Think Factories, Think Tanks and the Privatisation of Power

Introduction to a Work by Andreas Siekmann

Sven Lütticken

Editorial – April 16, 2015

Within *Open!*'s research theme *Commonist Aesthetics* *[www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics]*, artist Andreas Siekmann created a series of pictograms and a matching glossary to continue his investigation into the increasing privatisation of the public realm. The work is part of his larger ongoing project initiated in Berlin in 2012, *The Economic Power of Public Opinion & the Public Power of Economic Opinion: Think Factories, Think Tanks and the Privatisation of Power*. One can view and read Siekmann's contribution by either clicking the underlined entries beneath the pictures in the slideshow, or by directly entering the glossary pages in which pictograms and texts combined are combined. Sven Lütticken wrote a short introduction to the piece.

Often working in collaboration with Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann has frequently investigated processes of appropriation, accumulation and privatisation with artistic means. Specifically, the artists have together revived the "picture statistics" methods developed by sociologist Otto Neurath and artist Gerd Arntz in the 1920s and 1930s to chart the complexities and inequalities of our global order. In addition to updating pages from Neurath and Arntz's "atlas" *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (1930), Creischer and Siekmann have instigated major projects such as *The Potosí Principle* (2009–2011), with Max Jorge Hinderer, which brought together baroque artworks from South America in the context of an investigation into the Spanish exploitation of the silver deposits in Potosí, Bolivia as a form of primitive accumulation (or, in a better translation from Marx's German, "original accumulation").

This type of accumulation is "not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure," and for Marx its "classical example" was the "usurpation of the common lands" in England around 1500, a privatisation that resulted in the violent expulsion of peasants from land that had been in common use. In *The Potosí Principle*, the colonial appropriation of silver, the destruction of social structures and the separation of the indigenous population from their land is placed in conjunction with contemporary forms of "primitive" accumulation, for instance by foregrounding the situation of migrant workers in China. In their more recent duo project *In the Stomach of the Predators* (2013 / 2014), Creischer and Siekmann focused on rise of proprietary agricultural crops, which obliterates farmers' control over the means of (re)production; the artists linked this to Marx's early analysis of the Prussian state's criminalization of the gathering of wood by peasants, which turned a customary common right into a crime.

Siekmann's project *The Economic Power of Public Opinion & the Public Power of Economic Opinion: Think Factories, Think Tanks and the Privatisation of Power*, Berlin 2012, continues this investigative strand with a focus on think tanks, or *Denkfabriken* (think factories) in German. The rise of think tanks and their impact on policy not only speaks of the increasing privatisation of the public realm — when policy in the age of think tanks aims at maximum value extraction from public goods, this is also a renewed wave of *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*. After all, when water supply is privatised, this is the selling-off of a public utility that is or should be a common good. One particularly telling image in this project shows an "Unilever conference" with the title *Can the world feed itself*, while the glossary adds that "Unilever is the largest consumer of palm oil in the world with 1.6 million tons each year, for which large areas of rainforest are destroyed." The question has an inbuilt response: the world can feed itself if the solutions are corporate and large-scale, preferably involving proprietary crops, whether or not communities or indeed the conditions for life as we know it are destroyed in the process.

Siekmann's pictograms here take formal cues from Arntz, but they do not function in the manner of *Bildstatistik*: the pictograms do not line up in rows to give us quantitative data, but rather function as baroque emblems in relation to the glossary. With the installation version that was shown in Bregenz parading the pictograms through a kind of conveyor belt (a mechanical Theatrum Mundi), here the entire set of pictograms and glossary entries has been reformatted for the web — and the elements do, indeed, form a web of references. The more one clicks, the more things begin to click.

Making literal the term *Denkfabrik*, Siekmann combines pictograms of the brain and of a factory. In bis "brain" emblem, the human brain appears as occupied by "think factories." Perhaps this is ultimately the main form of ongoing original accumulation in this piece: the colonisation of the brain, of subjectivity. Adam Curtis's *The Century of the Self* is referenced in the glossary, and the pictogram for "Television" contains terms such as lifestyle, *Lebenslanges Lernen* [life-long learning] and Ich-AG, a German term that could be translated as "Me, Inc.," denoting the transformation of the subject into a post-Fordist self-corporation perpetually (re)producing its own enclosure.

Sven Lütticken is a member of the editorial board of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain.* He teaches art history at VU University Amsterdam; is the author of several books, including *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (2013); and writes regularly for journals and magazines including *New Left Review, Afterall*, *Grey Room*, *Mute* and *e-flux journal*. At the moment he is working on a collection of a essays under the working title 'Permanent Cultural Revolution,' and editing a reader on art and autonomy. See further: www.svenlutticken.org.

Crosslinks

Commonist Aesthetics: www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics

Tags

Aesthetics, Capitalism

This text was downloaded on November 5, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/think-factories-think-tanks-and-the-privatisation-of-power