Thinking through Subversion in the Time of Its Impossibility

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While first preparing this paper, I named it “A Short History of Subversion.”[1] But I changed the title because I would have set you on the wrong track with it. In this paper I will not tell you a story of subversion. I will rather give you an insight into my own history with the term. The story starts with my experiencing the photos of French artist Claude Cahun and the way she staged her gender-blurred appearance in the 1920s as something subversive. I decided to dedicate my PhD-project to the subversive representations of bodies by Claude Cahun and two other artists, the US-American performance- and concept-artist Karen Finley and the Danish contemporary dancer and choreographer Mette Ingvartsen. Before I had started to think more thoroughly about the term subversive and of possible definitions of it, I regarded the subversive as a radical artistic expression in opposition to hegemony. It was only after I had realized that many authors in art studies and art criticism use the term subversive as a label without defining its meaning or calling into question its impact, that I also felt more and more uncomfortable with the way I used the term. What did I mean with subversive? Why did I use the term for the artistic practices of the three artists? For quite some time I tried to find possible definitions of subversion which would fit together with my sources, the artistic practices. But then I asked myself whether the term subversion is too universal, too loaded with all kinds of problematic assumptions and as such, whether I could still relate it to my sources at all. What I put here in a few sentences actually was quite a long process. My thoughts went in all kinds of different directions. By thoroughly dealing with my sources, I realized that the term subversion is not the right tool for my analysis of the sources anymore, or at least not the only tool I should use. What sounds like a failing, and in the first moment also felt a bit like it, was actually a very productive process. Instead of going down a traditional way of academic research – where one sticks to a concept and tries to defend it as well and as coherently as possible, I decided to partly let go of a concept that still fascinated me immensely. Letting go does not mean that my interest in the idea of subversion has vanished – it just means that I accept the fact that my sources should not be cut short of their complexity by applying a term that shuffles onto them problematic assumptions and prospects. Rather than calling the artistic body-representations I deal
with in my dissertation automatically subversive, I will try to critically expose the problems of the concept of subversion and the practice of using it as a label of reception in each case individually.

I have decided to include the process that I experienced during my research on subversion in my PhD-thesis. The first chapter of my dissertation thus traces the process of my thinking through subversion, or how I call it in German “Denkbewegungen zur Subversion.” I do not write a history of subversion nor do I answer the question whether subversion is possible or not. It is also not intended to be a recipe for “how to successfully be subversive.” The intention behind writing down my thoughts on subversion is to give an example for what I think is a productive struggle with a term in academic research. Theorizing a concept like subversion might give an insight into how, when, why, and under which circumstances terms are applied in academic research. My process of dealing with subversion is one of reflecting, dismissing, defining, defending and problematizing. In the chapter of my dissertation I am presenting short parts of texts by authors that inspired my thinking: on possible definitions of subversion; on methods of subversion; on subversion as a practice of production and reception; on spaces and temporal aspects of subversion; and, finally, on the possibility of subversion, especially in art. The way I use the parts of texts by other authors first let me call into question my own method, since it can be perceived as a limiting practice. But I justify the practice by stating that it is not meant to produce correct and thorough interpretations of the texts, but to use the parts of texts as a kind of springboard for my own thinking on subversion. Since meaning is produced in the process of perception, the meaning of the texts in my case is produced while dealing with subversion. The authors I focus on deal with the concept of subversion in the field of politics as well as in the field of art. Thus I also reflect on the question of how to draw the dividing or permeable line between politics and art.

In this paper I can only present a few examples of my process of thinking through subversion.

During the process I made several trials of defining subversion. The lexical meaning of the term subversion describes it as an act of undermining or overthrowing. An early attempt of my own definition of subversion was inspired by Stuart Hall’s concepts of culture, representation, and the communication of meanings.[2] Things in themselves do not have a meaning, therefore subversion cannot be inherent in something either. Thus I defined subversion as being produced in the act of perceiving it as such. But I soon found this definition to be oversimplifying. After dealing with the concept of subversion by Judith Butler, I attempted another definition: in contrast to the lexical meaning of the term as an act of undermining or overthrowing, I defined subversion as an act of shifting hegemonic meanings and codes.[3] Thus subversion does not necessarily mean innovation, because it must relate to something already existing so as to shift its meaning or transform it. Soon after its creation I named this definition the “soft-version” of sub-version, since it is not based on the physical idea of overthrowing, but on a “softer” form of action, which shifts or transforms hegemonic meanings. I will spare you all my other attempts of defining subversion. Let me just cite here Judith Butler because I can very much agree with her statement in the context of failing to satisfactorily define subversion:
“I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I not believe that such judgments endure through time (‘contexts’ are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity). Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to.”[4]

Unfortunately I cannot dedicate more space here in this paper to my dealing with methods of subversion, the space and time of subversion, or the relation of the term subversion to other terms such as utopia, protest, rebellion, resistance, critical or transgression. These aspects can be found in my dissertation.

Instead, I want to focus on the relation between subversion and the mainstream.[5] In my dissertation I use “mainstream” as the term for the ruling norms of mass appeal, especially in relation to commercial culture but also other forms of commodities. The term hegemony more generally refers to ruling norms and their dominance in a society, for example norms of a binary gender-construction. I claim that the word mainstream is very popular with those authors I deal with who write about pop-culture. I propose that there is A) the subversion of mainstream and B) the subversion as mainstream. A) seems to be more logical: subversive practice often opposes what is hegemonic; but B), the subversion as mainstream, happens quite often too. If subversion is successfully transforming norms, the subversive elements may become hegemonic themselves too. Many of its aspects of pop-culture that were once considered to be subversive, for example, are these days a big commercial success, and far from being subversive. Symbols of subversion – let’s think of the styling of rebellious teenagers for example – thus can become commodities of the fashion industry.

Why did I put into the title of this paper the provocative phrase “in the time of its impossibility”? From what I have written so far there is no hint of an impossibility. I claim that subversion – at least theoretically – has reached the time of its impossibility. In my surrounding in the artistic field and academic field in Vienna, to deal with subversion, whether as an intentional practice or as a philosophical discussion about it, is not in fashion. Many people I know find subversion in the hyper-capitalistic culture we live in impossible. Instead of a culture of demonstration and protest there is apathy. Critical positions flare like fashion trends, and being dissident might still be “cool,” but there is nearly no serious attempt to engage with subversion to be found.

These polemic thoughts of mine developed out of observations and conversations with many artists and scholars that surround me. There are some contemporary authors that claim subversion to be impossible in a system that includes subversion, shock, and scandal as modernizing elements that make commodities out of subversive elements. In my dissertation I cite for example the German philosopher Katja Diefenbach in this context.[6] She problematizes the idea of the agency of an individual subject. How can an individual person possibly act subversively in a system that constantly subverts itself, and that has the concept of its subversion already integrated for use as a modernizing tool?
According to Katja Diefenbach, the idealistic idea of the individual’s possibility of resistance should be challenged by thinking of forms of political resistance as a collective practice. The well-known German pop-culture theorist Diedrich Diederichsen claims that maybe the most difficult problem of subversion nowadays is “das Benennen eines Feindes und das Sichtbarmachen/Wahrnehmbarmachen seiner Verbrechen, die er durch permanente Kommunikation über sie erfolgreich verdunkelt.” – “to name an enemy and the making visible/making perceivable of the enemy’s crimes, which the enemy successfully darkens through permanent communication.”[7] Another German author, Thomas Ernst, states on the other hand that subversion is still possible, even when it seems that alternatives to the ruling system do not exist anymore.[8] He claims that subversion is far more modest these days but nevertheless exists as a practice of transforming discursive formations or interfering with discursive processes.[9] As I have said before, I will not be able to give here a general answer as to whether subversion is still possible or not.

In the beginning of my research I found art to be an especially suitable space for subversive action. I still claim that the existence of rules and norms in the art-field that differ from those in other fields such as the field of politics, allows for such practices that can far more likely to cumulate in subversion. By stating this I do not want to propose that in the art-field anything is possible or anything goes, nor do I want to romanticize or idealize the impact of artistic production. Although this is a slightly problematic thesis which hints at classical avant-garde theory, I would say that artistic practice has the potential to open up alternative ways of perception by making visible, switching, affirming (and so on) hegemonic meanings. I cannot go into this topic here more thoroughly. In my dissertation I think through the different ways of unruly practices in art in more detail. But there is one insight of mine which I want to cite here. I claim that subversion as an artistic intention is “out” these days. While the subcultural habitus of the 1960s and 1970s included a belief in the possibility of subversion,[10] I would state that today the subcultural habitus rather includes the opposite – pessimism. In my dissertation I can only give one example of an artist that I know of who calls himself subversive these days. The British performance artist Richard Dedomenici advertises himself on his homepage as follows: “Richard Dedomenici is a one-man subversive think-tank primarily dedicated to creating the kind of uncertainty that leads to possibility.”[11] While the statement of the artist is very likely to be understood as ironic, in my dissertation I play the game of taking it seriously and think about whether I would agree with Richard Dedomenici. Since 2001 Richard Dedomenici has developed performances and interventions in public space. One of his first interventions, called “Break-In,” was an attempt to climb up the walls of Cardiff’s prison and thus to break-in. The slogan of this intervention was: “See Richard attempt to Break-In to Cardiff Prison, thereby Break-In the law, but hopefully not Break-In his legs.”[12] A policeman arrested him temporarily, stating this reason: “I am arresting you for aggravated trespass.”[13] Richard Dedomenici often comes into contact with the police during his interventions. On the 15th October 2004 he made a performance in London called “The Big Flyposter Draw.” The slogan was: “Graffitiing something that has itself been illegally stuck to the wall theoretically isn’t illegal.”[14] The artist painted over a
poster which was illegally stuck to the wall with white paint and then wrote the slogan in red on it. A group of police-men, who questioned his action, were convinced by Dedomenici that his action was not illegal by British law.

Richard Dedomenici’s interventions cause mainly irritations and confusion. They startle passers-by, or police-men, out of their daily routines. Although startled might be the wrong term to use. His interventions are not done with a sledgehammer. They do not intend to scare or shock. It is rather a soft awakening out of daily life. Dedomenici’s interventions in my understanding carry a potential of reflection in them. They make norms visible that are often over-seen or not reflected upon in daily life. When he is testing the “gray areas” of British law, his practices do not lead to an unleashed action which would inevitably provoke the police to intervene. Rather his actions provoke some sort of uncertainty with the police. Most likely, most of the police-men are not sure how to react. I believe this subtle artistic practice, which always stays precisely inside what is legal, carries a very effective potential. It can ideally lead to reflection whilst actions that intend more forcible shock-reactions often achieve nothing but spontaneous hostility. Those who should be irritated in the latter case often do not allow such an irritation but close themselves to such an experience. Richard Dedomenici’s practice approaches its audience subtly; it creeps in softly.

To come back to the beginning of the game: the answer to the questions whether I find Richard Dedomenici’s art subversive is yes. In some way I do believe that he is subversive because his practice of playing with norms and British law, while always staying very precisely inside what is legal, does create an uncertainty which I understand to be very effective. But my answer is also no, if subversion is defined as an overthrowing practice or the undermining of a system cumulating in transformation.

I hope this paper gave you a few insights into my process of thinking through subversion and the problems of defining it generally. Subversion is in the eye of the beholder. Thus I would propose a practice of thinking subversion not necessarily as something which is generally impossible or possible but something that has to be questioned in each and every single case.

Notes:

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[13] Ibid. Whether the policeman truly stated the reason like this or whether the formulation of the sentence is part of Richard Dedomenici’s performance is not important for my game of thinking through Dedomenici’s art.

[14] See on [www.dedomenici.co.uk](http://www.dedomenici.co.uk) under “Archive.”