

Hans-Christian Dany, July/August 2011

We'll Be Rich Tonight

Sometimes I'm not sure whether it is the surroundings that are standing still or my gaze sinking into its own indifference. A curtain opens, a bright light shining behind it. Blinded, I close my eyes. Since I have no idea how I can look at it or how I should move in it, I stay put. In moments of paralysis like this, I sometimes think I am not alone. But neither can I discover any We, from which to talk about it. So I murmur to myself in dazzling light, turn around and speak a bit louder. And as the processes repeat and my mouth keeps moving, I don't mind getting lost in contradictions.

Between the curtains there are apparatuses everywhere – noises come out of some of them. One apparatus limps around like a music box with a worn-out spring, another speaks in complete sentences now, then I see one showing entire films on a screen. Human voices pour out of loudspeakers. They speak of a discontent. And as they talk, the discontent melts away like ice cubes in the bright sun. The apparatuses can turn everything into a vague puddle, simply by presenting it. But there are some things they don't show, standstill not visible on any screen, perhaps because the apparatuses cannot bear what is similar to them. Incessantly, the apparatuses comment on everything happening in the remainders of public space. At the same time, they constantly maintain that the world is moving quickly, because the apparatuses have been continually further developed.

While the sequence repeats, I feel empty and monotone, like the blue sky above me. It may be that the apparatuses are changing,

but their changes seem more quantitative than qualitative. They become a bit faster, a function is added, or I can do something with them that I have heard for twenty years would some day become a reality. It is an eternal heralding of the future, and tomorrow there is supposed to be yet another innovation and everything will work even better. But the update doesn't deliver and the promises are postponed again to an orderly numbered future. Sometimes I almost think that the apparatuses spin our lives in a circle until the dizziness gives us the illusion that the world is changing. They call it "digital revolution", claim it has determined our lives for the last twenty years, and yet it all seems like a substitute for all the changes that have not happened. If I posted this assertion to a social network, I would certainly get applause, but maybe that too is nothing but a nervous twitch. And on days when my view of the world is a bit more paranoid, I consider digital agreement as an automatic function for avoiding that any assertions are left standing uncommented.

As I go on, I'm thinking that the apparatuses have probably noticed in the meantime that with their explanation – that technology continues to develop and therefore move the world – they are no longer able to get by. Despite their digital self-assurance, hardly anyone is buying it now. The narrative has long since lost every promise and can no longer carry any meaning at all. Maybe to distract from their worn-out self-narrative, the apparatuses now constantly display on their screens other uprisings and revolutions, not digital ones, even if they are allegedly organized through apparatuses. From the perspective of central Europe, these upheavals usually happen elsewhere. If I turn off the transmissions from the moving distance, a feeling arises that image and sound don't fit together, something is wrong. What the commentators of the rebels in the apparatuses are calling "democracy" or "true democracy", mostly just involves an optimal connection to the global market. But the commentators in the apparatuses know that democracy simply sounds better than

global market or capitalism, and then they look at you with large blank eyes. They know that, they don't need to think it: the ratings for democracy are almost as good as for animal films. In democracy everyone gets to vote and the choice is not just between commodities and jobs. Democracy presumably also sounds more attractive, because it occurs more and more rarely – in fact, it has actually been a scarcity for some time now.

A scarcity of democracy now does not mean any dictatorial rogue states or what is left over from state communism or those religious enemies of democracy that are constantly reported to us. No, in the middle of Europe, politicians convincingly present to us more and more often that, due to economic circumstances, we can no longer afford the luxury of democracy, and political decisions have to be made on the basis of economic conditions. How little the elected decision-makers hesitate to commit themselves to the point of self-abandonment and subjugate themselves to the dictates of the economy, is impressive. Yet not many seem to be alarmed by the austerity cuts to the political. The apparatuses, in the meantime, are able to present this transformation completely unfiltered and even comment on it critically. One might almost believe everyone has gotten used to being governed without politics. The disappearance of politics is probably the greatest change of the last twenty years, without leading to an improvement of central Europe. With a slight smile, the commentators call the subsequent state “post-politics”. This sounds lukewarm and hopeless, but that is how the circumstances seem to be: still somehow sated, but without any idea of a future.

While politics has been left by the wayside, the speakers in the apparatuses more and more frequently quote Prussian war theory: “War is the continuation of politics with different means.” For this continuation of democracy with different means, ten years ago a world-wide crusade was launched: in reaction to the attacks of 11 September 2001, in pompous color the United States declared

War Against Terror. All those deviating from a certain notion of late-modern life were soon declared enemies, most of all the Islam deemed to be value-conservative. In this presumptuous war, the western alliance once again pulverized what had been called politics until then. The totality of the claim to be the only acceptable arrangement of life destroyed every democratic legitimation. The manifold front of diplomatic, economic and military response forces soon presented, at best, no more than a pitiful shadow of what the western alliance could claim for itself from the defeat of German Nazism.

In the noise of the militant democracy roar of the past ten years, the question was raised again: If economically driven processes have taken the place of political decisions, then what does it mean if I, a so-called citizen, continue to insist on political forms and pursue my established rights? Mass mail-out printers still send us recurrent letters. In them, we are called upon to vote. Other apparatuses chime in, asserting that the majority does that. Because I still have faith in other people, I can't really believe this majority, and on election day I'm surprised how many of my neighbors go into the voting office across from my home to elect politicians, who tell them we can't afford political decisions. Casting my vote for this kind of admitted incapability would feel like climbing through the window of a bankrupt restaurant and waiting for the waiter fired long ago, as though he were Godot.

If I say that, my neighbors tell me, and it truly astonishes me when I hear it, that seeing things this way is too idealistic, elitist, theoretical or simply unproductive. And if I'm not satisfied with the way things are, I could demonstrate on the street in front of the poll against bankrupt politics. I have to swallow and ask myself how I should productively wait for something that won't come, because it has long since fallen by the wayside. I could imagine that appearing as a demonstrator might be somewhat more productive, but this productivity would be neither tragic nor

ironic, but would instead have no expression at all and, at best, just contribute to the illusion that a politically conditioned democracy still exists. I could play along in this contemporary theater, but I really have no plans to complain. Instead, I declare my agreement and will walk up and down the street with a sign saying: “Yes, I think it’s all great!” Unfortunately, this also leads to discontent. Nor do I want to demand a right, not even the right to think it’s great. Every demand for political rights would just put the addressees, who have long since departed from politics, in the right and applaud their show. That is also the reason why I don’t sign the electronic letters, the prescribed versions of which are sent to me almost every day by unknown persons, so that I can add my name and send them on with a few clicks to other apparatuses that can count in my opinion.

Cynicism in cynical circumstances is quickly exhausted. Yet sentimentality promises almost even less, for which reason it seems superfluous to call for a return of circumstances as they were just recently or once upon a time. Why should I recall a past that would put every wish for a different future in the shadows?

But maybe the question does not even start with how I speak, but rather the fact that I put words into reasonably meaningful contexts at all, in order to communicate. In apparatus-capitalism, it seems that it really doesn’t matter what is communicated and circulated. What is important is that there is communication. Communication aims to dissolve all contents, all the way to a kind of void without taste or smell, without a thought or a movement – simply another curtain, another over-exposure, a substitute freed from all ballast. But also the consumers are supposed to communicate as extensively as possible in any way, in order to ensure circulation with as little friction as possible. All are points and form a web by constantly communicating who, where and what they are, what they like, what they don’t like, what they consume, and which possibilities of consume don’t appeal to

them. The web is dependent on the points keeping their desires transparent, because as long as the points remain transparent, they can be governed – which means under post-political conditions, first of all calculating their consumption. In the nineties there was the slogan, “wishes will leave their houses and take to the streets”. At that time, and it is not so long ago now, that was meant to be resistive, participative or post-situationist, but today, wishes wandering out into the public sounds like a key to the governability of remaining desires. I often think it would be more consistent to just sit quietly and refuse to make any statement about one’s own wishes and every consumption. Occasionally, one of the silent points could also smash one of the omnipresent wish-machines to pieces, the way autonomous activists used to tip over mobile toilets. But even the mute absence of movement and wishes with occasional outbursts sooner or later leaves a piercing discontent, simply because it can hardly interrupt the communication and circulation. And even the smashing of a wish machine can be treated by the loops of commodity conveyance and control as a response to be evaluated.

In a networked environment, the loneliness of human beings can best identify with the apparatuses. Nevertheless, the ensemble has to be emotionally re-charged again and again, to keep the commitment of the humanmachine stable. During this summer, the serial drama is staged as an interplay of loss of control and metabolism disorder. The symbolic representation (money) and its real cover (value) have separated far apart from one another, it is said. Their relationship is sliding into a deep crisis, because the symbolic representations have uninhibitedly multiplied through credit and the mass production of money. Now debts are exploding a numerical representation of reality into wild flatulence. This season of the series is called debt crisis. Its plot, the inflationary representation that has become increasingly alienated from reality, appears to be a widespread symptom. Politics also continues to circulate in symbolic replica

constructions without reality. In the market, artists have established themselves as successful suppliers of politics-substitutes. Art is suitable as a substitute, because its symbolic assets enable it to generate much beautiful illusion on the basis of little reality. There is hardly a cheaper way to generate the appearance of a democratic discourse than with art. The politics-substitute created by artists softens the social lack. The spectrum of customers for artistic politics-substitutes ranges from questionable regimes seeking to dangle a little democracy in front of their business partners, through the beautification of dubious industrial zones, all the way to a mask for the worn-out democratic institutions of central Europe that have to representatively compensate for their lack of democratic engagement. The micro-models of service-art, blinking with politicization, stabilize the ensemble through decorative critique. The de-politicized power relations remained untouched by such performances, simply because they follow a completely different logic.

The increasingly diversified appearance of these kinds of artistic representations of desirable and usually poorly paid critique has resulted in the transformation of methods of “critical practice” or the politicized approaches of the nineties into an expansive convenience store: participative approaches overlap with relational aesthetics or appear in the friendly garb of street art or the genres of critical post-coloniality. Everything has a theoretical superstructure and threefold academic shoring. As art is taken into service as an illusion of democracy, the link between art and politics is meanwhile quickly coagulating into a sticky mess. In this catch-22, it seems to be nearly impossible to produce signs without serving the repair of conditions, of which little is left to maintain. All that is left is to elude the web of communication and circulation, in order to open up spaces of possibility outside their recording mechanisms. Critique can hardly still be the means of choice here. Critique would require learning and speaking the

language of conditions, of which there is nothing left to repair. Critique would be legible and comprehensible, would at best feed the feedback loops of the apparatus with the information needed for control. Critique would simply stabilize untenable conditions.

What presented itself as a closed circle, silenced me for a long time. Yet at first I kept quiet without intention. It felt more like being paralyzed, as though I alone had lost the capacity for speaking and producing signs. It was only gradually that I began to realize that it was something other than the loss of my own abilities, that it affected neither me alone nor me personally. Busy with my own muteness, I had overlooked how many others became mute at the same time. I only gradually realized that the cause of the loss of my own voice was largely to be sought outside myself, that it had the same stereotype effect on many. Light into the darkness of my initially personally considered incapacity to speak, first appeared in a strange imperative from the French philosopher Alain Badiou: “It is better to do nothing at all, than to work on the visibility of that, of which the West maintains that it exists.” The formula-like statement seems so general and pointing in different directions, that at first I wondered how it had wormed its way into my consciousness and repeated itself there like a broken record. There were reasons for succumbing to standstill, becoming “immobile and incommunicable”. Yet it soon became clear to me that it is very difficult to do nothing at all. Immobile and incommunicable. How should that be?

Sooner or later, the phrase “I would prefer not to” comes to mind. Bartleby’s refusal dispenses with communicating beyond the rejection itself, hardly communicates at all, does not say what it wants, but what it would prefer not to, and even that remains unarticulated. Bartleby’s speaking in truncated phrases, the refusal of self-information, figurative gestures, those are all possibilities, but not solutions. Now, however, I would also prefer to remain

part of the problem through articulations that not only elude, but even interrupt the ongoing channeling and emptying of signs through communication, by skipping over their own communicability and scattering blind spots. This may sound paradoxical, but perhaps it is precisely this paradox that reacts like a crystal in an unstable solution. A radically incomprehensible strangeness, which does not depict its radicalness. A variable geometry that transgresses every symmetry, but where it is not possible to say where its crookedness is to be found. It would be the anti-discourse of an overly loud silence or interruption from astonishment. Gestures that remain incalculable for the apparatuses or could only be recognized by them at best as the liquidation of meaning. Blind spots form on the sensors and transfer themselves to the inside of the apparatuses. As information that is not to be processed, they generate short-termed system crashes and implosions, speechless powerlessness is inverted into its opposite. A moment of impatience scurries across the murky horizon of the sequence without perspective, and the only apparatus in sight responds with a smile, as though it wanted to apologize for its existence.

But does all of that say anything at all, does it want to say something? Does this balancing act make any sense at all, or should it not refuse sense altogether more intensively? I also wonder whether this interim report could not be given a positive turn. Not against control, but rather for freedom and autonomy. Not against communication and cybernetic capitalism, but rather for a humane community. Not against commodities, but for things. Not against the tremendous boredom and emptiness, but rather for life. Something struggles against the poison of the clear concept. But perhaps the negation could be conceived of differently again?

In London buildings are burning again tonight. A fascinating moment of the riots is how the looting and destruction can be

explained from the logic that they attack. The rioters declare they are not political, and one of their few slogans is: “We’ll be rich tonight!” The calls for looting could be posted almost identically in a hedge fund to the participating employees before a hostile takeover by a hostile company. Radically economicized post-politics is attacked in the streets with its own value system, greed. The only enemy is the state regulative, “the cop”. The difference between what is stigmatized as an “anti-social parallel society”, the mob senselessly stealing trainers and mobile phones, and the neoliberal humanmachine order becomes almost indistinguishable. The commentators in the apparatuses don’t want to see it that way, of course, but they have an inkling of something in this brief disruption of the circulation. They comment somewhat helplessly: the riots were organized with the help of apparatuses from the firm Blackberry. They say that again and again, and not much more, as though they could still just recognize the Smartphone in their hand, but their own face mirrored in it has long since become a blind spot. The London riots are an interruption, yet still it continues: the humanmachines will probably be selling their symbols with no future to one another for some time to come.