

Drug Dealing as Labor

An Introduction from Dr. Massimo Perinelli,

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This art project by Scott Holmquist, installed by him and his team, now on display in the exhibition has been and still is the target of massive, right-wing, racist political and media-based attacks. Knee-jerk hate, fear, and anger so strongly envelop the project that the artistic aspects have become invisible and any discussion of project's topic seems almost impossible.

On January 11, 2018, the third and next-to-last event took place in conjunction with the exhibition "Other Homelands" at the FHXB Museum, which was funded in part by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The exhibit ended on January 14 with a final panel discussion at the museum. The [January 11] podium was made up of the Viennese scholar and activist Monika Mokre, the social media activist Moro Yapha, the exhibition's artist Scott Holmquist, and Ralf Köhnlein, an employee of Fixpunkt e.V. The event was moderated by the Andrea Kretschmann, a scholar of criminal sociology from the Centre Marc Bloch at HU Berlin. It was held in both English and German.

The issue had nothing to do with drugs. On the contrary, Destination Berlin flirts almost obsessively with the subject of how edgy and pulsating the long Berlin nights are. Car makers like Opel have plastered huge billboards with ads for their electric car using the slogan "Typical Berlin, electro and speed," and even the Berlin ice hockey team, the Polar Bears, once printed posters promising their fans that their games offered "more speed than at Kotti." No one seems to get worked up about any of it.

Why, then, did not only the AfD but also the CDU and others try at all costs to stop this exhibition, and why did the Berlin newspapers and the BILD seethe with headlines like "Exhibition Glorifies Criminal Drug Dealers"? Since, interestingly, the exhibition itself says nothing at all about drugs, dealers, or the situation of dealers in Germany. Instead, it simply uses images and sound installations to describe the drug dealers' places of origin, the neighborhoods they come from, the climate there, the architecture of the houses or the character of the rivers. The interviewees, the dealers, end up with nothing more than a specific individual story. No word on their reasons for fleeing, nothing on the migrants' motivations or their situation here.

The contrast between the daily banality of these real people and the media fury voiced in the 500+ articles – also presented at the museum – on “The African Dealer” could not be wider. They are two narratives that do not meet, do not reference one another, do not communicate with each other. Instead this exhibition creates a gigantic void between the homelands of the interview partners and the situation in the Berlin parks.

In my view, however, this void creates the necessary space to open conversations about everything in between these two poles: about reasons for fleeing, about the migrants’ dreams as they made their way to Europe, about refugees being deprived of their rights, about working under the conditions of a general prohibition for refugees and their extreme exploitation, about the fierce competition over the use of urban green spaces, about community meeting points and police repression, about groups of men and sexist violence, about the societal need for intoxication, about the senseless criminalization of certain substances, exhaustively analyzed over the last few decades, about supply and demand, about the Big Business of drug trade, about visibilities and invisibilities.

That this topic is not at the fringes or specific to the local scene is evident in the similarly charged irrational and discursive flood after Cologne’s New Year’s Eve attacks, which managed to reverse this country’s political climate on migration from the celebrated “culture of welcome” to a culture of deportation within just a few months. Sentences like “Refugees are grabbing our women” and “Refugees are poisoning our children” are expressions of ideologically identical agitation.

What we need is political education that is able to disentangle and rationalize the knotted, heated strands of discourse. Because it is about so many things: about work and capitalism, about racism, about movement and immigration, crime and criminalization, drug consumption and drug policy, public and private space, and the need for safety – on all sides.

Political education is particularly important not only because it can counter emotion with concrete arguments but also because its role is to expose the interests hiding behind the politics of fear. Stoking fears and fighting coolheaded observation are not a matter of ignorance but rather a targeted, right-wing populist strategy aimed against rationality and information. It is a strategy that emerged barely two years ago in this country, in which rightist agitators and furious citizens attack democratic debate and succeed in steering published opinion and liberal institutions. Whatever you do, don’t talk about refugees, or drugs, or black dealers – it can all backfire and push voters into the arms of the Right. And so this overeager obedience actually serves the rightist agenda and amounts to political capitulation.

It is all the more important that we use events like this one, in the Salon [of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation], to actually talk to each other, to find real solutions to a situation that is indeed problematic in many ways. In doing so, it is particularly important to focus on the situation of Sub-Saharan refugees, a group that, for the last two-and-a-half years, has not benefitted from the “culture of welcome” whatsoever. Some of these migrants have lived here for decades on a “toleration” permit (Duldung), often stuck in bleak camps with little prospect of realizing their ambitions. Those whose work it is to buy drugs from white people and then sell it to other white people for a low profit margin in Berlin parks are the most powerless link in the long chain of the drug trade. And on a side note: as Leandra Balke distills in her current sociological study, it is a business that constitutes “a victimless crime, since dealers and customers interact through mutual consent.”