Peter Weibel, Rewriter

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By Günther Holler-Schuster

Edited by Aaron Levy

SLOUGHT FOUNDATION
Contemporary Arts

Photo: David Alesworth

Weibel Files

Aaron Levy

"The artist is left with but one possibility: to found an institution of his own, making themselves an institution." - Boris Groys

Inside the hidden "records rooms" of Karachi, Pakistan, behind the uniformed army and police officers and the commandos who oversee its security, one finds millions of paper records belonging to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles—a veritable index of the city's past and present inhabitants which the digital revolution of the twenty-first century has yet to reach. Here, one encounters an archive that has exceeded its capacity; what is supposed to be a place of bureaucratic order documenting a city and its inhabitants has instead become one of disorder. Over the years, Karachi-based educator David Alesworth has gained entrance to this archival system. If nothing can be easily retrieved, it is equally the case that nothing here can fully disappear. The archive continues to receive new records daily, each file deposited under the pretense of order into whatever crevice is available. It is this endless accumulation of files, rather than any particular individual file lost or found within, that Alesworth has chosen to photograph. If ever there was an aesthetic dimension to bureaucracy, surely it can be found here.

I immediately thought of Alesworth's photographs of massive accumulation when I encountered Peter Weibel's *das offene werk*, which is a sort of *catalogue raisonné* numbering over 1000 pages in length that documents the innumerable thought experiments he conducted between 1964 and 1979. The book served in turn as the basis for our retrospective exhibition at Slought Foundation in January 2009. The images printed in *das offene werk* documents Weibel's work with a silver-colored method that gives the work a ghost-like presence. Despite the encyclopedic scale of the publication, and the fact that many of these works are being published for the first time, the book has the feel of something ephemeral and transitory, something headed for the "records room" of Karachi. Perhaps this is because, somewhat curiously, *das offene werk* lacks a proper enclosure—it is as if the printers walked away from the book at its most vulnerable moment, just before the cover was to be attached to the binding such that the heterogeneity inside cannot be easily codified under one rubric or style.

The idea of Peter Weibel as a sort of *agent provocateur*, continually introducing perturbations in our habitual engagements with the cultural, came to mind when I encountered Weibel's *das*

offene werk for the first time. However carefully one may proceed to read its precious contents, the binding quickly begins to degrade, just as the outside pages curl. *Use it just once and you destroy it,* it suggests. *Use it twice and it becomes an open work.* The book holds on to the discrete fiction of authorship only so long as to see it unravel, and in its place we are left with a disparate series of photographs and miscellany suggestive of a sort of laboratory where the artistic disposition and the scientific mindset meet halfway. The now legendary work of Billy Klüver's Experiments in Art and Technology immediately came to mind, but this associative train of thought continued for just so long, as I was quickly reminded of the devolving book in my hands. Surely, the artist must be observing this peculiar scene from some far off vantage point with delight, I thought. *Das offene werk*, after all, comes enclosed in a generic box, a bureaucratic filing cabinet. That box anticipates the unbinding of its contents, its eventual devolution through use. *After a few years, only leaves...*

That Weibel would deliberately choose to record his activities in a manner inhibiting use, let alone destructive towards preservation, suggests that on some level he desires to evade fixed classification and forms of engagement, as well as archives more generally. There is a part of him, as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever*, which is fundamentally anarchival. Perhaps he is also of the conviction that archives are temporal constructions that, over time, invariably evade and outlast their point of origin. Far from being fixed sites of authority preserving a shared cultural heritage for eternity, they are perpetually staving off the passage of time, haunted by the arbitrary classifications and contingent meaning of the artifacts on which their authority depends. As the pages of *Das offene werk* detach from their binding and reshuffle, we begin to bear witness to a new instantiation of the archive: an art of disarray.

This disruptive attitude towards the archive can also be understood in light of Weibel's notorious past as one of the bad-boys of Viennese Actionism. His collaborations with Valie Export, as documented on the enclosed DVD, demonstrate some of the many ways in which Weibel recast art as a form of extreme institutional provocation during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Through social interventions such as *Map of Dogginess*, in which Export led Weibel through the streets of Vienna on a dog chain, or *Tap and Touch Cinema*, where Weibel invited casual passersby to fantasize about and indeed touch Export, he has continually introduced perturbations in the public sphere by probing the social, sexual, and intellectual conventions of his time.

His practice also builds upon the legacy established by artists such as Joseph Beuys, for whom art also served as the blueprint for a newly reconfigured social landscape. In founding a free university and a political party, Beuys explored how art could serve as the basis for a social relationship, and the museum could be reconceptualized as a communication network conducive not just to exhibiting artifacts, but also cultivating new forms of collectivity and the experimental disposition more generally. In installations such as *Honey Pump in the Workplace* (1977) at the Freidericianum in Kassel, Germany, for instance, Beuys pumped honey—a material highly suggestive in the classical period of knowledge and vitality—through tubes coursing through the museum, metaphorically rejuvenating the galleries. If the museum is typically associated with the mausoleum, in that it serves a storehouse for artifact, staving off the passage of time, Beuys transforms the museum into an incubator of practice, a newly reinvigorated force for creation.

Among Weibel's artistic contemporaries we can surely list Braco Dimitrijevic as well, an artist who has created works that play with museum masterpieces as ready-mades, and who creates works through new constellations of old masterpieces. Weibel, however, treats the institution

itself as a sort of ready-made, as the inductor of new semantic blocks. Of Peter Weibel's many contributions to the arts, he is most widely known today for directing the museum complex known as the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, an educational institution that is itself a sort of thought-experiment, with its encyclopedic approach to cultural expositions and philosophical dialogue about the pressing considerations of our day. At the ZKM, it is as if the cultural organization has become the new art form of the 21st century, acting as a sort of custodian over the social engagement that was formally the domain of the artist.

Traditionally an exhibition serves as a sort of platform for communicating a clear outcome or objective to the viewer; for Weibel, however, the role of the artist is to create thought-experiments and "expositions," sites of performative address calling attention less to any measurable goal than to the conditions of their own staging. Frohne references Mieke Bal's work in further arguing that Weibel's work, with its emphasis on process, has a sort of "showing" function that entails a discursive dimension that takes place in and through the very staging of the work.[1] Here the word exposition implies "the process of making public, of showing to the public, of the public presentation of opinions and judgments."[2] It is in this sense that Weibel's thought-experiments could be thought of as transformative in positioning the audience in an open-ended relationship to the work and the questions it raises.

Weibel has always proceeded upon an expanded idea of practice and a newly invigorated sense of responsibility that typically exceeds and resists the vernacular understanding of the role of the artist. Weibel's work lacks any clear aesthetic signature or style, just as his sense of curiosity evades any singular focus. In Weibel's early works it is also quite clear, as Ursula Frohne has eloquently argued elsewhere, that the role of the artist has undergone a profound and perhaps irreversible transformation, one that is oriented towards a "future public." As an artist, but also as a curator and theoretician, Weibel seeks out new forms of experimentation and indeed public address, continually questioning the traditional politics of display. As with Weibel, I dream of a new age of artistic inventiveness, a landscape of new possibilities, potentialities, as well as failures.

At the ZKM Weibel has also upended our understanding of the creative process by recasting the artist as a sort of intellectual entrepreneur, a rewriting machine who mixes, reconfigures, and reframes existing work through new configurations. We can locate the origins of this perspective in *das offene werk*; on page after page, Weibel maps scientific developments of his time onto the arts and back again. Releasing the artist from his atmospheric conceptualization as beauty-maker, Weibel highlights the artist's role as agent of interdisciplinary exchange. For Weibel, the role of the artist is to occupy precisely this position of exchange, unclarity, and discomfort; maneuvering along a "liminal axis," the artist accesses a landscape of potentiality.[3]

Following Theodor Adorno, chance and the risk of failure find their home in Weibel's museum; their presence there serves to remind us that the cultural realm as being more than an assembly line of cultural production. The artistic sphere, after all, is aptly suited to introducing perturbations and variations in our habitual engagements with the public. Amidst a general landscape of cultural industrialization and the instrumentalization of education, perhaps artists such as Peter Weibel offer up the only possibility that things might be otherwise.

1 Mieke Bal, quoted in Ursula Frohne, "Detournement as 'Poetry Made Real,' in *Peter Weibel: The open work, 1964-1979,* Buol-Wischenau, Karin and Christa Steinle (Eds.) (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 972.

2 Ibid.

3 See George Quasha and Charles Stein, eds. Gary Hill: Art of Limina (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa), 2009.

## Manifesto for Peter Weibel

Osvaldo Romberg

A cultural terrorist stages his struggle openly, exploding concepts, forms, institutions, canons of taste, and intellectual positions through violence, fear, and any other means he can access - much like Nam June Paik, John Cage, etc. A cultural saboteur infiltrates the system from within, casting it into question, modifying discourses, and producing metabolic change in the systems he disrupts.

Across the span of his career, Peter Weibel has transferred his energies from radical avant-garde art to radical curation. In his iconoclasm, he has repositioned himself from cultural terrorist to cultural saboteur. Weibel's career has taken a singular course. Distanced from the avant-garde movements of his cultural moment, his actions and his street interventions have an unconventional aesthetic. His work is deprived of the beauty that permeates the performances of Viennese Actionists like Nitsch and Rainer. Additionally, it bears no resemblance to Art Informel and other dominant tendencies of the 60s. An explanation for his distinctive idiom can be found in his origins in poetry and philosophy, as opposed to a more traditional training in the visual arts.

His literary predispositions are reflected in his work. There are conceptual art traces, as well as a profound sensitivity to sociopolitical culture. His street actions were improvised and his texts were unprinted manuscripts. In almost everything he did in the beginning, his wish to fight against established power saturated his practice. This is seen in his naked self portrait, *The Prince of Darkness* (1971), his walk as a dog leashed by Valie Export in the streets of Vienna, *The Map of Dogginess*, and *Tap and Touch Cinema*, also with Export. These works are irreverent to the public as they took very sensitive sexual issues to the streets. Also, they are an attack on the art establishment in their rejection of fine arts materials and a refusal of an aesthetic finish.

His passage from art to curatorial activity in the 1990s is the continuation of a particular drive to disseminate social and philosophical awareness in the public domain. As a curator, he maintains a distance from French poststructuralist theory as well as American pragmatic postmodernism, because of his strong belief in large, determining narratives - such as Medium Religion, at the ZKM, or YOUniverse, at the 3rd International Biennale of Seville. He includes a transnational selection of artists to prove that a new curatorial tendency has emerged: a kind of PLUSmodernism based on theory, science, global participation, didactic intentions and an economical approach to exhibitions and publicity. To paraphrase the French semiotician Roland Barthes, the literature of the future will most likely be criticism and analysis. Is it a possibility that PLUSmodernism will be a mixture of art and curation? This hybrid practice has acquired an increased presence in the art scene and Peter Weibel is a pioneer of it. In his curatorial projects, he turns the history of art into a self-critical process of rewriting, repudiating art as market product or decoration. His shows enable people to re-inscribe their own concepts of art history through new practices. In this way, rewriting history turns into is a subjective undertaking for the viewers of his exhibitions.

Cultural terrorism and sabotage, in the overlapping spaces of Peter Weibel's career, seem to reflect the strategies of the Tupamaros, a Latin American group active in Uruguay in the 1960s. This group operated not through fear, but by exposing secret bank accounts, money laundering schemes, and other economic transgressions. In this way, the Uruguayan public was made aware of the corruption that pervaded their country. As a natural extension of his early practice, Weibel exposes a system's fissures through his exhibitions at the ZKM, at museums, and even at biennials. Intervening within institutions rather than totalitarian regimes, his career has adopted tactics of both the cultural terrorist and the saboteur through strategies of explosion and disruption.
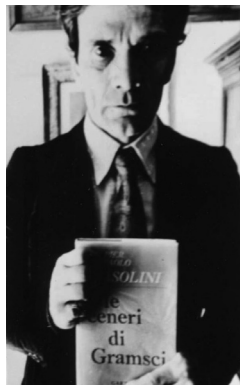
Sandro Becchetti,
Pier Paolo Pasolini
Museum of Modern Art, Udine
Photo: Christa Steinle

Peter Weibel, A Heretic of the Art System
Christa Steinle

The first presentation of Peter Weibel's early work at an American institution was held at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia in 2009, curated by artist Osvaldo Romberg. In any biography of Peter Weibel can be read how he was born in Odessa, grew up in a small town in Upper Austria (Ried im Innkreis), attended school in Linz, first studied medicine in Vienna and then literature in Paris, before continuing his studies of mathematical logic in Vienna. He entered the Vienna literary scene following his encounter with the poets Ernst Jandl and Friederike Mayröcker in the mid 1960s, establishing contacts with authors of the Vienna Group including H.C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Oswald Wiener, and Friedrich Achleitner. His initial analytical interest was thus primarily in language. Starting from semiotic and linguistic considerations (Austin, Jakobson, Peirce, Wittgenstein and others), Peter Weibel developed a language that led him from 1965 onwards through experimental literature to concept art, performance, actionism, video art, and film.

To mark his 60th birthday in 2004, the 15 years comprising Weibel's early work was presented comprehensively in an exhibition tour of Prague, Graz, Karlsruhe, Budapest, Ljubljana and Hamburg under the title *The open work 1964–1979*, and was analysed by such prominent theorists of art as Hans Belting and Boris Groys in a catalogue of 900 pages that weighs 13.5 pounds. In his early works, Weibel opens fresh latitudes with different practices in widely varied media extending from film, video, sculpture, installation, and performance to actionism; in each of these practices he aimed to create disturbances, oppositions, and irritations using experimental methods. He used art as a means of provoking a pronounced focus and awareness for political and social problems; as an intellectual purist of Concept Art, he rejects all sensually consumable in favor of intellectual insight.

Examples are the scandal he caused in the framework of the arts festival *Steirischer herbst* in Graz in 1979, with his exhibition contribution in a radio shop window with a display of Hitler's "Volksempfaenger" mass-market radio sets coupled with anti-Semitic slogans on the panes such as "Do not buy from Jews"; or the phrase "trampling on the law" which he wrote all over the floor of an exhibition area in Krems in 1968, with the result that the public at the exhibition opening were obliged to comply with this order.

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Aaron Levy and Osvaldo Romberg requested that I formulate my character study of Weibel in a brief account for this publication, as we have now interacted over a period of more than two decades, especially in the exhibitions organized for the Neue Galerie Graz. I will attempt here to sketch his work as an artist, theorist and curator through the example of his commitment to the Neue Galerie Graz at the Landesmuseum Joanneum, where he has been chief curator since 1993. I have worked there since my student days, first in an internship, and following graduation as a collection custodian, then as a curator, and finally as director. I have acquired "professionalism" from and with Peter Weibel in my curatorial activity during the early 1990s, when I assisted him in the work for the comprehensive exhibition *Identität: Differenz–Eine Topographie der Moderne* (*Identity:Difference–a Topography of Modernity*). The personal events I lived through and the experiences I gathered during the year of preparation for this major thematic exhibition taught and impressed upon me what it is to conceive an exhibition with a full sense of responsibility, to research it conscientiously, evaluate the results, check the artistic positions, select the exhibits, and bring them together in an intellectual and aesthetic unity.

I begin with the history and origins of this particular exhibition, because it brought a final breakthrough for Peter Weibel as an exhibition curator, following his successful Vienna Festival exhibition *Bildlicht / Image Light* in 1991. It clearly demonstrates his enthusiasm for the discursive and the presentation of contemporary art in a gesture almost deserving of the term manic, which moreover characterizes the entire creative accomplishment of Peter Weibel as an artist, theorist, or curator, and one who is truly at home on an international stage. He saunters through "paradises of the arts" with this gesture of obsession, whether as a sensitive observer, or as the re-discoverer of an ontology of perception, or as a soulmate of Charles Baudelaire whom he has esteemed since his youth and acknowledges as the originator of modernism. In a cultural situation where reliance is placed firmly on the known and established, where the ponderous weight of bias persists irrevocably amongst obsolescent forms of art and of life, he senses a "discontent in the civilization" with the response that any breach of taboo is justified in rebelling against the paralyzing burden of the zeitgeist. It was in these terms that he also felt for the exhibition *Identity:Difference* the need to re-evaluate the cultural history of Italy, the former Yugoslavia, and Austria, which had long shared a common culture linked to the "Inner Austria" territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With the exhibition he was interested in researching the historical development of this cultural history instead of digging among its myths, so as to re-write a topography of modernity in the process.

Per non dimenticare–Surweibel Research (*In order to not forget-Survival Research*) was the title of a photographic documentation which a colleague and I presented together to Weibel following the successful conclusion of our first jointly curated and organized exhibition project. We wanted to thank him for our having successfully passed through a form of survival training, setting a benchmark for our future in the art world. The demands of the task were indeed challenging in the extreme. This involved working through, comparing, and presenting a half-century of art history in the so-called Trigon countries of Italy, ex-Yugoslavia, and Austria, linked by the roots of the centuries-long common history of the former Inner Austria of the Hapsburg Empire, with its center in Graz. A regional daily newspaper was quick to perceive the dimensions of this project-in-development, dubbing it a "mammoth task" since it was planned to extend through three exhibition buildings in Graz: the Kuenstlerhaus, the Neue Galerie, and the Stadtmuseum, It was to involve some 270 artists and approximately 600 works, and was ultimately presented as part of the *steirischer herbst* festival in 1992.

During the first formation phase of the project in spring 1991, we had no idea that this critic's zoological analogy of our project would turn out to be an understatement. The original plan

had been to conceive an exhibition from the collection of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum in homage to Wilfried Skreiner, the director of the Neue Galerie over many years, who was highly regarded by Weibel and who had brought international positioning to the Neue Galerie with his future-oriented Trigon biennale exhibitions, such as *Ambiente / Ambience* in 1967 or *Audiovisuelle Botschaften* (*Audio-visual Messages*) in 1973 (in which the great pioneers of US media art Nam June Paik, William Wegman, and Trisha Brown participated). The intention behind this was to honor Skreiner's commitment and exhibition activity in this cultural space, particularly a curatorial sensibility which had included and brought in work from countries behind the former Iron Curtain (Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia). We also sought to demonstrate the scope of his achievement with works from the collection. It became clear to Weibel after viewing the collection, however, that it would not be easy, or perhaps even possible, to fulfill the high standards set in this exhibition: namely, to examine political discourse by means of art discourse. It would not be possible to analyze the cultural text which the political space had produced, and alternatively to differentiate the individual states in a regional and global dialectic process within a social geography of modernity. Moreover, the political turmoil in the states comprising the former Yugoslavia, where the problems of nationalism in the Balkan countries had come to a head in a dramatic manner in 1991, catapulted this exhibition into the focus of an extraordinary and shattering topicality.

Weibel had above all placed emphasis in his exhibition concept on examining the problematic issues of totalitarian systems such as Fascism, Communist dictatorship or National Socialism and to present in critical terms his long considered views of Austria's identity as a "country without qualities" (a reference to the title "Man Without Qualities" of the key Robert Musil novel). Austria had never enjoyed a conflict-free relationship to modernity, especially in the interwar years, when its representatives had been banished and exiled, and after the "Anschluss", the incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich, Austria had denied and suppressed its pernicious role as a guilty party in the Holocaust. This project of negation of criminal involvement and an abysmal identity transfer to that of a victim had been only too gladly passed down to the present time and the problems blithely swept under the carpet. Peter Weibel has rebelled from his earliest youth against this public denial of an "expulsion of the intelligentsia from Austria" both in spectacular art events and performances as also in his theoretical writings and has remained an intellectual authority on contemporary political and topical social issues.

Our extensive field work began in autumn 1991 on location at the Neue Galerie Graz in a duo consisting of myself together with a young art historian, Alexandra Foitl, as assistant, each of us equipped with a typewriter and a telephone on which we both kept an eager watch, in the hope that Peter Weibel—our master's voice—would report to us from the Frankfurt Institut für Neue Medien, or from anywhere else around the world, to check our results and add to or put them into perspective. Peter Weibel had made his position clear to us: "The results of this exhibition should not be the mixed goods of a general store selection by the exhibition maker, as in the case of the 'documenta' presented this year, but a presentation of a historic development in regional art that must be as neutral as possible." And it was for this reason that we had engaged art historians as consultants. In Italy we had Laura Safred (Trieste), and from the ex-Yugoslavia region we had Igor Zabel (Ljubljana), Zelimir Koscevic (Zagreb), and Zoran Gavrić (Belgrade) in our service. The material in hand grew and grew. Mountains of catalogues and books had to be studied. We established a filing system for biographies, which were initially written as essays, and also for the creation of precise catalogues of works. The photographs and slides we had made on our research trips through these countries needed to be labeled and sorted, and texts in many different languages had to be translated into German. Alexandra and I had

a sense of being paralyzed by this sheer abundance, which both filled us with enthusiasm and also strained us to our limits. We needed more space and we also urgently needed more staff. Apart from the fact that the exhibition was to be documented in a catalogue of the most demanding theoretical standards, a symposium was to be organized. The funds available to pay the young new team were limited in the extreme, but in exchange motivation was all the higher. We were injected with a regular dosage of this in the daily phone calls with Weibel, and even more so when he was present in person. When he was with us, discussions proceeded on the artists and their significance in the context of the exhibition; we requested loans of work, then cancelled requests; budgets for insurance, transport, and courier needed to be observed, data had to be researched, authors were invited and then dropped again, texts were abridged or sent back unused with a return fee. The quality threshold was set extraordinarily high in every single area, and we all attempted to give our best with all the energy at our disposal.

In the meantime we had also engaged an architect, since this exhibition was to be spread among three venues due to the enormous volume of art works covered. The choice fell on Manfred Wolff-Plottegg, who had congenial relations with Weibel in implementing exhibition projects from his youth through to the present. This background naturally meant that he was no easy case to deal with either, and he held with unrelenting firmness to each of his "Utopias," whether the issue was a deconstruction of the Kuenstlerhaus roof, or pushing through his plan for the development of unconventional wall structures in steel for the Baroque halls of the Neue Galerie, in which he brought our restorer to the point of madness, or even his plan of filling the city with silage bales for use as an advertising medium. The conflict potential rose with the temperature in the course of an unusually hot summer. All holidays were cancelled and any of the usual divisions between the working day and the weekend, day, and night gradually vanished. Our eating habits changed – it became a joy to have the pizza service arrive somewhere around midnight bringing us our "lunch"; Red Bull and Bach-flower drops were used to keep up our concentration through the early hours of the day while reading and editing the galley proofs that were being set manually. Alexandra measured out the dimensions for the illustrations using a ruler, she cut and glued them for the layout that Weibel had specified.

The memories come alive in overwhelming abundance and living detail as I write this. I could fill pages and pages with more such anecdotes of our first existential experience of the Weibel exhibition methodology. I will simply limit myself to one of the most important memories, which for me has perhaps been the most sustained out of the entire project. On one of our trips to Italy, we visited the Museum of Modern Art at Udine in Friaul. The director first showed us the collection, and she then left us to look at the works of representatives of the classical Italian modernists. Afro, Mirko Basaldella, Capogrossi, and Giuseppe Zigaina, among others. The picture by Afro dating from 1952 had the title "Per non dimenticare," and was a *memento mori* for the victims of the Second World War. To us it was a key work of the aesthetics of resistance, and addressed the trauma of the totalitarian systems of the 20th century and the wars they had brought in their wake. We used this title for our own album of memories because of its doubly pointed meaning, on the one hand as an incunable on our subject, and on the other as an entirely personal statement on our collected borderline experiences that meant so much to us, and for which we both were, and still are, so grateful.

We found the most important works of all, however, in the museum storeroom into which we had descended. Peter Weibel, following his famously good nose as a matter of course, Alexandra and I more hesitant, once again posing those awkward questions: where will we find the space? Who is going to pay the transport? We then told the director our loan wishes

(resistance having been fruitless), and, as we were leaving, Peter Weibel found a photographed portrait hidden away on an obscure wall. This was of Pier Paolo Pasolini holding his book *Le Ceneri di Gramsci* in his hands. This great artist, director, poet, theater and filmmaker had also been designated for inclusion in our exhibition, but due to the various administrations for his estate, we had not yet met with any success. An end was now put to this problem with a single tip from the director, and a phone call to the celebrated Italian painter and graphic artist Giuseppe Zigaina, the friend and companion of Pasolini's for many years as well as his biographer, who lived only a few kilometers away. He immediately invited us to visit him, showed us his Pasolini collection, letters, poems, paintings, drawings, photographs...

The "taming of the shrews" (Alexandra and Christa), however, had to be dealt with before this phone call could be made. At a filling station on the road to Venice, Peter Weibel ordered us to make a quick call to Mr. Zigaina to solve the Pasolini problem. Although we could speak Italian we refused to obey to this request, to make an assault of this kind on such a famous artist so casually from a phone booth against all the rules of politeness. Finally we had to give up, as we were simply not capable of coping with such dogged persistence. But as so often before, Weibel was proved right in his wayward "stubbornness." The telephone call proved to be really short: "Come and dine with me this evening. I will be delighted to meet you and to talk about your exhibition and my friend Pasolini."

A friendship began there, and we were ultimately able to conceive a Pasolini exhibition together for the Neue Galerie in Graz in 1995. Peter Weibel wrote what for me was an absolutely outstanding art essay for the catalogue, entitled "Pasolini's Pansemiology, or Reality as a Code". In this text, Peter Weibel reveals himself as comprehensively knowledgeable about this early and significant representative of the new type of artist with the multi-media mentality, the "polyartist" artist type which Weibel himself perfectly embodies. It is perhaps no accident that both men were born on the 5th of March. On the opening of the exhibition *Identity:Difference* a critic wrote: "The sheer pace with which Peter Weibel produces and discusses always leads to the suspicion that there must be several of him. The bewildering scene, and the omnipresence of this artist-thinker, has already led to the conjecture that he is going around in cloned form... But he has never been seen bodily in double. At least, not yet." Seventeen years later, on the occasion of his Slought Foundation exhibition in the USA, various media reported that Peter Weibel would be present at the opening and doing a performance. In an enthusiastic way, Osvaldo Romberg told me about this opening event, and of his live interview with Peter Weibel in a hugely crowded environment. It had been made possible, naturally, by a live transmission from the ZKM in Karlsruhe.

Selected Literature
- Oswald Oberhuber, Peter Weibel, "Oesterreichs Avantgarde 1900-1938: Ein unbekannter Aspekt", Galerie naechst St. Stephan, Vienna 1976.
- Oswald Oberhuber, Peter Weibel (eds.), "Die Vertreibung des Geistigen aus Oesterreich", Zentralsparkasse and Hochschule fuer angewandte Kunst, Vienna, 1985.
- Peter Weibel, Christa Steinle (eds.), "Identitaet : Differenz. Tribune Trigon 1940 1990. Eine Topographie der Moderne", Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Boehlau, Vienne Cologne Weimar, 1992.
- Peter Weibel, Friedrich Stadler (eds.), "Vertreibung der Vernunft The Cultural Exodus from Austria", Loecker, Vienna 1993.
- Giuseppe Zigaina, Christa Steinle (eds.), "P.P. Pasolini oder die Grenzueberschreitung / organizzar il trasumanar", Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Marsilio, Venice, 1995.
-Peter Weibel (ed.), "die wiener gruppe   the vienna group. the visual works and the actions. a moment of modernity 1954 1960", Biennale di Venezia, Springer, Vienna New York, 1997.
- Peter Weibel (ed.), "Beyond Art: A Third Culture. A Comparative Study in Cultures, Art and Science in 20th Century Austria and Hungary", Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Springer, Vienna New York 2004.
- Peter Weibel (ed.), "das offene werk / the open work 1964 1979", Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Hatje, Ostfildern/Ruit 2006.

Images of Thinking
Boris Groys

Avant-gardes of the twentieth century fought against the (art) institutions in the name of each individual artist's freedom – the freedom to overcome the limits of these institutions, to break free from them, flout obsolete standards and create the outrageous. Today people still like to criticize institutions, aiming at their disempowerment and abolition. Meanwhile, however, the meaning of this critique has changed completely.

Today criticizing institutions serves only to conceal the fact that these mighty, normative institutions *de facto* no longer exist. Today's art institutions are usually weak willed, have no money and are scarcely perceived by the wider public. They cannot and do not want any longer to set up binding aesthetic standards. They would rather chase after fashions spread by the media; they seek to be cool and hip to appeal to "young visitors." The great, mighty museum director with indisputable power over his collection, or the art critic with a far-reaching influence who sets directions and dictates his taste to the public: these are figures that belong to a long-gone age. Today's criticism regarding cultural institutions can only be interpreted as a nostalgic invocation of this past epoch – an attempt to conceal the real weakness of today's art institutions.

Under these conditions the artist no longer has a chance to orientate himself according to existing art institutions, be it in the sense of adapting to the standards they have established, or in the sense of a revolution against these standards. Basically, the artist is left with but one possibility: to found an institution of his/her own, making themselves an institution. Certainly this way is much more cumbersome than the easier way of common criticism of institutions. Hence there are only very few artists who have been down this road consistently. And these artists deserve our admiration. Amongst these very few, we most assuredly find Peter Weibel.

Weibel understood from early on that advanced art has no stable place in our society and that this place has yet to be created – on all levels of topical artistic practice. As an artist, if one does not choose to make oneself a curator, one is dependent on the curator. And when the artist wishes to assume the role of curator, his best move is to keep a museum space constantly available for himself. A space in which he or she can experiment with all kinds of exhibitions. Today's artists cannot count on a binding comment on their work unless they become theoreticians in their own right and comment on their own work. They could also invite other theoreticians to write for a publication conceived by the artist, and then design and edit the book themselves. Ideally they would print it themselves as well. In this the artist would always be dependent on the technology continuously developing in art production and distribution. If they don't develop the production on their own account. In this way they could avoid being dependent on using only the things other people had produced as a technological progress. This would mean the artists themselves must create and manage an institution, which would further develop artistic techniques. They must run this institution, employ people and have the means to pay them. So the artists have to ask themselves how they would not only passively reflect and criticize the economical, political and administrative aspects of their artistic practice, but also how they could actively design, organize and manage them on a daily basis. In other words: Once the artists stop to act as a decorator for the state, they have no choice but to become a state within a state, if they choose not just to cater for the art market.

This development is an implicit consequence of the modern artist's quest for sovereignty. Sovereignty regarding the decision as to what will be presented on the surface of an image or in the context of an installation is, however, obviously not enough, as true sovereignty calls for a domination, control and design of the contexts in which a piece of art will be placed

and received. The abolition of modern art institutions hence requires the artist to govern, command and organize in order to make sure that his sovereignty does not perish in the meaninglessness of today's art market. Of course, not all artists are apt to govern; neither do all of them have the inner discipline and stamina that such a task requires. Most artists do not have the determination for totality, which cannot be separated from the quest for sovereignty, i.e. the will to control not only a few of the contexts in today's art practice, but all of them. Peter Weibel has this determination. As an artist he took modernism's promise to give the artist sovereignty and independence seriously. Hence he undisputedly gave his path of life a paradigmatic meaning. This meaning is becoming increasingly clear with time. The perception of the independent artist controlling the network of his/her own institutions is an image eminently present, one that characterizes our epoch more accurately than any other image.

Weibel's art, however, is not limited to the creation of this image of artistic sovereignty. Beyond art institutions there is another dimension that increasingly determines today's art world, i.e. the beholder. The avant-garde promised the artists absolute individual freedom regarding all their artistic decisions – the freedom not only to choose freely the theme of their work, but also to dispose freely of all artistic means, independent of all traditions, conventions and criteria of good taste or the mastership that still largely determined artistic creation before the rise of radical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century. This newly promised freedom had a drug-like effect on the artists at first and created an unprecedented intoxication. This is why so many works arose from these early times which we still admire today. At the same time, however, one cannot deny that little has remained of this early euphoria. Today, artists no longer feel free – rather, they feel that their subjectivity has but little or no relevance for the art world. The reason for this new powerlessness on the part of the artist can be put down to the fact that, in the attempt to free themselves, at the same time the artists of the historical avant-garde committed a somewhat fatal act, and one whose importance they themselves did not notice in the beginning: they freed the beholder. The beholder was relieved of any of the criteria he used, or was supposed to use, for his judgment of a piece of art. The artist actively liberated himself from these criteria – and the beholder lost them.

This made the beholder extremely insecure. He no longer knew how to react to the pieces of art that were presented to him. He felt helpless *vis-à-vis* the arbitrariness of the artist, utterly un-able to defend himself by means of a well-founded judgment. This initial insecurity reduced significantly with time. The further modern art developed, the more the beholder began both to cherish and relish the insecurity of freedom given to him by the artist. There are of course more beholders than artists and, according to democratic conditions, we all know that the minority must bend to the will of the majority. In earlier times the artist was able to reject the public's judgment by asserting that they had not properly understood his work. The artist could call upon his mastership, the historical originality of his work and the strength of his inspiration, etc. Today, however, these justifications no longer apply, as the public feels totally free in their judgment. If they simply do not like something, they are not prepared to let themselves be convinced otherwise; the tables have turned. The avant-garde has directed the artist's freedom against all of the public's judgments. Now the freedom of the public's judgment is directed against all reasoning and explanations on the part of the artist.

This is the trap of freedom into which the modern art at the end of the twentieth century has fallen. Modern art proclaimed the absolute freedom of the individual's esthetic judgment and then itself fell victim to this freedom. If the beholder is free to make their own aesthetic assessment and the artist cannot call upon an independent entity to repudiate the beholder's judgment, the artist then becomes dependent on the public. They become dependent in the same way that they once felt utterly independent of their public. Each and every objective

art-theory finding will fail in reference to a modern work of art. One no longer *recognizes* why a certain piece of art is good, or even why a certain piece of art is a piece of art. One can only *vouch* for modern art – if one likes it. The growing dependence on the public's taste, which can no longer be criticized, irritates modern artists increasingly. One well-known symptom of this growing irritation was Viennese Actionism, in the atmosphere of which Weibel embarked on his artistic path. Viennese Actionism was mainly a desperate attempt to fight against the modern public's callousness and conceitedness employing brute methods. Events, images and texts were produced in order to shock the public by at least briefly shaking up their arrogant attitude and pleasure in the new freedom of esthetic judgment. This desperate, almost hysterical action was successful to a certain degree. However, such an attack can never be reasonably maintained – it has to be historically unique. So Weibel chose a different way – albeit with the same aim of controlling the public's taste; he chose to use technology.

Even if our culture no longer believes in the criteria of taste, it certainly believes in knowledge and in technology. Art's liberation from the beholder's taste can only happen in terms of a mechanization of art. Or, in other words, its re-mechanization. Art was always, in the first place, a matter of technique. Only the historical avant-garde discredited and then abolished art production's old techniques. Malevich's *Black Square* and Duchamp's Ready-mades introduced an age of the de-mechanization of art. It was particularly at this point that artists lost their cultural privilege regarding the beholder. If an artistic decision is totally free to declare an object or a random form a work of art, then the beholder must also be free not to accept this decision. Everything becomes a question of personal or individual taste. If the artist's taste is contrary to the beholder's taste then, as we all know, the loser is the artist. The avant-garde was an attempt to liberate art by de-mechanizing it, by liberating it from capability and knowledge, by equalizing the act of artistic creation with aesthetic judgment. Today, this de-mechanization of art, which was carried out by the historical avant-garde, increasingly presents itself as the preparation for a new phase of its radical re-mechanization. The avant-garde abolished old techniques such as drawing, painting and sculpture – or relativized them in their meaning. However, after a phase of being freed from technology, the re-mechanization of art has begun. It started with the use of new digital techniques of image production and distribution. The artist has again become a technician, a specialist and a producer, thereby once again establishing cultural distance between himself and the beholder.

Peter Weibel had an early understanding of the opportunity offered by the new determination of arts and he seized it. Many artists and theorists have preached the return of art to technology and knowledge in the times of the Post-modernism of the 1970s and 1980s. However, this almost always implied some kind of ironic return to traditional artistic techniques. One wanted to protect oneself from the all too mighty mass media and define other, alternative spaces. For the same reason others use to legitimate their farewell from the avant-garde, as Weibel connects to the avant-garde's traditions. The opportunity and even the need to restructure the avant-garde program, results for Weibel from the fact that art has definitely left behind its traditionally closed rooms and must act amidst today's technological, medialized world. Hence the avant-garde was right in letting go of traditional art techniques, directing the view of the beholder onto the new technical world – even with a critical purpose. Today, however, it is widely pronounced that art should give up its critical, elitist, avant-gardist attitude and should be easy to digest. In short: that art, as soon as it starts to be produced in the context of and by using mass-media procedures, should be obliged to adapt aesthetically to the laws of mass-media dissemination too.

The original character of Weibel's art strategy consists in the fact that he indeed shares the corresponding proposition; however, he does not accept the above-mentioned conclusion. The fact that art is no longer primarily practiced in protected museum spaces does not mean

for Weibel that topical art is condemned to be the mimicry of media surface. On the contrary: this is what makes it necessary to refuse such mimicry. This is, how-ever, not about breaking taboos or crossing limits, the typical means of attracting the media's attention and thus, from an artistic point of view, of little relevance. It is rather about the acquisition of the techniques and procedures used for the production of the images circulating in the mass media – but also about using these techniques and procedures differently.

Here, the avant-garde is not dismissed as obsolete but rather transcended by means of a re-mechanization of art and continued in its critical impetus. The repertoire of images circulating in mass media networks is very limited. Not only so-called images of the other, but also images created by science, interactive images, purely subjective images, let alone abstract images, usually have no chance of entering large mass-media networks. It is, however, just these denied, excluded images that Weibel works with. Images which can be created using technical media and are hence indeed technically compatible with the networks of mass-media dissemination. At the same time, they display an aesthetic incompatibility with these networks. In this sense Weibel's artistic practice is a direct continuation of the artistic practice of the historical avant-garde under the conditions of its technical and medial topicality. This would imply a continuation of the critical discussion of mimetic illusion.

An artistic technique is always a technique of reproduction. This is how artistic technology differs from plain technology. Technology produces technologic items such as cars, aircraft or computers. Art also produces artificial items that mimetically reproduce certain "natural" things. So what is now mimetically reproduced by means of digital art operating with computer programs? One could say it was thinking. For the avant-garde, using the title art is a purely subjective decision, which, if you like, takes place in the "mind" of the artist or the beholder. The classical avant-garde saw the expression of individual freedom, autonomy and sovereignty of the artist in this both lonely and socially obliging decision. This autonomy was however radically called into question by discourses such as the Structuralism of the late 1950s and 1960s. Back then, the lonely autonomous decision of an individual was no longer seen as a free decision, but rather as one dictated by the system of the mind/reflection/thinking, i.e. the code controlling the thinking and decision processes of an individual. In this sense, Concept Art at that time attempted to use art in order to clarify and illustrate how such decisions worked and how they are built into the system of thinking, and also what "objective" logic looks like that could lead and does indeed lead to such "subjective" decisions. Of course, only the introduction of computers allowed the reproduction of such thinking processes, i.e. formalizing them as computer programs and depicting them. But Concept Art in the 1960s made the decisive step towards depiction of the thinking process by making pure thinking its object, thereby aestheticizing it. Only by rendering thinking aesthetic was the way towards new computer art opened up. The art is produced by means of programming, i.e. depiction of thinking processes in the computer. In this way, new computer art will only then fulfill its real task if it not only reproduces the world's surface in the form of images, which could also be reproduced with traditional artistic techniques, but also makes a process-related depiction of thinking as such. To fulfill this task, however, means at the same time a reflection of the limits of a mimesis of thinking. Attempts to depict thinking processes can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. At the basis of the latest computer programs, too, stands classical formal logic as formulated in the works of these authors. However, as we know at least since Frege, Russell and Gödel, this logic is incomplete, leading to numerous paradoxes. It creates an idealized and therefore incomplete picture of human thinking. In this way, utopian projects such as those designed by Ray Kurzweil are given clear limits. This includes the central project of depicting the entire human brain in a computer. Once upon a time, Magritte stated that the depiction of an apple was not an apple and the depiction of a pipe was not a pipe. Hence the depiction of human thinking by means of computer programs is not thinking. So-called artificial intelligence

is both hardware and software that copies, duplicates and simulates certain functions of the human intellect – similar to the way the world was reproduced on canvas before. Man needs thinking for his individual and collective survival – for the sake of his self-preservation instinct. As a contrast, "intelligent" machines just keep thinking all the time – far beyond any kind of concern about survival or well-being. Such artificial intelligence would be classified as natural stupidity if diagnosed in a human being. This demonstrates again that artificial intelligence, i.e. computer pro-grams built on formal logic, does not represent thinking but rather an image of thinking, just as traditional painting did not produce apples, but images of apples.

This insight, however, would only worry an engineer, not an artist. Weibel is very well informed about the limits of logic, since he has seriously and systematically researched the field. Artists like to use computer programming and simulation because they like to demonstrate how the system loses its own systematic, how strict logic leads to paradoxes and how an ambivalence is created by an obsessive search for unambiguousness. Art is indeed interested in system, structure and program, but mainly where they lead themselves *ad absurdum*. It is exactly in this drift toward the absurd that it becomes clear how the image of thinking differs from thinking itself and that the living cannot easily be mimetically duplicated. Today's artists, working with communicative and "intelligent" media, are more interested in the blind alleys, disturbances and absurdities of media communication than in its acquisitions. This is why the re-mechanization of art is certainly not just about naive enthusiasm or worship of technology. On the contrary: it allows not only an ideological claim of the limits of technology but also their technical analyses. But it is not mere pleasure in chaos that makes artists interested in the dysfunctional, in the deceptive element of computer-controlled and communicative processes. It is instead a systematic and critical analysis of mimetic procedure by means of art. This is a task modern art has imposed on itself and in the meantime it has become tradition. Except that today it is the mimesis of thinking, not reality.

The analytical, critical dimension of Weibel's occupation with the operational logic of today's computer-controlled and communication systems, which he pursues in the context of his work at ZKM Karlsruhe, is already detectable in his early works dealing with the logic of mass media and everyday communication. These earlier art works can be seen mainly as examples of the artist's critical occupation with the conventions of today's media culture. These works often have a clear political dimension. They frequently refer to the chances as well as to the shortcomings and absurdities of today's media world. However, mostly these works display a very specific sense of humor. As we all know, Soren Kierkegaard drew a strict line between irony and humor. For Kierkegaard, irony was the manifestation of a seemingly endless subjectivity aiming for a triumph over the finite character of things. Humor was for him the result of this subjectivity's insight about its own finiteness.

Weibel is very aware of the finiteness of human subjectivity and repeatedly seeks contrast with the potential infinity of technical media. It is precisely the finite character of the human being manifested in humor that makes a final subjection of man to the repetitive infinity of logical systems impossible: For man, the possibility of an instantaneous, illogical and unique fad, the spontaneous need to make a good joke, results from the finite character of their existence – hence the fact that he is readily prepared to sacrifice the infinity of logical laws to this instantaneous fad. This is exactly what the jokes in Weibel's art are like – the instantaneous, immediate readiness of its author to sacrifice the whole logical system for the sake of this joke. However, this readiness has a strict logical basis. Because, when the logical system can be sacrificed, this means that the system itself is still not really as logical, consistent or complete as it seems. This humor on Weibel's part is the clearest sign of the independent treatment of its author of all kinds of systems with their media and hence his belief in the survival of the human being and art under the conditions of the media age.

Weibel Lies
A "Derive" in the Ancestral Portrait Gallery of an Armed Experimental Aesthetician
Günther Holler-Schuster

Don't worry, this is not an attempt to trace family circumstances or events way back in Odessa. The making of spiteful allegations is not our purpose either but rather to take a leap in the dark and to attempt an investigation of one of the most lucid creative contributions to Austrian art since 1945 – the work of Peter Weibel.

Lügt (lies) was the message written on a board the artist held up beneath the sign of a police station in 1971. Let us forget for a moment that it is above all federal institutions, which through their practice contribute in no way at all to the good of certain groups of people. Indeed, these institutional inventions have set themselves objectives such as the freedom of the individual or social progress, or simply, the welfare of mankind, yet, there are also some quite contrary side effects, extending as far as the blatant discrimination for some of the so-called "supported."

If this were not the case, in our representational democracies we would be obliged to assume that the police are ultimately the tool of the representatives of the people (politicians). They again, are elected by the people (us), representing it (us). They are the people (us). So if the policeman lies, this is first of all an incident, maybe resulting from a certain specific personality structure. For instance because the policeman as an individual is given too much personal power which as a consequence he might abuse to the detriment of other individuals. Lies are told, however, also by the institution, the state, the representatives of the people, by the people themselves – and finally by us. In this paradoxical situation you too, dear reader, are lying every bit as much as the author of these lines – and consequently Weibel too. We know what the artist is on about and what he is denouncing, at the same time, however, we understand the limits of linguistic possibilities. Thus in striving for freedom and knowledge, we are forced to contrast the state lie with our own lie, whilst the notion is relativized as soon as the viewpoint changes.

In the most radical moment of anti-art, in the 1960's, avant-garde artists – building their work on the heritage of Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism – were able to shatter the foundations of bourgeois society, and thereby create fear. The traditional self-conception of art at that time was after all based on the assumption that art *per se* was a part of bourgeois society and thus part of its own system of rule and power. So if art crosses the divide to become an expression of both cultural and political rebellion, its demand for truth will change. For its "counterpart" this becomes a lie that must be fought against. Whilst for the avant-garde, art, now transformed into a weapon, will reveal the lie of the bourgeois capitalist society and hence of the federal power. So we should look at Peter Weibel's practice with regard to this field of conflict. Seemingly remote sources from anarchism to scientific-theoretical models were suddenly applied in order to help art to get out, to transform, helping it to new relevance.

In Weibel's public "notice" – or, in the connotation of the *double-entendre* implicit in the German word *Anschlag*, his "attack" on the police, by accusing them of lying – the complexity of his practice as it is lived out becomes apparent. The state appeals to the principal of truth by virtue of the force of law, and through the legal texts it issues. But these statutory texts must then be interpreted – so who is lying?

With respect to the idea of the statement, the linguist Roman Jakobson differentiates between a process of statement and a result, the statement in itself.[1] Jacques Lacan goes further by making the assumption that the "I" of the statement is different from the "I" making the

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1 Roman Jakobson describes this process in the essay, *Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb* (Harvard University 1957).

statement. He describes this as a logical paradox. When a person says: "I lie" the deception in this is quite obvious; what we are confronted with is the fact that a human being is in a position to be deceitful about his own deception. The police, then, are deceptive in speaking about truth, while actually lying – indeed, they are not actually able to do otherwise. The sign with the word "lie" placed under the public or "corporate" notice of the police puts things right again. In both formal terms and in those of content the artist reaches a point here that presents the dilemma that we exist in all its naked clarity before our eyes. This is also, in the final analysis, the point where Weibel's efforts intersect and reveal themselves in their fullest density.

Polizei lügt (police lie) is one of a series of actions that was documented photographically. Weibel changed the script on public notices. *Oberlandesgericht* became *Oberschandesgericht* (Higher Regional Court became Higher Disgrace Court), and *Rechtsanwalt* became *Rechtsgewalt* (attorney at law became violence of the law). This "scriptual terrorism" came into existence simply through holding the appropriate letters at the corresponding positions in the word. These interventions were a more direct invasion of public space than the graffiti being created at this time in New York City. As a potential for the denotation of an actual content, a warning, a revolt against state institutions, these "attacks" create feelings of insecurity. The graffiti by contrast no longer contains any direct message, for they have internalized the message and have been radicalized in their formal qualities. "Being neither denotation nor con-notation, they evade the principle of nomenclature and break as empty signifiers into the sphere of the fulfilled signs of the city, which is dissolved in turn by their pure presence."2 Thus graffiti represent a variation – derived from the sub-culture – on linguistic criticism. Weibel's series were titled *attacks* and still speak the language of the protest movement: do it! It also represents a form of subversive poetic statement, reducing content to its opposite through linguistic intervention, while plumbing the limitations of what language in fact can do.

Weibel has himself studied and done academic work on the issue of philosophy as criticism of language, culminating in the formal thinking of the mathematician Kurt Gödel. Gödel has provided the quasi salvation of the "liar" paradox in his statement "I cannot be proved." If Nietzsche took God from us, then Gödel would seem to have robbed us of ourselves. Because where are we if we cannot be proved or demonstrated? There, perhaps, where God is...

A connection between linguistic skepticism and individual social rebellion was developed still further in the protest movement of the 1960's of which Weibel was a part. This connection provides a basic framework, in which the content and socially critical expressions within Weibel's art can be developed. He did this in the mid 1960's in literature and as an extension from this into the fine arts. He would not be Weibel if he had not also created a theoretical foundation for his artistic actions. He provides coordinates for the clarification of his procedure in his *Sub-geschichte der Literatur* (A Sub-History of Literature).3 Here we learn that the official history of literature is not "a history of human invention through, with, and in language" but "rather a collection of felicities and self-help." Thus no basic or social change is possible without bringing about a change in the formal structure. The hero, in content that is, is not an adequate figure however when presented in traditional costume. The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson provided a formulation of this development in 1921, by describing the poetic procedure as the "sole hero" of literature. The formulation of a sub-history, such as that of the avant-garde, comprises in itself a social-political dimension, precisely analogous to the content which it reports in its special cases.

Let us imagine the powerlessness of the individual within a representational democracy -- a state of affairs that will arise ever and again, among other reasons due to either an inadequate

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2 Jean Baudrillard, *Kool Killer oder der Aufstand der Zeichen*, Berlin 1978, p. 26.

3 H.C. Artmann wrote: "There is a phrase that simply cannot be attacked, that you can be a poet without ever having written or spoken a word."

supply or a total lack of information or the provision of false information. The media forms this bogus public platform in part to keep the proportion of information, versus that of pure entertainment, very low. It is thus essential in our circumstance to ensure that there is a wide range of information available. Social change cannot be brought about by this means – and art is not able to achieve this either – but the attempt to make the change possible is nevertheless given by this means. Very few thinkers, among them the linguist Noam Chomsky, aim at this process of "making possible" by providing the public with the information and analyses, which are in turn the results of their research. Chomsky has repeatedly stressed that the objective is to make decisions, and that each individual has the choice of acting in accordance with moral principles, so as to compel the powerful to behave in a compatible manner.

Weibel's early experiments began in 1964, downwind of the Vienna Group that had begun to assemble in the 1950's. Direct work was done by this movement during the 1950's and 1960's as a sort of continuation, in the most radical manner possible, of the results achieved by the historical avant-garde (Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, Constructivism u.s.f.). Vienna was by no means ahead of the times in this decade – it was provincial, traditional and marked with the brown striations of a Nazi past. Neo-avant-gardist movements such as the Vienna Group had an absolutely unsettling character; the conviction that the transformation of bourgeois aesthetics would of necessity go hand in hand with the transformation of bourgeois society was here understood as a matter of course. Criticism of both the state and of reality by means of a criticism of language contributed on the one hand to an overstepping of the aesthetic consensus of the times and on the other hand to the transgression of genre frontiers. In anticipation of the "linguistic turn," the artists expanded into other media such as photography and film, and, even more radical forms of artistic practice such as happenings, Concept Art, and actions. In other words, change-related thinking was by no means solely restricted to language and the arts, and the borderline between art and life was shifting in consequence.

The *Eight–Points–Proclamation of the Poetic Act*, written in 1953 by H.C. Artmann, acts here to a certain extent as godfather.[4] The expansion of the definition of language first took place through the inclusion of sounds and words, but continued with another phase of development that included other materials as well, up to the point where the poet could get by without using any kind of verbal language whatsoever. The visual dimension of the written text was rapidly overcome by Weibel as well, whose own work developed along the lines of action texts, motion poems, photo poems, object poems, process poems, and, as a concluding sort of gesture, the radical use of one's own body. In works such as *raum der sprache – skulptur mit angeschlossenem organismus* (space of speech – sculpture with a connected living organism) Weibel had his own tongue set in a block of concrete. The point that is articulated in this gesture ranges from general speechlessness to the achievement of a bodily and social effect on people through the use of speech. What else can it be but a lack of freedom, after all, when the letter of the law is interpreted by a judge? What is possible for a judge, in setting his organ of speech in motion, is altogether impossible for the person whose tongue is sealed into a wall of concrete and marked by bodily repression.

All of this was ultimately part of a revolt against a literature and art that moved along state-directed channels. The consequence of this is evidently that "literature will remain what it has always been: a service to the state, the trans-figuration of a prison to the best of all possible worlds, the strengthening of the status quo." Or, as Peter Weibel suggests in 1969: "poetics will remain what good poetry has always been: the transporting of new knowledge and experience, exploration of reality outside of the standards set by the state, the strengthening and the raising of the individual. The result of a poetic production of this kind can be: e =

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4 The Philosophy of Art and Politics. Dialogue between Richard Kearny and Herbert Marcuse, in: The Crane Bag Journal of Irish Studies, vol. 1, no 1, 1977, s. p. (from the American English by P.–E. Jansen).

mc^2 (Einstein) or 'destroy this world to win a paradise' (Shakespeare)."5 Weibel's subsequent approach to and engagement with electronic media – which as to be experienced as a sort of extension of physical and social realities, as wel as consciousness, in the manner of an invisible drug – is established in this moment. The transformation of the body through media results in an extension of its possibilities. The technical medium thus becomes so immanent to the body that a new step in evolution opens up, a new freedom from current bodily and intellectual limitations. If language or writing was the first step towards this process of bodily abstraction, then the transformation of the body through media represents the next logical step. The visual is combined with the textual, and is transformed into a more complex communications system. New power relationships however are also concealed in the coming into existence of this new communications form, as there is an interplay between the real body itself and the media image of the body. Access to both is possible, and in fact here a duplication takes place. Weibel's media art thus comprises from its earliest phases onwards the creative components of a new development, alongside a critical engagement. A decisive approach in Weibel's work and thinking can also be seen here: an art that works with social structures, with the structures of time and space.

"Preparations for war," however, are also in full progress here. In the typical sense of the avant-garde, that is: in the radicalization of the thesis that there can be no political rebellion without a rebellion in the arts, and vice versa. It only appeared to be possible to turn art into a place for criticism outside of the limitations of a bourgeois society. The conception and perception of this society that art be affirmative had to be destroyed first. Social change through art naturally contained a change in the concept of art as well: the abolition of the classical concept of art. Questions as to whether a thing was still art, or was art in any sense at all, became also obsolete as a consequence, for those questions were to be rejected as bourgeois, as the compulsion to legitimate. The sovereignty of the artist was to be demanded now, as a means of achieving a more general social sovereignty.

And sovereignty also includes, by definition, the possibility of declaring war on the state. It is at this moment and in this regard that negation and destruction can be understood as a productive force, and in fact we shall come to Bakunin shortly, because it is here that a series of parallels to terrorism can be traced. Walter Benjamin published his celebrated essay *Kritik der Gewalt* (A Criticism of Violence) in 1921. In it, he describes the dialectic of violence and the law, i.e. a legal state (statutory situation) that legitimizes the use of violence. This is a system that is equally made use of by terrorists. A group is formed whose demands are understood as being equal to the formation of a new legal state, and that in consequence suspends the existing state of law. In the first case, force is an instrument of maintaining the law, insofar as the state is in the position of holding a monopoly on force; in the second case, it is used towards the implementation of a new state of law. It is entirely clear that in this situation the state must fear terror, since both pursue a similar logic. My point here is that the artistic avant-garde has always been in a similar terrorist position in relation to the art of the establishment, which is an expression of the existing state power.

If we look at Malevich's *Black Square* from this point of view, it represents the obliteration of all pictorial images, and yet there is simultaneously the paradoxical fact that the picture of destruction is nevertheless a picture. Weibel's *attack lecture* within the context of *kriegskunstfeldzug* (war-art-campaign) in 1969, undertaken together with Valie Export, turned not only against the work of art, but also against its public, namely, the audience. Language (the lecture) becomes a verbal weapon, while a water cannon, the *publikum(s)sprenger* (audience blaster/sprinkler), constructed by Wolfgang Ernst, is used against the audience as Valie Export starts whipping the audience. Finally, Weibel threw rolls of barbed wire at random into the audience. *Mehr verkehrstote, weniger staat-bürger* (more dead on the roads, fewer

5 Peter Weibel, *VORSÄTZE*, 1969, in: *protokolle – Zeitschrift für Literatur und Kunst*, Otto Breicha (ed.), Vienna, 1982.

citizens), another action that Weibel carried out jointly with Franz Kaltenbäck, had a similarly aggressive structure, but was in essence a terrorist act: petrol was poured into aluminum foil, that was laid out across the road, to be ignited as soon as a car approached. The attempt to cause a road traffic accident is made clear here. The use of one's own body is decisive at this moment as well, in relation to performance art. The event no longer took places in the context of art performed for an audience, but is unannounced, and in fact was kept secret, aiming ultimately only at its destructive result. This act is action art in its most radical form, and is comparable with terrorism, else has a structural relationship to it. While the target in this case lies outside of one's own personal sphere, it is nevertheless one's own body that is again the focus of attention. Whether the body becomes the location where art is performed, or the body is used as a sort of weapon, clearly in both cases the body becomes the location where art is performed and consummated. In both cases, the potential effect is full of risks, both for the practitioners and for those whom they address.

Herbert Marcuse spontaneously offers a helping hand here: "Only when art remains negative is it in a position to negate existing reality itself." And he continues: "Only authentic art is negative and this in the sense that it refuses to obey the existing reality, with its language, its order, its conventions and in its images. (...) To this extent art provides a representation of a free society and of closer human relationships. But art cannot go beyond this." During the student revolts of the 1960's, artists in a wide range of fields argued about the commitment of art within the context of the revolutionary process. There was relatively little to hear about these ideas in this respect in Austria, however. The work of the Viennese Actionists (e.g. *Kunst und Revolution* / Art and Revolution, 1968) represented one of the few contributions to this. Weibel, who was to some extent an active participant in Viennese Actionism and provided theoretical support for it, was once again the exception, however, for no other significant artistic work of Austrian origin provided such thoroughly committed contributions to these various processes.

Michail Bakunin should be permitted to have a word here as well. For him, positive means reactionary, an acceptance of the status quo and thus ultimately a sort of quietness. Negativity is for Bakunin, as he wrote in 1842 in his essay *Die Reaktion in Deutschland* (Reaction in Germany), the democratic principle, which in his day represented the negation of an existing reality, and indeed ultimately represented a sort of movement. He argues from this that the negative alone has the right to existence, closing with the celebrated words: "The lust to destroy is also a creative lust!"6 This sentence has had a great influence of course in artistic and intellectual circles through to the present day. The intensive desire for change in the midst of an unbearable reality sounds like a trumpet call for all avant-garde demands and manifestos. This same phrase applies to the work of Dada, through Surrealism, and even the Viennese Actionists, just as it is to be encountered in linguistic criticism of that time, in its most radical and brutal formulations. In short, Bakunin's sentence is the legitimizing basis for all such anti-positions, and not just in art.

Erich Mühsam aligns himself with this position as well when he defines artistic production as an opportunity for rebellion. Mühsam's conception of art comprises two important approaches, which we encounter again both in the classic avant-garde and also in the neo-avant-garde of the 1950's and 1960's. On the one hand there is the social commitment derived from Kropotkin which he demands from politically conscious artists. On the other hand there is the aesthetization of life, which aims at a lifting of the boundaries between life and art. The finished production of art is secondary in this regard. Anyone can be a part of Bohemian culture, simply as a result of the way one lives: "art is an area of freedom for people who refuse to do utilizable work in society."7 "Poetry can indeed be poetry without (verbal)

6 Michail Bakunin, *Die Reaktion in Deutschland*, edition: Hamburg 1984.
7 Erich Mühsam, *Boheme*, in: *Die Fackel*, 8/202, April 30, 1906, p. 6.

language," Weibel similarly wrote in 1969.8 Recall that "*Ne travaillez jamais!*" was the call of the Situationists in the 1950's as well. Later, Mühsam went decisively further by radicalizing his views by legitimating violence for the achievement of these objectives. The Surrealists (Breton) aligned themselves with this position as well, as previously mentioned, as did the Viennese Actionists, who develop the same argument in their manifestos. For example: "using the ace of the future ZOCK hacks into the pile of politicians. ZOCK treads on everything that has the stink of nature and law. ZOCK is a smash in the gob of every opinion."9 Or as Peter Weibel and Valie Export suggest in *kriegskunstfeldzug* in 1969: "art that wishes to survive as a place of utopia, that wants to take care of utopia's arrival, that wears brass knuckle-dusters for utopia, art that takes care of survival will carry out paramilitary actions… through the armoured territory of 'order' it leaves behind the vandal tracks of freedom. If it encounters instrumental reason it knocks the instruments out of its hand (...)."10 The actors, it should be mentioned, used pseudonyms for the ZOCK event: Otto Muehl was "Omo Super," while Peter Weibel was "Ford Mustang 70." The RAF activists worked in a similar manner at the end of the 1960's: Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader were "Hans and Grete," Jan Carl Raspe was the "Zimmermann (carpenter)," and Holger Meins was "Starbuck."

In the 1960s, Weibel joined his interest in a performative art reflective of the forms taken by political struggle with an interest in rock music. The work of not only the Situationists, but also the beatniks, hippies and provos remained substantially outside the scope of artistic reflection in Austria at the time, and Weibel was certainly the first person in Austria to have given this issue a significant dimension in his artistic work. Figures such as Allen Ginsberg, or even Allan Karprow, a former student of Meyer Shapiro, together with Jerry Rubin, or even Abbie Hoffmann, represent some of the leading thinkers in the protest movement of the 1960's, which sought to take a stand against the American commitment in Vietnam. Nam Jun Paik, Karl Heinz Stockhausen, and Yoko Ono were also closely involved in this movement. Political forms contradicting the standard logic of the revolutionary fight were frequently practiced, reminiscent of happenings and new forms of theater. Jerry Rubin described in *Do it!* how he succeeded in turning his summons to appear before the US Congress House Committee on Un-American Activities into a theatrical performance.11 One is reminded of Weibel's past in the courts as well: for example, in an action in Göteborg in 1970, Peter Weibel, together with Franz Kaltenbäck, used the local museum as a musical instrument. Aces, stones, and other objects were assembled and moved on the glass façade of the building, so that the glass of the building would break according to the pattern of a set rhythm. Alarms were set off and the police arrived on the scene. A futuristic symphony was to be heard while the artists - or perpetrators, depending on your point of view -- soon appeared in court, albeit in Vienna. Weibel described how he disputed the charges with the court according to linguistic-philosophic criteria, and indeed was ultimately discharged. His partner Kaltenbäck, however, was convicted.12

On April 9, 1950 three young lettrists - Michel Mourre, Ghislain de Marbaix and Serge Berna – succeeded in carrying out a spectacular action in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris that could be said to truly shock the public. André Breton himself admitted that he would have liked to have been capable of this act himself.13 One of the three young heroes dressed as a Dominican monk, stormed the altar during a pause in the credo, and "preached" to the worshippers gathered to celebrate the Easter Mass: "I accuse the universal Catholic Church of deadly abuse of our living forces in the service of an empty heaven, I accuse the church

8 Peter Weibel, *protokolle*, op.cit., p. 5.

9 ZOCK manifesto, archive Peter Weibel.

10 Peter Weibel/Valie Export, *W.I.R. sind W.A.R.*, in: *Underground Explosion*, Munich, Zurich, Essen, Cologne, Stuttgart, 1969.

11 Jerry Rubin, quoted after Justin Hoffmann, Destruktionskunst – Der Mythos der Zerstörung in der Kunst der Sechziger Jahre, Munich 1995, p. 56.

12 Peter Weibel, *Grundlagen des Attaismus*, in: *Ausbruch der Kunst*, Carl Hegemann (ed.), Berlin 2002, p. 106.

13 Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces – von dada bis punk, eine geheime kulturgeschichte des 20. jahrhunderts*, Hamburg 1992, p. 270.

of humbuggery, I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its morality of the cemetery, and of being the cancer of the declining West."14 The "perpetrators" were at first able to escape from the mob of the congregation that was in a mood to lynch them, and they were "rescued" a little later by the police. In the context of the action *Kunst und Revolution* at the Vienna University in 1968, in which Peter Weibel took an active part and provoked the well-known reactions, it is interesting that after this action there was a call and a rumor for a repeat run of the entire action – but this time in Vienna's St Stephen's Cathedral. Weibel wore an asbestos glove when he gave his *brandrede*, setting fire to his arm. When the glove lost its protective function unexpectedly, he threw it with a brief shout of "ow!" into a bucket of water. After the event the audience were perplexed, paralyzed, and indeed some were sick as they left the room.15 Weibel's question "what is to be done," which Lenin had posed at the beginning of the century, could be seen here receiving an answer from Jerry Rubin: "Do it!" In the face of the turmoil in the late 1960's, this was in fact a quite coherent answer.

In 1968, Peter Weibel presented his film *exit* at a cinema in Munich. "The screen was of aluminum foil, and rockets and fire-works were fixed to it. These were lit and flew fizzling, smoking and spraying sparks into the audience, while Weibel read and shouted texts about the aggression of the state and society against the freedom of the individual into the auditorium through a megaphone."16 Again the media showed little mercy for this event. The newspaper *Die Welt* commented cynically on November 23, 1968: "The attempts by progressive film makers to destroy thinking, seeing, and behavioral habits are taking on ever more desperate forms. [...] Pyrotechnics, the burning down of entire cinemas or the public beheading of visitors, surely represents a further opportunity to question our habits."17 In this regard, it is important to keep in mind in that both Viennese underground filmmakers and the Viennese Actionists (Weibel belonged to both groups) did not have to previously reckon with qualified criticism in the media. Instead, there actions were more often to be found written up on the pages of court proceedings, rather than on the arts pages of the newspapers.

Most of Weibel's statements on art, at least until the mid 1970's, follow the structure of the underground. This is of course a period that has come to an end since the late 1970's, as the mainstream has absorbed everything that was once underground. Adorno has been proved right, as has Debord. Someone who claims today to belong to the underground can only be termed a hopeless romantic. The origins of the term are rooted in the Paris bohemian milieu of 1830, the culture of which was an intoxicating mixture of avant-gardistic aestheticism, political radicalism, religious mysticism, opportunistic criminality, and alternative sexuality.18 In this underground, which transgressed class boundaries, or at least ignored them, the differences between aesthetics and politics were scarcely to be distinguished. This erosion of difference runs like a ribbon through Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists, the Beat generation, the protest movement of the 1960's, and even Punk. Terrorism as radical chic was a significant element for many protagonists, many of whom ended up in prison, died in the fight or as a consequence of hunger strikes, or simply from drug overdoses. The various freedom movements, including those in the arts, have achieved a great deal, and their sacrifices have apparently not been in vain. People still continue to do what they have always done. They have sex in the most various of forms, listen to music, take drugs, are politically active, and are possibly successful too along the way, at least in middle management or, on the art market. There is no longer any need to term this underground – but rather "lifestyle," the politics of everyday life, or simply fashion, as Adorno earlier suggested.

14 Ibid., S. 269.

15 *wien – bildkompendium wiener aktionismus und film*, ed. by Peter Weibel, co-edited by Valie Export, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 265.

16 Quoted after: Justin Hoffmann, *Destruktionskunst – Der Mythos der Zerstörung in der Kunst der frühen Sechziger Jahre*, Munich 1995, p. 180

17 Hans Scheugl, Erweitertes Kino – Die Wiener Filme der 60er Jahre, Vienna 2002, p. 145.

18 In 1979 Peter Weibel wrote the foreword to the German edition of Pitigrilli's novel *Cocaine* (1922).

In concluding, I would like to remark that Peter Weibel, "before whom we lay on the ground,"[19] is certainly the only well-known artist in Austria who has also played a role in the history of pop. "I fought the law, but the law won" (The Clash). This song proves a good description of how the story ended, how avant-garde artists were absorbed again by society. When they were not destroyed and died, only a small number of these, and among them Weibel, were able to integrate the consistency of their positions into other professions, and thus continue the fight. Some of them have retreated into a ghetto-like private scholasticism, or have spread out to distant corners of the earth. Many have betrayed their cause and have become successful by breaking on through to "the other side." Weibel's artistic work is without doubt also of relevance in the discourse of pop music, and thus a few bars of music before finishing. Here we go:

The call was made in the United Kingdom in 1976, "God save the Queen, and the Fascist regime," and a little later the cry from the same source shifted to "Anarchy in the UK." "The Guns of Brixton" could be heard, while just prior the "White Riot" had broken out. Observers claim to have seen all the "perpetrators" at the same "Iggy and the Stooges" concert. "Velvet Underground" and the "New York Dolls" were brought from NYC by Malcolm Mclaren together with safety pins. Iggy Popp was not at all squeamish on stage, nor did he spare his own body in the least – this much he had seen and taken to heart from various art performances. The band made good use of their guitars. Only a little later, one saw Sid Vicious open fire in a video, staggering down a show staircase, while shooting wildly into the audience and bellowing "My Way." Was it not André Breton who had described the simplest Surrealist act: to go out onto the street and to shoot indiscriminately into the crowd?

"Attack lecture" and anyway, "more dead on the roads, fewer citizens" – "Exit" – the end of the 1960's. "London's Burning" at the end of the 1970's, Weibel's arm was ablaze in 1968 – "Art and Revolution." We already know that the police tell lies – "Scheiss Polizei" (shit police), "Dead in the Head," "Stromtod" (electricity death). So watch out "Cocain Cowboy" and "Nimm deine Schrecken mit dir" (take your terrors with you), best of all to the "Hotel Morphila." Hotel manager Peter Weibel will inform you there about "Sex in der Stadt" (sex in the city) while the orchestra plays "Pollock Rock" – "Die besten Strophen sind die Katastrophen" (the best strophes are the catastrophes).

Meanwhile the dams have broken; "Ganz Wien ist heut' auf Heroin" (all of Vienna is on heroin) proclaimed a young dandy, who soon after admitted that he had always lain at the feet of Weibel. His co-combatants arose during this like zombies out of a swamp of ketchup, vomit, and all kinds of other substances. Vienna Actionism raised its children well and let the call go out loud and clear for the "Super Sheriff." He actually came in response and forced everybody "onto their knees." The "Panic on the Streets of London" continued through the 1980's when the call was "Burn down the Disco, hang the DJ because the music he's constantly playin' has nothing got to say about my life." "Kraftwerk" drove down the "Autobahn" (highway) and "Bauhaus" mourned the death of a legend, "Bela Lugosi is dead" – and had been for a long time. Nietzsche had just arrived as a guest in the "Hotel Morphila" – Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Verlaine and the others were already there. "We are not of this world." The Keats-, Yeats- and Wilde-driven dandy Morrissey apologized politely: " Sweetness, I was only joking when I said I'd like to smash every tooth in your head." McLuhan be thanked, we have finally arrived. Arrived from the "Wurlitzer Galaxy", we have Leary on the back seat and a junked up "Soft Machine" in the boot – he had originally wanted to take the "Nova Express."

PS. Since this is not a history of art analysis of Peter Weibel's early works, reference is only made to his work on an exemplary basis. Furthermore it is not the author's intention to retain a strict chronological structure. What has been aimed at here was to go cruising (derive) in aspects of the intellectual climate of Peter Weibel.

19 Falco, quoted after: Peter Mahr, *Der Falco-Effekt – Zur Theorie österreichischer Kunst von 1977 bis 1988*, in: *Kunst in Österreich 1945–1995*, symposium, Academy of Applied Arts, April 1995, Vienna 1996, p. 177.

Peter Weibel and Valie Export, *From the Map of Dogginess* (1968); Cover: Peter Weibel, *Welcome* (1964)

VAL
'AUS DER MAP