgent critique of it, is trash [...]” (Adorno 1994: 359; Translated by E.S.) has as its point of departure that even the most committed (artistic) approaches to the problem entail a fundamental impossibility, because it is impossible to comprehend or discursively grasp the crimes committed in Auschwitz. It is formulated out of the concern and the epistemological finding that the abyss that has come into the world through the reality of Auschwitz is and remains too great to compose any adequate, even artistic, position on it. The artists addressed here by Adorno are in part those affected by Auschwitz, in part those born after it — but they are united by an attitude of radical, critical and reflexive commitment. In no way did he want to mark here artistic creation from the perpetrator perspective, but rather the fatal paradox of commitment: according to Adorno, even the greatest (artistic) commitment must remain insufficient and does not do justice to the reality of horror.

6 See in this volume: “CURATORS IN CONVERSATION. Susanne Wernsing talks with Rainer Fuchs (mumok), Stella Rollig (Belvedere) and Angela Stief (Albertina Modern) about critical curating”, p. 75.

To equate this verdict with the Mühl case is, in my opinion, inadmissible, because here we are dealing with a legally convicted criminal. The committed proposal not to show Mühl's art by omission as a critical reference is understood as (normative) censorship and marks the still existing blind spot towards the violence that is also in his art.

Violence is violence is not freedom!

— **Sabine Kock**, born in Kiel in 1960, lives and works as a philosopher and cultural scientist in Vienna. Her research and practice focuses on the following areas: Epistemology, aesthetics, discourses of memory, gender & diversity, social network analysis, digital humanism, transformation of work, (platform) cooperative movement.

LITERATURE

Adorno, Theodor W./Horkheimer, Max (1987): »Dialektik der Aufklärung«, in: Max Horkheimer (1987): Gesammelte Schriften, Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940–1950. Hg. von Alfred Schmidt et. al. Band 5. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, zuerst 1947, S. 13–290. Erstaussgabe unter Mitwirkung von Gretel Adorno unter dem Titel »Philosophische Fragmente«. Hg. vom New York Institute of Social Research, New York 1944.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1994): Negative Dialektik. 8. Aufl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, zuerst 1966.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1973): Studien zum autoritären Charakter. Hg. von Ludwig von Friedeburg, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Bolten, Jürgen (Hg.) (1984): Schillers Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Habermas, Jürgen (1986): Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. 16. Aufl. Darmstadt und Neuwied: Luchterhand, zuerst 1962.

Habermas, Jürgen (1988): Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Band I/II, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, zuerst 1981.

Horkheimer, Max/Fromm, Erich/Marcuse, Herbert et. al. (1987): Studien über Autorität und Familie, zuerst: Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1936; dann: Verlag zu Klampen, Springe/Lüneburg, 1987.

Kant, Immanuel (1974a): Kritik der reinen Vernunft, (1781/1787). Werkausgabe Band III/IV. Hg. von Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Kant, Immanuel (1974b): Kritik der Urteilskraft, (1790). Werkausgabe Band X. Hg. von Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Kant, Immanuel (1978): Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, (1788). Werkausgabe Band VII. Hg. von Wilhelm Weischedel, 4. Aufl., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Mühl, Otto und Schulmeister, Terese: Back to Fucking Cambridge. 1987. Österreichische Mediathek, Sammlung Friedrichshof, Online: <https://www.mediathek.at/unterrichtsmaterialien/suche/detail/?pool=BWEB&uid=05BDEAC8-1CD-00077-00000AA8-05BD5DD4&cHash=6b4c521e2cbaa71ea8fea3ffa0442ad3>, seen 30.7.2023.