

## **Actualizing Realism**

(Frankfurt am Main, 11 October 2009)

Annexed for so long by Western art history, both politically and artistically, “realism” has recently come to be fundamentally upgraded in its museum value. Now that the systemic contradiction has come to a definite end, the neo-liberal present seems to be taking possession of its meanwhile extinct opponents on the cultural level as well, and to be interested in redefining realism as its own. In other words, the moment has come for a politically updated definition. Since 2007, the Free Class in Frankfurt/Main—a self-organized association of art students—has been discussing questions related to realistic tendencies in contemporary art and its predecessors with various active debaters in the field. Within this framework, Jessica Sehrt and Jeronimo Voss invited three of them—the art historians Kerstin Stakemeier and David Riff and the artist Johannes Paul Raether—to take part in a discussion in Frankfurt/Main. Johannes Paul Raether discusses realism as an approach to his own artistic production and the possibilities for political organization presented in that context. As a member of Chto Delat?, David Riff has been addressing this theme in his work from various standpoints since 2004. For Kerstin Stakemeier, the issue of realism became relevant in conjunction with the Aktialisierungsraum (actualization space) she has been running with Nina Köller in Hamburg in 2007/08.

**Jessica Sehrt:** The endeavors to actualize the notion of realism in art got underway in the Free Class in Frankfurt/Main around 2007. We set out to discuss realism as an acquisition process, also in relation to political self-organization: not as an arbitrarily fashion-dictated, historically non-committal referencing of the term without regard for its history and without the intention of solidary historiography, but by exposing references and making them historically discussable as elements of a shared history.

**Jeronimo Voss:** Our discussion began with Gustave Courbet’s artistic and political practices.<sup>1</sup> Courbet’s painterly realism emerged in part from discussion with the early

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Herding Interview

Socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the writer Jules Champfleury, and his point of departure was what he considered the failed bourgeois revolution of 1848.<sup>2</sup> When he himself became an active participant in the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871, he temporarily ceased producing art. In a situation which promised a political appropriation of reality, Courbet was not concerned with producing “political art,” but rather in the moment of confrontation his realism was politics itself. Even today, to conceive of realism as something distinct from the label “political art” still appears to us to be a highly productive attitude.

**Jessica Sehrt:** Since the emergence of painterly realism in the nineteenth century, the central issue of this relationship comes up again and again, for example in connection with the revolutionary forms of artistic practice in Russia from 1913 onward, the realism experiments in the context of the revolution attempt in Germany around 1917, or the Expressionism debate<sup>3</sup> of 1938 as a strategy of the Popular Front. What these and many other realism strategies have in common is that they all developed in a context of political organization among artists. At the same time, we see how fundamentally the realism debates changed with the political situations in which they took place.

**Kerstin Stakemeier:** In those contexts, “realism” denotes a genuinely political positioning of artistic practice. Its concern is with life, with everyday politics. It is a commitment to reality which takes art itself—and not only the images it produces—seriously as a battlefield, as a question of media, as a matter of conscious and unconscious positioning within a society’s political development. In other words, a realism which—as in the case of Courbet or the politics of the Popular Front —is of relevance above all where there is an absence of reality: realism as the projection of a reality already latent in the present but not yet carried to realization. To express this in more political terms: realism as a historical and contemporary attempt to construct points of dominance, points of a visible, artistic partisanship. For us, the question

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<sup>2</sup> Siehe Klaus Herding (Hg.), *Realismus als Widerspruch. Die Wirklichkeit in Courbets Malerei*, Frankfurt a. M. 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Vgl. Expressionismusdebatte

thus arises: how can realism serve as a political lever today, without a systemic alternative at hand, without a Communist party, without a sense of confidence in the autonomy of art—i.e., ultimately, without the constitutive cornerstones of the historical avant-gardes? Due to the fact that the possible constructions of dominance in the present require constant updating, the emphatic reference to the particular, the mundane, remains a decisive factor. The debate over realism is a debate over what is real.

**David Riff:** I agree as far as the idea of seeing realism as something distinct from an already labelled, identificatory ‘political art’ goes and, as Kerstin proposes, using it as a ‘political lever’ of another kind. But where in the history of realism does one look for a counter-history? A key element for me would be Karl Marx. In my opinion, Marx was a realist. His concern was with using dialectic manoeuvres to grasp reality, and to do so from a position of apparent political resignation. Not to tell the world what it’s fighting for, but to show it what its struggles are actually about.<sup>4</sup> This is why Marx attacked the “critical criticism” of his day so adamantly.<sup>5</sup> This is all very relevant today. The ideology machine of “critical criticism” has long since advanced to become a productive force, and we work in special “critical institutions,” whether privately or publicly funded, in which criticism becomes reality as a mass-produced good, denying all reality in the process. For me, to this day, realism bears a potential to pinpoint and specify the truth in the face of diffuse criticality.<sup>6</sup>

**Jerónimo Voss:** Here the question also arises as to the role assigned to “political art” in the civil art institutions of the present. What actually happens in a field in which artists refer to themselves as “political” and thematic exhibitions of political art take place by the dozens?

**Johannes Paul Raether:** In this field there’s a tendency to identify the political as a nostalgic accumulation of formal means rather than the debating over a different

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx. Aus einem Brief an Arnold Ruge. Briefe aus den Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbüchern, MEW Band 1, 344ff.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx. Die heilige Familie oder Kritik der kritischen Kritik. 1845. MEW Band 2, S. 3 - 223

<sup>6</sup> Vgl. David Riff, „Criticality or Truth?“, in: Chto delat 18: Critique and Truth, Frühjahr 2009.

reality with the means of art. Here the abstract criticism of the social setting created within the bourgeois art institutions has become a consensus, whereas the political struggle over how, specifically, these settings are to be changed, is forced into a standstill. The actualization of the concept of realism therefore has to take as its point of departure the question as to where political positioning takes place: in which organizational forms, on which platforms, and in what contexts. Because the problem of the art institutions which constitute the critical art field is that they continue to focus primarily on events aiming at representation. There can be no political organization within this framework, merely a presentation of denominations. Instead of looking for “political art” in the present, I think the effort should be put into looking for what I would call “artistic politics”: an artistic practice conceived as a kind of interrelation of artistic production, the individual work, discussion and organization.

**Jessica Sehart:** The attempt to bring about an artistic politics of that kind would also bear a relationship to the construction of the “point of dominance” Kerstin was talking about—the attempt to establish a self-organized place within the field of contemporary art, from within which one could construct elements of dominance over the circumstances.

**David Riff:** In Marx’s *Outlines*, in the chapter on the forms preceding capitalist production, there’s an interesting paragraph:<sup>7</sup> in ancient times, the aim of production was a very limited human being, but never production in and of itself. That is why the “childish old world” seems so appealing from the narrow-minded viewpoint of the present, Marx says: we look for closed forms and set limitations. Antiquity gives us restricted enjoyment, whereas the world in capitalism cannot satisfy us, or, where it appears satisfying, proves wicked. In my opinion, that is still a very accurate assessment of cultural production today, despite all of the emotion mobilized within it. So maybe realism is actually about finding forms and relationships of this kind as “art in life,” and then to give it shape—and thus to clarify it—collectively, i.e. about establishing a reality-immanent conception of truth.

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<sup>7</sup> MEW Band 42. S. 396

**Kerstin Stakemeier:** When it comes to rescuing the concept of truth, I would like to stick to the Marxist assumption that social reality presents itself as a totality, but attempt to subsume this under a concept of truth which functions more in the sense of constant concretization—as for example in Gilles Deleuze’s political reformulation of the concept of affirmation. And one could go on from there by saying that, in a way, realism has to do with an affirmation of reality, or, more specifically, an affirmation against its mere factuality. An affirmation in the sense that we have an obligation to reality, since reality is the only thing that requires rescuing, and against that background what has to be done is to turn both works and texts against themselves. Realism as a constant conversion of reality, so to speak, against a self-marginalizing utopianism. To put that in more concrete terms, let me come back to the function of institutions in the formation of contemporary art, an aspect already addressed by Johannes. Marx referred to institutions as “objectifications of political attitudes”.<sup>8</sup> Here he was not concerned with a fundamental rejection of institutionalized action, but with the question as to what political attitude is realized in the respective institutional practice. And this brings us precisely to the problem of New Institutionalism and its neo-liberal standpoint that not only art is critical in and of itself, but also its institutions: its criticality is mere stuffing. These institutions are not interesting on account of their critical self-labelling, but because of their actual neo-liberal art policies.

**Johannes Paul Raether:** This form of institutional self-legitimization is interesting primarily with regard to the formation of national ideology—on the one hand in the form of seemingly ‘critical’ national self-historicization of the kind demonstrated by the Germany shows initiated by Eckhardt Gillen, for example, on the other hand, in the area of contemporary art, through the sponsoring of ‘critical’ positions as a distinctive national quality, as observed, for example, in the activities of the German Federal Cultural Foundation. What we have here is a pattern of “nation-branding” practiced all over Europe in the past years, its specific form varying from one country to the next. The question that arises is: how does critical art which is funded publicly,

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, Marx-Engels-Werke, Bd. 1: Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, Leipzig 1982, S. 209.

institutionally and nationally change as a result of its public subsidization? In this context, several attempts at self-organization are presently being carried out, for example the Rosa Perutz group to which we all belong.

**Jeronimo Voss:** This question also plays a decisive role with respect to the function of art funding for national image policies, if you think about the fact that the Goethe-Institut and the IFA are directly politically involved in the cultural hegemony of the expanding German “culture nation” abroad. When we criticize these institutions, though, the aim is not identify ‘culprits’, but to draw attention to the structural function of art and culture within globally active nationalisms, and to organize means of expressing opposition to these practices.

**David Riff:** That’s interesting. In contrast, the official “nation brand” Russia has been aggressively ‘post-critical’ and extremely affirmative, even imperial, in the past years. And realism? In this representation mentality, it is no more than a memory of its former self, one more resource in resource capitalism. It has lost its critical force. At the same time, collective ‘realism experiments’ taking place on the Russian periphery are extremely fashionable these days in the European fortress as a form of political outsourcing. How can you work ‘realistically’ in such a situation? How can one hegemony be played off against the other?

**Johannes Paul Raether:** I think it’s important not to discuss these changes moralistically, not just to accuse one another of sell-out, but to define art as a production condition in which we have to actualize our own forms of organization from the conscious reflection of our own roles as individualized producers.

**Kerstin Stakemeier:** If we take as our point of departure this kind of reconstruction of reality in the ‘critical’ art field, the possible role of an updated concept of realism can also be construed. No artwork can be merely realistic in and of itself. It is necessary to take leave of the idea of the dignity of the work category. That applies to artworks as well as to artists. The myth of singularity leaves both in the necessary overextension. Because what we have here is not a solitary structure, but rather a

“perforated subject”<sup>9</sup> whose formulation of a claim to reality does not function above all identificatorily, but is only conceivable as means of producing common alignments. Only a “realistic dispersal” of projections of the traditional, heroic, male subject of art can lead to a clustering of elements from which realism can evolve today as the organization of realistic artistic policy and the formation of the respective front: goodbye to the tragic, heroic figure, hello to documents, objects and structures of history and the present. The end of the solitary heroic achievement—dominance as a joint battle arrangement of history.

**Jerónimo Voss:** The melancholy figure of the glamorously failing dandy so popular these days would thus be replaced by something like ‘sticking together in failure,’ a means of gaining a perspective on individual practice in solidary contexts.

**David Riff:** I really like the idea of the “perforated subject” because in it I recognize a ‘realistic’ line of self-reflection of what it actually means to create art or culture in a bourgeois society. In this sense, the “divided subject” is the logical development of Hegel’s “destructive” or “evil subject”,<sup>10</sup> a reference—on the part of Hegel—to Rameau’s nephew, a figure created by Denis Diderot.<sup>11</sup> This nephew is an anti-hero, a fraud, a music teacher without masterworks who dawdles away time for the bourgeoisie, but who, in certain moments, exposes the contradictions of early bourgeois society and is thus closer to reality than the “honest”, “virtuous” consciousness with which he is juxtaposed. It is not difficult to recognize the romantic hero of the “failing” artist subject in this figure, but above all the type of figure which embodies the present-day “immaterial” producer at his/her worst, a shattering of virtuoso, self-alienated abilities. If we heroize this figure, we confirm the bourgeois subject, which sees its cohesion only in “virtue”, but always fails heroically alone. I think we should learn to conceive of our own mimetic virtuosity and its collective

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<sup>9</sup> the art of...

<sup>10</sup> G.W.F Hegel. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Felix Meiner Verlag Hamburg 2006. 332 ff. Zur Problematik des “zerklüfteten Bewusstseins” bei Hegel, siehe Georg Lukacs, *Der junge Hegel*. Band 2 Suhrkamp, 761 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Denis Diderot. *Le Neveu de Rameau 1762* (Aus dem Manuskript übersetzt und mit. Anmerkungen begleitet von Goethe. Leipzig: G. J. Goschen, 1805)

political failure in view of these cruel production conditions not only as fetishizable agony, but as an occasion for outrage which does not arise from the “quixotic” consciousness, which does not disguise itself as harmless culture, and which does not constantly dampen the fuse leading to the powder keg we’re all sitting on.