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Disruption in the Arts: Prologue

The essay collection “Disruption in the Arts” examines, from a comparative perspective, the phenomenon of aesthetic disruption within the various arts in contemporary culture. It assumes that the political potential of contemporary art is not derived – at least not solely – from presenting its audiences and recipients with openly political content. It rather derives from using formal means to create a specific space of perception and interaction: a space that makes hegemonic structures of action and communication observable, thus problematizing their self-evidence and ultimately rendering them selectively inoperative. The contributions in this volume conceptualize various historical and contemporary politics of form in the media, which aim to be more than mere shock strategies, and which are concerned not just with the “narcissistic” exhibition of art as art, but also, and above all, with the creation of a new “common horizon of experience” (Stegemann 2015: 156). In doing so, they combine the analysis of paradigmatic works, procedures and actions ranging from E.T.A. Hoffmann to Steve McQueen, with reference to central theoretical debates in the fields of literature, media, and art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By applying the concept of disruption from media and communication studies (Shannon and Weaver 1949) to configurations and constellations in the aesthetic domain, they show on the basis of concrete examples how, within a conflict-bound social frame of reference, textual, visual, auditive or performative strategies disclose their own ways of functioning, intervene in automated processes of reception, and thus work directly or indirectly to stimulate a sense of political possibilities.

Thus, if in what follows “disruption” is to be distinguished as a meta-category for the critical and artistic analysis of our times, the first thing that needs to be emphasized is the productive character of disruptions. Disruption designates interruptions – thus, not the definitive collapse or the destruction of habitual practices of reception and/or decoding. In the mode of disruption, the latter are not only rendered temporally dysfunctional but also rendered visible in the same stroke; to paraphrase a thought of Martin Heidegger, they exit the mode of a self-evident *ready-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*) and move into the problematizing mode of *present-at-hand* (*Vorhandenheit*) (Heidegger 2006: 73–75; see also Rautzenberg 2009: 165–175). Analogous to the “mediality of media,” which becomes palpable in the course of disruptions (Kümmel and Schüttpelz

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2003: 10), artistic disruptions set in motion a dynamic of self-reflexivity, such that the constitutive conditions of art themselves become the implicit or explicit object of the works in question. In the aesthetic domain, disruptions can occur as the result of intentional strategies, that is, as “artistic means” (Gansel and Ächtler 2013: 8), as effects of the medium-bound conditions of a work of art, or as the effects of interference between different logics of the media. Disruptions additionally possess the character of an event, since, due to their relational nature, they are bound to the handed-down forms of representation and reception, which can only be challenged situationally.

A disruption becomes political when – following Jacques Rancière’s theses – it is bound up with a “dissensus” concerning different possible perspectives on reality, such as when the contingency of a particular aesthetic regime is laid bare, and at the same time other “distributions of sensory experience and space” (Rancière 2010; trans. modified) are identified as possible. For this reason, works of art must always first reproduce the hierarchical, representative forms of representation that they want to disrupt, so that by means of aesthetic strategies of destabilization these forms can then be rendered fragile: political art “occurs” precisely where “a sense of order and ordered meaning [*geordneter Sinn*] comes into contact with chaotic sensuality” (Sonderegger 2010: 32) – that is, into contact with the noise [*Rauschen*] that constitutes the disruption, where contingency turns into aesthetic experience. This simultaneous “process of entering into and revoking power relations” is articulated in the aesthetics of disruption as a “break with one’s own (pre)-suppositions, whether they are technical-modern determinants or aesthetic-romantic ideas” – which is why the “gesture of breaking with one’s (pre)-suppositions” can be considered the feature that is common to most of the works examined in this volume (Robnik 2010: 26).

As a bi-stable (reversible) figure situated between order and disorder, aesthetic disruption produces a reflexivity that can be grasped methodically only if it is brought into relation with other aesthetic concepts such as “performance,” “space,” “presence,” “body” or “affect.” In the contributions assembled here, “disruption” is therefore a theoretical starting point that allows the most diverse aspects of the aesthetic to be comprehended: the particular logics of performance practices and physicality that resist representation, the different aesthetic, temporal and spatial effects of textual, visual or audiovisual media, the intervention of new techniques – such as digital techniques – in aesthetic traditions, the perturbation of the mechanisms and expectations of reception aesthetics. Such strategies do not necessarily have to produce subversive effects in a traditionally “leftist,” politically progressive sense – the need for a differentiated view of forms of aesthetic disruption is made clear by the adaptation of classical concepts of disruptive guerrilla communication (Schölzel 2013) by the right-wing

“Identitäre Bewegung” (Kökgiran and Nottbohm 2014), as well as the perfect fit between the “new spirit of capitalism” and the forms of “artistic critique,” and thereby certain aesthetics of disruption (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Pertinent to them all is a negative realism that critically addresses the contextual conditions in which worldmaking becomes possible. In the first place, however, and practically speaking, maneuvers of aesthetic disruption are a technique of communicative de-automation, whose attention-gaining potential can be capitalized on for quite different purposes.

The focus of the essay collection is accordingly on works and aesthetics of the present day which, through disruption, develop the perspective of a second-order critical observer on the “age of media immanence” (Hagener 2011), in this way demonstrating the potential of art to carry out a diagnosis of the contemporary world. Political aesthetics results from a virtualization of current orders of the sayable and the visible, which breaks through the surface of self-evidentness and brings to light latent social and aesthetic alternatives. These contributions are supplemented by the perspectivization of historical disruptive maneuvers that serve as a template for, or even anticipate, the poetics and aesthetics of the present. The overarching thesis of the volume is that experimental systems of aesthetic disruption harbor an epistemological potential that can prove seminal in observing and critiquing the political-cultural constitutive conditions of acts of referring to the world in the media. Disruptions in the arts, such as new forms of writing, new techniques of processing and montage in digital film, or unexpected performances in a conventionalized theater, always prove to be a political effort designed to perturb or introduce radical change into certain social arrangements. Scandals may, within a very short time, point to such breaches of norms and attract a great deal of attention. However, while some disruptions may be perceptible initially only on the micro-political level, and do not yet provoke a radical cultural break, they can nevertheless have an impact on the members of a society. For, in a second phase, through the accumulation of numerous disruptive processes, a certain agitational potential can be exceeded, whereby previously subversive disruptions then trigger larger controversies, whose aim is then the re-negotiation of power relations.

Media provoke disruptions and serve to trigger micropolitics that concentrate directly on the *body* of members of a society. They thus set in motion a process of subjectivization, which can also provoke new social formations and thereby realign *power relations*. Accordingly, the contributions in this volume are subdivided into the sections media, body, and power, without us wanting to assert clear lines of separation. Rather, the individual elements can be seen as mutually generative, as intersignificant, building a relationship of power. As Foucault put it: “The phenomenon of the social body is the effect [...] of the ma-

teriality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals” (Foucault 1980: 55). For the program of disruption in the arts, one can add that the media and their correlated politics of form cause individual bodies and the social body to stumble, and bring to light micropolitics as well as power relations.

The volume begins with conceptually-oriented contributions designed to open up access to the phenomenon of disruption in the arts from a theoretical as well as a cultural-historical perspective. Each article discusses a concept that is complementary to disruption, dealing respectively with experiments, scandals, miracles, and the imagination.

The article on “Aesthetic Experiments” by Lars Koch and Tobias Nanz systematically establishes the principle of disruption as a productive phenomenon, as well as a point of departure for social self-descriptions and self-assurance. In keeping with this perspective, which provides the theoretical basis for the other contributions in the volume, the arts can be understood as an experimental system that shapes the perception of the past, present, and future. Moritz Mutters’s contribution, “Scandalous Expectations,” examines scandals from the perspective of the social sciences as communicative forms of processing disruptions that expose the norms of modern societies and, in the interplay of de-normalization and re-normalization, give the lie to the alleged absence of moral principles. In his article on “The Miracle as Disruption,” Mario Grizelj devotes his attention to miracles, which he sees as disruptions that serve as crossover points between anarchy and order – for miracles can demarcate, move, and overstep boundaries, and thus question concepts of the world and order. With the concluding contribution, “Imagined Scenarios of Disruption,” the editors propose a model that analyzes imaginary scenarios of disruption with regard to their function for security policies and differentiates them analytically concerning their disruptive potential. In addition, they outline a typology of disruption that emerges from the history of security-policy apparatuses (*dispositifs*) and is derived from the relationship between imagined (i.e., artistic) and real disruptive events.

The section on media brings together essays that examine the operations of the individual arts and ask to what extent the idiosyncrasies of the media themselves, or an idiosyncratic approach to the media, can produce disruptions that in turn call for new practices of interpreting and viewing. The three contributions, therefore, deal with literary disruptions and demonstrate, on the basis of specific examples, that beginning around 1800 and continuing into the literature of the present day increased competition from other media led and leads to experimentation with alternative modes of writing.

In her contribution on selected works by E. T. A. Hoffmann, Tanja Prokic develops a notion of “Disruptive storytelling,” which triggers a process of difference and repetition, thus anticipating an aesthetic procedure that only came

into its prime much later, in the twentieth century. Christoph Kleinschmidt, in his essay “Perturbing the Reader,” deals with Adorno’s proclaimed concept of art as a riddle or enigma, and inquires into the function of this concept in contemporary literature, taking as examples works by Rainald Goetz and Christian Kracht. Johannes Pause’s contribution, “Expansions of the Instant,” is devoted to fantastic deformations of time in novels by Thomas Lehr, Helmut Krausser, and Daniel Kehlmann, among others, which point to a collision between models of time in technical and textual media. Two further contributions then go more deeply into the relationship between visibility and disruption. In her essay “Disruption, Photography, and the Idea of Aesthetic Resistance,” Marie-Sophie Himmerich uses the example of Sophie Ristelhuber’s photographs of the Gulf War to show that disruptive interference can be a productive phenomenon in the artistic production process. Lastly, Johannes Binotto’s contribution, “Closed Circuits,” deals with film and examines the disruptive potential and the limits of the electronic image, using Michael Mann’s cinema as his main example.

The section on the body looks into the ways that the subject and the body are shaped or even fundamentally transformed through dependence on technical media. The body is thereby understood as a target object of (political) techniques of power, in that disciplines are trained into it; at the same time, the body is a source of disruptive potential which can influence techniques of the media and culture, and lead to a readjustment of power relations.

This is clearly illustrated in Anna Schürmer’s article, “Interferences,” which deals with the scandals and debates prompted by the introduction of electronic music in Germany in the 1950s, and which investigates the relationship between humans and technology, thereby also contributing to the debate concerning post-humanism. In “The Dis/rupture of Film as Skin,” Daniel Eschkötter presents an analysis of Claire Denis’s horror film, *Trouble Every Day* (2001). Dwelling on the French word *pellicule*, which can designate both film and skin, Eschkötter’s analysis links the filmic operations with the form of the medium itself, thereby sounding out disruptions that generate perturbations on both levels. In her essay “They starve to death, but who dares ask why?,” Tanja Nusser analyzes Steve McQueen’s IRA drama *Hunger* (2008), where the focus is on the hunger strike as a self-destructive practice, a form of protest against the prevailing political order, but which as a “vanishing sign” is itself threatened with being extinguished. Finally, in “Writing Aphasia,” Elisabeth Heyne deals with a disruption of physical health, namely a brain tumor which, due to the symptoms caused by the illness, inscribes itself into the texts of Wolfgang Herrndorf and thus documents itself.

The section on power presents reflections on disruption that help to describe political power relations and at the same time they discuss the extent to which

disruptions are able to alter existing power relations. Tobias Nanz's article "The Red Telephone" goes back to the Cold War, in which crises were induced discursively and socio-technically, and were counteracted by media-technical means, such as the fictional apparatus of the "red telephone" line between Washington and Moscow. Lars Koch's essay discusses "Christoph Schlingensief's Image Disruption Machine," which in the course of Schlingensief's talk shows and performances, was designed to disrupt media routines and hegemonic discourse, and thus initiate change in social realities. Katrin M. Kämpf's and Christina Rogers's contribution "Citizen n-1" concludes the section on power with an investigation of Laura Poitras's documentary film, *Citizenfour* (2014), which links a portrait of the paradigmatic troublemaker Edward Snowden with an analysis of the current security regime, examining the logics of paranoia as well as the possibilities of reflecting on an open future.

Following the research papers is an archive section, where in each case an artistic and an academic text on disruption is made available and commented upon. Thus, "Notes on Secondary Drama" by the Austrian writer, Elfriede Jelinek, is presented here for the first time in an English translation. Jelinek's essay can be considered paradigmatic when it comes to the question of the aesthetics of disruption, in that it explores the disruptive potential of her new "genre" for the conventional theater. Teresa Kovacs' commentary on Jelinek, "Disturbance in the *Intermediate*," examines the conception and procedures of secondary drama, whose disruptive function has parasitic features attributed to it.

The second contribution in the archive section comes from the media and literary scholar Friedrich Kittler, and deals with "Signal-to-Noise Ratio" in mathematical information theory, which refers to the ratio between background noise and signal in the course of a communication. The essay is a classical contribution in German-language media studies, since it addresses the materiality of communication as well as the disruptive function of the media, and at the same time aims to challenge the subjectivity that results from the advent of new media. Moreover, in his subsequent commentary "Disrupted Arts and Marginalized Humans," Tobias Nanz sees it as doubtful whether it is possible to identify a human source and referent for the arts, once the latter can be fabricated by technology.

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