Re-Imagining the Good Life in Times of Crisis (Leuven, 8-10 May 14)

Leuven, May 8–10, 2014
Deadline: Oct 20, 2013

PD Dr. Silke Horstkotte

Performing Protest
Re-Imagining the Good Life in Times of Crisis
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Keynote Lectures:
Ingolfur Blühdorn (Bath)
Boris Groys (NYU)

In 2011, Time Magazine named the “protester” person of the year, arguing that protest has become “the defining trope of our times” and the protester “a maker of history”. More than anything, however, this making of history is a creative process. The post-democratic experience of disempowerment at the grass-roots level of many European societies coincides with the urgent need for new visions of social prosperity and wellbeing as revealed by the recent crisis of economic, environmental and social sustainability. In the wake of this multiple sustainability crisis, unexpected forms of political and cultural activism (e.g. Occupy, Femen, Indignados, Wutbürger) have gained momentum and public visibility. Under the close scrutiny of an equally hopeful and skeptical public, these protest cultures are reconsidering older revolutionary positions and forging new cross-cultural visions of alternative wellbeing. While counter-cultural protest movements had already been a motor of major socio-cultural change in Europe, they have been profoundly reconditioned by complex trends of (dis)engagement, (de)politicisation, (trans)nationalisation and (post)democracy since the mid-1990s.

The three-day international conference Performing Protest. Re-Imagining the Good Life in Times of Crisis draws attention to protest movements, activist arts (literature, film, performance, theatre, visual arts), theoretical considerations of protest, and the dynamic interaction between them. It discusses these modes of engagement with a special focus on artistic practices that imagine social wellbeing and respond to the experience of political disempowerment and democratic dysfunctionality. Fostering dialogue between scholars, arts performers and political activists it questions the extent to which artistic practice opens up new forms of protest and articulates new models of democratic participation while also testing their viability in virtual concretization. What will be discussed is thus the role of artistic production as a test arrangement, both probing and problematizing new models of civic participation.
Questions to be addressed at the conference include the following:
• What (if anything) do the widely debated notions of post-democracy and post-politics mean

beyond the academy?
• How do diverse protest movements and cultural-artistic actors articulate the post-democratic experience and contribute to the shaping of related societal discourses?
• How does the perception of the post-democratic and post-political condition affect the ability of (counter-)cultural movements and the arts to function as laboratories for the development of alternative visions of prosperity, social wellbeing and the good life?
• To what extent can theatricality function as a means for political intervention in the public sphere? To what extent are protest performances based on a process of re-framing and re-enacting (with a critical, perverting, deconstructive twist) financial-economic discursive practices – including their structural inconsistencies and deficiencies?
• How do the post-democratic condition and the multiple crises of sustainability challenge national cultures and traditions of protest and at the same time reinforce and mobilize them to inform transnational visions of alternative wellbeing?
• What new forms of community are envisaged within European political and cultural activism, to what extent do they redraw the European cultural map, and how do they facilitate (or obstruct) the formation of new European identities?
• How are the new protest movements and their notions of wellbeing, prosperity and the good life facilitated and refracted in the mass cultural environments of television, internet and social media?
• To what extent can a transnational migration or mimicry of models, discourses, strategies, symbols and tropes of protest and unrest indeed be diagnosed? And what kind of modifications do these transfers entail?
• To what extent does a diachronic ‚migration' of models, discourses, strategies, symbols and tropes of protest and unrest take place and which transformations go along with these diachronic transfers? How legitimate are the comparisons with the revolutions of 1989, 1968, and 1848, that frequently appear in the media? In what ways are older visions of anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism and post-materialism being reconfigured?

Since participants will include academics as well as artistic practitioners and policy makers, this event aims at fostering a true interdisciplinary and interartistic dialogue, in which the study of literature, film, visual arts and theatre goes along with theoretical and philosophical reflection on discourses of protest and visions of utopia. In order to integrate different approaches and viewpoints, the conference will employ a variety of formats of interaction, ranging from academic papers over workshops and roundtable discussions to performances and screenings.

We invite both academics from the most diverse fields (sociology, philosophy, literary studies, theatre and media studies, etc.) and artistic practitioners to deliver a paper, organize a panel or workshop, or present a performance. Proposals (in English) should be sent to performingprotest@kuleuven.be by October 20 2013. These should contain a 300-word abstract as well as a short bio listing contact and affiliation details.

This conference is organized by the University of Leuven (Department of Literary Studies), the University of Leipzig, LUCA – School of Arts, the University of Amsterdam (ASCA – Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis) and Verona University.

If you have any further questions, please contact arne.dewinde@arts.kuleuven.be or

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Reference:

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