About the Equivalence Between Silence and Death

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The exhibition P.O.L.E. took place at the New Museum from September 1, 2014, to February 15, 2015.Jesse Untracht-Oakner

Under the suggestive title P.O.L.E. (People, Objects, Language, Exchange), the New Museum in New York recently showed an exhibition by the artist duo Gerard & Kelly. Their site-specific arrangement comprised different objects like two central brass poles, plywood sculptures and a video work made in the aftermath of the Ferguson police shooting that killed Michael Brown and led to nationwide protests against (racist) police brutality and the indifference of the justice system. The exhibition resulted from workshops Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly organized during their six-month research and development residency at the New Museum, which investigated pole dancing and the kinds of exchanges it enables as well as the ways in which different communities have adapted it.

A performance during the run of the exhibition centered around the daily performances of two dancers from different (sub-)cultural backgrounds, who use the poles for a score-based choreography titled “Two Brothers” (other than its androcentric title suggests, “sisters” were also among the dancers). Lightened by neon tubes lined up against the gallery’s western glass façade, the performance was further illuminated by pink and blue light emanating from ACT UP’s famous neon piece that depicts its now-iconic SILENCE=DEATH motif, which was mounted on the upper part of the room’s back wall and thus immediately visible to visitors entering the museum’s lobby. The artists themselves understand their adaption and reconceptualization of this particular work, which was originally part of the window installation Let the Record Show… that New Museum curator and Visual AIDS co-founder Bill Olander commissioned for the New Museum in 1987 and that has been shown in different contexts within the museum’s walls ever since, as a reminder of ACT UP and queer activism’s cultural legacy: “We are part of a second generation of the civil rights movement that’s using the strategies of direct action and non-violent protest that were perfected by ACT UP,” Gerard explains in an interview. “For us, the inclusion of the SILENCE=DEATH neon sign is an attempt to bring a light from the past to the present movement.”

In that sense, other than just treating the sign as a relic of old times, I am convinced that the motif’s inherent semantics are still relevant in this “post-Ferguson moment” (Kelly) concerning the criminalization of young black men, because it contours collective problems: How can minority (queer/black) subjectivities claim visibility in a representational regime that appears to define itself through their exclusion, subordination or--so to say--silencing?

The initial question evoked by the equation (that due to its mathematical, axiom-like character claims some sort of universal truth) is usually: What or whose silence constitutes an equivalent to death--and why? Therefore, the original poster that first appeared in Manhattan in 1986 added two smaller, from a distance not legible lines underneath the motif; the first denounces Reagan, the Centers for Disease Control and Protection and the Vatican’s silence toward the ongoing epidemic. SILENCE=DEATH can thus be easily understood as a reference to state and clerical ignorance: Because of their denial, AIDS and the affected individuals appear as unintelligible events, deprived of their recognition as something “real.” This process of “othering” can, on the opposite, be conceived as the constitution of a humanity that, by articulation, becomes (or already is) lamentable--or at least recognizable. This epistemic, “dehumanizing” (Judith Butler) violence is comparable to the current form of deprivation of humanity, which culminated in the grand jury decisions neither to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting of Michael Brown nor Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner.

Coming back to the previously mentioned poster, the second line calls for self-organized ways of protest, which leads to yet another interpretation of the equation that becomes even more evident in the context of the poster’s (modified) adaption of the familiar symbol from the gay liberation movement: The pink triangle, which traces back to the sign used by the Nazis to identify homosexuals and that--because of this reference to a common historical victimization--seemed suitable to increase consciousness as well as responsibility for a collective group affiliation during the 1970s. According to the contemporary liberationist credo “Out of the Closets and onto the Streets,” SILENCE=DEATH serves here as an analogous proclamation in terms of using identitarian

visualization as a means to enforce political as well as social equality. For Lee Edelman it thus comes down to the “production, that is, of more text, as a mode of defense against the opportunism of mainstream medical and legislative responses to the continuing epidemic.”[i]

It’s exactly this ambiguity that defines the strength of ACT UP’s graphic, as well as its relevance for present civil rights movements: It on the one hand demands awareness for the delegitimization of [iii] through the media’s images, anonymous masses are shaped into a political collective, which denounces public (in-)activities and demands self-determined visibility.

In this sense, the inclusion of the SILENCE=DEATH-sign is, as pointed out by the museum’s press release, supposed to let us reconsider “relationships across moments and movements.” But it also sheds some sort of utopian light on the ongoing injustices. A hope articulated in the rhetoric of the sign’s initial museum presentation: The record will show; “history”, as Olander put it back in 1987, “will judge our society by how we responded to this calamity.”[iv]

Drawing on art’s activist potential, P.O.L.E. reminds us of the necessity of political, direct actions instead of just hoping for a potential redemption.

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[i]Edelman, Lee: “The Plague of Discourse, Politics, Literary Theory, and ’AIDS’,” in: Edelman, Lee: Homographesis, Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory, New York; London 1994, pp. 79-92, p. 87.

[ii]Butler, Judith: “Critically Queer,” in: GLQ, Vol. 1 (1993), pp. 17-32, p. 23.

[iii]Ibid.

[iv]Olander, William: “The Window on Broadway by ACT UP,” in: Wallis Brian (ed.): Democracy, A Project by Group Material, Seattle 1990, pp. 277-279, p. 277.

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