

Maria Ptqk

The Tie-tieds. Capitalism and the artist critique.



This text was produced for *Office Party: Multidimensional Spectrum of Voices*, a curatorial project by Lorenzo Sandoval with writing by John Holten, María Ptqk, Eirik Sordal, and Anna-Sophie Springer. Kinderhook-Caracas gallery, Berlin; galería Rosa Santos, Valencia, 2013.

Office Party: Multidimensional Spectrum of Voices is a narrative experiment that unfolds in the form of multiple objects, texts and activities. The project stems from a series of images found in an unmarked Ilford Photograph box. The box contains a group of black and white photographs taken at a party in an office in West Berlin in the late sixties. Or maybe the early seventies. The images were taken by the same person, surely the official photographer of the celebration. There are multiple prints of certain photographs, which were likely made to be sold or given to the employees of the office as a reminder of the event.

Four writers were selected to interpret the photographs narratively, and to install their texts within an architectural device that provides a discursive space to host them along with the original photos. The exhibition is developed in conjunction with a series of collective writing workshops and performances taking place at Gallery Rosa Santos in Valencia and Kinderhook & Caracas in Berlin. A resulting publication will be compiled and released by Broken Dimanche Press.

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Maria Ptqk, 2013.

Herr Brandt never wears ties, but ribbons.

Lady-kind of ribbons, narrow and glossy, in different shades of maroon. He has an impressive collection and is proud of it. "I iron them all myself". Today he is wearing the finest piece of his collection. We celebrate the retirement of two Senior employees that leave the company after many years of devoted work. The tradition is: they get presents, they give a speech, the director of the company also gives a speech, we eat sandwiches and pastries, we drink something similar to champagne and the next day everything comes back to normal. It's like chatting around the coffee machine but all day long and with drinks.

Herr Brandt, besides his politeness and sincere commitment to etiquette, can't help his disdain for what he calls "the tie-Tieds". According to his theory, the tie is a boundary for the modern man. In his words, "a rigid piece of cloth that prevents the flow of creativity". While ties make torsos look like armors and men look like scouts, ribbons are light and subtle, a sign of mind agility. They are smart. "The man of today is not a soldier anymore, but a poet. And poets cannot be tied-up". That is his statement.

In the near future, management theorists will embrace Herr Brandt's ideas.

At the beginning of the XXIth century, values like creativity, self-expression and personal fulfillment will be key in the new business culture. Offices will be populated with T-shirts, sneakers, floppy jeans, funny haircuts, amusement arcades and ping-pong tables. Anyone wearing a tie will be seen as an antique, a piece of furniture from the museum of the drawn world. Offices themselves will not be called offices anymore but "laboratories", "co-working environments", "open spaces", "creative hubs". Because they are not offices anymore, people will work there at night, during the week-end, at Christmas. The idea of schedule or holiday will become an antique, too.

In the year 2002, an urban planner and consultant from Canada called Richard Florida will write a book about all that stuff: "The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community And Everyday Life". According to him, the best way to foster economic growth in a city or a country or a company will be to invite artists and fagots in.

But today, in 1969's Germany, things are quite different.

Nobody is a fagot. Or an artist. Tie-tieds are all over the place. Specially in our company, an ordinary, reliable, efficient German company specialized in the manufacturing of agro-industrial equipment (harvesters and tractors, mostly), that started as a family business and now employs more than 200 people. A company that uses the most advanced technology while keeping alive the traditional values of our national working ethics. They pay well, they provide us with a good all-in-one-home-and-family-insurance and a good pension. A few months ago, some changes were made on the company "production strategy", so now we sub-contract the manufacturing process. It's better like that. We don't have to deal with the noise, the dust, the shifts and the never-ending strikes of the chain workers. And it's cheaper.

At the end of the sixties, more than two decades after the end of II-WW, an era of flourishing economic growth is about to start in the Western countries. Several elements will make that happen. First, financial operators will be granted the highest degree of freedom

they ever got since 1929's crash. Financial speculation will become the most profitable business ever. Its consequences will only arise much later, in the second decade of the XXIst century, after a financial crash bursting in summer 2008. Second, middle- size companies will start to grow and to externalize and diversify their activities. It's the beginning of transnational corporations. 1973's oil crisis and the wave of desindustrialization that followed will weaken this process only superficially. All in all, they will become the perfect excuse to keep on rushing in the same direction. The end of the sixties mark the beginning of global neoliberalism.

For most of the people in the office, the Tie-tieds specially, Herr Brandt is just an eccentric old man. For others, however, his love for ribbons as a sign of disobedience. Or an expression of too much self-consciousness. I heard them talk about him this morning, at the conference hall. Someone said something about men paying too much attention to their cloths. "A businessman wears a tie, not a ribbon". The word *pussy* was mentioned a couple of times. But Herr Brandt's purple ribbon is not the only problem we have here today.

Two weeks ago, we occupied the company's warehouse.

We, the secretaries. We did it without telling anyone. Simple and clean. We met in the evening when everybody was gone, took our stuff (desks, chairs, drawers, typewriters) and moved it to the warehouse in the ground floor. Before, each of us had to sit in a desk outside a Tie-tied office and remain there all day long, transferring phone calls, serving coffee, typing stuff, stuck to his door like a funny guard. We felt stupid and isolated. We told the Tie-tieds it was dumb, demotivating. Many times. They didn't listen, so we just moved. The warehouse was empty anyway, since we don't need to store the equipment (the other company deals with that too). We even changed its name, it is now called The Executive Department. We added the sign this morning. A big sign over the entrance door, so everyone could see it when they got to the party.

Our basic claims now are: First, we are fed up of 9-to-5. We demand flexible schedules, according to the actual amount of work and not to a childish school-like timetable. We are grown-ups, aren't we? Second, we refuse to submit to a Head of Department monitoring our work. Instead, we propose to organize project-based teams and run a general meeting once a week, to discuss what everybody is doing. Knowledge transfer, they call it. "More than a company, we are a working community" is our slogan.

May 68 was last year.

According to historians, the industrialized Western world is reaching its zenith and facing the beginning of its decay. Old values decline: strain, self-control, stability, uniformity, honor, family. New values emerge: autonomy, self-expression, diversity, boundless entertainment, imagination, individualism. Several decades later, in the nineties, French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, will study the connection between these changes and the transformation of capitalism.

According to them, the end of the sixties is the time when anti-establishment movements, that have been growing in the margins of society, will start to be absorbed by capitalism that will use them to strengthen its dominance. How to transform the critique of capitalism into a new form of legitimacy, support and enthusiasm, even for those who do not benefit from it?

The answer is the Artist Critique.

The Artist what? For Boltanski and Chiapello, the end of the sixties is exactly the moment when the Artist Critique of Capitalism takes over the Social Critique of Capitalism. A milestone in the politics of the XXst century.

The Social Critique belongs to the marxist and socialist tradition. It stands against individualism, the search of particular interest and the exploitation of the working-class by the bourgeoisie. It demands a wider distribution of wealth, collective empowerment and social benefits. The hero of the Social Critique approach is the proletariat, its enemy is the businessman. The Artist Critique, on the contrary, comes from the avant-garde and subcultural movements. It stands against the standardization of life-styles and behaviors and against the repression of the self. It demands a higher degree of autonomy and the right to pursue personal pleasure and fulfillment. Its hero is the bohemian, its enemy is the clerk.

The new spirit of capitalism will feed the Artist Critique. During the last decades of the XXth century, the bohemian way of life will flourish. Mass production, entertainment industry and an unlimited access to credit will captivate the consumeristic dandy. "Become an artist" will become the new credo. The capitalistic sublimation of the Artist Critique will reach its full expansion in the XXIst century with the rise of communication technologies and the internet. Spontaneity, mobility, networking, multi-tasking, conviviality, openness, availability, intuition, diversity, informality, empathy, creativity... The key elements of the working ethics of the future, as analyzed by Richard Florida, are already present today. They belong to May 68 repertoire.

We are still in charge of some of the secretaries' old tasks.

Like buying and packing the retirement presents. After a long assembly, where we re-discussed again the scope of our activity, we decided that: ok, although now we are the Executive Department, we would do it, just this time. So we bought the presents - a couple of heavy watches, both the same model, engraved with the names of the Seniors and the dates of their official retirement- and we packed in a solid black paper box with the logo of the company at the front. The protocol says the Seniors have to open the presents in front of everybody, at the end of the ceremony.

But we also decided that, according to our new "executive" position, we should be entitled to modify the protocol. What does a retired old man need a watch for, anyway? To guess if it's time to feed the pigeons? A ribbon is a much nicer present. It fits better with the easy-going, un-stressed new life they are about to start. It can even spice-up their marriage. "Power is not to be asked for, but to be taken", Che Guevara says.

This change of protocol was unanimously agreed, but we spent a long time discussing what it meant. Was it a step-forward for our company, a positive value we had to stand up for? Or just a simple sabotage? These questions lead us to the more complex debate on "what we really want" by moving to the warehouse and claiming to be a full department, with its own agenda and expertise. "Is it just a professional move? What for?" More pay is clearly not the issue, we all agree on that. "A higher degree of recognition?" Probably. "A higher degree of freedom?" Yes but... "Freedom in the working place?". And that's when the discussion becomes endless. We are still talking about it now actually, in the back of the conference hall, while the first Senior, finishing his speech, is about to open his present box. I just realize we have run out of champagne.