

JUST THE NAKED TRUTH CHANGING REALITY

A research on the critical potential of subversive affirmation in contemporary performances

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical potential of the strategy of *subversive affirmation* in contemporary Western performances. It builds on the article “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance” (2006) by German theorists Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse. In the first chapter, a theoretical reflection of the concept subversive affirmation will be given by a discussion of multiple examples of subversive affirmation from Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and The United States in chronological order between the 1920s until the year 2010. In this discussion the concept of *over-identification*, first posed by Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Žižek, will be integrated to discuss the examples. Over-identification is understood by Arns and Sasse as a form of subversive affirmation and is extensively discussed by the Flemish research collective BAVO. In this discussion of the performances that make use of subversive affirmation, in which the definition provided by Arns and Sasse is guiding, four components of subversive affirmation stand out: *affirmation*, *subversion*, *distancing* and *exposure*. The observations of chapter one are further clarified by the notion of *hegemony*, posed by Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe. In the second chapter, these four components are elaborated on, in order to present their effectivity as means of artistic resistance, and to provide a lens through which one can look at those performative actions using the strategy of subversive affirmation. In this chapter the four components are further divided. Regarding the components observed in the first chapter, each one is distinguished into two sub-methods. In the third chapter these components – and their sub-methods – are being used as analytical tools in the dramaturgical analysis of two performative actions: *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens (2008) and *The Federal Emergency Programme* (2014) by the Center for Political Beauty. This paper presents the position that the strategy of subversive affirmation has a high critical potential in contemporary performances, because it enables artists to be critical about large topics regarding the current society (e.g. representative democracy, climate change and the refugee crisis), without their work being solely understood as commercial or capitalist art. Through the insider’s position, they force large institutions or influential people to justify, and reconsider, their own policies and responsibilities regarding these large topics.

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Introduction

In 2002 Mr. Hank Hardy Unruh, a representative of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), spoke at a textiles conference in Tampere, Finland. In his presentation, entitled 'The Future of Textiles, The Future of a Lifetime and the Lifetime of the Future', he presented the WTO's very own solution to two of the biggest problems in management: first, maintaining rapport with a remote work force; second, maintaining helpful amounts of leisure as a manager. According to Mr. Unruh, this solution is based in textiles. He presents the WTO's solution after giving a brief history of the worker-management problem and a calculation of the costs of 'contemporary slavery', a term that Mr. Unruh uses to refer to a world where involuntarily imported labour has never been outlawed, where slaves still exist and where it is easy to own one. Directly after, Mr. Unruh presents the 'Remote Labour System': a gold latex suit with a 3-foot phallus for managing your employees whilst simultaneously having your leisure. Not only does the suit allow the manager to watch his employees directly on a little screen, it also consists of signals communicating the exact amount and quality of work done by the employees. These signals are not only visually transmitted, but also through electronic channels transmitted directly into the manager's body. The workers, for their part, are fitted with corresponding chips that are implanted directly in the shoulders, so the manager can physically sense what is going on in the workers. After his presentation, Mr. Unruh was kindly thanked for the interesting presentation and the well-educated audience members had no further questions.¹

As a reader of this text, it is not unlikely that you have questions regarding this extraordinary proposition. You are presumably already suspicious and do not believe a thing about the feasibility of Mr. Unruh's presentation. This would mean that you are less vulnerable to the authority of a big institution such as the WTO than those present at the conference in Tampere. If you did not buy this outrageous solution, you are right: this was not a real solution provided by the WTO. But perhaps it did make you think about the circumstances of the employees in sweatshop factories creating your fashionable Levi's jeans and the way these workers are being managed. The presentation was part of an action by the American activist duo called the Yes Men. Through identification with big corporate identities they are able to reflect on the corporations' policies in public and as a consequence these corporations themselves have to reflect on their own policies. By creating websites identical to those of

¹ All information derived from the article "Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance" by Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse (2006), 444-455. And the documentary *The Yes Men: Changing the World One Prank at a Time*, by the Yes Men (2003), accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the-yes-men/>.

powerful organisations and/or people (typically a corporate or government representative or executive), they try to get invited to conferences or other public platforms as a representative of these powerful organisations and/or people. Once in public, they make ridiculous and shocking comments that caricature and thereby criticise the ideological positions of the organisations/people they pretend to represent. One of their favourite corporations to ‘hijack’ seems to be the WTO. According to the Yes Men, this corporation acts on inhumane principles and only maintains the neoliberal power relations that are already in place. As spokespeople for the WTO, the Yes Men deliver shocking satires of WTO policy to audiences of, what they refer to as, so-called ‘experts’.

According to German theorists Sylvia Sasse (Professor Slavic Literature studies) and Inke Arns (curator) in their article “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance”, the Yes Men make use of a strategy called *subversive affirmation*.² Strategies of subversive affirmation are forms of resistance that through techniques of affirmation, involvement and identification, put the spectators precisely in a state or situation which they will later criticise.³ The article by Arns and Sasse will continue to serve as a central source throughout the rest of this paper. Arns and Sasse are the most prominent voices in the research on the emergence of the tactic of resistance that they call subversive affirmation. In particular Sasse is prominent in this debate. She is one of the few researchers engaging with the use of subversive affirmation in the field of performance art. Particularly her focus on the contemporary use of the strategy is exceptional. Arns and Sasse edited an issue of the Slovenian magazine *Maska* (2006), in which critical analyses of diverse examples of subversive affirmation are made by different authors.⁴ These essays have provided me with useful information and methods for looking at the strategy of subversive affirmation.

Via engagement and involvement artists present an alternative perspective, one that can be understood as an internal critique provided by an incognito outsider. Subversive affirmation first appeared in the restrictive cultural spheres of the Soviet Union, where artists were only allowed to deliver art that was true to the state. Artists, then and always, will find ways to deliver critique through their work, and artists within restrictive regimes did so by developing strategies of subversive affirmation. Arns and Sasse name the strategy of *over-identification*, first posed by Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Žižek, as a form of subversive

² Arns and Sasse.

³ Idem, 445.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Why are NSK and Laibach not Fascists” (1993); Bazon Brock, “Negative affirmation, Bad capitalism” (1960s); Martin Doll, “Similarity as a Mask. On the Identity Corrections of ‘The Yes Men’” (2006); Mark Siemons, “The moment when reality appears. On ‘self-provocation’ and the void”, year of publication unknown. All published in *Maska*, ed. Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, no. 3-4 (Spring 2006): 1-111.

affirmation. The Flemish research collective BAVO, who focus on the political dimension of art, architecture and urban planning, published a volume of essays: *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-identification*, which was the outcome of a symposium in Amsterdam in 2006.⁵ Over-identification is a strategy where the artists strategically over-identify with the ruling norms and practices instead of contesting them or proposing an alternative for them.⁶

According to BAVO the positioning of art in society, especially the role of art in politics, is still strongly hierarchised. BAVO regards politics as a specialised field of expertise dominated by political professionals and regards art, in contrast, as a specialised, politically neutral discipline focused on the production of beautiful objects.⁷ BAVO discusses how artists are being disqualified (by those who legitimately hold authority and power) as a legitimate discussion partner if they merely criticise and do not offer concrete alternatives or solutions. For this reason, artists are not taken seriously when they question “the ideological coordinates of the current order”, such as representative democracy, the free market or the nation-state.⁸ By using strategies of over-identification and subversive affirmation, artists will still be able to question, and thereby criticise, the current order, without risking being disqualified from the (political) discussion. The essays, published by BAVO, will be a great addition to the article by Arns and Sasse because of the focus on the potential of over-identification in an activist context.

Inspired by Arns and Sasse, I ask myself why these strategies of subversive affirmation are currently becoming important, once more? These strategies were developed in an openly repressive context in the 1920s and later more extensively in the 1960s in Eastern Europe, whereas today we live in a different – political, social, economic – context that is supposedly more liberal and less repressive. It is still unclear what the critical potential of this new-born subversive affirmation can turn out to be. This leads me to my main research question: *what is the critical potential of subversive affirmation in contemporary performance?* In this paper light will be shed on a set of subjects and sources in order to provide an answer to this research question. The paper is divided into three chapters, all elaborating on one sub-question.

The first chapter consists of a theoretical reflection of the concept of subversive affirmation and will be concluded with an answer to the first sub-question: how has the strategy of subversive affirmation developed in the context of Western performance? Arns and Sasse discuss the emergence of subversive affirmation in a fragmented and non-

⁵ BAVO, *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-identification* (Rotterdam: 2007), 6-119.

⁶ Idem, 6.

⁷ Idem, 18-19.

⁸ Idem, 19.

chronological approach, whilst taking big steps through history. In my opinion, they miss out on some important (aspects of the) examples they discuss, through which one can better understand the development of subversive affirmation and how it has reached its current shape. I have chosen to deviate from their non-chronological approach and instead maintain a more chronological approach. This chronological approach outlines a clear development of the strategy of subversive affirmation and what we can expect from it in contemporary performative actions.⁹

Besides the article by Arns and Sasse, I will make use of the book *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* written by American art historian Amy Bryzgel, the book by BAVO, and “Specta(c)ting: theatre of the oppressed, orthodoxy and adaptation” from the book *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response* by American author, director and Professor of Performance Studies Jan Cohen-Cruz.¹⁰ Bryzgel maps the emergence of performance art in Eastern Europe from the 1960s onwards. In the exploration of the various manifestations and meanings of performance art across Eastern Europe, Bryzgel highlights the diversity of artistic practice, with each country’s socio-political climate in mind.¹¹ This focus makes her work a great addition to the article by Arns and Sasse and therefore to my own research. In the final paragraph of the first chapter the concept of *counter-hegemonic practices* will be introduced, posed by Belgian political theorist and Professor of Political Theory, Chantal Mouffe in the article “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art”.¹² This concept will help form a better understanding of the recent rise in the use of the strategy of subversive affirmation in the West (Europe and the United States).

The answer to the first sub-question provides a clear vision of what the strategy, in different socio-political climates, has been used for, and how. Considering the start of subversive affirmation in restrictive regimes and the popularity gained in the West in the 21st century, I draw a preliminary conclusion that in a performative Western context, subversive affirmation has developed into a strategy that questions and criticises the contemporary

⁹ According to Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse the tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification led to an ‘art of practice’, the performative character of the works discussed in this research is undeniable. In addition, they differ from a documentary to street actions to whole campaigns. Therefore I will maintain the notion of ‘performative action’ during this whole research.

¹⁰ BAVO, *Cultural Activism Today*.

Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 1-366

Jan Cohen-Cruz, “Specta(c)ting: theatre of the oppressed, orthodoxy and adaptation”, in *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 42-66.

¹¹ Bryzgel, 2.

¹² Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art”, in *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, ed. Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 66-75

democracies and their failings in a radical manner, whereas the first examples of subversive affirmation in Eastern Europe were more modest, in order to be effective and safe within restrictive regimes.

In the second chapter I will provide an answer to the second sub-question: how can the four components of subversive affirmation be used as analytical tools? These four components, deriving from the definition of Arns and Sasse, are: *affirmation*, *subversion*, *distancing* and *exposure*. In the second chapter, the observations of the discussed performative actions in the first chapter will be clarified by the article of Arns and Sasse and the book by BAVO. The clarification of the observations and the focus on the four components of subversive affirmation will touch upon the effective means of subversive affirmation as a form of artistic resistance. At the end of this chapter, it will have become clear that the analytical tools facilitate a specific analytical lens through which one can have a closer look at how subversive affirmation, and its components, are reflected in performative actions.

In the third chapter I will execute a dramaturgical analysis on two case studies: *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens (2008) and *The Federal Emergency Programme* by Center for Political Beauty (CPB) (2014). This analysis will provide an answer to the third sub-question: how do the contemporary performative actions *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens and *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB make use of the strategy of subversive affirmation? I will support my observations with the article by Ruben De Roo, "Immortality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' Enjoy Poverty", the article by Arns and Sasse, the above introduced article by Mouffe, and several online sources (e.g. websites, blogs, interviews) discussing the performative actions.¹³ The two cases will enable me to, on a small scale, explain how subversive affirmation is used again today and what its critical potential can be. With the two examples used here, it can be seen that their critical potential is formed by the socio-political intentions that motivated these actions. With both actions, attempts are made to discuss current socio-political topics with regard to Europe's responsibility towards foreign countries in crisis. Martens discusses the legacy of European colonialism and the effects of Western influence in the Democratic Republic of Congo; CPB discuss how the German government could really change something in the inhumane circumstances of the refugee crisis. Furthermore, they both had actual consequences, the CPB's more prominent than those of Martens' performative actions.

¹³ Ruben De Roo, "Immortality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' Enjoy Poverty", in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Rotterdam:NAi Publishers, 2011), 140-145.
Arns and Sasse.
Mouffe.

I chose these two contemporary performative actions as case studies because they both appropriate an existing discourse to show the complications within that same discourse. Regarding the accessibility, *Enjoy Poverty* by Martens is a film to which I have complete access on a DVD. *The Federal Emergency Programme* is a campaign including a website, commercials, PR material and even more, all of it mainly accessible online (<http://www.1aus100.de/en/>). A preliminary conclusion of the analysis can be drawn as such: both cases use subversive affirmation to criticise current socio-political topics in the hope for actual change. Through the subversive affirmation they create an ambiguity, because their intentions remain unclear. This ambiguity establishes room for reflection for both the spectator and the (in)voluntarily involved parties.

At the end of this paper, it will have become clear that through the use of subversive affirmation contemporary artists enable themselves to, in a highly informed way, question large topics related to the current state (e.g. democracy, climate change, refugee crisis) and the governments' policies. By the exaggerated affirmation of powerful organisations and/or people, artists force these organisations/people to justify their own policies and confront involved parties with the underlying structures of these organisations/people. By using the strategy of subversive affirmation to deliberately expose the appropriated discourse, artists hope to make a change in the current society and its discourses. The urgency for radical change, through the exposure of underlying structures, is one of the causes for the re-occurrence of the strategy of subversive affirmation in today's Western performance context.

The outcomes of this paper left me with some ethical questions: how far can one go with the purpose of transmitting an artistic message? I will discuss the ethical consequences of the strategy of subversive affirmation by referring to several sources: the essays "Immorality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*" from Ruben De Roo; "The New Activism: A Plea for Affirmative Ethics" by Rosi Braidotti (2011); both from the book *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization* (2011); and *Theatre and Ethics* by Nicholas Ridout (2009).¹⁴

According to Arns and Sasse, contemporary Western society is confronted with a situation where everything (and thus nothing) can be said. The contemporary culture industry has shown that the strategy of critical distance (an outsider's position that has been common among artists in the recent years) proved to be ineffective since these works will be appropriated by the dominant political and economic capitalist system, and as a

¹⁴ Lieven De Gutter, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouck, eds., *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2011), 4-333.
Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (Palgrave macmillan, 2009), 1-76.

consequence even the most critical viewpoints are rendered ineffective.¹⁵ Different scholars argue that if contemporary artists want to take part in a political discussion, it is better they take up an insider's position within the system of the adversary.¹⁶ The role of the contemporary artist is changing, and regarding the growing urgency to act on climate change and other socio-political circumstances, the strategy of subversive affirmation seems to be the perfect tool.

¹⁵ Arns and Sasse, 444.

¹⁶ The need for an artist to take an insider's position is, among others, discussed in: Mouffe; Sébastien Hendrickx, "Kunst die zich voordoet alsof ze iets anders is dan kunst" [Art pretending to be something other than art], *REKTO VERSO*, September 25, 2013, last accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/kunst-die-zich-voordoet-alsof-ze-iets-anders-dan-kunst>; Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-235; BAVO; Arns and Sasse.

Chapter 1: Theoretical approach to subversive affirmation

This first chapter will present a theoretical approach to subversive affirmation through a chronological discussion of examples of performative actions where this strategy has been used, and how the four components: affirmation, subversion, distance and exposure are visible in these actions. Arns and Sasse, inspired by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, define the strategy of subversive affirmation as:

“(...) an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterised precisely by the fact that with affirmation there is simultaneously taking place a distancing from, or revelation of what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite.”¹⁷

Before I will start with the disassembling of the definition, in order to recognise it in performative actions and see how it has developed, I will clarify the concept of ‘discourse’ and how it will be used in this paper.

I choose the notion of ‘discourse’ as an overarching concept since all the different sources that have been used for this paper make use of different terms to refer to what is being affirmed and subverted: activities, institutions, formats, spaces, constructions, identities, policies, systems and so on. Discourse is a concept defined by Michel Foucault as a way of constituting and distributing knowledge, that in turn constitute social practices and power relations. The discourses, (un)consciously, dominate human beings in their everyday life.¹⁸ I am interpreting discourse as a set of rules that is generally understood as being normative, a set of rules that is both dominated by already existing power relations and is simultaneously enforcing these relations. Foucault further poses the term *enunciative modality*, with which he explains the system of how people in specific positions have more right to articulate (and act), leading to the deduction that others do not have this right.¹⁹ This enunciative modality is also connected to official institutions or companies. It is these

¹⁷ Arns and Sasse, 445.

¹⁸ Weedon (1987, 108). Quoted in Jenny Pinkus, "Foucault" (August 1996), accessed June 20, 2019, <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/theory/foucault.htm>.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 194. Quoted in Martin Doll, "Similarity as a Mask. On the Identity Corrections of the 'The Yes Men'" (2006), in *Maska*, 68.

unquestioned power relations that the artists usually question with the strategy of subversive affirmation.

If one takes a closer look at the definition provided by Arns and Sasse, four components can be distinguished: first there is the affirmation of a discourse; secondly the subversion of this same discourse; third the subversion that leads to a distancing from the discourse; finally, through the previous three components an aspect of the discourse is exposed (mostly related to the underlying power structures and false promises of the discourse). This is the surplus that destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite. Throughout this chapter the definition from Arns and Sasse will function as a guideline because it provides the clearest definition of subversive affirmation, and provides the best tools for a better understanding of subversive affirmation and how it manifests in performative actions.

The study of Arns and Sasse shows that the method of subversive affirmation is first found in the 1920s in repressive political situations. In the 1960s subversive affirmation emerged more prominent in various Eastern European socialist countries, adopted by way of necessity, whereas, after 1989 these methods were deliberately appropriated in the West.²⁰ I will follow their distinction between the emergence of subversive affirmation in Eastern Europe in the 1960s and in the West from the 1990s. Whilst elaborating on the examples, attention will be paid to the socio-political circumstances in which the artists produced their art. This chapter will be closed by answering the first sub-question: how has the strategy of subversive affirmation developed in the context of European performance?

1.1 The beginning of subversive affirmation (1920 – 1950)

In 1922 Stalin became the head of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee, acquiring the title of General Secretary. After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin steadily managed to expand his office and consolidate his power. In addition, at that time the growth of Communist power contributed to the restrictive cultural environment and extremely minimal artistic freedom. These restrictive circumstances were dominant until Stalin's death in 1953, after which his successor Krushchev made an attempt to reform the Soviet Union's repressive political policy. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union never really lost these artistic restrictions and socio-political tensions. According to Arns and Sasse subversive affirmation has its first appearance in these repressive political circumstances of the late 1920s.²¹

²⁰ Arns and Sasse, 444.

²¹ Ibid.

Arns and Sasse encounter a link between the absurdist practice of the Oberiu and subversive affirmation. The Oberiu was a group of authors who were regarded as the last Soviet avant-garde group of the late 1920s and 1930s.²² Arns and Sasse see the work of the Oberiu as the precursor of subversive affirmation. This is supported by a few studies (non-English languages) that link contemporary strategies of subversive affirmation (especially in Moscow Conceptualism) to the Oberiu.²³ Arns and Sasse observe that what is defined as Moscow Conceptualism can be characterised by a structural repetition of totalitarian practices. “In the context of totalitarian literature we can designate subversive affirmation as a ‘literary strategy of the exterior’ in an ‘interior’ (i.e. totalitarian culture) that presents itself as ‘total’”.²⁴ The exterior is the artist that uses an artistic strategy to question something from within the dominant culture. In this questioning the artists present their work as a ‘total’, making it part of the dominant culture and therefore giving it a sense of legitimacy.

Regarding an example of one of the authors of the Oberiu, Daniil Kharms, it will become more evident how the ‘exterior’ can interfere with the ‘interior’ while the artist presents the work as ‘total’. In other words, how the artist (exterior) can interfere in restrictive regimes (interior) by using the strategy of subversive affirmation. In 1940, Kharms wrote a fake confession of a nameless defendant where he made use of the Stalinist practice of inventing crimes. Kharms’ minimalist text and the idea of invented crimes was a reference to the ‘show-trials’ taking place from the late 1930s onwards, which were full of fake confessions and self-accusations. According to Arns and Sasse, Kharms’ inventions, or rather those of his protagonist, were much more fantastic and strange than Kharms’ fictive accusers ever expected. Thus, the accusers were confronted with the laying bare of their own strategy. Kharms’ confession was a confession about Stalinist techniques of truth production.²⁵ With Kharms’ choice for Stalinist ideas he affirmed the ruling ideology while simultaneously undermining it through his fantastic and strange approach to the discourse. With his fake confession, Kharms distanced himself from the discourse and exposed the power structures and injustices in Stalinist techniques of truth production, which is the surplus.

The late avant-garde authors affirmed existing discourses to expose something within these discourses, whereby they were able to undermine and criticise the discourse. Arns and Sasse explain how this repetition of already existing linguistic and/or other artistic forms was

²² Oberiu stands for ‘Ob’edinenie real’nogo iskusstva’, or ‘The Association of Real Art’. They existed between 1927 and 1932, and is the last formation within the Russian or Soviet literary groups in 1932. Arns and Sasse, 450.

²³ Arns and Sasse mention M. Epstejn “Iskusstvo avantgarda I religioznoe soznanie” in *Novyj Mir* (1989) and A. Hansen-Löve “Zur Typologie des Erhabenen in der russischen Moderne” in *Poetica* (1991).

²⁴ Arns and Sasse, 450.

²⁵ *Idem*, 451.

the only possible way to speak up within the restrictions of the communist regime of Stalin. Although the first appearance of subversive affirmation was seen in literature, in the following decennia the strategy reoccurred in more performative practices.

1.2 Performative activities in Eastern Europe between 1950 – 1990

American art historian Amy Bryzgel describes the first performative activities in Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America since the 1950s and 1960s. In her book *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (2017), she maps the emergence of performance art in Eastern Europe from the 1960s onwards.²⁶ Bryzgel explains how this experimental art stood in sharp contrast with the more traditional forms of art in which the state wanted the artists to work: painting and sculpture.²⁷ The experimental performances constituted a challenge to the commercial institutions of art, that was the painting and sculpture produced by order of the state.²⁸ With these actions artists acquired a certain autonomy, which created a space of freedom within restrictive artistic spheres.

The work of the Slovakian artist Alex Mlynárčik (1934), is in compliance with this experimental form because his participatory projects were fusing art and life. Furthermore, his work challenged the commercial institutions of art and confronted the state with what they wanted artists to produce. For example, Mlynárčik deliberately used a real wedding as the stage for his work *Eva's Wedding* (1972), instead of creating a painting or sculpture. *Eva's Wedding* was a restaging of Slovak modernist painter L'udovit Fulla's *Village Wedding* (1958-59). Mlynárčik did not only used a real wedding as a provocation against the states' influence in artistic practices, this form also enabled him to publicise his work. Bryzgel explains how due to this work's resemblance of real-life events, in this a traditional marriage, the authorities were unable to publicly object.²⁹ Mlynárčik's work can be seen as a performative activity that makes use of the strategy of subversive affirmation, because, at first, it affirms a certain discourse: that of the traditional wedding. Secondly, however, it undermines the traditional wedding, since Mlynárčik only used it as the stage for his performative activity and therefore did not respect the conventions connected to a marriage ceremony. In this staging, he is taking a distance from both the wedding itself and the states influence in the production of

²⁶ Bryzgel.

²⁷ Idem, 22.

²⁸ Ibid.

Kantor was a stage director, creator of happenings, painter, set designer, writer, art theoretician, actor in his own productions and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. "Tadeusz Kantor", *Culture.pl*, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/tadeusz-kantor>.

²⁹ Bryzgel, 23.

art. By this, he exposes the restrictions in the artistic spheres that are caused by the influence of the state, resulting in the surplus: the desired fourth component of subversive affirmation.

In the same year as *Eva's Wedding*, the Serbian artist Bálint Szombathy executed his performative action *Lenin in Budapest*. Szombathy walked through the streets of Budapest with a large sign with a picture of Lenin on it. This was an action that copied its form from the actual May Day celebrations, as during those celebrations, the participants usually carried signs with a portrait of their leader on it. His transformation from a collective celebration into an individual action gave his work a certain ambiguity: It could be conceived as either supportive or derisive of the regime.³⁰ According to Bryzgel, the ambiguity was created by the fact that Szombathy took a collective celebration and turned it into an individual one. Even a simple gesture had the potentiality of being perceived as undermining the regime it was directed towards, due to the hypersensitivity of those in authority.

It is this that the appropriation of an existing and well known act, the May Day celebrations, makes Szombathy's action an example of subversive affirmation. With his performative action he affirms the glorification of a leader by walking around with a huge sign. Simultaneously, however, he undermines the discourse of glorification of the leader (Lenin) by the individuality of his action with which he ridicules this same glorification. Through his individuality, Szombathy distances himself from state and the power of the glorified leader, making it possible to reflect on both. Szombathy's performative action questions and exposes the influential power of Communist leaders and the act of glorification. The latter fact, finally, provides the surplus as the final component of subversive affirmation.

In the 1980s the Slovenian multimedia group Laibach was formed. It was not their music, but the group's stage shows and overall aesthetic approach that captured their audiences' attention and made Laibach one of the most significant artistic groups in Slovenia's history. According to Arns and Sasse, Laibach became notorious for their "hyper-literal repetition of the totalitarian ritual".³¹ In their live performances they embraced the iconography of military rituals and regimes. At Ljubljana's festival *New Rock* in 1982, lead singer Tomaz Hostnik performed as Benito Mussolini, whilst in his background films of military parades and speeches by the fascist leaders Mussolini, Tito and Jaruzelski were shown. The group used its performances to question their country's recent political history and its contemporary political environment. By taking the aesthetics, choreographic militarism, and intensity of totalitarianism and by showing these factors in an exaggerated, performative manner, they were able to criticise this totalitarianism and distance themselves from it. In

³⁰ Bryzgel, 33.

³¹ Arns and Sasse, 448.

reference to an interview with Laibach, BAVO discuss that they analysed nationalism through the aesthetic dimension.³² With the placing of many national symbols alongside each other, Laibach demonstrated the ‘universality’ of these symbols.³³ They showed how nations are not original when it comes to defining their own originality, as they often use the same arguments and symbols. BAVO explains how Laibach’s performances visualised the universality of totalitarianism, thereby making it look ridiculous.

To return to the four components of subversive affirmation: with its affirmation of different symbols, all part of a corresponding discourse, Laibach simultaneously undermines this discourse by showing its universality and the silliness of the conflicts deriving from what are now proven to be (nothing more than) minimal differences. By exaggerating the obvious similarity of the different totalitarian symbols, the Laibach performers distance themselves from the specific totalitarian regimes and reflect on their corresponding features. Thereby shedding light on the performativity of these totalitarian regimes, constituting the final surplus that is required to destabilise the discourse. Slavoj Žižek helps us understand this process of undermining the discourse in his essay “Why are Laibach and NSK not fascists”. In this essay he explains that the performative, public staging of the exaggeration of the ideology, suspends its normal functioning.³⁴

Both Bryzgel and the duo Arns and Sasse discuss the ‘acts of sabotage’ between 1987 and 1988 by the group Chempiony Mira (World Champions). All their actions used affirmative tactics that partly (in content or in structure) repeated socialist realist practices. For example: in the performative action the *Hygiene on the Shore* (1987) they cleaned two kilometres of the coastline of the resort town Koktebel (Krim) by shampooing and wiping down the rocks on the beach to mock a by the state obligated collective activity like cleaning the streets.³⁵ Bryzgel explains how this practice unfolds:

“By repeating the required gesture (of voluntary work, for example), the action was neither critical nor supportive (towards institutional powers); it simply exposed the action for what it was, leaving the observer to decide for him- or herself on which side to stand.”³⁶

³² BAVO.

³³ Idem, 30.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Why are Laibach and NSK not fascists?” (1993), in *Maska*, 40.

³⁵ Arns and Sasse, 447.

³⁶ Bryzgel, 44.

Arns and Sasse explain how Chempiony Mira copied the Stalinist idea of ‘purification’ by giving it a new content. “Through this systematical [sic] devaluation the purification became concrete, cute, and ridiculous.”³⁷ It is exactly the repeating of the required gesture that enabled the artists to produce their work, and even enabled them to openly criticise the Stalinist idea because their action deviated just slightly from the norm. By affirming the discourse (the policy of the government, for example the obligated collective activity) Chempiony Mira was able to undermine this same discourse. They transformed the voluntary work into an act of pure wastefulness through which they distanced themselves from the discourse and took on a reflective position. The surplus they created was an exposure of the Stalinist idea of purification through the systematic devaluation of this discourse. Nevertheless, because they produced their work within the restricted orders of voluntary work, the government could not easily arrest them.

In all the Eastern European examples discussed above, it is clear that the strategy of subversive affirmation was initially adopted by way of necessity because of the socialist regimes the artists resided under. Whereas later, throughout the 1990s, it became an influential ‘Eastern import’ in the West where artists deliberately chose this strategy. Before I will come to these deliberately chosen works of subversive affirmation in the West, I will first discuss the work of Augusto Boal, an artist from South-America who produced within strong artistic restrictions. Boal was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1931. A new military regime started in Brazil in 1964 with a coup d’état supported by the Brazilian elite, the church and the middle class, as well as by the United States (who hoped, with their involvement, to put a halt to the spread of communism in South-America). Boal’s controversial work was seen as a threat to the Brazilian military regime.³⁸ The fact that Boal now had to work under a strong military regime, forced him to develop certain strategies that enabled him to carry on with producing his art.

1.3 Performative activities between 1970 – 2000s

Whereas clear examples of subversive affirmation in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1990 are easily found and discussed as such by theatrical and philosophical theorists, it is harder to find such examples from approximately the same period of time but outside of Eastern Europe. In a search for these more Western examples, Augusto Boal’s *theatre of the oppressed* came to surface. It is plausible that examples from the West in this period of time

³⁷ Arns and Sasse, 447.

³⁸ “Information about Augusto Boal”, accessed July 11, 2019, <https://augustoboaltheatrefoppressed.weebly.com/information-of-augusto-boal.html>.

are harder to find since there are little to no examples of equally obstructing policies by Western governments. Although none of the earlier discussed sources mention Boal's theatre of the oppressed in relation to subversive affirmation, I observe similarities with subversive affirmation in Boal's theatrical work and his strategies.

Theatre of the oppressed is a form of theatre that deals with restrictions, specifically those of minorities, first developed in the 1970s in South-America and later spread over Europe. In her text "Specta(c)ting: theatre of the oppressed, orthodoxy and adaptation", Professor of Theatre Studies Jan Cohen-Cruz argues that the political context of Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1960s forced Boal to find other ways for resistance.³⁹ Through the theatre of the oppressed, he applies the language of class struggle to the theatrical context.⁴⁰ Inspired by Marxist ideology, which sees theatre as an efficient weapon, Boal strove for a utopian goal with his theatre: a classless, equitable society.

Cohen-Cruz mentions one of Boal's techniques that shows similarities to subversive affirmation: the invisible theatre, masquerades as everyday life.⁴¹ These invisible theatres took place in public spaces, such as restaurants. In one performance that took place after the performer had dinner in such a restaurant, the performer claimed he/she was not able to pay the bill because he/she was out of work. With this apparently real situation Boal wanted to start a conversation about social responsibility for the unemployed. With this form, it suddenly became an event that involved different parties, all (unwillingly) participating in the discussion.⁴² The invisible theatre was created in the repressive context of Argentina in the early 1980s and enabled artists to deliberate publicly and critically about important issues without risking arrest.⁴³ It is exactly this dealing with restrictions and the question of how one can enable oneself to create art that makes the theatre of the oppressed interesting in the context of this paper.

Boal's invisible theatre is not identical to subversive affirmation but it does include some of its components because it appropriated a format and then undermined this same format. By staging the performance in a restaurant, Boal managed to affirm the discourse of a restaurant and those privileged to be able to go out for dinner. Simultaneously, he undermined this same discourse with the exposure of the unemployed. By staging this scene in a restaurant Boal exposed the unemployment and the social responsibility connected. With the invisible theatre, Boal confronted those who do have the money to go out for dinner with

³⁹ Cohen-Cruz, 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Idem, 45.

⁴² Idem, 46.

⁴³ Idem, 46.

the downside of the way money is distributed. By taking on this approach and the disturbing effect that it had, he managed to distance himself from the discourse he acted within. The surplus in this case was the discussion in which all involved parties took place, which is the opposite of the simple, relaxing dinner the guests of the restaurant had expected. In addition, with his invisible theatre Boal tried to create an awareness around social responsibility, ideally ultimately inspiring other people to take action too.

Only ten years later, around the second half of the 1990s, Arns and Sasse witness an increasing use of subversive affirmation in the West. For example, in the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel and the Yes Men, strategies are noticed of resistance through affirmation of – and compliance with – the image, identity and strategies of their adversaries.⁴⁴ In 2002, Schlingensiefel started his project, which consisted of a performance and a film called *Please love Austria*, better known as *Ausländer raus! (Foreigners out!)* on a square in Vienna, Austria. For this reality TV-event, twelve participants, introduced by Schlingensiefel as asylum-seekers, spent one week in a cordoned-off container complex in Vienna, while constantly being filmed. Through an online website the public could continuously watch the participants. Each day there was a vote on the two least popular contestants, who were then allegedly sent straight back to their native country. The container complex was decorated with blue flags representing Austria's far-right populist FPÖ party. In addition, fragments of speeches from the FPÖ chairman Jörg Haider could be heard across the square. Arns and Sasse explain that Schlingensiefel was very aware of how his action resonated in the mass media as he advertised the whole event as an action of the FPÖ.⁴⁵ Schlingensiefel combined two well-known formats to lay bare the consequences of Austria's violent immigration policy: the TV show *Big Brother* and the right-wing party FPÖ. In *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of over-identification*, BAVO discusses Schlingensiefel's project as an example of the tactic of overidentification:

“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.”⁴⁶

It is the exaggerated affirmation of the extreme right-wing, populist discourse in a performative manner that enables Schlingensiefel to openly protest against the extreme right

⁴⁴ Arns and Sasse, 444.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, 452.

⁴⁶ BAVO, 33.

party FPÖ joining the Austrian government. Or, put differently, through exaggerative affirmation, Schlingensief enables himself to openly protest against the violence in the ideology of the FPÖ (being the discourse). The concept of overidentification does not refer to the exact same as the concept of subversion does, but it does, however subvert the discourse by the exaggerated affirmation and is therefore a form of subversive affirmation. Furthermore, this makes the observation by BAVO supportive to the one of Arns and Sasse.

The Yes Men, whose action formed the introduction for this research, believe in the strategy of lying in order to expose a certain truth. The Yes Men conceive of their own work as *identity correction*. In one of their films, Mike Bonanno (member of the Yes Men) explains this designation. According to Bonanno, they correct the identity of “criminals” that are not really presenting themselves honestly, who hide something about their nature.⁴⁷ The correction means an exposure of a hidden “something” and this is likely to be the underlying ideology of powerful entities.

In 2002 at a conference in Sydney, as spokesperson for the World Trade Organisations, the Yes Men announced: “[I]n the light of all its mistakes, it [the WTO] would shut down, starting again as an organisation whose goals were not to help corporations, but rather to help the poor and the environment.”⁴⁸ The Yes Men infiltrated into the WTO by first affirming their discourse and format through the appropriation of their websites. Nevertheless, after this infiltration, they firmly distinguished themselves from the ideology of the organisation, once they spoke on behalf of it. It is the tactic of speaking at these conferences as a representative with which they undermine the discourse (and thus the organisation) and take a great distance from it. The alternative perspective the Yes Men present of the WTO is the surplus that destabilises the discourse and turns it into its opposite. Furthermore, they force the WTO to justify their policies and simultaneously make the WTO’s actual partners look critically at their own relationship with the WTO and its policies (which they endorse).

Finally, an example can be found from a country that used to be part of the Soviet Union, but has been independent from 1991 onwards: Estonia. In 2010 the performative action *NO75 Unified Estonia* was created by performance group Theatre NO99. Because they produced their work relatively recently, this example is not discussed by any of the previously mentioned authors, who have only published the work used here before the year 2010. A year before the then upcoming parliamentary elections, Theatre NO99 called for a press conference where they announced their new political party: Unified Estonia. The political party had everything to position itself as a real political party: a visual identity; an anthem; slogans.

⁴⁷ Transcript of a statement by Bonanno in: Chris Smith, Dan Ollman u. Sarah Price, *The Yes Men* (USA 2004). Quoted by Doll, 64.

⁴⁸ Arns and Sasse, 455.

Unified Estonia was a hyper-populist party whose entire identity and methodology was taken from existing populist handbooks and copied from actual parties. With their fictional hyper-populist party, they meant to make the actual populism in real life redundant.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, during their whole campaign it remained unclear whether Unified Estonia was really trying to acquire a position within the government, or whether it was “just art”.⁵⁰

With their performative action they affirmed the acquired form of the regular politics, which was needed to announce a political party and establish a position within the politics. Simultaneously, with their realistic features in this creation of the populist political party they played with what they call the arrogant attitude of politics, saying it is complicated and others should not force their way into it. In their documentary *NO55 Ash and Money*, that sheds light on how *NO75 Unified Estonia* came to existence, Theatre NO99 explain they wanted to “do good politics”, as a response to the parliament sometimes doing bad theatre.⁵¹ With this performance they wanted to criticise their contemporary Estonian democracy, which, in their eyes, was not as democratic as it should have been. Decisions were being made by a select group of people who, in their opinion, were responsible for the manipulation of the Estonian people. With their political party Unified Estonia, Theatre NO99 presented this failed democracy and the manipulation by mimicking its manners. With the performance *NO75 Unified Estonia* Theatre NO99 affirmed the hyper-populist politics. Through the theatricality of their actions they simultaneously undermined this discourse and took a distance from it. They used the fictional convention of theatre to reflect on Estonian democracy, with the possible alternative perspectives on Estonians representative democracy being its surplus.

1.4 The development of subversive affirmation

I will finish this first chapter by providing an answer to my first sub-question: how has the strategy of subversive affirmation developed in a Western performance context? According to Arns and Sasse, subversive affirmation in general re-occurs in so-called repressive political situations.⁵² By using these already existing formats, artists enable themselves to question and/or criticise restrictive regimes, as well as the influence of the state. When this strategy is being used out of the necessity that repressive or strongly restrictive regimes induce, the performative action seems to be more modest than when it is being used in a more liberal

⁴⁹ Theatre NO99, *NO55 Ash and Money* (documentary), directed by Tilt Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper, premiered September 16, 2013, accessed May 2, 2019, <https://no99.ee/productions/no55-ash-and-money>.

⁵⁰ "NO75 Unified Estonia Assembly", Theatre NO99, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://no99.ee/productions/no75-unified-estonia-assembly>.

⁵¹ *NO55 Ash and Money*.

⁵² Arns and Sasse, 444.

climate. This can be explained by the political restrictions artists have had to cope with. Out of necessity the artists have to be more careful in order not to be prosecuted for subversive work. Whereas in the more liberal climate, artists seem to be more explicit in their critique, because otherwise their work can be easily understood as the commercial, capitalist art that is being subordinated to the state.

In the invisible theatre by Boal, the same modest shape as in the Eastern European work is visible. These actions shed light on social problems that would otherwise never be discussed, or at least not by the ones most influential in these social problems. In the examples produced in the West the subversive affirmation causes more radical performative actions. It is thus clear that a difference can be distinguished between the more modest subversive affirmation in Eastern Europe and a more radical form in performances produced by Western artists.

All the performative actions referred to in this chapter show that in order to be able to be critical about a certain discourse, the best thing an artist can do is to literally submit him- or herself to that very same discourse. In the article “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art”, Chantal Mouffe discusses two artistic strategies: first, the strategy of *exodus* that concentrates its efforts on constructing alternative social forms outside the state power network, and, second, a strategy that, instead, recommends an engagement with institutions. It is this second strategy that in the context of this paper is particularly interesting. This strategy is formed by a theoretical approach with two key concepts: *antagonism* and *hegemony*. According to Mouffe, the hegemonic practices are those practices of articulation, through which a certain structure (like those of identity and power) is created and through which the power of social institutions is fixed.⁵³ It is the expression of unquestioned, fixed power relations that in their nature exclude other possibilities. The notion of hegemony is closely related to discourse, but they are not the same. Discourse is primarily defined by language and power, whereas hegemony is defined by identity and power. *Agonistic spaces* are abstract spaces where the dominant consensus is challenged and where different approaches or discourses are confronted without any possibility of final reconciliation.⁵⁴ It is a space where conflicting points of view are confronted, without the aim of consensus.

The hegemonic practices can be challenged by *counter-hegemonic practices*: “[p]ractices which attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony”.⁵⁵ These practices do not take the outside form of the exodus, but aim to profoundly transform those institutions by critically engaging with them. According to Mouffe,

⁵³ Mouffe, 67.

⁵⁴ Idem, 71.

⁵⁵ Idem, 67.

cultural and art practices have an influential role in the constructions of a hegemony, and therefore they might contribute to a counter-hegemonic challenge to neo-liberal hegemony: “[t]his counter-hegemonic politics aims at targeting the institutions that secure the dominant hegemony so as to bring about profound transformations in the way they function.”⁵⁶ The gained popularity of subversive affirmation can be explained by the dissatisfaction in representative democracy.

According to Mouffe we live in splintered post-political times, as a result of consensus democracy where politicians only make small adjustments because they do not have the answer to neoliberal globalization either. It is the artistic activism, or ‘critical art’ (both terms used by Mouffe), that tries to transform the hegemonic structures from the inside out. In order to resist the existing hegemony, according to Mouffe, artists should engage with the institutions supporting this hegemony to create the counter-hegemony.

In the performative actions referred to in this chapter, we have already seen this type of targeting certain powerful institutions in order to criticise them. In a performative Western context, subversive affirmation has developed into a strategy that questions and criticises the contemporary democracies, discusses perspectives and negotiates possible alternatives. How subversive affirmation first strongly affirms with the discourse and by this affirmation – and other steps – questions the discourse at the same time, will be subject of research in the next chapter.

⁵⁶ Mouffe, 69-70.

Chapter 2: Four components of subversive affirmation

Chapter one discussed how and where the strategy of subversive affirmation has appeared in performative actions since the beginning of the 20th century in regard to the four related components of subversive affirmation, as derived from the definition of Arns and Sasse: affirmation, subversion, distancing and exposure. In this second chapter, I will elaborate on these four components and their sub-methods, by referring to the examples discussed in the previous chapter, in order to use the components as analytical tools in the third and final chapter.

2.1 Affirmation of the discourse

Out of the discussed performative actions, two closely connected sub-methods of affirmation stood out: *engagement* and *identification*. In all the examples discussed above, it becomes evident that for subversive affirmation, first a close engagement with the discourse that is being criticised is necessary. These sub-methods are intertwined, but while engagement seems to be connected to a certain sincerity in the intention of the artists and the exaggerated execution of the performative action, identification seems to be more about the creation of a credible, temporary reality.

In the performative actions of Schlingensief, Theatre NO99, and the invisible theatre by Boal, the close engagement of both the artist and consequently the spectator is visible. In these actions the spectator is positioned in an active role because he/she, willingly or not, is actively part of the performative action. Moreover, the spectators were asked to influence the action by their choices. For example, in *Ausländer raus!* by Schlingensief, spectators could vote on their least favourite asylum seeker. And because Theatre NO99 kept the purposes of their political party Unified Estonia ambiguous to a late stage, all involved parties acted sincerely, since they did not know for how long the political party would exist. Finally, with Boal's invisible theatre, he places the spectators right in the middle of the discussion that is constituted by the performative action, forcing them to reflect. In these performative activities, it is not so much about the removal of the spectator's horizon (as is the case with over-identification), but more about establishing a close connection to the discourse for the artist, and ideally the spectator too.

The engagement can also be established by the identification with the discourse, as is the case with the actions of the Yes Men. Their identification with big corporations (in their words "identity corrections"), are more aiming for the creation of the credible temporary situation that removes the spectators' horizon. In other words, initially, the spectator is not

looking beyond the specific work of art he/she is experiencing and understands it as real. They interfere in big corporations by the identification of their visual identity: websites, logos, ideology. In public, they present themselves as representatives of the organisation they hijacked, so to say. This renders them, initially, like-minded with the audience of the conferences. Once the Yes Men subvert the organisation by making ridiculous statements, they do not longer share the same ideology as the audience. This contradiction (the WTO pronouncing contradictory statements) is an attempt to make the spectators reflect on the WTO's policy. Through the identification with the discourse, the spectator is being immersed in a constructed world that looks a lot like reality. Ideally, the spectator understands this constructed world as the reality. This causes an even bigger reflection on the discussed discourse, because the spectator is fooled and exposed to an alternative way of shaping reality. This will be further elaborated upon in chapter three, with regard to the performative activity *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB. By an extreme affirmation with the discourse, artists are able to subvert the discourse, as will be discussed below.

2.2 Subversion

The second component of subversive affirmation is the subversion of the discourse initially affirmed. For the subversion of the discourse, first a strong engagement is necessary, as we have seen in the previous section. The subversion itself occurs within the discourse that has just been affirmed. Regarding subversion, I have distinguished two sub-methods: *exaggerated affirmation* (or *over-identification*) and *devaluation* (or *systematic downplaying*) of the action. These sub-methods are also closely intertwined, because the exaggerated affirmation consequently means a devaluation of the discourse. Hence, it is important to emphasise that these are two different methods with which to subvert the initially affirmed discourse. The devaluation can also be used deliberately, for subversion, and is therefore not always the consequence of an exaggerated affirmation.

BAVO refers to different philosophers and their ethics to argue how this exaggerative engagement – the overdoing – can break with the discourse and make a change for good:

“The act of over-identification, (...), 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, 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."⁵⁷

Because of the exaggerated affirmation the spectators (and the ones subject to the discourse) can no longer deny the exposed structures. The artists so to say 'drown' the spectators in the ideology, which is the affirmed discourse. The subversion is caused by an exaggeration of the at first strongly affirmed discourse. The exaggerated affirmation is prominent in the work of the inventors of the strategy of over-identification, Laibach, and in the performative actions by Schlingensief and the Yes Men. Arns and Sasse mention Laibach as the developer of the tactic of over-identification. According to Arns and Sasse, over-identification can be understood as the ultimate form of affirmation because it manages to create an absolute totality.⁵⁸ In these examples, we see how identification is not enough to subvert the discourse. An additional exaggeration is required. An identification with every single sign of the discourse's identity is necessary in order to subvert it: ideology, format, rules, restrictions, protagonists, looks, statements, etcetera.

The performative actions *Lenin in Budapest* by the Serbian artist Szombathy and *Hygiene on the Shore* by the Russian group Chempiony Mira are both exemplary for subversion through devaluation. Both their actions subverted the original discourse by adding an extra layer to it: Szombathy devaluated the collective glorification of a leader by executing the glorification all by himself, whereby the glorification lost all its impact since a respected leader should be glorified by the entire nation, not only by one man. The individuality of Szombathy initially made it ambiguous whether Szombathy was supportive or derisive towards the regime. Whereas, Chempiony Mira subverted the discourse of voluntary work through an action in which a whole city often participated.⁵⁹ In *Hygiene on the Shore*, it is exactly the high number of participants that executed the ridiculous, useless, voluntary work that strengthens the subversion. Through this additional layer, they made the actions completely useless and with that they exposed and ridiculed the ideology behind the discourse. However, and this is important for understanding the difference between the two sub-methods, both actions did not explicitly over-identify with the affirmed discourse. By the over-identification (as seen in the work of Laibach, Schlingensief and the Yes Men) and/or the

⁵⁷ BAVO, 32.

⁵⁸ Arns and Sasse, 448.

⁵⁹ Idem, 447.

systematic downplaying of the discourse (Chempiony Mira and Szombathy), artists distance themselves from the discourse, as will be expanded upon in the next paragraph.

2.3 Distancing

The third component of subversive affirmation is the distancing from the discourse, caused by the subversion. The distancing can happen explicitly or implicitly, but at some point a distancing will occur. In order to take a distance from it, an artist first has to establish a certain engagement with the discourse. By engaging with the discourse, artists validate their own interfering in the discourse, the subverting of the discourse and their own distancing of the discourse. I will discuss how this distancing can occur explicitly or implicitly, as well as the sub-methods for distancing: by *creating ambiguity* and by *ridiculing the discourse*.

First, I will discuss the performative activities that explicitly distance themselves from the discourse. The most obvious example would be the Yes Men, since they take a radical, oppositional position to the affirmed discourse, once they are able to speak on behalf of the big corporation they hijacked. They do not shy away from ridiculous statements that betray the whole identity that they appropriated at the start. A good example would be the performative activity of the Yes Men discussed in the introduction of this thesis, where the Yes Men talk at a textile conference. Once on stage, they present a gold suit with a 3-foot phallus for administering electric shocks to sweatshop employees. Through these ridiculous statements, for an audience that is expecting a talk by the WTO, they very explicitly and publicly distance themselves from the discourse and, what is probably more important, from the organisation. If they had not made this ridiculous statement, it is likely their action could have been considered as real, consequently maintaining the unequal power relations that are deeply rooted in corporations such as the WTO.

Two other performative actions that explicitly take a distance from the discourse they originally affirmed are the performances by Laibach and Schlingensief's *Ausländer raus!*. In both cases, it is the exaggeration of political signs that ridicules the discourse and thereby causes the desired distance. Laibach magnified nationalist signs by putting all of them next to each other, which showed the universality of the nationalism. They distanced themselves from the totalitarian regime by ridiculing and theatricalising it. Schlingensief distances himself from the political debate through the over-identification with the populist-right discourse. This over-identification causes a strong performativity in the *Ausländer raus!*, which is reinforced by the second appropriated format: the Big Brother TV-show. The performativity, in combination with the appropriation of the identity of Austria's far-right Populist party FPÖ, causes the explicit distance, since it is obviously not an action of the FPÖ. Obvious, because

Schlingensiefel also makes insults and provocations levelled against the new Right. BAVO explains how this constant switching between opposing positions (the over-identification with the FPÖ but simultaneously the insults and provocation) is a deliberate attempt of Schlingensiefel to 'produce the contradiction'.⁶⁰ BAVO calls this constant contradiction a deliberate 'structural ambiguity', and it is precisely through this structural ambiguity though which Schlingensiefel explicitly distances himself from the populist-right discourse. In addition, the structural ambiguity deprives the audience of a stable point from which they can interpret the action.⁶¹ So as a consequence of Schlingensiefel's distancing, he distances the audience from the discourse as well, to enforce reflection and space for alternatives.

On the other hand, we have those performative activities that take a distance from the discourse in a more implicit manner. The implicit distance seems to be more common in subversive affirmation than the explicit distance, which can be explained by the original environment where subversive affirmation has appeared: the restrictive regimes. Within restrictive regimes, the distancing from the discourse was less easy, since this could have serious repercussions, as the artist could be accused of producing work dismissive of the state. The distancing therefore is more subtle, less straightforward than the way it is done in the actions by the Yes Men and Schlingensiefel.

In the first appearance of subversive affirmation, with the work of Oberiu, this subtle distancing is already visible. The use of previously existing linguistic forms was the only possible way to speak up within the restrictions of the communist regime of Stalin. The use of these existing linguistic structures for other purposes was already a subversive aspect; there was no explicit expression possible. In the performative actions *Eva's Wedding*, *Lenin in Budapest*, and *Hygiene on the Shore*, this subtle distancing as the only possible way to speak up within restrictive cultural spheres is also visible. All three actions refused to completely cooperate with the regimes they lived in, or, put differently, they refused to accept and cooperate with the prevalent policies. As a reaction, they used the same discourses they were refusing to criticise them through ridicule.

The performative action, *NO75 Unified Estonia*, by the Estonian group Theatre NO99 was produced in a much more liberal environment. Still, they implicitly distanced themselves from the discourse, because they wanted to retain the credibility of their political party. Due to this credibility, which caused an ambiguity, the reactions from other involved parties were more serious and enabled Theatre NO99 to show the dishonesty and manipulation that play out in politics. It is the extreme engagement that enables Theatre NO99 to take a stance of

⁶⁰ BAVO, 34.

⁶¹ Ibid.

implicit distance, shortly before the elections. Because of the ambiguity in the intentions of the artists, often created by the use of a multiplicity of signs, they distance themselves from the discourse.

2.4 The exposure

The fourth component of subversive affirmation is the exposure of (an element of) the discourse caused by the previous three discussed components: affirmation, subversion and distance. Artists seem to use the strategy of subversive affirmation to expose a surplus of the discourse, mostly related to the underlying, concealed power structures and false promises of the discourse. According to German philosopher Walter Benjamin, referred to by BAVO, quoting is more effective than critically commenting on something.⁶² It is about presenting the adversary in the clearest way possible, or as the authors of BAVO argue: by fully endorsing the discourse of the opponent, the artists already show their distrust of the discourse in their strive for clarity.⁶³

The exposed aspect forms the surplus, which is always an *exposure* of the discourse or the *proposition of an alternative perspective* on the discourse. Either way, it destabilises the originally affirmed discourse. The earliest examples: Oberiu's work, Mlynárčik's *Eva's Wedding*, and Szombathy's *Lenin in Budapest*, all exposed specific restrictions or techniques that were primarily communist. Rendering these restrictions or techniques visible was already understood as critique. Furthermore, they did not have the artistic freedom to propose alternative perspectives. The performative actions by the Yes Men, Schlingensief's *Ausländer raus!*, and *NO75 Unified Estonia* by Theatre NO99 are not only exposing unquestioned structures, they also present alternative perspectives, mainly on representative democracy. In the documentary about the making of *NO75 Unified Estonia*, initiators of the performative action, Tilt Ojasso and Ene-Liis Sempes, explain how they wanted to reflect on how easily people's opinions (including their own) are manipulated. Because of the extreme engagement at the start of their action, they provided themselves with a situation in which they could demonstrate the manipulative character of politics and the ease with which people are being manipulated themselves.

In the Dutch article, '*Kunst die zich voordoeft alsof ze iets anders is dan kunst*' (Art pretending to be something other than art), dramaturg and editor of the Belgian theatre journal *Rekto:Verso* Sébastien Hendrickx discusses how art can be an instrument to experiment with various social alternatives, as these artistic alternatives can have a final product somewhere

⁶² BAVO, 33.

⁶³ Idem, 34.

between idea and execution.⁶⁴ The arts can function as a laboratory, where new social forms can be developed in an artistic setting. Subversive affirmation pulls a discourse out of its own domain to show its structures in a performative domain. This change of scenery facilitates a critical perspective on the discourse, since other rules apply to the domain of the arts. Arns and Sylvia Sasse discuss how artists use subversive affirmation to unveil the ideological concept underlying a discourse by radicalising the discourse in its realisation.⁶⁵ Artists expose discourses which are otherwise never expressed in this overtly and clearly manner, as critique as well as to provide the audience with alternative perspectives. Or, as argued by the authors of BAVO: “it is a cut through a political correct façade, because the artists express the hard statements that are usually diluted or distorted in the official discourse.”⁶⁶ Especially in the performative action *Ausländer raus!* by Schlingensiefel, the work by the Yes Men, and Laibach’s stage shows, this exposure of usually diluted or ignored statements and/or structures is obvious. By merely repeating the entire discourse in an exaggerative manner, the iniquity of the discourse is exposed and the motivations for the discourse are overruled.

I will conclude this chapter with an answer to my second sub-question: how can the four components of subversive affirmation be used as analytical tools? As we have seen, all four components of subversive affirmation can be divided in different sub-methods that are interconnected and interdependent. The artist affirms the discourse via *identification* and/or *engagement* with the discourse, the latter often including a certain sincerity. Subsequently, the subversion happens through *exaggeration* and/or *devaluation*. This distances the artists from the discourse by the creation of an *ambiguity* in his/her position or by the *ridiculing* of the discourse. Finally, with all the aforementioned components, the artists *exposes* the discourse and/or presents *alternative perspectives* on the discourse. The detailed elaboration on these components facilitates a guiding framework for a close analysis of performative actions through the extrication of the sub-methods and how they interrelate. Furthermore, it presents the efficiency of every particular component as contributing to the whole. In the following chapter, I will apply the four components as analytical tools with which I will analyse two performative actions.

⁶⁴ Hendrickx.

⁶⁵ Arns and Sasse, 449.

⁶⁶ BAVO, 33.

Chapter 3: Subversive affirmation in contemporary performative activities

In order to take a closer look at subversive affirmation and how it is being used in contemporary performative actions, I will now focus on the strategy of subversive affirmation and how it is used in two performative actions: *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens (2008) and *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB (2014). Throughout these two analyses, I will be guided by the four components of subversive affirmation.

3.1 Subversive affirmation in Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*

Renzo Martens is a Dutch artist and filmmaker, born in 1973. After a year of political science at the University Nijmegen (1991-1992), he started studying at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent (1992-1993), after which he switched to the Gerrit Rietveld Academy Amsterdam (1993-1996).⁶⁷ Martens' work is strongly engaged and deals with political, economic, and social power structures. In his work he shows an affection with Africa, more specifically, with the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter Congo). This country provides the setting for his documentary film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, and in 2012 he founded the Institute for Human Activities (IHA) in Congo.

Enjoy Poverty is the second episode of a series in which Martens tries to deal with the role of a camera in a filmed world. In an interview with Joe Penney (published on the blog *Africa is a Country*), Martens explains how he uses his episodes to challenge the conventions connected to documentaries.⁶⁸ He discusses how most documentary films merely criticise or reveal an outside phenomenon, whereas Martens positions himself right in the midst of these phenomena. In *Enjoy Poverty* Martens travels through the country of Congo with a neon sign sculpture saying 'Enjoy Poverty', and a small flickering 'please' in between the words 'Enjoy' and 'Poverty'. During his journey, Martens shows inhabitants of the poor country the harsh side of how big NGO's, journalists, photographers and documentarists make money off of their poverty. Martens argues that the poverty Congo has to cope with today is the legacy of European colonialism and the continuing Western influence.⁶⁹ In *Enjoy Poverty* Martens asks the following question: 'who owns poverty?'. He proposes an emancipatory program where

⁶⁷ "Biography", Renzo Martens, accessed May 28, 2019, <http://www.renzomartens.com/biography>.

⁶⁸ *Africa is a country* is a blog initiated by Sean Jacobs and that "started as an outlet to challenge the received media wisdoms about Africa from a left perspective, informed by his (Sean Jacobs) experiences of resistance movements to Apartheid". Sean Jacobs, *Africa is a Country* (blog), accessed May 10, 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/about>.

⁶⁹ Congo was a colony ruled by Belgium between 1908 till 1960. "Belgian Congo", *Britannica*, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Belgian-Congo>.

the poor Congolese turn their own poverty into their greatest asset. If a Western journalist can earn lots of money with an image of a malnourished child, why would the Congolese themselves not be able to profit from their own victims of poverty?

Affirmation

The first component of subversive affirmation is the affirmation of the discourse by engagement and/or identification with the discourse. In *Enjoy Poverty*, the discourse that is being discussed is the poverty, and the system of wealth distribution Congo has to cope with today, as a legacy of European colonialism and the continuing Western influence. The discourse resonates in the question Martens poses: 'who owns poverty?'.

In Martens' film the discourse unfolds in two ways: first the image of poverty appropriated by Western media; secondly, the Western development aid worker who supposedly visits the country to help. Most obviously, Martens affirms the image of Africa presented by Western media: extreme poverty, extreme heat, children with swollen bellies from malnutrition, devastated mothers, death. These are all images of the horrible circumstances provided by Western media in an attempt to recruit more donors for charities such as UNICEF. In the first half of the film, Martens presents the horrible circumstances in Congo by visiting different plantations and showing a number of malnourished children, whose situations is a consequence of the extremely low wages of the plantation workers. By first establishing this well-known image of the poverty in Congo, Martens affirms the contemporaneous, poor situation of the country and the Western vision of it.

The second affirmation is established by a sincere engagement with the country and its inhabitants, and as a consequence an allegedly sincere intention to help. Throughout the whole film Martens presents himself as a Western journalist who is visiting Congo to train the inhabitants, to empower them, and to help them become the beneficiaries of their own poverty. In the first scene Martens sits on a boat together with three fishermen, whose catch is very disappointing. Martens asks condescendingly if this is all they caught, and proposes that the fishermen should fish for something other than fish: poverty. In all his attempts to help, Martens never loses trustworthiness; he remains the documentary-maker who visits the country in good intentions. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that if you portray poverty, you cannot escape the economy from which the poor themselves fail to profit in any way. This self-conscious position later enables him to openly criticise the Western influence because he is just as much part of this economy as the institutions he is criticising are.

Subversion

In the previous chapter I discussed how the discourse could be subverted by an exaggerated affirmation (over-identification) and/or devaluation of the discourse. Martens over-identifies with the white man who uses the Congolese resources under the guise of helping them develop. This is a role that is dangerously similar to that of the white colonizer: Martens is the all-knowing white man who wants to teach the (colonised) Congolese how they should understand their own poverty as their biggest resource. The exaggerated affirmation is strengthened by the absurdity and unfeasibility of Martens' plan. Furthermore, in his film Martens presents the underlying constructions that make it impossible for the poorest Congolese to profit from the development aid by Western countries. Martens subverts the discourse by subverting himself and his own propositions through exaggeration. *Enjoy Poverty* deals not so much with portraying the circumstances in Congo, but more with the effects of the Western influence. With Martens' approach he devaluates the Western influence, because he shows how their development aid is not reaching the ones most in need, and is actually maintaining and enforcing the unequal power structures.

Distancing

The third component of subversive affirmation is the distance that is explicitly or implicitly taken from the discourse. The two sub-methods distinguished in this component were the creation of ambiguity and the ridiculing of the discourse. In the case of *Enjoy Poverty*, use is being made of the tactic of implicitly distancing from the discourse, because Martens embraces the ambiguity he creates with his honesty towards both the Congolese and the Europeans. This ambiguity makes the distancing implicit, because Martens stays exceptionally honest in his position and intention towards both parties (Congolese and Western people) throughout the film. This extreme honesty is created by the exaggerated affirmation of the white man, who is there to help the Congolese make a profit out of their own poverty. Simultaneously, the sincerity in Martens' position shows similarities to the other white men Martens meets, who are also only attempting to help. Due to the absurdity of Martens odd position his intentions become ambiguous. In addition, this odd position makes the temporary situation less credible because, it seems too cruel to be true.

In the conversations with the other white men, the ambiguity in Martens position causes both the distance and the exposure of a surplus (which will be further discussed in the next section). This, for instance, becomes clear when Martens talks to an Italian photographer about the possession of images. The Italian photographer gets paid fifty dollars for a single photograph of a raped woman, a malnourished child, or a corpse. According to the photographer, he is the owner of the picture instead of the people in the photo that make

up the circumstances that is portrayed, since he captured this situation. There are many horrible situations that the Congolese have to endure, but the photographer took the one that made the best picture. And therefore, in his opinion, the picture belongs to him.

Later on in the film, Martens has a similar clash in position when he brings two Congolese photographers – who he recently educated to be news photographers – to the Doctors Without Borders officer, Mr. Frank. Martens taught the photographers that it is more rewarding to photograph raped women, corpses, or malnourished children, than happy-looking people at weddings or parties. Martens asks Mr. Frank if he would be interested in the photographs, since he buys similar photographs from Western journalists. Mr. Frank is not willing to buy them from the Congolese, arguing that it is inappropriate to allow the Congolese photographers access to the Doctors without Borders hospitals, only for them to be able to make photographs of the patients and get money out of it. In the conversations, Martens' positions as trainer or educator clashes with Mr. Frank's and the photographer's position, because Martens is suddenly aiming at undermining the discourse that he initially affirmed: the white man that is there to support the Congolese. It is Martens' ambiguous position and intention that deviates from the norm off the naïve, yet supporting man, a fact resulting in an uncomfortable conversation and that enables Martens to take a great distance from the discourse.

In *Enjoy Poverty* Martens radicalises the Western vision of the economic circumstances in Africa and how the Western institutions think they contribute with development aid, whilst the Western aid is never unconditional. By ridiculing of the ideology of the two Western men, he distances himself from the discourse. Furthermore, he ridicules his own position when Martens – like an old-fashioned missionary – teaches the two Congolese photographers how they should change strategy if they really want to make a living out of their photography. Presented on a white-board, Martens introduces his calculation that shows how from photographs of weddings and parties they will earn one dollar per month, while photographs of raped women, corpses, and malnourished children, will make a thousand dollars per month. Through the ambiguity in Martens' position and the ridiculing of his own white masculinity and the power this immediately gives him, Martens is able to take a distance from the discourse. Consequently, he exposes the discourse by showing that the ones in control of the system are also the ones deciding who are and remain the victims of poverty, and therefore the owners of poverty. This will be further discussed in the next section.

Exposure

The final component of subversive affirmation is the exposure. There is a distinction between the exposure of the discourse and/or the proposition of alternative perspectives. In *Enjoy Poverty* Martens is not able to propose a realistic alternative perspective, apart from his emancipation program – in the last scene he even confirms the desperate situation of the Congolese. For the Congolese plantation workers this is no news, as there was little expectation that Martens' presence in Congo could make any difference. Therefore, Martens suspects the documentary would have more impact in Europe than in Congo. Martens proposes an alternative perspective on the Western vision of poverty in Africa.

By the identity Martens appropriates – of the Western journalist – he is able to expose the unequal power structures in the images of poverty and the consequences of Western influence in the country of Congo. Martens positions the Western citizens central in the problems he presents. On the *Africa is a country* blog, Joey Penney explains how by reporting on the conflict, one is indirectly contributing to it.⁷⁰ Martens' action is no different from the other Western development aid: he presents some critique on media and the input of NGO's, how they exploit the misery of the poor Congolese, but at the same time he does exactly the same, and even goes a step further by openly patronising the Congolese. He thereby gives them false hope, while in the end he is just, like every other Westerner with good intentions: a consumer of their poverty.⁷¹ Martens tells the Congolese how they are being exploited and how his film will not change this exploitation. They will not even get to see the film since it is made for the European market, where it will generate money. Therefore, he proposes, it would be better to profit from their own poverty, because the foreign aid will not change a thing for them.

In the conversations with the other white men, Martens is able to turn their statements 180 degrees around and he lets them expose the unequal power structures, themselves. The exposure is strengthened by their unawareness of the economic consequences and how their actions actually maintain poverty in Congo. In the conversation with Mr. Frank, Martens is being interrupted when he wants to argue how the exclusion of the Congolese photographers on the market will only make the problem worse: the poor do not profit from their own situation, while the internationals do. Mr. Frank does not seem to mind the fact that the internationals actually earn money with their photographs of malnourished mothers and children and he is excluding the Congolese photographers exactly for this reason. The scene

⁷⁰ Joe Penney, "“Enjoy Poverty”: Interview with Renzo Martens", *Africa Is a Country* (blog), accessed May 10, 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2010/07/poverty-for-sale/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

exposes the power structures that are in place, even in a supposedly fair institution like the Doctors without Borders organisation.

Through Martens' awareness of his own privileged position he is able to expose something about the Western system and its ethics. Theatre Researcher Ruben De Roo quotes Martens in his article "Immorality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' Enjoy Poverty", when he explains to the Congolese that Western ethics is narcissistic: "What we cherish is the image of ourselves that we see in Africans. The misery that we are served up in various media makes us aware of our steady lives and shows us just how happy we are".⁷² *Enjoy Poverty* breaks this pattern, because instead of making the spectators happy, it leaves them feeling uncomfortable.⁷³ Throughout the whole documentary Martens is able to show how poverty is the property of those in power, those able to communicate with their work or those picking out that one horrible situation that makes for the best picture. As I have discussed in the first chapter in reference to BAVO: the trick was to appropriate the component and its elements in such an exaggerated manner that it pushes the people who might otherwise have a more nuanced or relativist attitude towards the current state of affairs, to the point where they cannot take on the ridiculous perspective any longer and feel forced to take a radical stance. With his direct approach Martens sheds light on the hopeless situation in Congo and how Western aid is only maintaining Congolese disqualification from the Western market. This alternative perspective forms the surplus that destabilises the discourse.

3.2 Subversive affirmation in *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB

The Center for Political Beauty is a collective of political artists based in Berlin, executing performative actions since 2009. Philipp Ruch (1981, Dresden) is a political philosopher and the founder of the group. With the CPB's artistic-political actions they attempt to address the state by making a public scene. In their provocative actions the history of Germany plays an important role. According to the CPB Germany should not only learn from its history, but should also take action.⁷⁴ They describe their work as 'aggressive humanism': a new way of

⁷² De Roo, 143.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Although it has happened far after the performative action *The Federal Emergency Programme*, and therefore is not implicitly linked to my own research. I still want to emphasise the fact that the CPB have recently been accused of being a 'criminal organisation' under paragraph 129 of the German Criminal code. This means the state has been investigating the CPB over the last 16 months with far-reaching surveillance powers. The accusation is a reaction on an artistic action from the CPB: in 2017 they erected a replica of Berlin's Holocaust memorial next to the home of Björn Höcke, a leading far-right, anti-immigration politician from the Alternative für Deutschland party who had called on Germans to stop compensating for the crimes of the Nazi Era. The CPB understands the accusation as an attack on artistic freedom and have said that the message of the replica was that "we will no longer tolerate right-wing extremism". Philip Oltermann, "Holocaust memorial replica

resisting the system and changing things.⁷⁵ The stages for their actions are always public spaces, usually in the centre of Berlin and in front of important government buildings, in order to reach a broad audience and to confront the involved parties.

With the action *The Federal Emergency Programme (TFEP)* from 2014, the CPB launched a ready-to-use emergency program, as initiated by the Minister of Family Affairs, Manuela Schwesig. It allowed the temporary admission of 55.000 Syrian children, shared between German households. It was a multi-faceted campaign: commercials (both in German and in Arabic); an extensive website for the recruitment of interested foster families (including supplication form); extensive PR materials; an active hotline with actors answering questions about the program; contacts with schools and other organizations inside Syria.⁷⁶ As a response to the initiative, an altar to thank Minister Schwesig was created in front of the Ministry building. With the attempt to provoke an actual response, the CPB interfered right into the political field with a fictional action.

Affirmation

In the previous chapter I discussed how the affirmation is established by engagement and/or identification with the discourse. In *TFEP* the discourse is the German government's policy regarding the refugee crisis. The CPB identified with two different formats: the German Ministry of Family Affairs and a British initiative in the Second World War, called *Kindertransport* (child transport), where Britain took in a large amount of children at risk, who were accommodated in foster families for the time needed. The first aspect is identified through the appropriation of their identity, website and party members, much like we have seen with the hijacks of the WTO by the Yes Men. The CPB identifies with the *Kindertransport* by taking on a format for its emergency program that is very similar to that of the *Kindertransport*. Secondly, The CPB identifies with the *Kindertransport* by involving survivors of the Second World War due to the initiative. Through both identifications, the CPB interferes

stunt shines light on right-wing radicalism in Germany", *The Guardian*, April 7, 2019, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/07/holocaust-memorial-replica-stunt-shines-light-on-rightwing-radicalism-in-germany>. Catherine Hickey, "German art collective under investigation by state prosecutor", *The Art Newspaper*, April 3, 2019, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/german-art-collective-under-investigation-by-state-prosecutor>.

⁷⁵ "About", Center for Political Beauty, accessed May 28, 2019, <https://politicalbeauty.com/about.html>.

⁷⁶ "The Federal Emergency Programme", Center for Political Beauty, latest accessed July 19, 2019, <https://politicalbeauty.com/kindertransport.html>.

David Kretz, "Aggressive Humanism", *The Point*, accessed June 2, 2019,

<https://thepointmag.com/2017/politics/aggressive-humanism-center-for-political-beauty>.

right in the middle of the politics, because they present this ready-to-use emergency program as initiated by the Minister of Family Affairs: Schwesig.

Subversion

In the previous chapter I explained how the subversion can take place through either an exaggeration of the discourse or a devaluation of it. In the case of *TFEP*, it seems to be subversion through both the exaggerated affirmation and the devaluation of the discourse. Furthermore, a third sub-method seems to emerge in the performative action by the CPB: a subversion through empathy.

The devaluation of the discourse is related to the awareness of the peculiarity of the plan. On its website, the CPB explain how the government's aim of adopting 55,000 children and placing them in temporary foster families, is one of the most ambitious projects in recent German history. With the action, the federal government hopes to send a signal to other countries, stressing the urgency to react to the refugee crisis.⁷⁷ The fact that this statement does not originate from the German government, but is part of an performative action, creates a contradiction. With this contradictory statement, the CPB devaluates the maintained policy by the German government, criticising their lack of action in the refugee crisis.

The exaggerated affirmation is established by the multi-faceted campaign that also included videos. The two most striking videos are the one that recruits foster parents by letting a willing foster parents couple explain how priceless the feeling is of really helping a child, and another video of a young girl in Aleppo presenting herself for adoption. Both are strengthened by images on the website itself, showing children in Syria holding banners with texts such as 'Danke Manuela Schwesig' (Thank you Manuela Schwesig) and 'Wir lieben euch' (We love you). All the facets of the campaign not only create a total experience, they also respond to a sense of empathy. Through the empathy the discourse is undermined, because it presumably triggers both the spectators and the German institutions to see the urge of the situation: how the situation in Syria is deteriorating and how nobody is taking action.

Distancing

The third component of subversive affirmation is the distance that is explicitly or implicitly taken from the discourse. The two sub-methods distinguished in this component were the creation of ambiguity and the ridiculing of the discourse. In the case of *TFEP*, it is an explicit distancing from the discourse. Relatively soon after the launch of their campaign they openly

⁷⁷ "The Federal Emergency Programme".

declared the artistic nature of it. Through this declaration an ambiguity in the intentions of the CPB came to light. This ambiguity is supported by the current, inhuman Syrian crisis. For example, in the video of the children in Aleppo holding the cardboards with the thankful texts for Schwesig, it feels harsh they use these children – who are really in need of help – for artistic purposes only. Similar to the work of Martens, the ambiguity is strengthened by the improbability of the proposed plan and the participants involved in the creation of the artistic project. It is a sincere attempt, but simultaneously it is aware of its own impossibility and therefore the actions seem almost too cruel to be true.

According to the English magazine on philosophical writing, *The Point Magazine*, it was “a hyper-real theater performance”, in which the Ministry could have played along, but chose not to.⁷⁸ “Embarrassedly and awkwardly, they declared a day later, that, no, they would not save the children.”⁷⁹ In the pressure on the Minister to react, we find the second sub-method for distancing: the ridiculing of the discourse. With the emergency program they were aiming to ridicule European institutions, governments and the audience itself for not reacting to the refugee crisis. Through the size and dedication of the campaign and the open declaration of its own artistic nature, the CPB distanced themselves from the government.

Exposure

The final component of subversive affirmation is the exposure, specified in an exposure of the discourse and/or the proposition of an alternative perspective. In *TFEP*, the CPB created an action by presenting an alternative perspective. The CPB created a total experience that was very different from reality, but at the same time also very similar, and that called for a bigger reflection by both the spectators and the government, because they were being fooled and exposed to another way of shaping reality.

By the identification with the *Kindertransport* initiative, they could stress the urge of the Syrian crisis. Bearing in mind the annihilation of Jews in the Holocaust, the *Kindertransport* was turned into a matter of life and death. The way the CPB portrays the Syrian conflict and the innocent children that are suffering exposes the urgency of the case: it is a matter of life and death. Through the explicit distance they could expose (and force) the government to take concrete action: the German government responded to the performative action with the acceptance of an extra ten thousand continental refugees. They appropriated the identity of the Ministry to involve them in the discussion, or in their own words: “harassing them with morality, and exposing them on their own grounds”.⁸⁰ Moreover, with this appropriation they

⁷⁸ Kretz.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Sarah Khan, "Acting Up", *Frieze*, November 25, 2015, accessed June 5, 2019,

take a provocative stance, through which they resist the system in the hope of changing things. As the CPB explains on their website: “Welcome to hyper realism: No cynicism. No irony. Just the naked truth changing reality.”⁸¹ As a consequence, the German government had to justify her policy, which forms the surplus. With their action the CPB broke through, what they called, the omnipresent passivity of politicians, assuming someone else will take responsibility. Out of fiction, the CPB created reality.

3.3 Subversive affirmation in contemporary performances

In the last paragraph of the third chapter I will formulate an answer to my third sub-question: how do the contemporary performative actions *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens and *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB make use of the strategy of subversive affirmation? At the end of chapter one, I came to the following conclusions: the strategy of subversive affirmation enables artists to question and/or criticise the restrictions as well as the influence of the state. Secondly, Western performances are increasing in intensity of the actions, especially in the discourses they appropriate. Thirdly, Western artists, who are producing in a more liberal climate, are more explicit in their critique, because otherwise their work can be misinterpreted as commercial, capitalist art. Finally, according to Mouffe, the artistic interventions have proven to be an effective strategy for criticising the hegemony.

Both of the above discussed cases are exemplary for the subversive affirmation as seen in Western performative actions. *Enjoy Poverty* and *TFEP* criticise current socio-political topics related to Europe’s responsibility towards foreign countries in crisis. In Martens’ case the Western influence (of big NGO’s) in Congo and in the case of the CPB the refugee policy by the German government. Both cases do not explicitly criticise restrictions or the influence of the state in the artistic field, because they could produce work without strong restrictions. Through the identification with the significant, large, discourses, both actions question the effectiveness or conditionality of the related institution’s aid by using exaggerated affirmation. The exaggerated affirmation is also visible in the absurdity of the proposed initiatives. This establishes the ambiguity through which the artists can distance themselves from the discourse. Consequently, they expose the underlying structures of big institutions and let these institutions justify their policies, themselves.

The proposition of odd initiatives can be positioned within the phenomenon of the *alsof-strategie* (as if-strategy), posited by Hendrickx.⁸² Hendrickx discusses how theatre can

<https://frieze.com/article/acting-0>.

⁸¹ “The Federal Emergency Programme”.

⁸² Hendrickx.

be used for the experimentation with alternative forms of democracy. Art, here, becomes an instrument where various social alternatives can be discussed and negotiated. This corresponds to the counter-hegemony practices, posed by Mouffe, that try to create another form of hegemony that is based on agonistic spaces and negotiation. According to Mouffe, the dissatisfaction with the existing state of democracy is expressed in protests that are not aiming to demise representative institutions, but they aim at a transformation that makes these institutions more representative of popular demands. Artists do so in a strategy of “engagement with institutions”.⁸³ This is likely to evolve into a strategy of subversive affirmation, as is encountered in the work of Martens and the CPB.

Martens and the CPB use the performative domain as one where self-evident structures of power can be questioned. Both actions show a considerable self-awareness of own artistic purposes, that enables them to interfere in the socio-political topics. Furthermore, acknowledgement of their own artistic purposes justifies the artists’ involvement in the discourse, including the involvement of those suffering from it. With the engagement of the victims, the artists play into the feeling of empathy with the spectators. The feeling of empathy is new in the use of subversive affirmation and can be seen as a third-method of the subversion of the discourse.

From an, supposedly, outsider’s position, the artists put themselves right in the middle of the discourse. But as we have encountered in the documentary of Martens’, the artist is not capable to escape the dominated character of the discourse (or hegemony) either. Martens and the CPB use the strategy of subversive affirmation to be able to engage with big institutions whose policies usually stay unquestioned. It is a cut through a politically correct façade, because the artists express the hard statements that are usually diluted or distorted in the official discourse.⁸⁴ Martens and the CPB use the strategy of subversive affirmation to question current socio-political topics in regard to Europe’s responsibility towards foreign countries in crisis, and most importantly: the Western influence in this. Subversive affirmation overemphasises prevailing ideologies and thereby calls them into question.

⁸³ Mouffe, 74.

⁸⁴ BAVO, 33.

Conclusion

In today's most interesting – and I would claim most powerful – performative activities, we see artists taking on an insider's position within the system of the adversary. This re-appearance of an internal critique corresponds to the 'tactic of resistance' called subversive affirmation, originating in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century. Contemporary artists use this strategy to question large topics related to the current order, such as representative democracy, the free market, climate change, the nation-state, and the refugee crisis.

Chapter one consisted of a theoretical reflection of the concept of subversive affirmation, presenting a chronological development of different examples of the strategy, produced in different socio-political climates, from the 1920s until the year 2010. The discussion builds upon the article by Arns and Sasse, and is constructed by the four components of subversive affirmation, derived from this same article: affirmation, subversion, distancing, and exposure. The arguments made in this chapter are supported by the additional sources of BAVO, Bryzgel, and Cohen-Cruz. In addition, in the concluding section, Mouffe and her concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and counter-hegemony are introduced. I came to the conclusion that a distinction can be made between a more modest use of subversive affirmation in Eastern Europe in the past, and a more radical form in performances produced by Western artists in the present. Furthermore, I showed that, in order to be critical about a certain discourse, the best thing an artist can do is to fully submit him- or herself to that very same discourse. This is supported by Mouffe's observation that artists should engage with the institutions supporting the (neo-liberal) hegemony to create a counter-hegemony. These constructed (artistic) counter-hegemonies are aiming at a profound transformation of the contemporary representative democracy. Both BAVO and Mouffe explain how the current order demands for artists to take an insider's position in powerful institutions to question dominant power relations that usually stay diluted or distorted. If the artists take on the insider's position, their work will not be disqualified as "just art", enabling them to participate as equal discussion partners in a socio-political discourse.

In chapter two, I have elaborated on the four components of subversive affirmation in order to use them as analytical tools, with which one can take a closer look at how subversive affirmation is reflected in performative actions. The observations, gained in chapter one, are clarified in reference to the article by Arns and Sasse, and the book by BAVO. The theoretical reflection explains how the four components of subversive affirmation are interdependent and simultaneously interconnected, working together in order to force the audience (and other involved parties) to reflect upon the encountered discourse. Through the construction of a work that includes all four elements of subversive affirmation the artist is able to force the

spectators to reflect, because they, initially, understand the constructed discourse as real. At the end of chapter two, I have concluded that in the examples of subversive affirmation in Western performative actions, the exposure of a surplus as the final component of subversive affirmation, is mainly the proposition of alternative perspectives. Whereas in the performative actions by Eastern artists, it only renders (an aspect of) the discourse visible. The detailed elaboration facilitates the guiding framework for a close analysis of performative actions through the extrication of the sub-methods and how they interrelate. Furthermore, it presents the efficiency of every particular component as contributing to the whole.

In the third, and final, chapter I conducted two dramaturgical analyses of the performative actions *Enjoy Poverty* by Martens and *The Federal Emergency Programme* by the CPB. I have supported my observations with De Roo's analysis of Martens' documentary, the text by Arns and Sasse, Hendrickx's 'as if-strategy', and the notion of counter-hegemony by Mouffe. The latter two complement each other, because they both stress how the performative realm can be used for experimentation with alternative forms of democracy, in order to transform the current representative democracy. In the work by Martens and the CPB, attempts were made to discuss current socio-political topics regarding Europe's responsibility towards foreign countries in crisis. Both cases make use of the strategy of subversive affirmation to criticise current socio-political topics in the hope of actual change. Through the exaggerated affirmation with the significantly large discourses, both actions question (and criticise) the impact of the related institutions' influence. The absurdity of both proposed initiatives – they both seem too cruel to be true – established an ambiguity through which the artists distanced themselves from the discourse. By their actions they exposed the underlying structures of big institutions and let these institutions justify their policies, themselves. Additionally, in the case of the CPB, their action even made sure the institution adjusted its policy.

Contemporary artists use the strategy of subversive affirmation to enable themselves to question large topics related to the current state and the government's policies, without being disqualified from the discussion by those in power. Through the exaggerated affirmation of powerful organisations and/or people, artists create a counter-hegemony that questions and confronts those same organisations and/or people with their own discourses. With subversive affirmation, artists try to make an actual change in the current order, where critical art is easily relegated to commercial or capitalist art. In these times, artists try to get the attention of both the institutions and the spectators, by positioning themselves right in the middle of the discourse and the discussion.

Throughout this paper, I have shown how the strategy of subversive affirmation can be very effective, especially in larger discussions regarding current socio-political topics. It is a strategy that enables artists to take up a powerful position, one that gives them a certain authority, one with which they can hold the government to account. Artists are thus able to criticise those discourses that make up the current order, present alternatives, and negotiate possibilities. It is for these reasons that we encounter a re-occurrence of the strategy of subversive affirmation in contemporary performance in the West, in societies that are not particularly restricted by a regime, but seem to suffer from a lack of decisive governments.

Ethical responsibility

The observations throughout this paper have left me with an ethical question: How far can one go with the purpose of transmitting an artistic message? By using the strategy of subversive affirmation, artists often involve those parties that are actually suffering from the discourse that is being discussed. Furthermore, we have seen a certain ambiguity come up in the use of subversive affirmation, because the intentions of the artists are likely to remain unclear. As a result, it can enforce the already existing power relations and make the circumstances for those suffering even worse.

One of the members of the CPB once explained how reality is incredibly cruel and goes much further than what they do with their performative actions. Nevertheless, does this make up for the victims that are used for artistic purposes? Regarding Martens' film, De Roo and other critics question if it is still ethically responsible to present the hopeless situations in Congo, without offering any concrete help. Moreover, is it necessary for his film to present the most extreme cases? Due to Martens' direct approach, his film received these type of reactions. Although the hopeless situation of the Congolese has not worsened due to Martens' project, he only presented it in a way that deviates from the norm.

English Professor of Theatre Nicholas Ridout argues that theatre's greatest ethical potential might be found precisely at the moment when theatre abandons ethics.⁸⁵ This is the case in the work of both Martens and the CPB. Especially in *TFEP*, the CPB abandoned ethics, but forced the government to react, and made an actual improvement in the refugee crisis since as a consequence of their action the German government decided to allow another ten thousand refugees to enter their borders. Since both actions play upon the boundaries of what is ethically responsible, and what crosses that line, they let their spectators experience the same ethical considerations.

⁸⁵ Ridout, 70.

Italian Philosopher Rosi Braidotti discusses in her essay “The New Activism: A Plea for Affirmative Ethics” how ethics is relational: it cultivates the already dominated relations and can even reinforce them.⁸⁶ If artists want to be ethically correct, it is about the moral intentions as much as it is about the effects of power the actions are likely to have upon the world. Martens and the CPB create their work from a privileged position; they themselves are not the ones restricted by the discourse. As a consequence, they have the power to present a possibility for action. Conclusively, it can be said that in the performative actions of the 1960s in Eastern Europe, subversive affirmation was used as a strategy for survival. Whereas, in the examples from the 21st century by the Western artists, it is less about survival and more about creating an awareness, about showing their own engagement and hopefully arousing social responsibilities. Artists use subversive affirmation to confront society with the responsibilities and failings with respect to global problems. Proposing actions that are too cruel to be true is the only possibility for artists to eventually make an actual (and longlasting) change in the current order.

⁸⁶ Rosi Braidotti, “The New Activism: A Plea for Affirmative Ethics”, in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Lieven De Caeter, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Rotterdam:NAi Publishers, 2011), 268.

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