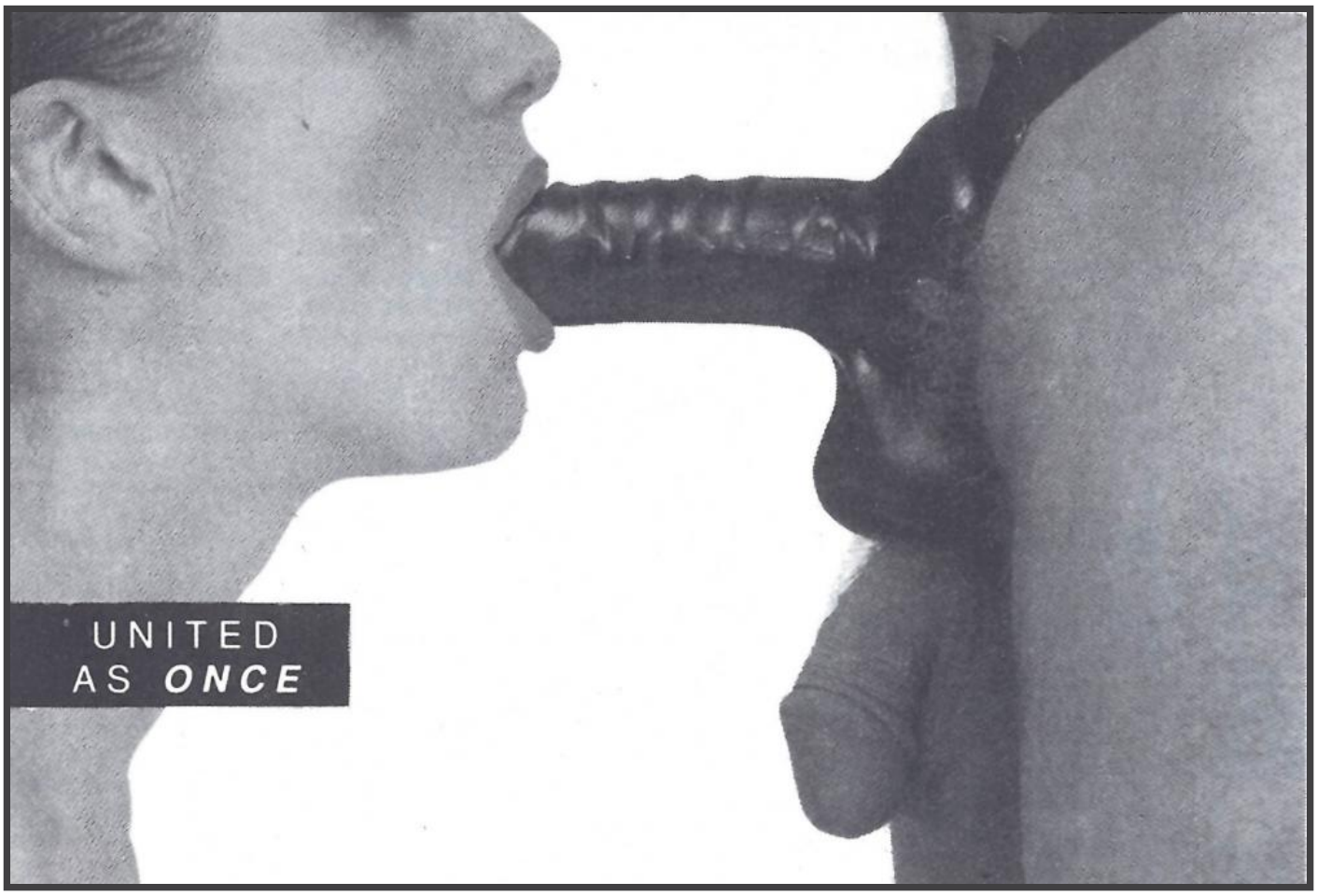
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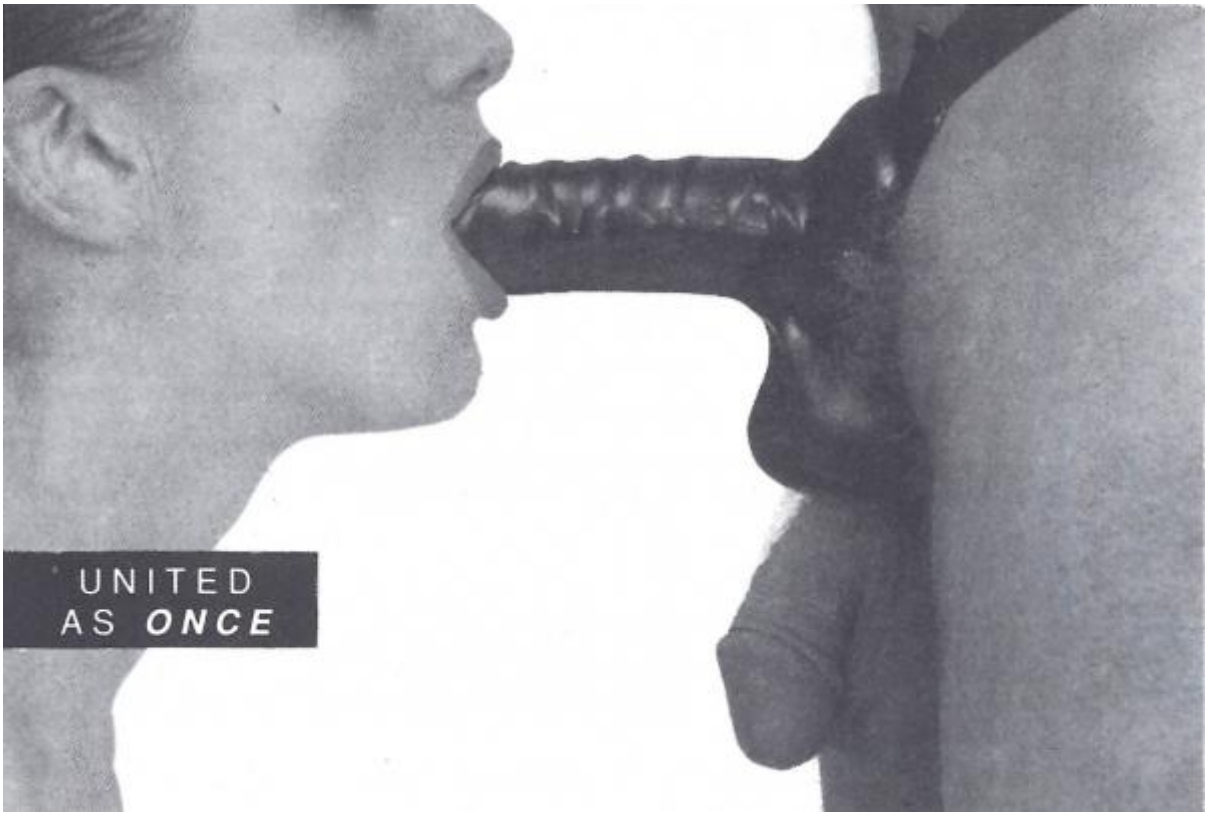
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Establishing Contexts

Pablo Müller, Peter Spillmann

In the 1990s, Peter Spillmann was on the board of the Shedhalle Zürich. He co-authored *Konzept 94*, its new operational concept, and actively promoted the subsequent politicization of the curatorial/artistic practice at the Shedhalle. We met at the restaurant of Hotel Greulich in Zürich and talked about the institutional realignment of the Shedhalle in 1994, about how its exhibition projects were received by the Zürich art scene and to what extent such a critical practice is still relevant today.





Anonymous, *United As Once*, 1994, artistic intervention in the newspaper *WOZ Die Wochenzeitung*, published as part of the exhibition *Censorship. Zensur in Kunst und Kultur heute*, response to the advertising campaign *United Colors of...* by Benetton, Photo: Archive Shedhalle

Pablo Müller: Under the curatorial direction of Harm Lux and Barbara Mosca (1988–1993), the Shedhalle Zürich became an internationally acclaimed art space. Despite this success, various groups called for an institutional realignment of the Shedhalle in the early 1990s. Why?

Peter Spillmann: This call came primarily from the City of Zürich which didn't want to fund two Kunsthallen in perpetuity. The Kunsthalle Zürich, which had been around only for a few years back then, and the Shedhalle received about the same funding. Moreover, under Harm Lux und Barbara Mosca the Shedhalle was becoming increasingly like a Kunsthalle in terms of its profile. In a relatively conventional way, it presented emerging international young artists mainly in solo exhibitions. In addition to being criticized for its institutional orientation, the Shedhalle was also accused — by the city as well as by the Zürich artists and, especially, the Rote Fabrik — of espousing a program that no longer had anything to do with Zürich. The Zürich and Swiss art scenes were to be better represented again.

PM: What did the then board of the Shedhalle criticize about the program of Harm Lux and Barbara Mosca?

PS: We felt that the division of roles and work was rather questionable. Harm Lux, it seemed to us, had slipped into the role of a star curator, whereas Barbara Mosca, the woman on the team, did all the work. He was in the spotlight and she secured the funding, cultivated contacts, invited the artists and booked the flights. Also, we — particularly my fellow board members, the artist Alfred Hofstetter, the architect Daniel Bickel and I — had a different understanding of art. We argued the case for going beyond the art field. We wanted new media to be considered as well. Such approaches didn't exist at the Shedhalle under Harm Lux and Barbara Mosca.

PM: The determination with which a politicization of art was realized at the Shedhalle post 1994 was extraordinary and exceptional in the Swiss context. Where did the desire for this kind of change even come from?

PS: I attended the F+F School for Art and Media Design (Schule für Kunst und Design F+ F) in Zürich that championed an open concept of art back then. Painting and sculpture were considered obsolete; if at all, we used computers, did performance or installation. That's my personal artistic socialization, and many other members of my generation whom I was in contact with back then held similar views. At the same time, we were confronted with a really nasty art vs art backlash, as the Neue Wilde and the <painter princes> of the 1980s were breathing down our necks. I personally had always been suspicious of the contemporary art establishment. This included the galleries and the major institutions who suggested that, ultimately, it comes down to becoming famous and selling the art. There's probably some sort of basic motivation why people consider studying art at all; in my case, it had a lot to do with the need for social change, self-empowerment and establishing a scene. We wanted to ask questions, highlight issues and move people.

Konzept 94

PM: When I learned about *Konzept 94* [b-n-l-de/ein-neues-betriebskonzept/] as part of my research, I was thinking about a kind of art-political manifesto. Then, when I read it, I was surprised by how tame the whole thing is. Statements are open-ended, sometimes to the point of sounding hollow, as in phrases like «less person-centered» and «more surprising projects.» Based on Konzept 94 alone, the subsequent break in the curatorial approach and the program doesn't seem compelling to me.

PS: The *Konzept 94* never could have been explicitly political. There were many voices on the board who didn't support more radical ambitions. In the end, the concept reflects what was then the lowest common denominator. Still, the demand that the program no longer be person-centered was quite political. At the time, many people had no idea what could make an art space interesting, other than a prominent curator selecting and presenting promising artists. The new provision that in the future the curatorial team was to consist of three people and that their tenure be limited to three years was accordingly controversial. The curators stepping down took every opportunity to make clear how unprofessional they felt the new board was and how sorry they were that such a successful program was now being run into the ground.

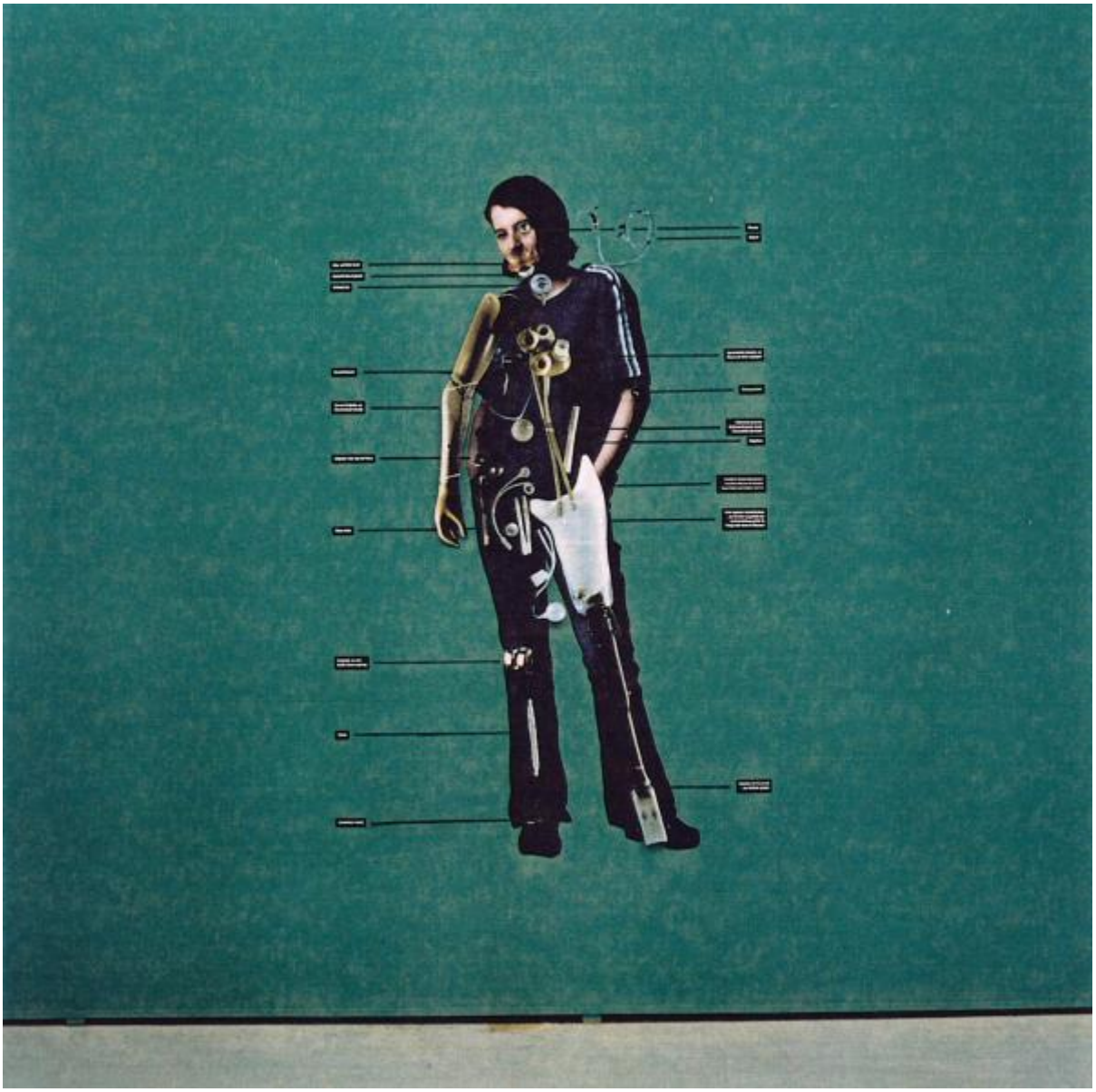
PM: The *Konzept 94* includes a proposal to set up an area next to the entrance, called the <foyer,> where events take place and artists can display their portfolios and various equipment — including a fax machine, a telephone and a computer — is made freely accessible. This proposal is illustrative of the direction in which the new operational concept was going: in the future, production, information and presentation were to be more closely linked.

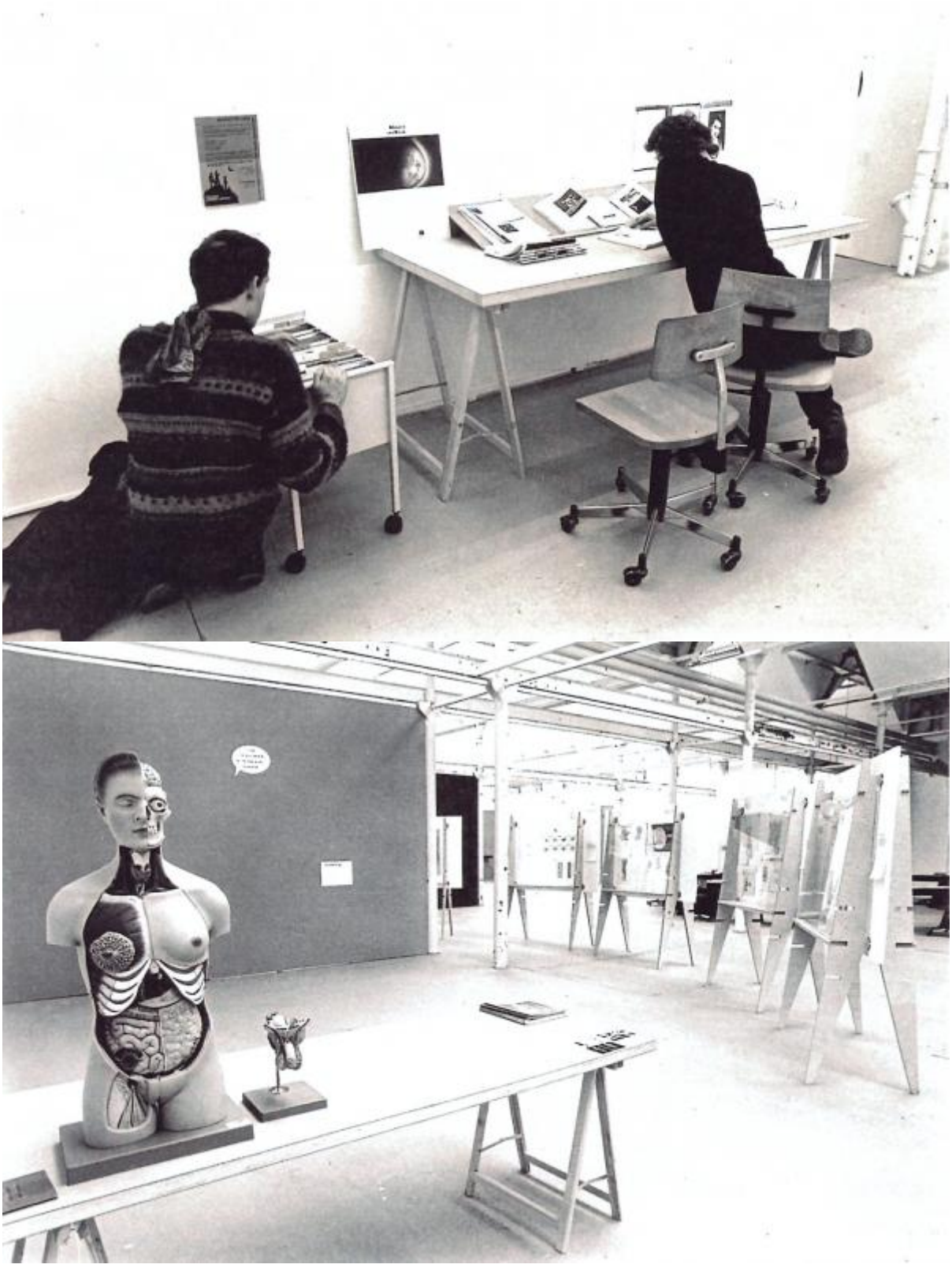
PS: In the late 1990s, many people used the foyer as a video editing workplace. There they had one of the first video cards allowing you to feed a VHS signal into a Mac, digitally process it and play it back again. Justin Hoffmann, who was a musician himself, later equipped the foyer with a sound infrastructure. The DIY principle and the fact that these means of production were made available free of charge were of central importance to us. For a time, this worked out quite well, and the foyer indeed became a studio for some. Thus, the foyer was in a way also intended as service to local artists. It was about exchange of information and presentation, and the means of production were accessible to anyone interested.

Renate Lorenz and Sylvia Kafehsy

PM: In 1993, based on the new operational concept, the board appointed Sylvia Kafeshy, Renate Lorenz and Stefan Banz as curators. Stefan Banz left shortly thereafter. Did this mean that your demand to have more team work had failed right in the beginning?

PS: Our idea was to create the most productive starting position possible through a deliberate composition of the team. The viewpoints each individual contributed were to be balanced out in the team. But then Stefan Banz bailed out at the very beginning. And this dyad ended up functioning somewhat differently than expected. There was less collaboration and more a quite prolific, but at times competitive parallel production. After two years, Marion von Osten joined. It was not until then that the team of three we had originally envisioned was complete.





Exhibition view *Game Girl*, 1994, Shedhalle Zürich, Photo: Archive Shedhalle

PM: What projects by Sylvia Kafeshy and Renate Lorenz continue to linger in your memory?

PS: In *Game Girl* [http://archiv2009.shedhalle.ch/dt/archiv/1994/ausstellung/gamegirl/gamegirldt.shtml], an exhibition Renate Lorenz did in 1994, she strongly criticized assumptions that biotechnology and genetic engineering or high-tech solutions in general are progressive forces, as was frequently alleged at the time, for instance in the context of media art at venues like Ars Electronica in Linz. Game Girl was quite elaborate: in the middle of the space there was a

huge, circular information display and a lot of researched material from print media, TV and advertising. This material had been compiled with the intention of questioning publicly circulating technology imagery. And instead of individual artists, activist groups such as antigena from Zürich and artists' collectives like Botschaft e.V. from Berlin were invited. Sylvia Kafeshy responded to Game Girl with a project on censorship in art and culture today (*Censorship. Zensur in Kunst und Kultur heute* [http://archiv2009.shedhalle.ch/dt/archiv/1994/ausstellung/censorship/censorshipdt.shtml]). It looked not at the kind of censorship familiar from totalitarian regimes, but at more subtle forms of exclusion or interference. Programs of Paper Tiger TV offering critical commentary on role attributions in soaps were screened in the exhibition, and it also included paintings by Josef Felix Müller that had been impounded for several years on account of their explicitly sexual imagery. With the many photos, paintings and videos it featured, this exhibition appeared on the whole more conventional than Game Girl. But it, too, required you to first read up a bit to understand how things were related and what the examples were about.

Culture War

PM: How did the Zürich art scene respond to these decidedly socio-political exhibition projects?

PS: Many found it shocking that it was no longer primarily about art, but rather about issues and discourses. As a result, whole new networks formed that went beyond the art scene per se. Encounters and dialogue became more important. At the Shedhalle the exhibitions were suddenly very discourse-heavy, and alongside those shows there were events like conferences and meetings. Many people were not accustomed to this, especially those who didn't know that this kind of practice existed at all in art and that it similarly emerged in other places like Cologne and Berlin at the time and later went down in history as a <re-politization> of art. Many refused or couldn't see how it was supposed to be art or an artistic strategy.



Exhibition view *Censorship. Zensur in Kunst und Kultur heute*, 1994, Shedhalle Zürich, Photo: Archive Shedhalle

PM: At the Löwenbräu Areal, the art conglomerate in West Zürich, there was also a turn towards the social and towards participatory artistic approaches back then, at least at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art. Rirkrit Tiravanija, for instance, cooked for visitors in *Das soziale Kapital* (1998) and converted the Migros Museum into a supermarket. Wasn't there goodwill from that side towards the approaches at the Shedhalle?

PS: There was definitely interest. The exhibitions were mutually visited, albeit with some skepticism. What was certainly characteristic of the 1990s was the consensus that you had to position yourself more decidedly. The positions of the Shedhalle and the Löwenbräu Areal were more like diametrically opposed. After some time, a kind of culture war started, with the two camps criticizing, and distancing themselves from, each other. In our view, the social was only symbolically relevant at the Löwenbräu Areal and never as a political issue: a party without content. At the Shedhalle, by contrast, there was the idea to analyze and dismantle social norms. The projects presented there sought to actively pursue a critique of neoliberalism and offer a feminist critique of society and criticism of technology. No such discussions took place at the Löwenbräu. There the focus was always on art, meaning a more aesthetic, symbolic side of art.



Exhibition announcement for *Censorship. Zensur in Kunst und Kultur heute*, 1994, Shedhalle Zürich, Photo: Archive Shedhalle

PM: And how did the city of Zürich respond to this development? Did it become an issue at city council, for instance?

PS: As far as I know the Shedhalle never became an issue at the institutional political level, at least not for content-related reasons — possibly because a project like *8 Wochen Klausur*

(Eight-Week Retreat, 1994) suddenly made clear what the social added value of such approaches could be. The aim of that project was to create a dialog between the various players then involved in the drug problem in Zürich. The project fueled a process that went beyond the institution of the Shedhalle and any purely symbolic function of art. There was a lot of positive feedback on the part of politics at the time. I also remember that Jean-Pierre Hoby, the then Chief Cultural Officer of the City of Zürich, returned from a meeting of cultural officers abroad and said how astonished he was to see the Shedhalle being discussed there as a “best practice” example. That it was seen as an institution achieving high impact and showing a great deal of innovativeness with little financial effort. From this moment on, the city was fine with everything. But for us this line of argument was actually very disconcerting, as it reflected the then-still-new neoliberal logic of a slimmed-down and optimized institution.

Critical Artistic Practice Today

PM: A key question for me is how a critical practice can be funded in the long run. Linked to this is the question what funds you are willing to accept, or indeed reject on principle for political reasons. We at Brand-New-Life seek to address such entanglements again and again. At the same time, we accept problematic funds (for instance, we receive support from the Canton of Zug and thus benefit directly from companies like Glencore or Shell).

PS: We would never have taken money from Nestlé, for example, because that money was earned in ways that were diametrically opposed to what we championed. To be honest, it was never offered to us either. Conversely, we were skeptical about public funding as well and suspected forms of influence peddling.
To see how much leeway you have with this same strategy it may be helpful to take another look at the projects of Andrea Fraser and the history of the Generali Foundation. Funded by the EA-Generali Foundation, she did a project that critically analyzed and visualized the foundation’s structures. The work was initially embraced by the institution and significantly contributed to the critical image of the collection. Then the fusion with the conservative Erste Bank put an abrupt end to the progressive program of Sabine Breitwieser and the collection of the Generali Foundation. This story illustrates that artistic critique doesn’t really work. The hope that capital will invest in its own critique is not dashed only as long as forms of critical reflection fit into a company’s corporate strategy. In the case of a change of direction, this can be reversed and obscured overnight.
I think it would be best to create guidelines and actually spell them out in writing. Such a codex of values is quite common in the economic field as well. The questions are always the same: where does the capital come from; were workers or natural resources exploited; does the corporate policy put pressure on states; are appropriate taxes being paid; are community concerns and human, animal and plant rights generally being respected; is it about innovations that secure sustainable, long-term future prospects? Based on those criteria, at least Glencore would fail in every respect; on the other hand, you’re dealing with public funds rather than direct contributions.

PM: Where are the approaches and strategies tested at the Shedhalle and other places in the 1990s still being pursued and developed today

PS: For example, in the micro-organizations where artistic strategies are subsumed into manifold collaborations with very different players and competencies are blended. Generally, they are about very specific social issues, including self-organized solutions where civil society fails. They involve, for instance, radically ecological models, new economies or new forms of knowledge production and education, no longer just in terms of a critical analysis and reply, but real, as implementation. That’s a major step. Symptomatic of this is the fact that a group like ruangrupa has been appointed artistic director of the next documenta. This

means that even the mainstream can no longer ignore that in the expanded field of cultural production, away from the art market and the exhibition establishment, ever new spheres of action and ways of working emerge that also involve redefining the role of art in society.

PABLO MÜLLER

Pablo Müller is an art historian and art critic. His writings are published in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung and Jungle World, among others. After having spent time in Berlin and New York, he has been working in research at the Lucerne School of Art and Design since 2014 and doing his PhD at the University of Zürich. He is co-editor of Brand-New-Life.

Pablo Müller ist Kunsthistoriker und Kunstkritiker. Seine Artikel erschienen unter anderem in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung, Jungle World. Nach längeren Aufenthalten in Berlin und New York arbeitet er seit 2014 in der Forschung an der Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst und promoviert an der Universität Zürich. Er ist Mitherausgeber von Brand-New-Life.

PETER SPILLMANN

Peter Spillmann is a cultural producer, an artist and an exhibition maker. He has been teaching and researching at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts—Design and Art in the MA in Fine Arts program with a focus on Art in Public Spheres since 2009, and has been the director of the StudioLab Eco! there since 2021. He is co-founder of several self-organized platforms such as Labor k3000 (1998) and CPKC Center for Post-Colonial Knowledge and Culture (2008) and develops projects and exhibitions in changing interdisciplinary collaborations, most recently included *Destination Kultur* (2012), *www.transculturalmodernism.org* (2012), *mapping.postkolonial.net* (2013) and *Viet Nam Diskurs Stockholm* (2016).

Peter Spillmann ist Künstler, Ausstellungsmacher und forscht und unterrichtet an Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst. Er ist Mitgründer von mehreren selbstorganisierten Plattformen wie Labor k3000 (1998) und CPKC Center for Post-Colonial Knowledge and Culture (2008) und entwickelt in wechselnden interdisziplinären Zusammenhängen Projekte und Ausstellungen; dazu gehörten zuletzt *Destination Kultur* (2012), *www.transculturalmodernism.org* (2012), *mapping.postkolonial.net* (2013) und *Viet Nam Diskurs Stockholm* (2016).