

Only Temporary. Structures in Flux

Projects by Botschaft e.V. (1990–1996)

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Botschaft e.V. was an association of up to fifteen people at a time, which in the six years of its existence in East Berlin, from 1990 to 1996, produced a multiplicity of spaces, discourses, media, personal constellations and fields of practice. In 1995, the group was invited to documenta X by its artistic director Catherine David, but refused to participate because in their view it would have narrowed them down as a group of artists. Their agenda, instead, was a wide range of exhibition projects, video and film productions, Internet platforms, self-organized seminars, clubs and political activism, which was constantly developed further through new projects. However, these project-based ways of working have entered into a complex and often complicit relationship with flexible and precarious work contexts that Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello characterized as part of a “new spirit of capitalism” (1999). This perspective overlooked and ignored the political dimension of a purely temporary structural fixation. This paper will describe a practice caught between the conflicting processes of institutionalizing and instituent practices as exemplified by Botschaft e.V.. A nuanced presentation of their micropolitics shows how their ability to resist questions of representation and temporary power relations allowed them to create possibilities for action.

Temporary; Project; Representation; Instituent practices; Botschaft e.V.

Temporary structures, as developed in project-based modes of production, have entered into a complex and often complicit relationship with the sort of flexible and precarious work contexts that the French sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello characterized as part of a “new spirit of capitalism” (1999).

In their understanding, a “project-based polis” is motivated by a temporary and decentralized restructuring of work in order to maximize productivity by exploiting all human resources and minimizing economic risk. However, their perspective is essentially based on business economics and management literature. Unlike Boltanski and Chiapello, this paper will look at the micropolitics of project-based and self-organized practices as exemplified by Botschaft e.V.. In the six years of its existence in East Berlin from 1990 to 1996, this heterogeneous group of up to fifteen individuals produced a multiplicity of spaces, discourses, media, personal constellations and fields of practice, which were constantly developed through new projects. Within the theoretical framework of a poststructuralist understanding of power, this paper will examine the representation of a purely temporary structure as a political dimension of a project constellation and its social space.

Hub of social relations

In 1995, the group was invited to documenta X by Catherine David. But Botschaft e.V. refused to participate in this important art exhibition, which doubles as a springboard for the art market. As they saw it, their participation would have pinned them down as a group of artists.¹ That is exactly what Botschaft e.V. was not about. Instead, their agenda was a wide range of exhibitions, video and film productions, Internet platforms, self-organized seminars, clubs and political activism. The group can be perceived as an important hub for the development of projects in early 1990s Berlin. The individual members—all of whom were in their mid to late twenties and most of them still studying—came from various fields that can be categorized roughly as the worlds of art and film, the music and hacker scene, and the skilled trade sector.² The group was able to draw on different areas of

1 — Different members of the group in conversation with the author between 2010 and 2016. Among them Tina Ellerkamp, Florian Zeyfang, Philip Schefner, Pit Schultz, Jörg Heitmann, Tom Prilop, Natascha Sadr Hagighian, Ed van Megen, Daniel Pflumm, Christoph Keller.

2 — Merle Kröger, Tina Ellerkamp and Jörg Heitmann studied journalism and film sciences at FU Berlin, each graduating with an MA in 1991. Pit Schultz

knowledge, competencies, production means and contacts. This explains why Botschaft e.V. saw itself not as a unified group or closed collective, but as a heterogeneous context of individuals. Therefore, they spoke of the group in plural: “Botschaft *are* projects, events, groups and groups, places and ideas” (Botschaft e.V., 1993, p.8). The regular listing of the group with its different backgrounds should reflect this. Each time they present themselves there is mention of the group of fifteen people being comprised of artists, communication scientists, filmmakers, musicians, locksmiths, psychologists, graphic artists, electricians and philosophers (Botschaft e.V.: 1990, p. 67). They described the basic motivation of their work as a desire “to find interfaces between different areas such as art, science, television and everyday life or to define these in group work” (Botschaft e.V., 1995, p. 288). “Node,” “platform” or “infopool” are other terms used by Botschaft e.V., which point to multiple possibilities for connection rather than a fixed constellation: “It was the idea of people working in different spaces in different disciplines to get together and work on special items and issues in another context” (Kröger, 1995).

This found graphical expression in the networked representations of tables of contents from this period: as an example, the back cover of the sampler *CopyShop* (FIG. 1) by the BüroBert group, with contributions from different groups, which does not follow a linear structure, but instead depicts the structure in individually interlinked points. A reader published in 1995 by curator Marius Babias, *Im Zentrum der Peripherie* (Eng. *In the Center of the Periphery*), works with a similar infographic on the back cover: the names of the authors are depicted in connection with groups, keywords and exhibition projects, to visualize the social and conceptual interweaving of the texts and authors (FIG. 2). To present one’s own position

was a computer science student at the Technical University of Berlin, Natascha Sadr Haghghighian and Florian Zeyfang enrolled in the subject Free Art at the Berlin University of the Arts. Gerriet Schultz had begun studying architecture at the Technical University of Berlin, then switched to German and Philology at FU Berlin, but eventually stopped his studies. Tom Prilop was the only one who had not studied but trained as an electrician and had the necessary technical equipment.

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FIG. 1
 Back Cover of CopyShop: Kunstpraxis & politische
 Öffentlichkeit 1993.

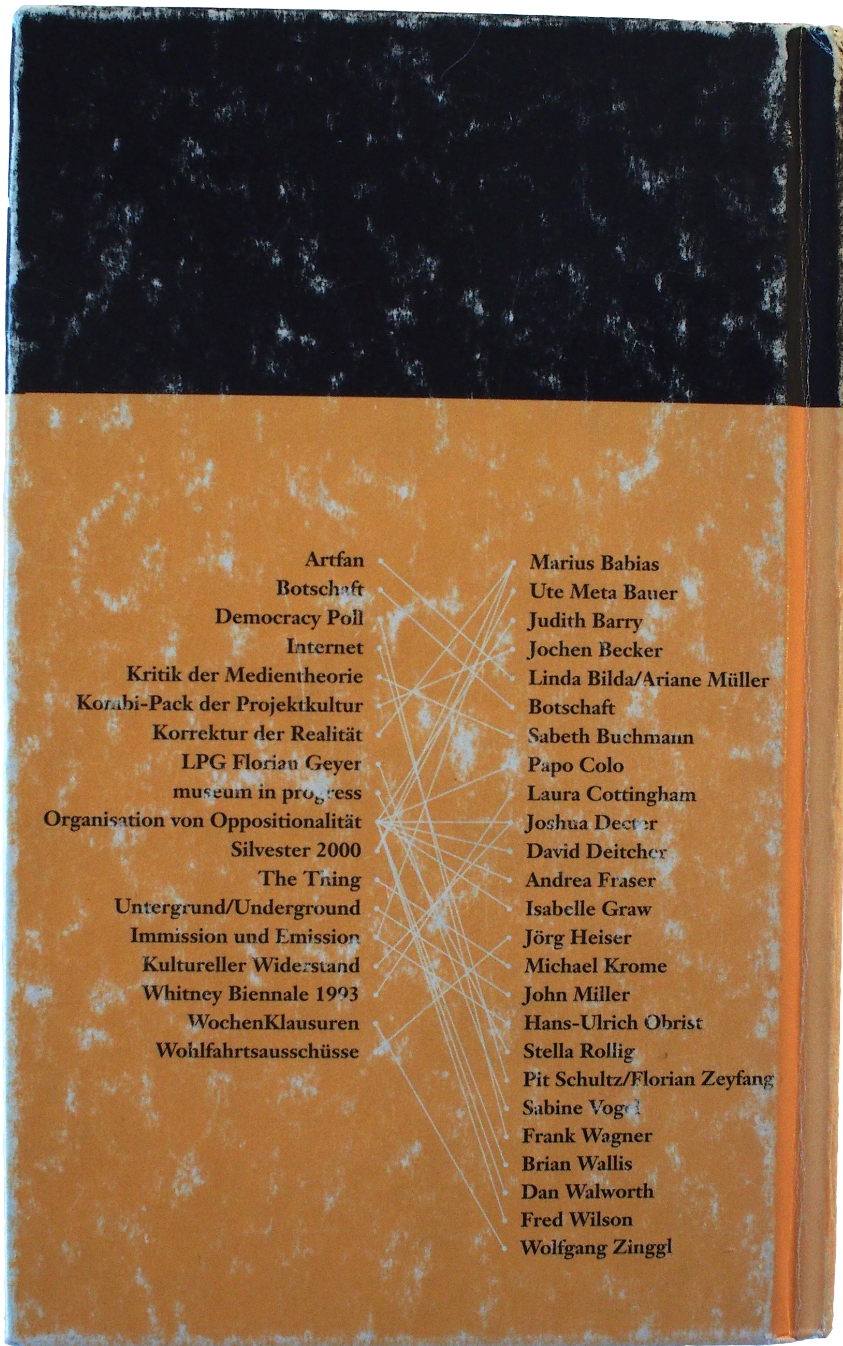


FIG. 2
Back Cover of *Im Zentrum der Peripherie* 1995.

as part of a networked context corresponded to the idea of a space that was no longer hierarchically structured, and which allowed a multitude of non-linear cross-connections. The transdisciplinarity they called for was linked with a processual approach that instead of solidifying the limits and conditions of a social structure, would keep it (endlessly) changeable and updatable. In the 1990s, an intensive discussion was conducted across disciplines about new concepts of space. Theoreticians like Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and also George Simmel had all—for some time—abandoned the concept of space as a static container. They no longer conceived of space as a given, but as a socially produced, and thus social, process.³ Cultural sociologist Markus Schroer notes a “temporalization of space” in the 1990s that sets space in motion: “Space is no longer the obstacle and the resistance-providing element, but is now liquefied itself” (Schroer, 2008, p. 143). The procedural spatial approach makes it possible to stop thinking of boundaries as dividing lines, but as (spatial) interfaces, as intermediate and boundary spaces.⁴ This fundamental shift in thinking replaces homogeneous, hierarchical and closed space with the idea of space as a social process, which is horizontally open, placing different things in relation to one another and thus is flexible in its constellations.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Botschaft e.V. thus associated themselves with project and group-based artistic approaches of collectives such as the New York artist grouping Group Material, which had already developed in New York in the early 1980s in the context of the AIDS crisis. In their self-portraits Group Material also highlighted the professional background of the individual members in order to communicate the differences within the composition of the group: “Group Material is 5 Graphic Designers, 2 Teachers, a Waitress, a Cartographer, two Textile Designers,

3 — Cf. the overview of the discourse on a social space approach by Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, 2006, p. 289ff.

4 — It is reminiscent of figures of thought such as the “crossways” and “tactics” at de Certeau, Foucault’s reflections on heterotopias and especially Lefebvre’s “differential space.” On the “border discourse,” especially in cultural studies, cf. Beatrice von Bismarck et al., 2005.

a Telephone Operator, a Dancer, a Computer Analyst and an Electrician” (Group Material, 1980–1981). The goal of Group Material—here lies the proximity to the practices of Botschaft e.V.—was to create a social space that, as founding member Tim Rollins describes it, acted as a “hub of social relations” (Rollins, 2010, p. 218). Group Material turned against the idea of a closed social space—in this case, a space that defined itself solely as an art space.

Our exhibitions and projects are intended to be forums in which multiple points of view are represented in a variety of styles and methods [...] we are not interested in making final evaluations or declarative statements, but in making these statements our chosen subject as a complex and open-ended issue. (Group Material, 1990, p. 2)

To differentiate themselves from the alternative spaces, which are merely offshoots of large commercial galleries “in appearance, policy and social function,”⁵ groups such as Group Material, Fashion Moda or ABC No Rio formed an “Anti-Alternative Movement” (Robinson and McCormick, 1984, p. 159).⁶ By establishing a shop in the non-arty Lower East Side in New York, Group Material made a clear statement about opening up to engage with a wide range of political topics—such as AIDS—and social groups outside the art context, but within art production. It was these cultural and political practices in producing space that Botschaft e.V. associated themselves with in the 1990s in a particular historical condition.⁷

5 — Press Release dated Sept. 1981, Group Material, Folder 45, Subseries II, Box 4, Parasite Archive, False Library, Downtown Collection.

6 — Thanks to Rachel Mader for the hint.

7 — There was no direct cooperation between Botschaft e.V. and Group Material, although in 1990 Group Material was invited by the RealismStudio of the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, and in particular by contacts of Berlin curator Frank Wagner, to realize a work in a public space in Berlin. From June 26 to July 5, 1990, the group realized the work *Democracy Poll* on the Avnet large screen on Kurfürstendamm / Joachimsthaler Strasse, 14 text panels in the subway area and an eight-page newspaper supplement on June 29, 1990 in the local newspaper Tagesspiegel.

Context of reunification in Berlin

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the wake of reunification and its social, political and economic transformations, the liquidation of numerous state-run enterprises as well as restitution processes made many large spaces available in central East Berlin. It was the time when (western) power structures started to be installed through real estate speculation by corporate business. Daimler Benz, for example, had already bought up large areas of Potsdamer Platz as early as 1990 (Lenhardt, 1998; Der Spiegel, 1991). As a result, in November 1990, Botschaft e.V. occupied the entire fourth floor of a building close to Potsdamer Platz,⁸ which was earmarked for demolition to make way for Berlin Senate's road expansion plans. It provided them with excess space (over 500 square meters) in the centre of Berlin. The immediate vicinity of the urban and political changes on both Potsdamer- and Leipziger Platz in Berlin-Mitte together with the Senate's plans was the starting point for their project *Dromomania* in November 1990. The group used the space to introduce a discussion about various models and concepts for the urban development of Berlin and brought together such diverse groups as representatives of the Senate and District of Berlin as well as their critics, mostly artists, urban planners, architects, activists and initiatives. Discussions took place that almost never took place elsewhere. They laid out their objective of "breaking up artificially created disciplinary boundaries, re-establishing connections, exposing structures" (Botschaft e.V., 1990, p. 67). The layout of the space was ideal for their strategy of "interaction and linking of contexts" (Botschaft e.V., 1995, p. 289), with eight interconnected working spaces arranged around a central area with doors (see floor plan in FIG. 3). In addition to discussions, an exhibition, performances, work meetings and seminars took place in the squat. These were, like the open spatial structure, also interlinked and constantly updated via a computer (already in 1990!), through a Hyper-

8— The house was built by the WMF (Württembergische Metallwaren Fabrik) group of companies as a Berlin branch and modern Art Nouveau business building in 1907. At the time of the occupation it was not clear if the house was under monument conservation. Later they moved on to an official temporarily rented space (Zwischennutzung) in Kronenstraße close by the WMF building.

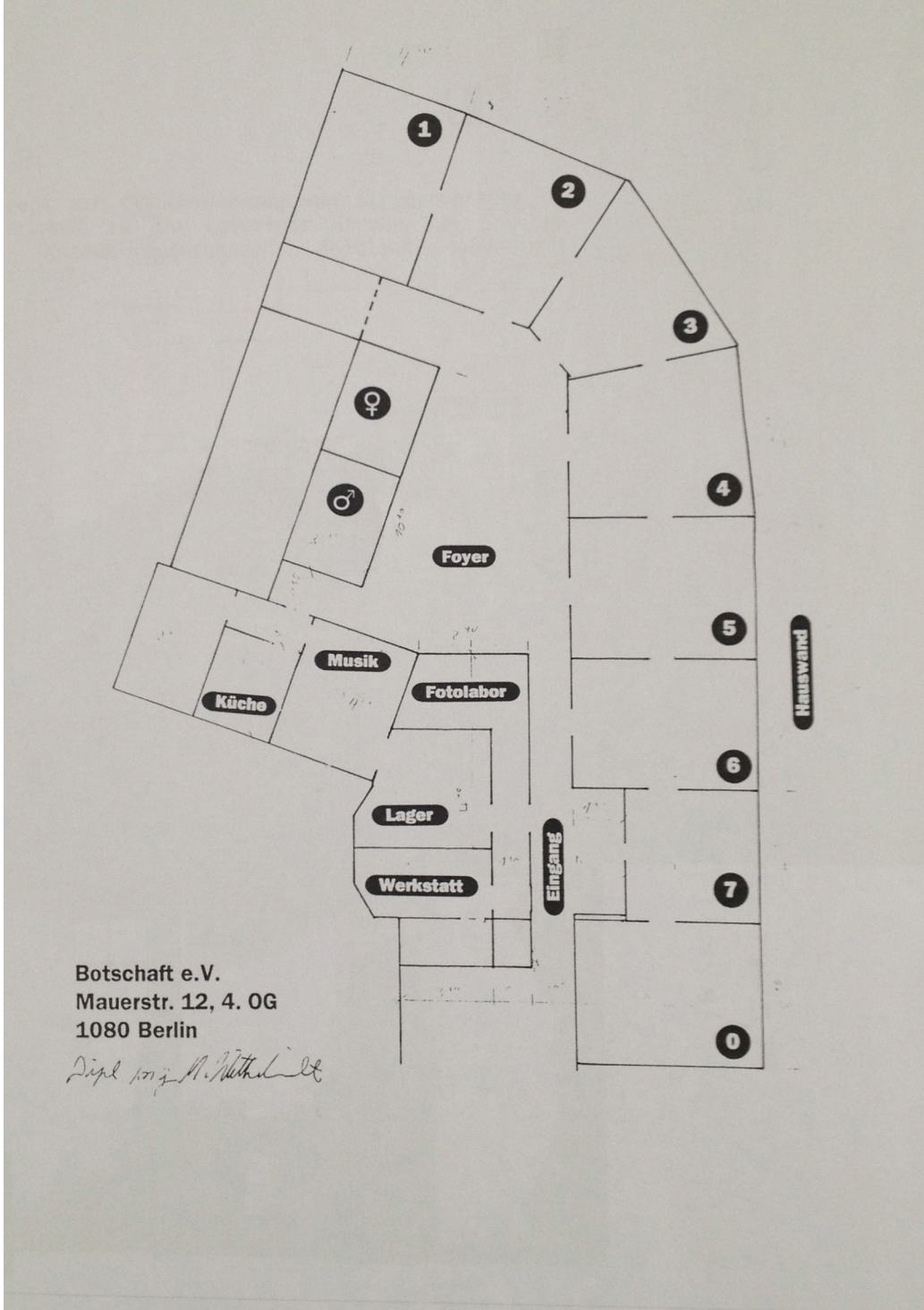


FIG. 3
Floor plan, WMF-House 1990.

Card documentary with texts on the projects and further information.⁹ *Dromomania* consisted of fragments of various event formats and was not dogmatic in its content. As the art critic Fritz von Klinggräff wrote: “There is—this is the most conspicuous thing—no common project.” (Fritz von Klinggräff, 1990, p. 23). But of course the key issue, and therefore “common project,” was to create a social space and engage in controversial visions of city development. Thus, *Dromomania* was not concerned with presupposing or enforcing a particular collective political goal; it was about bringing together different—highly controversial—interests, positions, knowledge bases and experiences. Consequently, the *Dromomania* project’s preoccupation with space was related to urban development, as well as how to create social space on a micropolitical level.

Organizational matters

In addition to the aforementioned idea of a horizontally open social space and the historical context of political transformation, it was the non-hierarchical organization of the group which was decisive. At least one member of the group was required to take responsibility for each project conceived and implemented by Botschaft e.V., developing and legitimizing it in the weekly plenary meetings held every Monday. Organizational matters, and also decisions about further steps—such as the offer to end squatting and move to another location—were discussed collectively. Protocols of the plenary sessions document the grassroots negotiation processes.¹⁰ That this was by no means a common practice at the beginning of the 1990s is illustrated by a comparison with Kunst-Werke e.V., which began its work as a collective structure at the same time (1991) in Berlin-Mitte.¹¹ As an association, they

9 — *HyperCard* is hypertext software with its own data format for an old Macintosh platform.

10 — Documenting different protocols of group meetings from 1992, archive of Philip Scheffner. See also “We always quarrel with each other” Daniel Pflumm in: *To be continued* 1995.

11 — See for more information: <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/about/> [accessed October 15, 2018].

had convened a “curator’s mix”¹² as a board of trustees in order to also facilitate different exhibition concepts through open structures and sometimes controversial attitudes. The crucial difference to *Botschaft e.V.*, however, was their high-profile communication of this to the outside (Gerner, 1996). But it was not communicated that the board of trustees had no decision-making power.¹³ The established network structure remained a central power structure linked closely with the director (the then founder of the *Kunst-Werke e.V.*, Klaus Biesenbach). By contrast, the political claim of *Botschaft e.V.* was “not organized, no structures, no hierarchy” (van Mengon, 1995). Moreover, *Botschaft e.V.* was reluctant to establish and represent its projects with one voice, instead producing texts with oppositional positions. Their collectively written text from 1994 is a good example of this practice and led to contradictory passages. For example, one speaks positively of the “strategy of refusal,” while in the following sentence the same strategy is devalued as being too obvious (*Botschaft e.V.*, 1995, p. 295).¹⁴ The text does not reflect one but several positions or voices within a discussion about motivations, goals and ways of working within the group. Descriptions of former projects are embedded in the text as footnotes and do not follow the chronology of events but rather the thematic starting points. In this way, the dialogue becomes central. The text reflects the claim that the group cannot be represented by one speaker or by a historiography of projects. In this sense, as *Botschaft e.V.* describe their practice, it was “a self-created work and communication environment from which dissent becomes a productive power” (*Botschaft e.V.*, 1994)¹⁵. The concept of the group did not follow a defined distribution of responsibilities, although certain roles (conceptual contents, janitors, bureaucracy) did become fixed and were linked to unspoken hierarchies. However, it was precisely this consolidation of structures and hierarchies that the group wanted to work against again

12 — Among them, Barbara Straka, Stephan Geene, and Thomas Wulffen.

13 — Stephan Geene in conversation with the author on August 13, 2013.

14 — This text is the only document found online. <http://www.botschaft-berlin.org/en/texts/strategyandparty/> [accessed October 15 2018].

15 — Self-description as stated in a fax from *Botschaft e.V.* dated April 22, 1994, Shedhalle Archive, project folder “Game Girl 74”.

and again, through changing constellations—and which was facilitated by the inscribed temporality of projects. This was also the basis for the claim that practice and theory should be regarded as “equal working approaches” (Botschaft e.V., 1990, p. 67). These negotiation processes intensified the existing differences between group members, as they required theoretical knowledge and rhetorical skills that were not distributed evenly. For this reason, theory and practice never achieved an equal footing. While some provided and discussed conceptual issues, a former member of the group described his role as the janitor who had no conceptual say;¹⁶ in particular, when they started to get public funding. For 1992/93, the district office Berlin Mitte approved five fully funded ABM positions including the related investment funds. A pool of equipment was set up, wages allocated to the ten members, so that livelihoods were financed by this work. (Botschaft e.V., 1995, p. 292). This bureaucracy was left to certain individuals. The allocation of tasks became further consolidated, because of the need to keep the accounts in order. From an external perspective, the German art critic Thomas Wulffen judged the ‘management’ of Botschaft e.V. as exemplary for a decentralized organization, thanks to the additional dynamism offered by the technological developments of the Internet and its non-linear structure from about 1993 onwards (Wulffen, 2000, p. 27).

Instituting/Institutionalizing power

It becomes clear, however, that practices of decentralized organization are not only digitally based, but also—according to my line of argumentation—due to shifts in the concept of power. According to Michel Foucault and a poststructuralist understanding, power is no longer conceptualized as a ruling power, but as a force circulating through everyday life and interpersonal relationships that is no longer centrally organized (Foucault, 1975, p. 38f.). The distinction introduced by the Austrian philosophers Gerald Raunig and Stefan Nowotny, between an “institutionalizing” and

16 — Tom Prilop (member of Botschaft e.V.) in conversation with the author on April 11, 2013 in Berlin. This conversation was not indicated by a sound recording, but at the request of Prilop only by transcript.

an “instituent practice,” is helpful in avoiding the politization of power as a dichotomous relationship for or against an institution, state or society. As Raunig and Nowotny point out, it is not the institution as such, but the specific form of institutionalization that leads to the solidification of power structures. Raunig brings these reflections to a passage in Foucault’s famous lecture *Qu’est-ce que la critique?* from 1978, in which he questions the possibility of fundamentally critiquing institutions. In it, Foucault clarifies the difference between the two statements, “we absolutely do not want to be governed” and “[we do not] want to be governed in such a way and for the purposes of these principles” (Foucault, 1992, p. 11). Raunig points out that Foucault is thus updating institutional critique and at the same time recognizing the “fight against institutionalization” as a “permanent process of instituting” (Raunig, 2016, p. 42). In the instituent practice, Nowotny and Raunig see the possibility of eluding the closure and structural fixation that characterizes an institutionalizing practice of power. Thus the shift away from an institutionalized concept of power to that of constant updating in the working process is accompanied by an ongoing negotiation process about power relations themselves. Ever since the 1970s, attempts have been made in and through projects to oppose hierarchically organized institutions with self-organized, non-hierarchical and constantly shifting power structures within the group organization. It was the social and political demands for participative urban planning, community-oriented living, self-organized youth work, decentralized cultural work and practice-oriented education which once initiated projects. It was this agency of instituting structures anew that triggered project-based modes of working in the historical transformation process of the early 1990s in Berlin.

Dissolution from within

In a performatively designed structure, as Nowotny points out, there is an “open horizon” that is not definitively terminated by a “project-determined purpose” (Nowotny, 2016, p. 168). Negotiation processes are involved that never stop questioning any goal, structure or formation a project might take. It paves no safe ways, but requires with each new start the instituting of meaning for the respective work constellation. As a result,

it destroys all consolidating factors that would have created value as genre, image or brand. By contrast, a merely temporary social constellation and production of social space undermines the consolidation of knowledge, power and representation through constant dissolution and new institutings. One project followed the next with changing constellations. The art critic Christian Höller aptly described this dynamic, which prevents a hegemonic paradigm, as “continuity through dissolution” because these groups “dissolve consistently from within” (Höller, 1995, p. 108). It is an attitude the philosopher Isabell Lorey sees prevailing in social movements today that she terms “non-representational” or “new non-identity forms” (Lorey, 2011). It means that one shared territory is always up for negotiation. Lorey’s main aim is to change the understanding of democracy to a present-day democracy, which instead of having classical forms of political representation “is not concerned with the unavoidable exclusion through representation, but operates radically inclusively” (Lorey, 2012, p. 40). The “institutions of the movement” she describes are characterized by contradictory processes of stabilization and opening up. This is precisely where the possibility of counteracting processes of institutionalization, consolidation and canonization, in the sense of a consolidation of power relations, can be set by continuously instituting infrastructures anew.

This all points to a crucial difference to Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s view of the format of the project as a “value-creating accumulation pool” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2003, p. 149). As mentioned, they derived their conclusions on management literature, which is focused solely on the potential for increasing economic productivity through project-based connectivity. However, working on a project basis inevitably means accepting the loss of resources, continuity and profiling, making it clear that the project mode is not automatically accompanied by economic productivity and is rather precarious. The described processual approach and non-hierarchical organization with collective authorship and decentralized communication, as in the case of *Botschaft e.V.*, leads to a constant opening up as well as conflicting struggles with dissolution and changes in its “project-determined purpose.” It is a deliberate inconsistency, which manifests in paradoxes in the archival material and archival situation itself. No central archive

exists in such temporary structures. Moreover, hardly anything is online as, with changing social constellations and unclear authorship, any official presentation becomes problematic. In addition, the quoted publications by Botschaft e.V. are all self-produced and the copied materials are mostly fading and usually not of standardized size. It is difficult to get access to sources of grey literature without personal contact to the former members of the group. This is borne out by the fact that little is known about the group today, because no major catalog or academic papers have been published on them; apart from a few short mentions, the group has not been scientifically developed.¹⁷ Nevertheless, I argue that it is precisely here that a hitherto overlooked political dimension becomes apparent. The inscribed changing status of their practice does not allow for a consolidation of power and, at best, keeps representation in flux. *

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17 — Cf. Holger Kube Ventura, 2002, or Sabeth Buchmann, 2015. The research for this paper was part of a PhD defence in 2018 titled “Thinking the Temporary politically. Production of Space in Post-Reunification Berlin on the example of Botschaft e.V. (1990–1996)” at HGB Leipzig.

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