

Culture, Corona & its Discontents.

A critical view of the role of culture in pandemic times

Eva Brenner

“All art forms are in the service of the greatest of all art: the art of living”

- Bertolt Brecht

1. No future without culture

The New Year’s Concert 2021 offered a unique sight: for the first time in its long history since World War II, Maestro Riccardo Muti conducted the “Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra“ in front of empty seats in the famed gilded hall of Vienna’s Musikverein. It truly was one of the saddest cultural spectacles since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic in 2020, encapsulating the dimension of the current cultural crisis. While sending messages of “Happy New Year” to millions of viewers in over 90 countries worldwide he used the occasion to add some personal-political words, stressing the vital role of culture as important for a society’s mental health: “Music is not mere entertainment, it also carries the mission to improve society, to bring peace, hope and love to the world.” This peculiar event comes at a time when artists across the world are not allowed to work and largely left without income and prospects for the future.

Within a larger context, democratic societies urgently need a radical reappraisal of art and culture if we are to progress as artists - whether we work in the bourgeois milieu of isolated studios, or within networks of progressive left movements and parties. We must re-evaluate

the achievements and failures of the existing cultural policies and politics in our respective countries, and develop new socially grounded concepts for an artistic/cultural scene reaching more people than the traditional 1-2 percent. This would include policy guidelines for cultural funding structures, distribution, and media as well as scholarly work – all of which in Austria have, for decades, largely benefitted classical or “high” culture, orchestrated by the dominant Social Democratic strategies.

2. Neoliberal culture in times of pandemic

“The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death”

- Theodor W. Adorno

From my standpoint as an Austrian “freelance” artist, we must look at the changes within the cultural-political setting influencing the left progressive (left), avant-garde, feminist, multicultural, as well as amateur community art and culture industry for the past thirty years. We must ask why and how large sections of progressive/political artists surrendered step by step to neoliberal concepts of individualism, competition, and consumerist - instead of cooperative - imperatives. In Vienna, for example, all artistic projects and

institutions - with the exception of a handful of private enterprises - are *de facto* controlled by Social Democratic cultural politics. While post-1968 artistic progressivism in art has been successfully co-opted by the cultural industry of the neo-liberalized socio-economic systems, funding increasingly flows towards privileged classical art for the privileged benefit of the capitalist economy and tourism while a shrinking number of “free”/alternative artists and institutions find themselves in the throes of precarious work. Hardly able to make a living, they are forced into non-artistic jobs to complement irregular engagements, often without unemployment benefits. Working with limited resources - and getting the crumbs from the table of the rich - they are condemned to work overtime, suffer near poverty in a rich “cultural nation”, and receiving scant media interest and minimal public funding. Their marginalized social position has been aggravated by austerity measures taking root at about the year 2000 as part of a sweeping neoliberal restructuring of the work force - policies exacerbated under the regime of a pandemic.

Neoliberal ideology was launched after the Second World War, determining policies in most Western countries to varying degrees during the 1970s; economically and socially the effects are well researched. This does not hold true for the cultural arena where concepts such as the idealized “flexible men” (Richard Sennett) began rapidly to change the face of the artistic world. Cultural remnants of the 68-rebellion were integrated into the new neoliberal framework, no longer carried by class-conscious collectives but individualistic, intellectual, and pedagogic principles- Left progressive groups were successively defunded, delegitimized and replaced by post-modernist, “anything goes”, hybrid conceptions of art, leaving the vast majority of cultural workers without rooting in any left/progressive base. All the while neoliberal capitalism disguised the new agenda by huge transfers of funds from bottom to top. The problem is that the international left did not sufficiently resist this aggressive move. The culture of past centuries - from classical painting and music, theater and

dance - became once again the domain of the rich, which all artists should provide with a shrinking workforce while popular culture had to follow consumerist formats and University curricula propagated the postmodernist focus on underprivileged identity-politics of “othering”, amongst them women, gays, people of color and other blacks as new agents of social change. As left-liberal artists and intellectuals joined ranks within existing institutions to build carriers and the rising internationalist right-wing movements turned popular culture nationalist, the left collapsed into the ideology of cultural “otherness” or withdrew from cultural endeavours. This is the contemporary cultural landscape left artists find themselves in - defunded, expropriated, and dismembered. This tragic turn of the tables within cultural class-struggle determines a loss of left cultural traditions no longer passed on to the younger generations and benefits rising anti-democratic, illiberal, racist right-wing forces throughout Europe - a political and also cultural defeat.

The current pandemic is not the principle cause of cultural deficiencies; it exposes existing problems of late Western capitalist society. Any serious analysis of predominant (social-) democratic culture must point to the lack or absence of left intellectual debate in the field of culture. From a leftist point of view (independent, social-democratic, communist) the failure to lead a continuous, sustainable, and multi-levelled cultural discourse grounded in critical theory, as well as the insufficient interest, attention, and programming on the part of left European parties in terms of progressive culture leaves individuals and groups without leadership; particularly younger artists lack socialist thought to guide their practice. An expanded notion of a “living culture” cannot be sustained in orthodox institutions; it needs the construction of community with new models of a contemporary socialist culture practiced in independent institutions which exclude no one and nothing - from language, to performance, from dress codes to eating habits, from housing to mobility and social rituals.

3. Roads to overcome an annus horribilis

“Before I ask: what is a work’s position vis-à-vis the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position within them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary technique”

- Walter Benjamin

The crisis has exacerbated the problems of an art world which has experienced sharp shifts to individualism, de-solidarization and de-democratization. In Austria, 50-60% of all artists working as freelancers are faced with decreasing optimism, the fear of total financial loss, and no prospect for a reopening of their studios, theaters, cinemas, and galleries in the near future. Lockdowns have come and gone, during light lockdowns hardware stores stayed open and skiing was allowed while cultural events remained prohibited - measures which clearly testify to political priorities which put hardware stores above theatres. At the outset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, protests demanding similar support measures as were given in trillions to businesses erupted - ballet cries which conspicuously subsided with increased pessimism as it became clear that politician’s lip service did not result in sufficient support for art and culture. Using up savings and belt-tightening was accompanied by balcony concerts, streamlined art events, and webinar discussions - all of which cannot substitute for the live event. Mainstream media gave sparse coverage to the plight of artists, busying itself with calls for discipline and law and order; a recent headline read: “Culture in a state of emergency”...

We are thus in need of a radical change of perspectives which challenge outdated capitalist as well as post socialist-realist approaches to art and culture, and the formulation of a socialist cultural-political vision which has learned from failures of the past and transforms

the left cultural heritage of the last 200 years into strategies and tactics for the 21st century. Any new order of socialist cultural production embraces interactive, progressive, collectivist cultural practices in which processes supersede the manufacturing (reviewing, analysing, discussing) of cultural products. This would follow the principle of Joseph Beuys’ vision that “everyone(is) an artist”. It must build on historical models such as Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater, the revolutionary theatre of Soviet Russia, or Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and the experiments of The Living Theatre. Pressing issues to address include the fight for democracy, freedom, equality, and internationalism, the struggle against racism, sexism, and fascism. While strategic institutional focus needs to be on re-building old progressive networks based on class consciousness within rooted, in the current post-democratic societies, in the under-privileged and unorganized within widely differing European traditions.

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