

THE READYMADE DEMONSTRATION

interview with James Voorhies, curator

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James: Could you describe what is The Readymade Demonstration?

RG: It is a performative event to take place in the public space of an urban environment. It is the re-staging of a demonstration that took place originally in East Berlin during the peaceful revolution in fall 1989. The idea is to stage the demonstration in a shifted context. In this way we want to open the possibility to look at the demonstration as a cultural technique and perceive the urban space as a stage for a discussion on common social values. By using a demonstration that already happened in a different context we avoid a specific political message but shift the attention towards the inherent cultural, economic and social implications.

James: In 2009 images of demonstrations proliferated the Internet and television. I can immediately think of the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh and the protests of the Iranian presidential election. Could you speak about the connections you see between the cultural technique of The Readymade Demonstration and those forms of recent protest in action? In other words, what is the relevance of the demonstration model as a cultural technique without a social or political breach to generate that action?

RG: When protests like those against the G20 Summit or the Iranian election are reflected in the media, they occur in certain iconic forms. There is a certain vocabulary used by the media to picture protests. One can think of shaky cell phone movies, pictures of burning flags and running crowds. On the other hand there is a certain traditionalized protesters culture: raised fists, a certain dress code, mumming etc. Demonstrators act to gain media attention and the media shapes the image of a protest in the public mind. The fact that a protest is reported, shapes it's appearance and the way it is perceived. In such a way protests can be seen as "instrumentalized events" absorbed by the media culture. A demonstration without a political breach represents this idea of a protest that has it's only relevance from celebrating it's stereotypic behavioral forms. It is interesting to take a closer look on the relation of opponents. Both sides depend on each other. There is no anti-globalization without globalization. So the culture of protests and the forms of dialogue are also determined by this dependency.

James: From a personal perspective could you speak about the pivotal point in German and world history when the Berlin Wall fell? How has it affected the content of your practice?

RG: In the original demonstration nearly half a million people were protesting. The demonstration was organized by civil-rights activists and the performing artists union. A result of the peaceful demonstrations were weekly round-table discussions between politicians and independent activists discussing democracy and reforms. We experienced this moment as a starting point of direct democracy. This the discovery of individual liberty continued in many Eastern European countries. After 20 years we can analyze that there were missed many chances of a radical renewal towards civil societies not only in the East.

Another interesting fact is that even an artist union was co-organizing a demonstration. From our point of view: art can be a catalyst of social processes. We understand this demonstration as an utopian space to pose questions and raise critical awareness.

James: Some of the participants in *The Readymade Demonstration* were not yet born in 1989 and others were too young to remember the Fall of the Berlin Wall. So how are they supposed to relate to the actions of the work?

RG: The work is not about history, but about how we perceive our personal role in society. The *Demonstration* uses the original slogans from 1989 in German. It means that there is almost no possibility for the participants to identify with the actual messages. The attention is drawn to a different aspect: the politics of space.

James: But, one might say since the work is based on an important break in political hegemony, history has a place in the concept of *The Readymade Demonstration*. Could you expand on the part of your response about the perception of our role in society? Could you say more your interest in the politics of space?

RG: Jacques Ranciere speaks about the creation of a common territory. For that reason it is important to analyze the political potential of space. By putting in question the established determination of space in terms of ownership, use and access there can be raised that critical potential. In our renaming projects we give temporary new names to streets. A new name changes the perspective and plays with different and ambivalent realities and contradictions become apparent. We try to create a new utopian space beyond from dispositions and definitions. With a change of perception through a public intervention or action there opens a social dialogue that can reach different audiences. Therin exists the responsibility in dealing with the politics of space.

James: The workshop was a significant part of The Readymade Demonstration. Could you describe it? Why did you organize it? And, why did you choose to recreate the banners and posters that you did?

RG: In preparation of the demonstration RG held a Banner Workshop. It was announced in public and mainly students took part. The workshop gave us the chance to introduce the idea of a readymade demonstration. It was important to us to involve possible protesters in the making of the materials. As banner models there were used original signs and posters from 1989. The aim was to re-create them completely including the German slogans. The message of the demonstration changes depending on the shifted place and time.

James: Were the banners and slogans selected for a reason? What is source for these particular images and why you decided to use them?

RG: The banners were collected in the 1990ies by the German Historic Museum in Berlin to preserve the hand-made artefacts of the demonstration. A selection from the preserved banners was a model for the readymade demonstration banners. Criteria for certain choices were that the banners characterize the main ideas of the peaceful revolution, like the claim of a better socialism and the ban against violence. Some of the banners were chosen for it's idealistic contents, like: "Philosophy Instead Of Ideology" or some others, like a banner for free market economy that refers to the romantic imagination of a social capitalism which satisfies all consumerist needs.

James: Beyond the obvious factor that you were invited to participate in the exhibition in Columbus, why did you decide to do this action in Columbus? What are some of the specific conditions in Columbus that you believe helped to shape the work?

RG: The project was developed especially for Columbus although it could have been realized also in other places. It was our interest to relate to the specific political, economical and urban conditions of the US American urban environment. The structure of almost all American cities stands for an economy of growth and consumerism. When we asked what is special about the place we were told that it the special thing is that is considered to be the most average American city.

James: And how did you find Columbus in terms of reaction to the work and willingness (or not) to participate? Does a particular situation or conversation come to mind?

RG: Friendly speaking we were not counting with a half million protesters. The participants of the readymade demonstration made a peaceful use of public space. When the demonstration crossed by a bus stop chanting Wir Sind Das Volk (We Are The People) the waiters for the bus spontaneously answered with a chorus: We Don't Care! This strange interplay perfectly illustrates the growing disintegration tendencies in a society that shows a tendency to shift existential risks from the public sphere to the individual.

James: Could you talk about the aspect of procession in your practice? With this in mind are there works or events by artists that have influenced that element of your practice?

RG: The word procession reminds us of a process. We believe that art interferes with other disciplines and can catalyze social processes. Also the original idea of the readymade as it was understood by Duchamp as an object changes toward a process that includes a procession. Processions in the closer sense played a role in some of our previous projects. For instance there is the public intervention Labour Day. Together with social activists we created banners that refer to the topic of work in a way that they describe job nomadism and the rise of the individual. The idea was to change the understanding of labour from a traditional, union based concept towards a concept of labour that is more and more connected to individual risks.

Another project was the Cow Demonstration, realized just a few weeks before The Readymade Demonstration. It was realized in the context of a debate on urban developments in Zagreb, Croatia. Cows were forming a procession to claim their territory in an area that was endangered to become a spot for real estate speculation. For this project we co-operated with environmental activists. Our art practice is merely influenced by political and social movements, not by art works in the first place.

James: How do you determine the success of a work?

RG: Success means that a work becomes part of the cultural and political consciousness of the society.

James: Comparable to some of the other participants in Descent to Revolution, REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT does not draw income from commercial art galleries. From a

practical point of view, in terms of economy and livelihood, how do you support yourself with your practice? What do you see as some of the challenges and benefits of this model?

RG: We see a clear distinction between the commercial art world which is determined by galleries, auctions and collectors and a different sphere that is sometimes called the second art market. When we started out we clearly decided not to relate to the first art market, but choose to be self-organized, meaning that the mercantile aspects of our practice are integrated in it and controlled by ourselves. So a lot our activities depend on a public interest, are based on public money, or relate to the educational sphere. Public funders sometimes try to control the artistic contents, so the challenge is to balance own interests and the requirements of projects that are produced in the form of a social dialogue.