

'Field theory in the Neoliberal Cultural Industries'

By David Brittain

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Journalists and cultural producers can appear to be at odds ideologically, but they can find common ground in certain situations. One thinks of the 1920s and 30s and the solidarity that existed between leftist artists in Germany and Russia and the anti-fascist press. Today this common ground lies in the mutual fostering of ever-closer commercial ties. One expression of this is a growth in promotional deals between media outlets and prestigious arts providers. Less well known are risk-taking projects that aim to satisfy the divergent aims and aspirations of journalists and artists. This paper concerns one such project. I suggest that it can be understood through the lens Pierre Bourdieu's field theory.

We don't have to look too far back to see that cultural producers in Western societies have been ambivalent about their relationship with the power of the media. Recently, especially in the quality press, there is evidence of closer ties between the two that may be partly attributable to trends in funding for the arts.

Since the 1980s, larger arts organisations across Europe have been encouraged by their state funders to forge links with business and to professionalise. In this situation, publicity becomes essential: for sponsors – to demonstrate what they get for their money; for arts organisations – to gain wide support for risks taken, to keep existing sponsors and attract new ones, and for cultural producers who – perhaps with less reluctance than in previous times - cooperate with journalists to publicise their events and seek public acclaim. Another factor may also be changes within the profession of journalism itself, which is cautiously opening its doors to non-professional voices (such as bloggers and citizen journalists). Barbie Zelizer¹ argues that this development poses important questions about what journalism is and who can be a journalist.

I am interested in a little discussed feature of this media landscape, which requires the close co-operation of cultural producers and journalists. This sort of feature comes in many formats. So far artists have produced special content for inclusion in a feature magazine (as Jenny Holzer and Christian Boltanski did for *Sddeutsche Zeitung* in the early and mid 1990s), and have been invited by journalists to work alongside them to make a response to the day's news (as did

¹ Zelizer, B. 'The Culture of Journalism' in Curran, J., Gurevitch, M. (2005) *Mass Media and Society*, 4th edition, London: Hodder Arnold

Gillian Wearing at the London *Guardian* in 2003). My research focuses on events in Austria where business sponsorship of the arts began in 1987 with the so-called 'sponsorship decree'. This entitled businesses that funded the arts to tax breaks - providing they publicized their activities.² Two years later, in 1989, the museum in progress was founded in Vienna: its neo-avant garde mission to produce art for dissemination in the pages of major Austrian news publications³. The museum in progress is in fact the product of the same neoliberal pragmatism that has been privatising the arts in many countries since the 1980s. The organisation supports itself through a mixture of state funding and business sponsorship and it has built an enviable portfolio of projects with important international artists and thinkers (see <http://www.mip.at>). I will discuss one of these collaborative projects from 1999 that was organised under the rubric, Interventions in Progress. I believe it is significant because the artists and the journalists who co-produced it seem to have started out with similar aims.

In a widely reported news story from that year the extreme right wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) caused a shock after it won 27 per cent of the vote

² Bucher, V., (1989) 'Art and Cultural Sponsorship 'Austrian-style' in *The International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 8, 77-82

³ The museum in progress identifies itself with the aims of some of the 'alternative museums' of the 20th century avant-garde.

in Austria. Controversially, the FPÖ had resurrected a Nazi term, *überfremdung* ('domination by foreigners') in their anti-immigrant rhetoric. The liberal press was joined, in its opposition to the FPÖ, by local and international cultural producers. Among those who produced cultural manifestations that were specific to the political context,⁴ was the Viennese group Get to Attack (comprising Marko Lulic', Dorit Margreiter and Meike Schmidt-Gleim). A one-page poster-like graphic by the group was published by Austria's prominent liberal newspaper, the *Standard*, after negotiations by the museum in progress. This graphic interrupted the editorial flow much like an advert, though readers may have noticed – more through the political slogans (denouncing racism and sexism) than the stylised Constructivist forms - that this wasn't an advert, but rather some extension of the editorial agenda. The design took at least some of its meaning from its reception within the public space of a newspaper (this is not quite the Habermasian 'public sphere' because media ownership within the Austrian printed press is overwhelmingly private and foreign owned). In collaboration with the museum in progress, and as part of their campaign against the far right, the *Standard* also published texts by important

⁴ Interestingly, some of the most memorable of these inhabited familiar media formats. For example, 'Please Love Austria' (2000) by Christoph Schlingensiefel was a parody of *Big Brother* that relayed live television images of immigrant 'house mates'.

intellectuals. One was the esteemed French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁵ Bourdieu's field theory offers a useful lens through which to examine this collaboration between the *Standard* and the Get to Attack group.

One of the questions that arises is: what are the risks in relation to the gains of such a collaboration – for both artists and journalists? In summary, Bourdieu asks us to think of cultural production as a field populated by agents who compete for different kinds of capital – economic, but also cultural and symbolic. If, like Bourdieu, we view this example of cultural production as a social process, it becomes a meeting of representatives from opposite sides of the field – each possessing different assets and different aspirations. Bourdieu defines the field of cultural production as subject to the influence of external economic and political powers that affect two opposing poles in different ways. Journalism is found at 'the pole of large scale production', which is subject to the influence of external power, and artists, for historical reasons, are at 'the pole of small scale or restricted production' where outside forces have less effect. A key concept of Bourdieu's is autonomy, which exists at both poles and is always relative.⁶ Journalists are less autonomous because their business is very susceptible to the influence of wealth

⁵ Bourdieu, P., 'For An Austria In the Avant-Garde of a Social Europe', <http://www.mip.at/attachments/258> (29 May 2015)

⁶ Bourdieu, P., (1996) *The Rules of Art*, London: Polity Press

and politics. The hard-won autonomy of artists at the opposite pole protects them from these forces to some extent. This meeting place between artists and journalists is the profession of journalism, which is rich in economic capital. Even so, 'quality' titles such as the *Standard* seek to augment their economic capital by acquiring cultural and symbolic capital, with which to compete against their closest rivals⁷. Rodney Benson describes this capital as 'accumulated prestige',⁸ which can include a newspaper's roster of distinguished contributors. The *Standard* has gained much prestige through its association with the museum in progress. Its organisers have enabled journalists to publish many important artists – including those Bourdieu calls the 'consecrated avant-garde' – Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Dieter Roth – and intellectuals such as Bourdieu, Baudrillard and Habermas. The gains in symbolic and cultural capital for the title are relatively obvious. Given the 'homology' (a favourite word of Bourdieu) between the title's producers and its educated consumers, journalists consider the contributions of artists and intellectuals as bringing added value to the editorial content⁹. Similarly, a newspaper that markets itself as an 'independent' voice, can only benefit from being seen to support the

⁷ In terms of economic capital the *Standard* is in a dominated position when compared with the tabloid *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, that in 1989 reached a staggering 43.1% of the Austrian readership.

⁸ Benson, R., (2006) News Media as a 'Journalistic Field': What Bourdieu Adds to New Institutionalism, and Vice Versa, *Political Communication* 23:187-202.

⁹ Interview by the author with Gregor Auenhammer, 7 Jan 2015, Vienna

‘purist’ (or ‘critical’) cultural producers. (Interestingly, the *Standard* has accrued valuable cultural capital through the acquisition by important art museums of the material evidence of the activities of the museum in progress!)

What are the risks for the newspaper? Journalists are relatively weak in autonomy – or ‘heteronomous’ – and what little autonomy they wield is often used to defend professional standards against the perceived intrusions of economic and political elites – both externally and from inside journalism (for example from the influence of over-zealous advertising departments or owners)¹⁰. Artists may pose a threat to the autonomy of journalists primarily because, like many outsiders, they do not subscribe to professional protocols – such as the adherence to the ‘ideology of objectivity’ that operates within quality broadsheets, endowing them with a symbolic capital that tabloids, for instance, lack. In addition to its non-empirical state, Get to Attack’s hybrid image represents another potential transgression: of the strict demarcation that exists in the profession between design and editorial.¹¹

Gains for artists in this relationship would include the enhanced cultural capital that accrues from being represented by a prestigious arts organisation and

¹⁰ Schudson, M., (2005) ‘Autonomy from What’ in Eds, Benson, R., Neveu, E., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, London: Polity, pp 214-223

¹¹ That said, journalists at the *Standard* are required to transgress within and beyond their editorial area – requisitioning advertising space, for instance, and adding textual information to the newspaper to identify authorship of the artistic content.

the long-term impact this may have for the artists' reputations and (axiomatically) the economic value of future object-based works. It seems, however, that the main intention in this instance was to subordinate cultural production to effect change¹².

A common criticism from within cultural production, of producers who aim to eliminate the distance between art and life praxis - as was attempted here - is that they are utopian. This is a risk the artists were prepared to take. A more common risk for the artist in this situation is a loss of agency. Journalists on the *Standard* exert limits on the freedom of the artists with whom they co-operate, and artists seem to accept this. This secures professional standards and ensures the smooth economic functioning of the title. Over time these journalists have built an elaborate system of rules that includes a ban on placing artists' productions on the front page, a ban on references to sex and religion, and a refusal to negotiate on any aspect of page design. A journalist I spoke to at the *Standard* calls these 'taboos'.¹³ One final taboo is the imperative that all such content must be identified clearly as a co-production of the museum in progress and the artists (this is achieved by prominent labelling). This ensures that the artist's voice will not be confused with the voice of the journalists. Furthermore, it offers some assurance that readers will not confuse

¹² Marko Lulic' interviewed by the author, 8 January 2015, concluded that the artists had been the main beneficiary of this action in terms of what it brought to their discussions.

¹³ The fact that journalists transgress their heteronomy by making autonomous decisions about the placement, presentation and timing of artists' content deserves more attention.

artists' productions with advertising (artists' contributions are places in spaces used for adverts).

In *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu argued that when cultural producers intervene in politics it is in the name of autonomy: having won from bourgeois society an exemption for any social responsibility, they are free to take a stance based on their 'personal impressions and subjective reactions.'¹⁴ By contrast, journalists do not enjoy this privilege. In one of his articles for the *Standard* Bourdieu asserts that the cultural producer in the contemporary context must be a champion of autonomy – someone pressing for ever more autonomy to counter the global threat that neoliberalism poses to cultural diversity. When journalists zone off the artists' content from the editorial content, they contrive (whether intentionally or not) to make a special feature of this autonomy.¹⁵ Bourdieu would recognise the result as 'symbolic action'. In defending their individuality, he writes, cultural producers defend 'the highest universal values'.¹⁶

Many questions arise from such a collaboration; not least, whether the artist 'speaks' or has been given a voice and how this might be evaluated. Or how, with any number of safeguards in place, journalists can prevent images from 'saying'

¹⁴ Bourdieu, P., (1996) *The Rules of Art*, London: Polity Press, pp 139

¹⁵ Arguably, this arrangement suits artists too, helping to protect them from the criticism that they have become compromised by exposure to economic capital.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, P., TransAct Statement II, <http://www.mip.at/attachments/293> (29 May 2015)

things they may come to regret or disavow? What is the reciprocal dynamic between the news that is produced by journalists and the artists' contributions? This kind of production – and there are many examples – demonstrates that cultural producers and journalists are able to transcend the imperative to produce promotional matter. It suggests that the 'institutional' authority of the journalism and the 'society-given' authority of art are not necessarily incompatible, and that the risks of any partnership can be surmounted. Obviously, further research is required if we are to learn more about this phenomenon.

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