

A statement about an exhibition space as social welfare office

We had an exhibition planned, discussed, organised and budgeted to show the works of Burak, Ieva and Runo at Galerie Wedding and in the public space around it. Then some weeks ago, on very short notice, we learned that the planned exhibition would be affected by the fact that the gallery space was turned into a makeshift office for social services. Due to new health and safety regulations because of COVID-19, since March the two rooms in Rathaus Wedding usually designated for showing art became spaces for administering people's applications for social welfare. Unexpectedly this state was prolonged until the end of September. From 9 to 11 am people are queuing for their appointments, from 12 to 7 pm, people are viewing art. Security staff is regulating public access in the morning and gallery staff is welcoming visitors in the afternoon. The front desk of the Amt für Soziales at Bezirksamt Mitte was moved into the exhibition space - with working desks and computers for people to process applications, and with office furniture and perspex sheets to enforce the social distancing rules in place. The same desks and computers are used by the team of Galerie Wedding in the afternoon during exhibition hours. The softly policed space of an art show became a thoroughly policed space of bureaucracy and vice versa.

So the practical conditions for showing artworks were altered drastically, not to say rendered impossible. But the real problem lies elsewhere - art, like life, is no mere practical thing even though it depends on practicalities. It seems there are many contradictions between this highly policed office environment, its protocols to serve and to discipline, and our exhibition. After many meetings with the colleagues of Galerie Wedding, we realised that the tensions between these two kinds of spatial and social protocols cannot be resolved or overcome - neither practically nor conceptually or politically. So we

either had to cancel or postpone the show or let them exist next to each other in this very moment in time and space. We decided to try and improve the situation for everyone involved - everyone that is victim to this prolonged state of exception. For the people queuing for appointments, the people working at the front desk, the team of Galerie Wedding that also has to work inside this space every day, and for visitors to the exhibition. The assumption is this: if the service provided by the makeshift social welfare office is meant to care for others, if it is a public service, a service of care, then why not do it well, care-fully, with attention and care for others, for the art, for the public and for everyone that works there? What follows is not an artwork. It is maybe a gesture, a humble attempt that can also fail. We suggest to offer basic comfort for the people queuing, working and visiting by providing water and seating outside, ventilation and plants inside. The questions we would like to raise in this particular situation and the improvements to this environment we have suggested to the Bezirksamt are this: Are we allowed to alter the social protocols even a little bit in order to point to other possibilities? Why is there one protocol in place for three hours of the day and another for seven hours afterwards? Is this really how a public service should be carried out? And how art is shown? If both answers are yes, why? If both answers are no, what does this tell us about the current state of affairs in this city, in this society?

We believe that by addressing the general current state of exception, which is presented on a micro scale in the situation of Galerie Wedding's forced merger with the Sozialamt, the following question becomes apparent: Is there a necessary contradiction between a social or a welfare state and contemporary art? The idea behind a state - whether it is called social or welfare, is that of a social contract. This

social contract should not be a question of urgency, necessity, priority or usefulness. It should not be called into question by a "state of exception". These notions are all poisoned with ideology and they are prone to serve the deeds of those who generate their power from the generosity of "a people" but don't act caring towards those being governed by them. So if we succumb to the current state of exception and its pressure to cancel, postpone, lay off or to sideline everything that is considered unnecessary, non-essential or useless we will find ourselves as agents of the prevailing concepts and ideologies that are responsible for how we ended up here in the first place.

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