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Strau, Josef: "The Non-productive Attitude", in: Make your Own Life. Artists In and Out of Cologne, University of Pennsylvania, 2006

**Josef Strau**

**The Non-productive Attitude**

It was maybe a kind of transformed fetishism attitude to live the social life of an artist without actually producing any art, or at least without presenting any art. On the one hand, the motives of this attitude could have been simple fear of representation; but on the other, they could have announced a desire to practice in a radical consequence what many theories suggested by the death an author or producer-subjectivity. Certainly this pose of anti-production in the period of the late eighties, which for sure was already inspiring nineties art fashion, was a self-transforming attitude—even as its strong background of theoretical and radicalist conceptual art considerations were criticized by some as a bourgeois attitude of well-fed men. The substitution of the artist-as-producer with the sheer behavior of the artist-bohemian was a reaction to the work values of the eighties and necessitated a very dense social field in which to act out its partly theatrical impulse. Otherwise it would be no fun to insist that every opportunity to just not do nothing somehow threatened the professional environment with a promise of a future real production. It is very difficult to explain the strength of this attitude, so obsolete and boring it may seem today.

For sure Cologne was the best place to be, if some considerations were granted. When I moved there in the mid- to late eighties, I was very quickly assured by my first impressions that at least some parts of Cologne would allow me some time to survive and to become an artist who did not actually produce anything, did not have much to show and did not even feel the need to fulfill social life in any exciting way. There was a new necessity to practice a separation between the meaning of the artist's social participation and the representation of his production, in order to dissolve its old organic unity by creating another kind of social recognition—and in the best case to unnerve the repressive demands for legitimation.

And anyway, it was easy to gain social recognition without work in Cologne because the city had developed a wonderful audience that allowed—with the greatest of interest—this rather scary lack. Instead of pressuring the non-productive artist, it inundated his or her suffering with loving honors and affection. For some time, it even became the place where such attitudes were not only observed but were bred and expressed and discussed. But behind this magnificent charlatanry was a subjective void of fear, the narcissistic cultivation of insignificance and meaninglessness. In other words, this was a process of gaining recognition through a production of negative surplus value.

In short, the popularity of anti-productive attitudes in Cologne was maybe a result of some iconoclastic tendency, the sympathy for an attitude which substitutes image qualities with narrative impulse. In the best years the non-productive artist got great recognition if he substituted his work for a good personal narrative. He could be a kind of island in the main art world, while securing continuity with the tradition of anti-visual heresies. The practice of including autobiographical personal references gave artists in Cologne the reputation for mere *Referenzkunst*. In that sense the anti-productive attitude was a kind of iconoclast discipline.

But later the destructive effects of time were particularly strong on this frail and theoretically quite exciting attitude, creating a certain darkness in the art community. As usual, a liberating movement turned into a repressive force, exemplifying the mechanism in which forms stray from their aims to develop a system of values that results in ugly and ridiculous political behavior. Qualities of embarrassment and subjectivity were replaced by demands for legitimation as individuals were forced to impose permanent judgments on others to create a position.

Since I haven't lived in Cologne for ten years and my social and artistic milieu in Berlin is quite different, Cologne became for me a metaphor of a certain kind of art attitude. Sometimes I miss it, but often I am quite glad it has lost its realness and influence and given way to a bizarre mode of memory. If I had to make an encyclopedia entry of these years in Cologne from the perspective of my present situation, I would characterize the prevailing attitude as a lack of interest in the procedures of production, with more emphasis on positioning oneself as an artist within the social fabric. I guess that, if I may be allowed to include myself as a former member of that territory, I might then have been a champion of that non-productive attitude. But my initial interest turned into an obsession with the social fabric of the art world and this became an attitude far removed from the earlier pleasure of heresy.

Friesenwall was a perfect example of how early-nineties audiences were so interested in perceptions of social influence and public representation rather than "work" or its values. The strong attention we received allowed us to play with non-productive oral statements and fragments of work. Most of the time we pretended to show "models" for a space instead of actual work within the space. This created a mythology consisting of divergent theoretical, personal and critical narratives. I don't think we would have been able to create such public attention with this kind of "empty" space in any other time or place. Sometimes I think the theoretical shift of the main perception of art away from its product towards its social conditions was taken too personally, leading to the typical obsession of ex-Cologners with critique and judgment of others. I am very happy to have moved to an environment that is more relaxed in this way.

It should perhaps be mentioned here that when I moved to Berlin after these sometimes really wonderful, wild Cologne years, I experienced a very different culture of art and politics. Everything appeared as a faraway country to me, although maybe it is interesting to remember how the Cologne art scene was perceived there, how it was really hated so much by the members of the art-political bohemia in Berlin, mentioned always with unbelievable dislike and described as the hostile place per se, standing for all evil, perceived as the place of old-fashioned hierarchical structures, artist-authorship power-attitude, commercialism, anti-political art, anti-PC, male brotherhoods displaying open anti-feminism—altogether the place of the most reactionary art system. Berlin had a general fashion of Cologne bashing, but of course this has nearly disappeared over the years. Anyway, this Cologne perception seemed quite strange to me, since some parts of its art scene shared Berlin's desire for a return of political engagement, an interest in the interpretation of art production as political practice—including the interpretation of its power structures, stemming from the theories of Foucault and Deleuze—deconstructive ideology critique, feminism, the understanding of artistic work as text and the critique of authorship. Not so different from the prevailing preferences in Berlin. If one is honest, in each city there was a hope for a transformation of art practice through a more theoretical approach to cultural production and a desire to shed the stronger focus on the social construction of the artist's personality. It is just that the latter, more artistic aesthetic focus left more traces in the public memory, while the more theoretical, political discourse did not leave much behind. Many of us used these dialectics of the political and the aesthetic as the diagnosis of nearly everything. Its synthesis was the great final aim, the claimed last accomplishment of any cultural production. In a maybe too-heroic, narcissistic interpretation of my "non-production" of that time, I could now say that I unfortunately loved both opposing strategies for the evasion of production: the delay of production caused by theoretical engagement, the commitment to theoretical studies which "allowed" for the production of an art object only as deferral, such that theory would itself become the production; but also the opposite—the non-theoretical, non-political artistic maneuver of constructing the artist as a personality who could gain social recognition without having made any work. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, this double affection led to a kind of creative death.

To speak about anti-production attitudes quickly becomes something really very vague. A general description of non-productive attitudes even more so. Yet the term "non-productive" describes a bit more strongly than "anti-productive" the implied individual psychology involved—the possible laziness, indecisiveness, inability or refusal of production as a result of talking too much before doing. I guess this was all part of it, not just intentionality but its causes and effects. I think, in fact, from a vantage of so many years later, one shouldn't seek to formulate something retarded or obsolete only, but try to consider an image that helps understanding by deconstructing the extreme production-oriented values so common in art today. The non-productive attitude should be seen as a refusal of production values, but not as a refusal of expression as such.

I am attempting the difficult task of describing the change of an attitude and its consequences. There is much psychology involved, a lot of fear of representing expression, a dream to use all the appearances of being an artist to avoid the involvement of production. Over time, practices of expression were substituted by those of organization, especially in the more alternative project-making activities of the nineties. In the beginning these organizational activities were designed to fulfill more theoretical desires for independence from production structures, which were fremdbestimmt, or, let's say, perceived as "alienating." This was perhaps a wrong perception since the alienating powers of organization became even stronger than those of the "real" art world. For me, Friesenwall was a perfect example. In my capacity there I turned from being an artist to being an art-organizer. It is great to be an art-organizer, but it should not substitute for practices of expression. Giving organizational values so much space was a general social development of the nineties. Chaos, vagueness, indifference—what were actually the driving qualities of a space like Friesenwall in the beginning—became impossible, substituted by monothematic meanings. With this turn in alternative art practice, all power concentrated in the organizer's values of influence-making and envy of expression instead of turning to independence of expression or to an art that could support narrative qualities.

I am trying to explain a very personal phenomenon. I felt my first years in Cologne to be the best time of my life. But remembering the same time now, immediately I have the feeling they were one of the worst. When I told a friend about this Cologne period, about how I am trying to formulate this Cologne memory problem, she replied by asking me if not everyone participating in this special time was suffering from a similar situation?

Maybe I feel this change of heart because so many psychological tendencies behind Cologne's semi-glamorous attitude, which I enjoyed so much, remained latent and hidden—or, as I said, because fear of real expression, fears of all kinds which I could never express, were denied by collective self-censorship.

The non-productive attitudes of self-constructing artist personalities were absolutely in the wrong place from the beginning—a farce—if considered against the content-oriented art practices of politically aware alternative art structures. Nevertheless, in a weird maneuver, they could have supplied this whole alternative art context some missing glamorous appeal, a necessary stylistic contradiction to itself. The big dream, which so many minds were obsessed with for many years, was the fusion of glam and politics. This was the mega-representation. I completely forgot about it, since no one has sought it for so long, as if it were a passing fashion, which, if truly gone, becomes uncanny for the next twenty years, so embarrassing would be its return. []

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### **Josef Strau**

Born 1957 in Vienna, Austria

Lives and works in Berlin

The Cologne-In-Review-Reading-Lamp, 2006

Tipp-Ex glaze on floor lamp with lampshades and photocopied brochure, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Open Space 2005, Cologne, 2005

"The Gone Wait," Gagosian Gallery, Berlin, 2005

"Jetzt und zehn Jahre davor (Now and Ten Years Ago),"

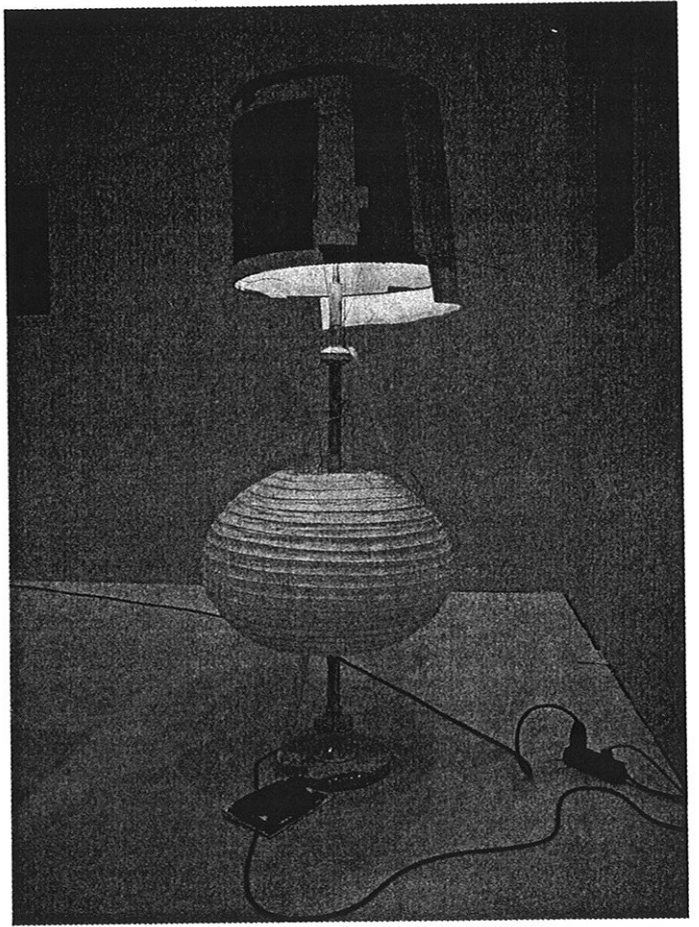
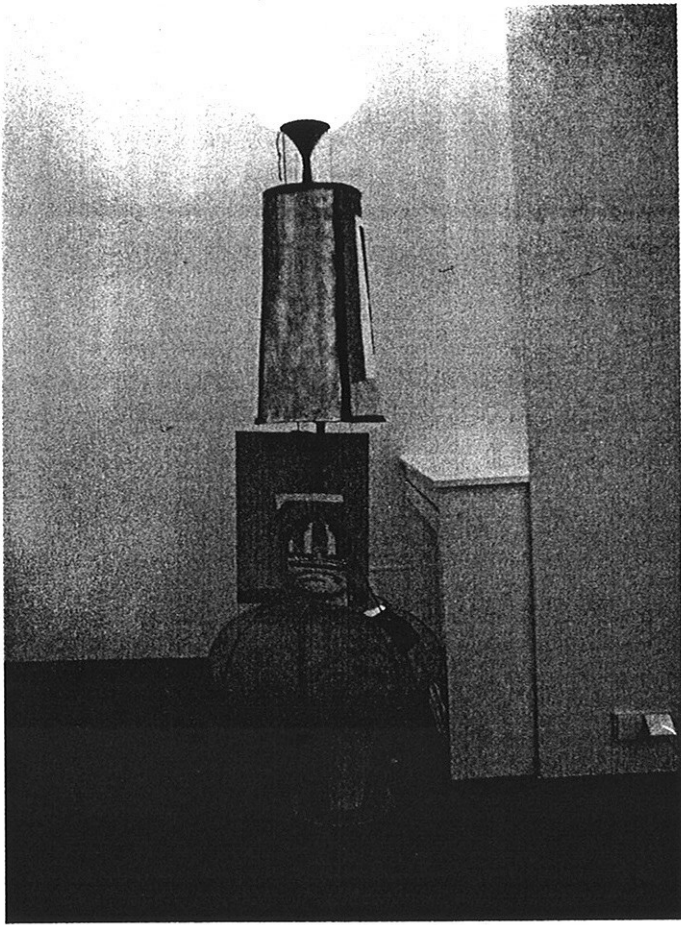
Kunste-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

"Teil 2 (Part 2) 'Quodlibet'," Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, 2004

"Teil 1 (Part 1) 'Müllberg'," Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, 2004

"Ökonomien der Zeit," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2002

"Stephan Dilleuth und Josef Strau," Forum Stadtpark, Graz, 1992



left: Josef Strau, Lamp for a Baudelaire Day in Berlin, 2003, lamp parts, mixed media and printed matter, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist  
right: Josef Strau, Dear Little Tiger Lamp, 2003, lamp parts, mixed media and printed matter, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist