

# Always Choose the Worst Option. Artistic Resistance and the Strategy of Over-Identification

by BAVO

Introduction: Shut Up and Give Us Art!

As a protest against the upsurge of extreme right sentiments in his home country Switzerland and its impact upon democracy, artist Thomas Hirschhorn occupied the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris for several days in 2005. There he staged an anarchistic show that levelled a withering critique against Swiss domestic politics, questioning its democratic character and mocking elements from popular culture that are manipulated by politicians and the media to propagate racist policies. Hirschhorn's action was entitled *Swiss Swiss Democracy* and took place in the *Centre Culturel du Suisse in Paris, March 2005*. It followed his earlier boycott against performing in Switzerland since October 2003 when Christopher Blocher, the leader of the Swiss Populist Party UDC was appointed Minister of Justice and Police. Needless to say, it did not take long for the politicians in question to strike back. The latter accused Hirschhorn of not respecting the democratic rules of the game, of using illegitimate means to manipulate public opinion, and of exceeding the extent of his power and expertise as an artist. In the end, this led to the Swiss parliament's decision to reduce the budget of the Pro Helvetia foundation that subsidized Hirschhorn's action.

This is exemplary of the sad fate of art in our current social order. On the one hand, art is seen as one of democracy's most essential pillars: it is the space *par excellence* for the free expression of ideas, the experimentation with new models of society. However, when an artist takes this role too seriously and becomes too straightforwardly political, s/he is accused of demagoguery or simply discarded as bad art. In short, s/he receives the same frosty treatment as the country rock band The Dixie Chicks did after having made the fatal error of uttering a word of criticism against G.W. Bush's war on Iraq. The underlying message of the organized boycotts of the band and public destruction of their records was loud and clear: 'shut up and sing' – as the title of the documentary rightly suggests – i.e. as artists, they should stick to what they know. It is clear that art is here defined in the most narrow, regressive way possible – as a specialized, politically neutral discipline focused on the production of beautiful objects or, in the case of The Dixie Chicks, beautiful sounds. The trouble started for the Dixie Chicks when, during a concert in London, the lead singer admitted to the audience to be ashamed to come from Texas 'too', which was immediately interpreted by a lot of Americans as a sign

of being unpatriotic and as support for terrorists. See documentary *Shut up and Sing* (Cabin Creek Films, 2006), directed by Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck.

This condescending treatment of art is the suffocating fate we all – artists or not – face today in these post-political times. On the one hand, one is allowed to say everything, experiment with everything, and criticize everything. More than allowed, it is expected, *demande*d even as our civic, democratic duty. Still, if one takes this commandment to subvert and criticize too far or too seriously – and 'too far' today means that one fundamentally questions the ideological coordinates of the current order such as representative democracy, the free market or the nation-state – one is immediately disqualified as a legitimate discussion partner, treated like an incompetent, ignorant imbecile who stepped out of line and should better stick to his own field of expertise. Needless to say, such reasoning could not be further removed from democratic politics proper, which, according to political philosopher Jacques Rancière, precisely takes place when somebody makes a claim that s/he is unauthorized or unqualified to do. See Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente. Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995). It is precisely this 'stepping out of line' that is foreclosed in the situation described above by sticking to a strongly hierarchized image of society in which politics is regarded as a specialized field of expertise populated by political professionals who are the sole masters of the art of politics.

Today's Blackmail of Constructive Critique

One of the most symptomatic manifestations of this onslaught on any real critique, i.e. critique that does not limit itself to mere window dressing, is no doubt today's insistence on constructive critique. What has become completely unacceptable is to 'merely' criticize, that is, to critically diagnose and analyse society's contradictions without at the same time offering a concrete alternative or solution for the predicaments analysed. The latter has become the sole criterion according to which every criticism is judged. Think of the reception of the work of documentary activist Michael Moore, especially his *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which investigates the murky reality behind the United States' war against terror both abroad and at home. Even within enlightened circles, it is common to downplay Moore as someone who is always the first to know what is wrong with something and to blame it on someone without ever coming up with a suggestion as to how things could be done better. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, critics might wonder how Moore himself would deal with the undeniably real threat of global terrorism. This allows one to dismiss his critical documentaries as suffering from the same

disease inflicted upon the Democrats in the United States who, although extremely critical of Bush, are said to be equally incapable of offering an alternative to war.

This demand for giving concrete alternatives is, of course, the standard way in which people affirm their authority with regard to a certain matter, neutralize any criticism and continue business as usual. Nothing is more effective to silence one's fiercest critics than to simply turn the tables and ask the latter: 'so, since you always seem to know better, what would you do then?' This change of register – from a discussion of problems to one of solutions, from political critique to pragmatic politics – is meant to catch the critic off guard, who as a rule cannot do more than regurgitate the same critical points or mumble some general propositions. The latter is then used to expose the critic as a cowardly, impotent figure deriving some sort of hysterical satisfaction from asking critical questions for the sake of asking them, yet shrugging away from the much more difficult and risky task of assuming responsibility and coming up with concrete solutions to the problems addressed. One can think here of the stream of mocking images of Michael Moore on the internet, in which he is depicted as an overweight, burger-eating, loud-mouthed, irresponsible, decadent, marginal character, manipulative of the facts so as to be able to criticize those in power, thriving on the negative attention he receives, sympathizing with America's enemies, and so on. This is the price to pay for taking one's democratic duty of criticizing too seriously: one is ridiculed as a sick, quarrelsome, pathological figure. The underlying blackmail is thus all too clear: 'either you offer constructive criticism with concrete solutions to go with it or you shut up!'.

It is therefore clear that the demand for constructive criticism deals a direct blow to any real critique. After all, radical critique – by its very nature – cannot immediately be made productive within the existing order since the latter is radically put into question. Radical critique challenges the very standard which measures productivity. It is no coincidence that such censorship – which the demand for concrete counterproposals undoubtedly is – is most often exercised when the critic hits a central nerve of the system, a fundamental issue that cannot be solved without a radical change of the existing order. Precisely the latter makes it so difficult for the critic to respond to this demand, since it asks of him / her the superhuman task of not only creating, through his / her critical labour, a mental space where a radically new set of ideological coordinates could be invented, but also to fill in that space and translate it into practicable policy for everyday situations.

A first, appropriate response on the part of critical forces would be to simply snub this impossible demand and tell those in power to solve their own problems, since they created them in the first place and have the mandate and power to do so. In other words, the critic should expose the demand to propose concrete alternatives as illegitimate, unfair and ultimately a sign of the ruling order's own impotence. After all, the existing order demands of its critic everything that it (the existing order) – with all its means and expertise – fails to do. By exposing the inappropriateness of this demand, the critic should therefore be able to project his / her alleged impotence back onto the ruling order. The latter, however, is only possible when critical actors stop playing today's game of pragmatic post-politics and defend their right to criticize without offering any alternatives.

#### An Executive with an Activist Face

A key scene in the critical documentary *The Corporation* allows us to understand the new norm of constructive criticism as part of a more general mutation, which has become increasingly more prevalent over the past decades – a change in the way in which the ruling order mobilizes society. See documentary *The Corporation* (Big Picture Media Corporation, 2004), directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott. In this scene, we follow a group of other-globalist activists as they organize a sit-in in the backyard of former chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart in order to protest against the malpractices of multinational oil companies. To their utmost surprise, the chairman revealed himself as a passionate critic of the oil industry, displaying a clear insight into the many inconvenient truths behind this notoriously dirty industry. Moreover, he claimed that they were not telling him anything he had not already thought of himself and that he therefore did not need activists for that. The real question, he retorted, is what they were going to do about it. In this way, Moody-Stuart put the ball back in the activists' court while at the same time making himself an indispensable link in the chain by making them aware of the fact that although they might not have the power to change anything, he did!

Here we encounter today's ruling order at its most cunning. The shrewd tactics of the former chairman of Shell consists in not only being more critical than the activists but also in accusing them of shrugging away in the face of the enormous challenges ahead: 'if you really think things are so bad, then stop complaining and put your money where your mouth is!' In short, every criticism is interpreted as an unconscious wish for constructive cooperation and, consequently, every critic is treated as a possible ally in finding solutions to remedy

the cracks in the system. Even if the activist in question might be in denial about it – so the chairman would undoubtedly argue – what he really wants is a share of power, in order to be able to make a difference.

It was psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who already in the late sixties theorized this new style of power. Contrary to the classical, authoritarian way of ruling, i.e. by brutally forcing one's own project down society's proverbial throat through sheer use of force and clever manoeuvring, Lacan noticed how the new authority figure – which he called 'the capitalist master' – assumed the same subject position as that of the hysteric. In Lacanian terminology, this subjectivity is symbolized by the letter  $s$ , which represents the split subject, the inherent hysterical character of subjectivity, the fact that the core of the subject is a question mark and not some stable, self-certain substance. Lacan's theories of power were part of his discourse theory, which he developed in his Séminaire XVII: L'Envers de la psychanalyse (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991). It was in a lecture he gave around the same time (12 / 5 / 1972) at the University of Milan entitled 'Du discours psychanalytique', that he indicated that what is repressed in the traditional master discourse, i.e. the fact that the master is also just a split subject ( $s$ ), occupies the position of agency in the new, master discourse – which Lacan calls 'capitalist discourse' – and that the master's project – in Lacanian terms, 'the Master-signifier' ( $S1$ ) – is inversely repressed. That is to say, the new master wins over the subject by putting his/her cards on the table, by openly listing all weaknesses and problematic features of his/her project. The advantage of the capitalist master is that by presenting herself as her own worst critic – think of the chairman in the above example – she outwits her opponents by robbing them of their ammunition, thereby disabling the standard critical procedure to tirelessly confront the existing order with everything it has to repress in order to simulate its superiority and flawlessness. The lucidity, modesty, enlightenment even, of the new style of power, on the other hand, creates the illusion that the system is receptive to participatory improvement, that there is still significant manoeuvring space that allows for bottom-up input as well as a willingness on the part of those in power to amenably discuss such suggestions and take them into serious consideration. In other words, it creates an atmosphere of horizontality, the feeling that both ruler and ruled are on an equal footing, engaged in a dialogue, and eager to complement each other's capabilities. Consequently, critical actors are seduced into collaborating amicably with their usual enemies about possible solutions to the many problems at hand.

Although the transparency or horizontality displayed by the capitalist master might be evaluated as a great leap forward, it is of course a sham. Let there be no doubt about it, the capitalist master firmly believes – no less than the traditional master that preceded him – that his own (capitalist) project is the only game in town and will sooner

or later create heaven on earth. From the chairman's response, for instance, it is clear that criticism of long-term resource depletion, environmental destruction and social deracination does not, to his mind, put in question multinational corporations as such. On the contrary, the latter are cleverly presented as the only possible means of solving the problem – lacking only in a more efficient, all-inclusive management of its activities. In short, the difference between the capitalist master and the old authoritarian master is that the former – conscious of the hyper-sensitivity of society to authority issues after centuries of emancipation struggles – strategically represses this belief in his own project by fostering an open, interactive approach to society. Note that the capitalist discourse inverts the traditional procedure of interpellation – as formulated by Louis Althusser. It is no longer a case of a figure of authority – a policeman, for instance – shouting 'Hey, you!', and the subject somehow feeling addressed by this call. Capitalist-style interpellation rather works like the figures in Kafka's courts – it pretends not to want anything from you, not to feel too strongly about its own case, even openly doubting and mocking it. The trick here is that it puts the ball in the subject's court. By erasing or confusing its own desire, the capitalist master ensures that the initiative has to come from the subject ('Do you really want to join us? It is up to you!') The capitalist master, in other words, never directly interpellates the subject by convincing the latter of his project, but only indirectly intrigues him/her via a complex dialectic of affirmation and mockery of that project. This sophisticated, virtual style of interpellation, of course, makes it more effective – like a poison slowly seeping into the mind.

#### Artists Without Borders

It is crucial to see how this new division of labour is more than mere wishful thinking on the side of power, and is increasingly internalized by artists themselves. Faced with an open invitation extended by the same powerful players they used to criticize, artists have reconceptualized their role as socially engaged actors. More precisely, under the motto 'you the power, we the critics-creative thinking', it has led to a more pragmatic interpretation of their critical role and idealism. Most symptomatic in this regard, is the rise, over the past decade, of what might be called 'NGO art' or even – analogous to the humanitarian organization, Doctors Without Borders: 'Art Without Borders'. With such humanitarian organizations, these art practices share the idea that, considering the many urgent needs at hand, there is no call for high art statements, big political manifestoes or sublime expressions of moral indignation. Instead what are needed are direct, concrete, artistic interventions that help disadvantaged populations and communities to deal with the problems they are facing. The latter is seen as the only way in which art can regain its credibility and legitimacy

as an engaged force in society, especially after its disastrous ‘affair’ with modernist, totalitarian ideologies and its more recent surrender to postmodern irony and relativism.

One of the rising stars in this genre is the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. Her position more and more resembles that of a conflict consultant, using art as a way to intervene and mediate in heated social situations. Her artistic actions include setting up a temporary museum for contemporary art in abandoned shops in a problem neighbourhood during the time of its restructuring; allowing children to design their own park facilities in the midst of a large-scale urban renewal project; helping residents faced with the destruction of their neighbourhood to construct a collective memory; and running an empty house in a newly built area to accommodate unregulated social practices. It respectively concerns the following projects: De Strip (Vlaardingen, 2002-2004), Face your world, Urban lab (Amsterdam-Slotervaart, 2005), Will o’ the Wisp (Rotterdam-Nieuw Crooswijk, 2004-2005), Het blauwe huis (Amsterdam-IJburg, 2005-present). Van Heeswijk is one of a growing army of artists who are travelling around the globe making their artistic-creative skills available for problem assessment and solving – sometimes even anticipating problems or creating problems to dynamize social processes. Whether it concerns the development of a cheap, sustainable and easy way for illegal communities on the border between the United States and Mexico to build their own housing (Estudio Teddy Cruz) or running a popular theatre in a third world slum (26’10 SOUTH Architects), all these projects betray a concern for social empowerment, for small, modest interventions that attempt to improve life in specific situations from the bottom up, in close interaction and participation with local actors and stakeholders. In all these cases, art is redefined in terms of creative consultancy – the act of consulting presented as artwork.

It is clear that in the case of Art Without Borders, the old existentialist motto of the engaged artist of getting one’s hands dirty, no longer refers to the tragic compromises and suicidal sacrifices an artist has to make in his/her engagement with a critical or revolutionary project. On the contrary, commitment is understood as the constant production of innovative micro-solutions – so-called ‘pocket revolutions’ – to the real, everyday problems people encounter in their immediate life world. This constitutes a fundamental move away from any deep criticism, away from a critical art practice that throws fundamental questions at the ruling order and tirelessly confronts it with its inconvenient truths, towards an art practice devoted to providing answers, solutions, toolkits and DIY-manuals for the problems at hand, often in close cooperation with market players or public instances.

Over the last decade, this ‘Art Without Borders’ has developed into an alternative art scene outside the official circuit of museums and art institutions, receiving considerable budgets and funding. However, this NGO art can be seen as the worldly counterpart of a contemporary movement within contemporary museum art proper. We are thinking here of the so-called relational art, as theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud, which is also explicitly positioned against the critical art tradition – that, for example, in the sixties ceaselessly confronted society with its contradictions so as to dialectically supersede the existing order and revolutionize society down to its every fibre. Relational art, on the contrary, aims at experimenting with new social relations in micro-situations such as a happening in a gallery space, for example. Instead of provoking the audience into action through confrontation with the violence and injustice of the current order, relational art is all about generating positive experiences in small, controlled settings, which might then form the basis of a renewal of social relations at large. For a critique of this relational art practice, see BAVO, ‘Let Art Save Democracy! Or: Can Relational Art Also Subvert Today’s Imperative to Re-stage Non-capitalist Social Relations in this so-called Post-utopian Age?’, in: Metahaven, Regimes of Representation. Art & Politics beyond the House of the People, conference proceedings volume (2006). This pragmatic turn is experienced by the proponents of NGO art as a sort of homecoming. After art’s disastrous adventure with politics in the twentieth century, it is now returning to what it can do best: to engage with the world in a no-nonsense way and, through experiment and play, offer creative solutions for real problems. The cultural agent is, in short, recast as a *homo pragmaticus* who – averse to and free from any political agenda or ideological distortions – engages with society.

However noble the intentions of this Art Without Borders might be, or perhaps precisely because of its noble intentions, it is a valued ally of the current system that, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu rightly puts it, is more and more evolving into a two-pronged system of hard, economic sectors as its right hand, and soft, social sectors as its left hand. The right hand is mercilessly cutting jobs in the name of efficiency and imposing market norms on every human activity – leaving a social wasteland in its wake. The left hand – the soft, social sectors – is then asked to patch things up within ever stricter budgetary confines. See Pierre Bourdieu, Acts of Resistance. Against the New Myths of Our Time (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Because of their inborn empathy for the underdog, their willingness to work *pro deo* and their ability to win the hearts and minds of the people, artists are increasingly enlisted in the left-hand side of this schizophrenic system. In this way, the art sector is reduced to cannon fodder for a system in which socio-cultural programmes are increasingly becoming not only merely palliative – i.e. limited to damage control – but also purely symbolic, i.e. meant to give the victims left behind in neo-liberalism’s incessant march forward the feeling that they are not just left by the wayside but still somehow count.

The crucial question is whether NGO artists, with their micro-interventions, also politicize the larger injustices and skewed power relations that are at play in the context in which they operate. In other words, do they also problematize the mechanisms responsible for producing today's 'homo sucker' – as Slavoj Žižek calls the many victims of the current world order? Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002) 71. It is here that *Art Without Borders* more often than not falls short. In the heated social and political situations in which they work – one can say that they deal with the reverse side of capitalism's magical recovery from its near-death experience in the mid-seventies – their highly specific and practical interventions cannot but strike one as too modest, naive, somewhat childish and misplaced, especially in light of the violent, systemic nature of the deeper causes behind the local problems addressed. In the case of Jeanne van Heeswijk's interventions within major restructuring schemes of neighbourhoods for instance, the underlying neo-liberal and neo-conservative mechanisms are never problematized as such or tackled with the same vigour and creative energy and attention that is devoted to the emotional and mental health of the victims of the restructuring. Still, it is neo-liberal kill or cure measures that are responsible for the victimization of these population groups and their condemnation to an uncertain future. For this critique, see BAVO, 'Neoliberalism with Dutch Characteristics. The Big Fix-up of the Netherlands and the Practice of Embedded Cultural Activism', in: Maria Hlavajova (et al.), *Citizens and Subjects. The Netherlands, for example* (Zürich: JRP-Ringier, 2007) 51-63.

One of the reasons why *Art Without Borders* fails to confront systemic issues in their interventions, is no doubt their adherence to a pragmatic-humanitarian ideology, with its emphasis on inventing concrete solutions that can be directly implemented – which is of course a manifestation of today's norm of constructive critique. The urge of NGO artists for concrete actions *a priori* limits the scope for action and shuts off the possibility of a radical questioning of the existing order, since the latter is needed – or at least, so it is assumed – for the realization of those actions. In other words, their addiction to doing something useful in the face of the needy other – which is elevated into some Levinasian Other – makes them dependent for the implementation of their initiatives on the same order that produced those needy in the first place. For this reason, artists have to repress the more fundamental problems at play in the context of the work. *NGO art* thus succumbs to what one might call the humanitarian fallacy, the idea that before one gets on one's high horse and aims at changing the world in its entirety, one first has to offer relief to the victims, the motto of the

humanitarian mind being: 'victims first, politics later'. In practice, however, this often implies: 'No politics please, victims only'. The humanitarian's reasoning is that taking an explicit political stance would endanger care for the victims, since it might cause opposition from the same authorities that are needed to deliver the goods in the field. This denial of politics leads to an excessive focus on the 'what' – i.e. on what can be done, how it is to be done, etc. – that overshadows the 'that' – i.e. outrage over the fact that there is something fundamentally wrong, the political causes, etc. We can say that the obsession of the engaged artist to immediately think in terms of practicable solutions leads to a pragmatic blinding, that is, today's variety of the ideological blinding so heavily criticized after the proclamation of the end of ideology. If ideological blinding referred to the denial or distortion of reality caused by an allegiance to an abstract set of beliefs and values that overdetermines the interpretation of reality and censors out all incompatible elements, and thereby seriously limits the scope for practical action, pragmatic blinding inversely means the censoring of a certain conceptualization of reality based on its alleged unproductivity for practice. We can thus also speak of a *censorship from practice*.

The paradox – or tragedy even – of *Art Without Borders* is the fact that precisely the eagerness of cultural agents to immediately get down to business and make a difference prevents them from acting in a way that would be appropriate to the bigger stakes of the context, as this immediacy sits uneasily with a radical critique of the existing order. This argument is fully developed in our forthcoming book, *Too Active to Act. Cultural Activism After the End of History* (unpublished manuscript). In practice, NGO art more often than not leads to a diarrhoea of unconnected, highly specific, ad hoc interventions that, although offering instant relief, extinguishes any possibility of a long-term solution.

#### Always Choose the Worst Option

Faced with such criticism, NGO artists will no doubt resort to the bottom-line argument that their actions at least succeed in making the world a slightly better place; that those most affected by the injustices of the current world order now at least have some means at their disposal to improve their living conditions or to socially empower themselves. We here encounter the true colours of *Art Without Borders*: it is not aimed at the deposition of the existing order, but rather at 'making the best of a bad situation'. In short, although aware of the many flaws and injustices in today's world, they do not believe they have the power to change or even challenge forces like capitalism or representative

**democracy. As a result, they rather focus on the small things they can change, on doing the best they can under less than perfect circumstances, on making a difference, however minimal, in the here and now.** This argument is sometimes also sublimated into a professional ethic, *i.e.* the fact that it would be unprofessional to interfere in matters that fall outside of one's creative expertise (*'who is the artist to say that capitalism is bad?'*). The latter is seen as a duty, since a minimally improved order is far more preferable than the existing order as such. In this sense, it differs greatly from more radical positions, *i.e.* positions of resistance that start from the premise that there is something so fundamentally wrong with the existing order that every attempt at making it better, however well-intended, will always be perverted by it, and that one should thus aim for nothing less than the radical subversion of that order. In light of this radical position, there is no doubt something self-defeating in the position of NGO artists. They depart from the premise that radical, global change is impossible, and consequently limit themselves to the invention of highly specific solutions designed for local contexts, which makes global change even more unlikely. In short, it is as if they throw in the towel too quickly and shrug away from the much more difficult task of forcing a fundamental change in mindset. NGO art also differs from those forms of resistance that – even though they do not see the possibility of a fundamental change in the near future – do not self-censor their critical potential from the get-go, but at least question the ruling ideological coordinates.

In the remainder of this essay, we will pursue this more radical line of artistic resistance. We will follow Karl Kraus's provocative suggestion that in being forced to choose between two evils, one should always choose the worst evil. This would imply that, as an artist, one would have to give up the will to resist altogether; to stop trying – like the pragmatic idealists – to be the 'idealist in the machine', patiently and tirelessly ironing out the rough edges of the system. Instead of fleeing from the suffocating closure of the current system, one is now incited to fully immerse oneself in it, even contributing to the closure. To choose the worst option, in other words, means no longer trying to make the best of the current order, but precisely to make the worst of it, to turn it into the worst possible version of itself. It would thus entail a refusal of the current blackmail in which artists are offered all kinds of opportunities to make a difference, on the condition that they give up on their desire for radical change.

We call this strategy that of *over-identification*. This term was coined by Slavoj Žižek to denote the unique subversive strategy of the Slovenian

avant-garde group Laibach in communist Yugoslavia of the eighties. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Why are Laibach and NSK not fascists?', in: M'ARS (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1993), vol. 3 / 4. See also: Slavoj Žižek, 'On (un-)changing canons and extreme avant-gardes', lecture on the symposium 'East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe', MOMA New York, 23 / 3 / 2003. Unlike the stereotypical Eastern European dissident movement – whose model is no doubt the Polish Solidarność movement – pleading for a humanization and relaxation of the communist regimes, Laibach challenged the communist regime by accusing them of being too lax, too soft, lacking belief in their own system. Inversely, Laibach's performances, in which a powerful potion of Stalinist and Nazi symbols was dished up, strategically pleaded for an ultra-orthodox communism that was *even more tough* than its 'real-life' counterpart. In this way, they succeeded in embarrassing the communist rulers that felt out-flanked on all sides, both left and right. It is this strategy of choosing the worst option – in this case between a communism with a human face and an even tougher, thoroughly inhuman communism – that we shall explore in the following section, applying it to today's topoi of resistance. We can here briefly mention two other strategies of artistic resistance of the radical type that are propagated today. The first is the strategy of doing nothing, the idea that artists should withdraw themselves from a system that thrives on the idealism of artists, that uses the latter's freshness to constantly revolutionize itself, thereby pulling the plug on that system. This strategy is today's variety of what, in the high days of May '68, was called 'marginalism': young people preferring life in the margins of society above participation in the regular economy. The problem with this strategy is that this marginality is internalized and accommodated within today's order, think of the way our oil-companies invent relaxed regimes for activists within the company structure. The second often propagated strategy is that of inventing new deep ideals, a new vision of society, that can feed / motivate a wide countermovement, so as to move outside or beyond of the existing ideological co-ordinates of capitalism or representative democracy. Problematic in this case, is where artists could find inspiration – if it is not to be some creation ex nihilo – for such alternative vision in the present system, that more and more closes in on itself and its subjects, and limits, controls even, their mental horizon? In other words, how radically new can such a vision be, so as to be able to resist the notorious capacity of capitalism to feed off other value systems?

### Giving a Big 'Yes' to Capitalism

It is precisely such over-identification with the enemy that is applied in the documentary *The Yes Men*, the story of activists Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum – who call themselves 'the Yes Men' – posing as representatives of the World Trade Organization (WTO), one of the key neo-liberal global financial institutions. In the bogus lectures they present ever so seriously at conferences and at universities, their strategy is to present the official discourse of the WTO in its pure, unmediated form, that is, stripped of any form of sugar-coating such as ethical sensibilities, concern for poverty or respect for democracy. Recall, for example, the hilarious scene in which one of the Yes Men participates as a representative of the WTO in a television debate

on global injustice and the role of financial institutions. The usual trick of genuine representatives on such debates is, of course, to water down their own policies or couch them in euphemistic terms, so as to prevent being attacked by the opponents head-on. The Yes Men, on the contrary, bluntly and openly propagated all kinds of hardcore neo-liberal arguments and schemes, to the obvious confusion of the other participants in the debate. As fake WTO representatives, they emphasized, for example, the WTO's alliance with big corporate power structures, presenting it as something natural. They even insisted that the works of neo-liberal thinkers such as Milton Friedman should be obligatory reading for school children. This open confession of an absolutely anti-democratic policy totally flabbergasted his main opponent in the debate, a wide-eyed otherglobalist barely able to utter the words: 'well, that's clear then'.

However, the real target of the Yes Men's performance is the WTO itself, which finds itself in an awkward position. The latter is faced not with a sceptic laying bare the inconvenient truths behind its policies – which can easily be denied or given a spin – but rather with someone who over-enthusiastically identifies with their position, completely annihilating any critical distance and fully endorsing the WTO programme and ideology. Confronted with such display of ultra-orthodox neo-liberalism, the WTO cannot but tone down its own message and emphasize how neo-liberalism should not be taken as the only game in town. After all, it cannot possibly solve all of the world's problems by itself. In other words, the Yes Men's strategy of over-identification forces their opponent, the WTO, to betray the articles of its faith, to deny its passionate attachment to the neo-liberal programme and admit defeat, which makes it – instead of its critics – appear weak.

The critical effectiveness of the Yes Men consists in being too honest and sympathetic towards the WTO, thereby they succeed in bringing into the open the 'neo-liberal utopia of unlimited exploitation' – as Bourdieu phrased it. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of resistance. Against the new myths of our time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Think of the entertaining scene in which the two Yes Men posed as WTO representatives at a student conference. There they proposed a scheme to solve the world's hunger problem by reprocessing the faeces of McDonald's customers into hamburgers for the Third World – thereby cashing in on its leftover nutritional value. What should be the ultimate wet dream of any neo-liberal adherent – not having to apologize for what s/he wants, being able to openly exploit a profitable opportunity while at the same time concocting a profitable solution for the third world's food shortage – somehow fails to result in a utopian world in which the freedom and dignity

of all is secured. Instead, it leads to a frightening, immoral universe of cold and ruthless calculation. The Yes Men, in other words, rush in where neo-liberals fear to tread by applying neo-liberal *doxa* more consistently, rigorously and ruthlessly – thus beating them at their own game and laying bearing the ugly dystopian kernel of the neo-liberal utopia.

Such explicit, uncut rendering of the ultimate consequences of a social formation, makes the strategy of over-identification an effective antidote against what cultural philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes as today's all-pervasive cynicism, in which people know very well that there is something fundamentally wrong with something, yet continue to act as if they don't. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983). Recall how, in one of the Yes Men's fake WTO presentations, the public – a gathering of highly educated people – uncritically endures the scandalous proposals of abject nonsense staged by the two activists or, at least, gives them the benefit of the doubt. As we argued earlier, this doubt is actively maintained by the capitalist discourse by presenting itself as an open system conscious of its own problems and ready to take into account critical suggestions or consider alternatives. This attitude causes people to let go of their criticism and to conveniently repress their knowledge about the terrible backside of our capitalist society, assuming that the latter cannot possibly be that perverted, immoral or unjust. *This tendency to always think the best of something, to believe that 'things can't possibly be that fundamentally screwed up', is the stuff ideology is made from. Ideology always parasitizes on the urge of people to believe the unbelievable, to make sense of the meaningless, to make plausible the implausible, since the reality of living in an inconsistent, meaningless world is, at least for the majority of people, experienced as unbearable. Consequently, faced by an inconsistent, unjust social system, people try to make it consistent at all costs – almost as if their life depended on it, which, in a way, it does. So, all the current order has to do, is to encourage such a sympathetic reading by the subject, to provide the footage, the materials to produce reasonable doubt in the subject. In this sense, one can say that the subject does the difficult job for this order, proving its case, legitimizing it, tying the loose ends together.*

This cynical subjective mode is, of course, only possible because we are never truly confronted with what we are doing, with the consequences of our capitalist lifestyle. Along with revealing documentaries exposing all kinds of inconvenient truths, today's subject is also bombarded by arguments that keep his/her disgust or shame in check – well below the level at which people start demanding instant and radical change. Even supposed critics of global financial institutions such as the WTO, like macroeconomist Joseph Stiglitz, argue that if economic globalization were to be managed better, the high profits of corporations will eventually trickle down to the world's poorest population. In short, after having sat through the onslaught of night-

marsh scenes of global destitution that come pouring into our living rooms every evening, we can rest assured and continue to participate with a clear conscience in the same system that produces that destitution.

The strategy of over-identification owes its effectiveness to the fact that it sabotages this dialectic of alarm and reassurance, fear and relief, by ruthlessly dishing up the system in its most extreme form – a side that the system itself strategically conceals. This strategy clearly proved to be highly effective in the Yes Men's presentation of the faeces-recycling scheme, mentioned above. The latter provoked disbelief in the audience, even anger, with people walking out fuming. It clearly pushed people who might otherwise have a more nuanced or relativist attitude towards the current state of affairs, to the point where they cannot bare it any longer and feel compelled to take a radical stance. The act of over-identification, in other words, eliminates the subject's reflex to make excuses for the current order and to invent ways to 'manage it better' so as to overcome or at least smooth over the problems. The strategy of over-identification could thus not be more opposed to Gilles Deleuze's 'alcoholic' ethics of always stopping before the last glass, so as to be able to sustain one's desire for liquor. This is, of course, also the trick of the capitalist master who is careful not to overpower or 'drown' its subjects with its ideology, offering it in small doses instead. Over-identification, on the other hand, as the Yes Men's performances illustrate, is closer to Søren Kierkegaard's 'emetic', which entails deliberately swallowing too much of the loved poison – overdoing it – so as to be able to break with it for good, to cut the ties with the ambivalent love object.

#### Producing the Contradiction

The action *Bitte liebt Österreich!* of theatremaker Christoph Schlingensiefel in Vienna in 2000, allows us to further sharpen our analysis of the concept of over-identification. The event was part of the Wiener Festwoche and took place from 6 – 11 June. See Matthias Lilienthal and Claus Philipp, Schlingensiefel's *Ausländer Raus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000); as well as Paul Poet's documentary, *Ausländer Raus. Schlingensiefel's container* (Monitorpop entertainment, 2005). Schlingensiefel's intervention was meant as a protest against the extreme right party of Jörg Haider (FPÖ) joining the Austrian government. In an improvised container camp, he organized a *Big Brother* show in which asylum seekers had to curry favour with the Austrian people, in order not to be voted off the show and out of the country. The banner on top of the container camp

stated the latter in no uncertain terms: *Ausländer raus!* The fact that this event took place in the heart of Austria's capital, right in front of the Burgtheater, gave it a high visibility both nationally and internationally, with crowds assembling daily in front of the camp.

As should be clear from the ultra-racist content of the banner, as well as the sadistic concept of the *Big Brother* show, Schlingensiefel over-identifies with the populist-right discourse. By overstating the latter, he tries to visualize the violence of the new Right, which is, of course, rarely ever expressed as such by its proponents. While racist slogans such as 'foreigners out!' are commonly used in rallies to mobilize people – often by party members low in the party hierarchy – in official discourse these slogans are couched in euphemistic terms or given a democratic twist. We can thus say that one finds the capitalist discourse where one least expects it. Even today's proponents of extreme right thinking – what philosopher Etienne Balibar calls 'neo-racism' – present themselves as self-reflective and enlightened – no longer clinging to some biogenetic race theory, but merely affirming the naturalness or inevitability of cultural differences. See Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991). For the often hilarious manifestations of such neo-racism, one can think of the 2005 campaign of the Flemish extreme right political party *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) in Morocco, in which some party members went to have talks with Moroccan politicians, stating what a wonderful country Morocco was, praising the country for the friendliness of its people, its rich culture, good business climate, and, inversely, making negative promotion of their own country, accentuating its notoriously dreary climate, slacking economy and individualist lifestyle. The hidden message behind this song of praise to the Other is of course that the latter should return to, or stay in his own country. It is the distorted, 'positivized' form of the classic racist argument against foreigners who complain about their poor life circumstances: 'if you really are unhappy here, why don't you go back to your own country!' By presenting his show as a FPÖ event, Schlingensiefel cut through this political correct facade, exaggerating precisely those racist statements that are diluted or distorted in official Right-wing discourse. Think also of his tactics not to argue with his critics or convince them of their wrong, but to simply repeat their arguments, slogans and insults through his megaphone, the amplification of which exposes the hollowness of their arguments even more, as well as the violence that drives them – the latter of course to the further agony of the opponents. It was Walter Benjamin who apropos the work of Karl Kraus remarked how more effective than critically commenting on something, is to simply quote what you're criticizing.

However, Schlingensiefel's strategy cannot entirely be reduced to one of over-identification or, to be more precise, the latter is constantly contradicted by his insults and provocations levelled against the new Right. Take the banner, for example, which functions both as an over-affirmation of the right-wing imaginary and as a challenge to the right-wing government, since Schlingensiefel repeatedly mocks the stupidity of this government for allowing such an utterly racist banner to hang



in front of the Opera House for the whole world to see. He also encourages tourists to take pictures of his event and to spread the word at home that ‘this is Austria’, that the latter has turned into a fascist regime. This constant shifting between opposing positions – between over-statement, on the one hand, and mockery or critique, on the other – is an express attempt by Schlingensiefel to produce the contradiction, which is how he defines the task of artistic resistance.

See Paul Poet, Ausländer Raus. Schlingensiefel’s container (Monitorpop entertainment, 2005). In this documentary, Schlingensiefel also describes his modus operandi as: ‘inviting a multitude of systems to gather in a dance and that dance becomes the picture’.

Or, as one commentator put it, Schlingensiefel creates situations that not only are not clear, but also cannot be made clear.

This deliberate structural ambiguity makes Schlingensiefel’s *Big Brother* show the exact opposite of the performances of the Yes Men discussed earlier, as the latter strive towards a sort of hyper-clarity of position: ‘I am a hardcore neo-liberal, let there be no doubt about that’. The Yes Men aim to present the enemy in the clearest way possible, fully endorsing the discourse of the opponent, perhaps only revealing a critical stance in the extreme clarity that is strived for. One way of explaining this difference is to say that the aim of both the Yes Men and Schlingensiefel is to confuse, but that they use different tactics to do so. The former’s tactic entails an exaggerated over-identification with something that invariably provokes disbelief that anybody can believe that uncritically in something. The latter, on the other hand, confuses by osculating between over-identification and critique, by giving out mixed, highly contradictory signals, thereby depriving the audience of any stable vantage point from which to cognitively map the event.

The advantage of Schlingensiefel’s version of over-identification is no doubt that it sabotages an easy interpretation of, or identification with the intervention, which makes it more difficult for both enemies and allies to discard or recuperate it. This became very clear when anti-fascist activists stormed the container camp to liberate the asylum seekers, violently tearing down the banner in the process. It revealed how the oscillation between over-identification and critique of *Bitte liebt Österreich!*, produces an uneasy situation for both the Right and Left: while the former cannot simply discard Schlingensiefel’s action as a platform for Leftist propaganda because of its use of Right-wing power-language, the latter cannot simply label it as fascist either

due to the simultaneous critical comments on the FPÖ. This undecidability with regards to its position is also what Slavoj Žižek pinpoints as the strength of the strategy of over-identification. As he writes about Laibach and their in-breeding of Stalinist and Nazi symbols: ‘By means of the elusive character of their desire, the undecidability as to “where they actually stand”, Laibach compels us to take up our position and decide upon our desire.’ (See Slavoj Žižek, ‘Why are Laibach and NSK not fascists?’, in: *MARS* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1993), vol. 3 / 4.) Also, neither of the two camps can intervene in Schlingensiefel’s event without reproducing their own, internal contradictions. This is most obvious for the Right: removing the ultra-racist banner actually contradicts what they really want, i.e. a tough asylum policy – thereby running the risk of alienating the rank and file. However, as the violent attack of the anti-racist movement demonstrated, Schlingensiefel’s *Big Brother* also confronted the extreme left with the inconsistency of its position. Their attack revealed that, while hyper-active in organizing all kinds of protest rallies, they are not willing to liberate the real camps for asylum seekers with the same bravery and destructive zeal as they did Schlingensiefel’s staged version. Further, as Schlingensiefel remarked mockingly, just how free could the unfortunate participants in Austria be, where an entire system is in place to remove them as quickly and efficiently as possible from the Austrian territory. One could therefore say that, instead of being liberated, they will merely exchange their fictitious prison in the *Big Brother* house for a real one. In short, given the fact that reality is much more cynical than Schlingensiefel’s staging of it, we can understand Schlingensiefel sneering at the activists, calling them ‘a self-deceiving demonstration culture’. See Paul Poet, Ausländer Raus. Schlingensiefel’s container (Monitorpop entertainment, 2005).

Perhaps we can say that the Yes Men, in the extremity with which they apply the concept of over-identification, are clearly activists – the radical, uncritical character of their identification with neo-liberalism being the opposite manifestation of their radical denouncement of it, i.e. their sympathy for the otherglobalist movement. As a result, once one realizes that they are fraudsters, both camps can easily give them a place: the WTO can dismiss them as impostors, while the otherglobalists can welcome them as sympathizers to their cause. Due to its deliberate impurity, Schlingensiefel’s *Bitte liebt Österreich!* resists any such easy recuperation and goes further than the Yes Men by allowing neither their friends nor their foes to sit back self-complacently and relax.

Conclusion: No More Mister Nice Guy

To the question of artistic resistance, the *topos* of over-identification thus provides an uneasy answer. It demands of cultural producers to stop being Mister Nice Guy and to sacrifice their ingrained urge

to counter societal cynicism with an offensive of idealism. The latter – so much should be clear by now – turns them into easy victims for the capitalist masters of this world. The strategy of over-identification is precisely aimed against this idealist reflex to do the right thing. Think, for example, of Schlingensiefel's comment regarding his *Big Brother* show: 'it's not an Amnesty International Project, it's not a "show me your wounds" project, it is a *Schweinische Unternehmung*' – a swinish enterprise! Or, what to think of the action of Dutch artist Martijn Engelbregt who distributed fake, pseudo-governmental inquiries in Amsterdam in which people were asked to communicate all kinds of information with regards to supposed illegal residents living in their area. Martijn Engelbregt operates under the name of EGBG, which stands for 'Engelbregt Gegevens Beheer Groep' (which could be translated as Engelbregt Data Administration Agency). The action took place under the cover name of Regoned, which is short for Registratie Orgaan Nederland (Registrational Body of the Netherlands). About 200,000 forms were distributed at the end of December 2003. This action immediately caused a wave of outrage and protest. It not only triggered bad associations with the Nazi occupation during the Second World War and the deportation of many Jews – in which the local government and population played a dubious role – it also focalized discontent about the recent hardening of Dutch immigration law. The artist came under heavy attack from all sides – within art circles he was criticized for his unethical behaviour, his dangerous manipulation of people's deep-seated feelings. This was the price to pay for radicalizing people's attitude towards policies they otherwise silently endure. One can see Engelbregt's action as the reversal of the civil disobedience of several mayors of Dutch cities to deport residing asylum seekers, which led to all kinds of emotional confessions on national media of mayors who 'as a person' could not do this to 'another human being'. The latter, however, had the paradoxical effect of only adding to the popularity of the then Minister for Immigration and Integration Rita Verdonk – notorious for her Right-wing, zero-tolerance attitudes – who got elected to most popular politician in the same year. Against the disobedience of the mayors, Engelbregt, with his action, on the contrary, resisted the system by what one could call a civil over-obedience, the advantage of which is that it now forces the existing order in a defensive, weak position, since the latter now have to explain how they would never go that far, etc.

It is clear that by enthusiastically joining ranks with the enemy, the artist invariably also strikes a blow at him/herself or, at least, at the Other in him/herself, the internalized myth of the artist as the last idealist, the one who, with his experimental attitude, is the ideal troubleshooter in a system plagued by internal problems and conflicts. It was such 'symbolic suicide' – the self-sacrifice of the idealist within the artist – that was staged by artist Christoph Büchel at *Manifesta 4* in 2002.

He sold his exhibition slot on E-Bay to the highest bidder and so cashed in early on the surplus value added to his symbolic capital by his selection for this international art fair. Christoph Büchel's action was entitled *Invite yourself*. It is obvious that the artist intentionally provokes society with the subversive question why he – and art in general – should be an exception when it comes to manipulating the laws of supply and demand for self-enrichment. Or, put differently, why art cannot be as ruthlessly self-interested or nakedly capitalist as everybody else?

By such radical refusal of the role transferred to art of protecting society from what it wants, the art of over-identification creates a suffocating closure within the system, no longer allowing its subjects any escape from its immanent laws. In this way, society can no longer delegate its task to resist the obvious injustices of today's order to the safe haven of art but is forced to face this task of subversion itself.

#### Appendix: the Unbearable Lightness of Hyper-Idealism

We are compelled to add one last complication to our analysis of the strategy of over-identification, which hinges on the question *what* exactly one over-identifies with. In what preceded, we focused on artistic actions that over-identify with the worst side of the existing order, i.e. its neo-capitalist, neo-racist, neo-conservative programme. There is, however, also the opposite possibility: to over-identify with ideals such as freedom or human rights, which the existing order has to evoke in order to implement its programme and to convince society of its superiority.

This, what one could call, positive over-identification is extremely relevant in an age in which the dialectic between the Law and its obscene underside – as thematized by Slavoj Žižek, for example – is radically reversed by the capitalist discourse. See Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Phantasies* (London: Verso, 1997). In its classical form, this dialectic describes the fact that every system has to maintain a distance from the very ideals it propagates. As a result, it is always split into an official level – 'the letter of the law' – and an unwritten universe of jokes, cynicism and mockery of those official ideals – 'the obscene underside of the law'. The latter is, of course, repressed, it can never see the light of day or be acknowledged as such – in undistorted form – at the official level. Today, on the contrary, in the capitalist discourse it is the official ideals that are repressed, since the slightest hint of any residual belief in some Grand Narrative

or absolute truth is enough to be disqualified, to be treated like a pariah. Truth has, in other words, become an obscene, dirty little secret, something confined to the private sphere that is relativized and mocked in real life. Inversely, it is the obscene underside that has become the official norm, brought home by the fact that we are continuously being commanded to deconstruct all deep beliefs and mock our passionate attachments.

This reversal of the traditional dialectic makes it subversive once more to over-identify with the system's repressed ideals. It would amount to what Jacques Rancière calls 'confirming the appearance, i.e. instead of criticizing the system's alleged ideals for their merely formal character and their betrayal in practice, it takes them dead seriously and demands their uncompromised application

in real life. Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente. Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) 126.

He gives the example of the French labour movement in the nineteenth century who used the system's lip-service to the declaration of the universal rights of men as a leverage to obtain the right to vote for normal workers.

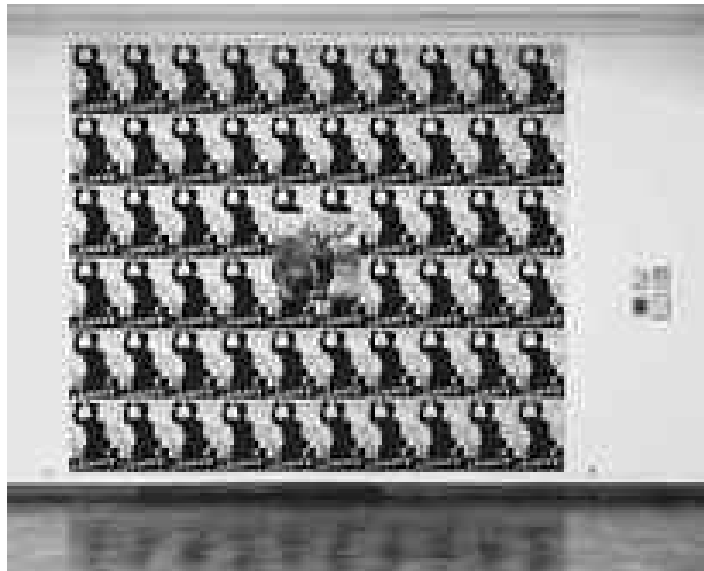
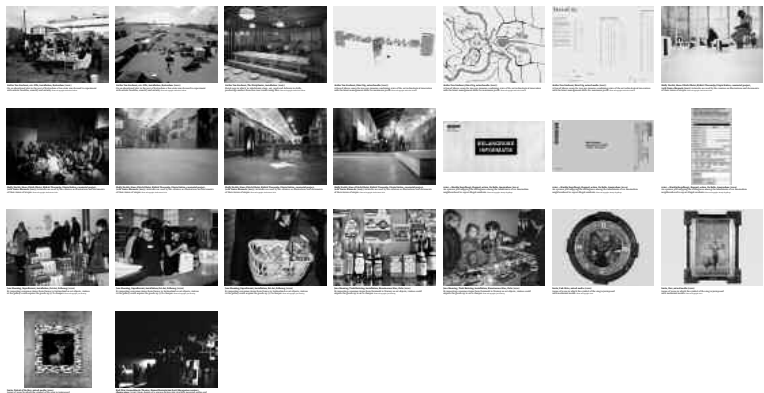
We can find a lot of examples of this strategy in the documentaries of Michael Moore. One might even say that he is at his most subversive when he usurps the ideals of his opponents – that of freedom and democracy – as opposed to revealing the dirty facts behind their policies. Think, for instance, of the scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11* in which Moore plays the devil's advocate by harassing members of congress who voted in favour of the war in Iraq, by asking them to send their sons and daughters to Iraq, so as to set a good example of what it means to sacrifice what one holds dearest for the sake of freedom. Moore's enthusiasm caused the congressmen, all of whom came up with all kinds of petty excuses, to become greatly embarrassed and to reveal their true colours: despite their rhetoric, they certainly never believed the war to be that noble so as to send their own offspring.

We can also think of Moore's soundtrack album of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, composed of naively affirmative songs on America's ideal of freedom. See *Songs And Artists That Inspired Fahrenheit 9/11* (Sony, 2004).

BAVO, 'The spectre of the Avant-Garde. Contemporary reassertions of the programme of subversion in cultural production', in: *Andere Sinema* 176 (2006) 38.

In short, Moore strategically identifies with the utopian core of American patriotism – i.e. its universal aspiration, the fact that everybody can be an American – to provoke its *betrayal* and *corruption* in everyday politics. Moore makes visible how the practical implementation of the ideals of freedom – the liberation of people all around the globe from evil dictators – is in actual fact used as a cover for securing

the interests of multinational companies and the United States at large. Of course, the subversive force of this strategy lies in the exaggerated belief in the ideal – a *hyper-idealism*, which radically represses the common assumption that all ideals are corrupted by reality or cannot be realized except by making compromises. It asks of the artist to play dumb and to insist, like an idiot, on the ruthless application of the ideals to social reality, without granting any exception.



**Laibach, Multiplied Steelworker and Stag, installation, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana (2004)**  
 A grid of posters representing a socialist steelworker with a painting of a stag superimposed in the middle. Photo and copyright: Laibach



**Santiago Sierra, 250 cm line tattooed on 6 paid people, Espacio Aglutinador, Havana (1999)**  
 Unemployed Cuban Youngsters having a line tattooed on their backs in return for \$ 30. Copyright: Santiago Sierra and Lisson Gallery, London





Atelier Van Lieshout, AVL-Ville, installation, Rotterdam (2001)  
 On an abandoned plot in the port of Rotterdam a free-state was decreed to experiment with artistic freedom, anarchy and autarky. Photo and copyright: Atelier Van Lieshout



Irwin, Portrait of the Deer, mixed media (1986)  
 Series of icons in which the symbol of the stag is juxtaposed with modernist motifs. Photo and copyright: Irwin

