

Excerpts from:

Antke Engel

The Surplus of Paradoxes. Queer/ing Images of Sexuality and Economy,
in: Pascale, Celine-Marie (ed.): *Social Inequalities & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape*, London/New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks (Sage) 2013: 176-188.

On:



My book *Bilder von Sexualität and Ökonomie. Queere kulturelle Politiken im Neoliberalismus* (Images of Sexuality and Economy. Queer Cultural Politics in Neoliberalism, transcript 2009) is motivated by a certain skepticism concerning diversity discourses and tolerance pluralism as well as by the optimism that there will always be articulations of difference or dissidence that are not appropriable by the given socio-symbolic order. Instead of subscribing to a narrative of progress, I argue that diversity discourses and tolerance pluralism, even if they go along with sexual liberalization and the pluralizing of sexed and gendered ways of existence, produce new social divisions, normative normalizations and hierarchizations both locally and globally. Diversity is the motto offered by a neoliberal economy as an organizing principle that promises economic growth.

[...] In societies where the regulation of sexuality takes place, not so much in the form of rigid normativity and exclusion as in the form of flexible normalization and differentiated integration, new forms of understanding domination and violence are needed (Duggan 2003). While open physical violence or repression may decline, psychic pressure may still structure individual life, and symbolic as well as structural violence defines who is “normal” and who may live a valued life (Butler, 2004). Questions of representation and cultural politics become more vibrant when violence is transmitted as a normalizing effect through visual and textual media. However, the other side of the coin is that queer politics of representation or cultural and artistic production carry potentials as forms of political intervention.

In *Bilder von Sexulität und Ökonomie*, I argue that in late modern Western societies neoliberal versions of pluralism not only make use of cultural politics, but particularly depend on image production and imagination as means of creating hegemonic alliances between disparate constituencies. The thesis is that these alliances take place through a process of dealing with social differences that I call “projective integration.” As a characteristic moment of neoliberal governance, projective integration fosters individualization and distinctiveness in order to motivate people to actively work themselves into the established socioeconomic relations. Rather than assimilating difference into the norm or creating multicultural niches next to the norm, projective integration aims at turning difference into cultural capital. It does so through providing cultural imagery that invites people to identify with precarity as a form of individual freedom—the freedom to offer one’s Asperger’s Syndrome to the computer industry, the freedom to function as the alibi Black working class graduate of an elite university, the freedom of being pushed into the glorious exemption position when speaking as a Muslim lesbian. Differences are not simply affirmed, but images function as screens of projection, interpellating its readers to dwell on the threshold of “difference as promise” and “difference as threat.”

In order to elucidate processes of projective integration, the book offers nine close readings of commercial advertisements and art works that visually intertwine sexuality

and economy. I analyze how heteronormative and capitalist hegemony is supported through the interplay of neoliberal and queer discourses, yet also how queering provides for disruptions and incites socioeconomic change. This chapter aims at undermining occidentalist superiority by cooperating with an artwork that sets in motion discourses of neoliberal economy, late modern racism, and queer sexual politics. The center of attention is the cover image of my book, a collage by contemporary Austrian artist, Ines Doujak. Doujak works in photography and installation, creating vivid and voluptuous scenarios inspired by sexual fantasies that do not submit to normative gender expectations, binary sex differentiation or heteronormalized bodies and desires. For Doujak, embodiments, movements, and unexpected constellations of bodies and objects are the sites where violent legacies and traces of economic exploitation and political oppression are contained—and transformed. Concrete historical or geopolitical struggles, particularly concerning the conquest, colonization, and postcolonial exploitation of Latin America and the myriad ways of subversion and resistance—ambiguous and contradictory rather than pure and straight-forward—inspire Doujak’s work.

I examine Ines Doujak’s untitled collage from the series *Victory Gardens* (2007) under the headline *Drag Feeding*. It is an image that both presents the practice of feeding in drag and shows drag being fed. The collage displays two figures in an orientalist setting, one of whom pours a copious amount of rice from a big bronze bowl into the open mouth of the other. Given the parallel angles of their bent bodies, the figures appear to be in a harmonious constellation. However, significantly, this “harmony” depends on the fact that the receiving figure must overstretch backwards and tilt its head in order to be “pleased” by the rice—given over to the other. Nevertheless, this subordination does not hinder the figure from having its eyelids devotionally lowered when taking in the overabundance. On Doujak’s canvas, pleasure and pain, lust and coercion seem indistinguishable. In this way, the constellation could be read as a sadomasochism or SM-scenario—although the colorful, campy representation of bodies and location confounds this kind of sexualization by not feeding into clichéd expectations of rubber, leather, and chains.

Other ambiguities and undecidabilities supplement the paradox of pleasure and pain in this image. The work activates various oppositions—such as those between North and South and male and female—but instead of simply inverting their traditional hierarchies, it challenges them, creating a more intricate hermeneutic field. Against established cultural expectations, it is the figure coded as “Latina,” particularly through visual reference to media images of the actress Carmen Miranda, who subdues and controls the figure coded as “white.” But in the work, the price of control is giving away resources to “the North” that might be needed in “the South.” Maybe, for the Miranda figure, it is worth the price, because the ironic assumption of control over the food supply effects a radical decentering of the North? Maybe it is a form of Southern self-empowerment to represent the oversupply of the North as an effect of

the sadistic cruelty of the South? Maybe the figures are, as their fashion design suggests, both members of the metropolitan middle classes who simply do not care about global inequalities? Since all three of these readings are supported by the image, the reader must grapple with the question of whether a reworking of racialized relations of power and domination takes place or not.

Concerning gender relations, it is more obvious that traditional hierarchies and clichés are thwarted—though this does not mean that there is less polysemy. The reader is confronted with ambiguous gender constellations, which allow for all kinds of desire. While the gender of the figure who combines bald head, long, mascara-blackened eye lashes and formal shirt remains undecidable, the dress and make-up of the other figure signals femininity, though this might be trans-femininity. Thanks to their hyperbolic, iridescent style, both figures can also be understood as being in drag. Thus, the relationship between the two figures can be decoded as a heterosexual, lesbian, gay and/or transgender constellation. A heterosexual version encounters a female figure having the resources to control a male. A lesbian version sees an instance of feeding and caring represented as a scenario of sexualized power—thus challenging the cliché of desexualized, nonaggressive lesbian sexuality, and also parodying the ongoing global malnourishment of girls and women. Finally, reading the figures in drag means perceiving care relations as camp performance, which accentuates how gendered, racialized, and classed social relations are constituted through sexualized power, control, and submission.

It is notable that even though Doujak plays with ambiguity and confusion, the image decisively refers to social relations of power and domination. None of the constellations mentioned above can be decoded as ambiguous without reference to (post)colonial, racist, classist, and (hetero)sexist regimes. Interestingly, all of these constellations invite one to read the piece as thematizing the asymmetries of the global food supply—all the while insisting that these are gendered and sexualized social relationships. [...] In realizing that one cannot exchange the roles of the two figures without turning it into a racist and sexist constellation, the workings of structured and structuring processes of domination are disclosed. On the other hand, the image avoids neutrality in not only quoting many different kinds of socio-historical relations of domination, but also in activating the destabilizing function of paradoxes in order to intervene in these discursive constructions.

Here, a difference between ambiguities and paradoxes is made productive: while ambiguities indicate a permanent shift in meaning, an unfixability and impossibility of closure, the paradox is an agonistic figure, which points out what is irreconcilable but reconciles them anyway. Even if paradoxes never can be fixed, thanks to the contradictory simultaneity of “neither/nor” and “as well as,” there are nevertheless definable elements. Therefore, the paradox pushes the strategy of equivocation, which destabilizes normative identity constructions and binaries into an agonistic struggle.

Practically, this manifests itself in the fact that Doujak's collage is also displayed by the artist as part of an installation that criticizes biopiracy, that is, the patenting and commercialization of life by the agricultural and pharmaceutical industries, the exploitation of natural resources and the appropriation of indigenous knowledge. [...]

I conclude by suggesting that Doujak's collage provides an idea of what I call "queer politics of paradox." [...] Paradoxes are equally appealing figures in both queer politics and neoliberal cultural politics and, indeed, become the hinge between the two fields. The paradox seems to be the ideal candidate for queer politics because it disrupts rigid gender identities and normative desires. The paradox becomes even more fascinating because it also enjoys high status in neoliberal cultural politics in which paradoxical appellations—for example to be exceptional but strictly normal, or to live out personal autonomy but simultaneously take responsibility in privatized care relations—aim at activating the individual's capacities to make impossible ends meet. At the same time, the paradox depoliticizes these contradictions into fate or fact. Neoliberal cultural politics make use of paradoxes in order to call people into responsibility for tasks, which might otherwise be understood as communal obligations, e.g. if individual consumer desires or distinctive family values are activated in order to legitimize that a formerly public health care gets privatized. The double deployment in queer and neoliberal discourses means that the paradox can point toward those areas where these discourses and imageries overlap [...]

Politics of paradox are interesting from a queer perspective for two reasons. First, they open up space for representations of difference that do not follow the identity principle and are often claimed to be unintelligible. Second, the logical figure of the paradox allows us to illustrate agonistic dimensions in politics. Queer politics of paradox make use of the pleasure in paradoxes and parasitically inhabit neoliberal appellations of individualized difference and processes of projective integration.