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STREAMERS

Scientific preface - opening of the COVID-19 column in front of the Vienna House of Economy, Praterstern

Artist: Benoît Maubrey

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The written word. The spoken word. The thought word. The coded word. Words without voice. Words with voice. Words without body. Words with body.

Thank you very much for the invitation and the possibility to speak a kind of scientific preface to the COVID column just built here in this cold time. Many points of reference came to my mind, so it was not so easy to sort out what might be relevant for today. First of all, I

would like to express my thanks to the artist for the preparatory conversation a few days ago, and also to Georg Weckwerth, who made this contact possible. I would also like to thank the eight-person team in the background, who braved the cold here and linked media technology and sculptural elements in public space. Benoît Maubrey's artistic work, especially his artistic strategy of exploring public space with sound sculptures, already has a long tradition. In Vienna, an initial idea for sound ships on the Danube in the wake of the pandemic led to joint deliberations between the artist and curator to create a reference to the plague column on the Graben.

It was there that the initial spark to erect a Covid Column out of gratitude for surviving the early 21st century pandemic was born to promote fun and everyday, spontaneous togetherness in public spaces.

Although the plague column, consecrated in 1693, was a thank-you gift from Leopold I - who had fled the city at the height of the epidemic around 1679 and later returned - it always stood for secular and spiritual power and superiority. About 80,000 people died in Vienna.

The plague - so it was assumed at the time - was God-given and incidentally, the city overcame the 2nd Viennese Turkish siege in 1683 almost at the same time - and so the Plague Column/Gnadensäule/Treifaltigkeitssäule also became a secular victory monument.

Even today, the plague column on the Graben, which was created by many artists of the Viennese Baroque period in a single casting, is a very strongly religiously influenced place that refers to the forces and powers of its time. In this context, it is remarkable for considerations regarding the forces and powers of today that the COVID column in the 21st century no longer stands on the Graben in the 1st district, but in late capitalism gathers publics in front of the House of Viennese Economy.

What is also common to both buildings - please allow me this feminist interjection - is that today, too, it is almost exclusively men who have been at work, which perhaps manifests itself a little in the somewhat fallish design language of the present column.

We know that the project of the Covid Column is based on the assumption of a historical promise, even an unfulfilled hope - the Corona pandemic would be ideally overcome with the inauguration of the column and one could return to joyful everyday life. In Austria, 13,500-14,000 people have died so far, 2850 of them in Vienna. It is important to address words of remembrance to the victims of the pandemic, their friends and families.

This brings us back to the work of Benoît Maubrey. Benoît, he says, comes from a family of poets and had a great interest in language, interpretations and linguistics. He was fascinated by the idea of letting words fly into the public space. It is there in public space -

or rather here - where they vibrate and create resonance. Flying words.

They are partly written words like these. Texts and tweets. They are spoken words. Chants and calls. They are also thought words, the ones that remain unspoken despite all the acoustics. Thoughts of passersby. And they are coded words. The word creations of

algorithms. Social media. It is an interplay, a polyphony, of spoken, written, coded words on quite a few channels framed by new and old

technologies, sound chests, boom boxes. Unexcited excited.

In urban studies, which focuses on the study of public spaces, we have been dealing with the changing relationship between public space and the public sphere for years. What is the difference? In the public sphere, people meet each other, so it is about the unfolding of public life. In the public space, views meet, so it is about public opinion and how it is formed.

We have heard a lot of grave references to public space in the last three decades. It is being privatized, commercialized, mediatized. Its appropriation no longer takes place solely through democracy-strengthening groups and individuals, but also through populists, lateral thinkers and dissenters. But that is precisely its quality as a democratic space: not being occupied by the expression of a single political point of view. Demonstrations like those of the opponents of vaccination have also recently generated counter-demonstrations (e.g. #yeswecare). So public affairs are contested, fought over. And that is good and important.

Apart from new forms of political violence in the public sphere, which are in any case to be condemned and sanctioned - leaving these aside for the moment - the public sphere is currently functioning quite well, from a political science point of view. The problem lies

rather in the illness of the public sphere. This is the space of action where public opinion is formed. And this is where the coded word of algorithms comes into play (cue Cambridge Analytica): political opinion currently no longer emerges publicly; it has retreated, into closed forums, clubs and chat groups. Public opinion (let's sketch an ideal type of the 20th century) arose primarily in a very differentiated media landscape, which was in part very strongly regulated by the public. This regulation came into being after World War II because people had learned from the horror and inhuman terror of dictatorship and the Holocaust what

happens when one political point of view, and only one, dominates the public sphere.

Two New York colleagues once considered public space as the geography of the public sphere. This means that we can explore the state of the sphere of public opinion formation

in public space. And - now I come back to the artwork - "Streamers - A Covid Sculpture" helps us in exactly this endeavor. Why? Because Benoît Maubrey brings the new formats of mediatization (Twitter and other social media) back into the public space. He opens up the club, the forum, the chat and invites them to become public again. Public therefore also has to do with openness. Spoken, written and coded words become spoken, audible in this way. They can be fought

over again here, in a political process that often only takes place very subliminally in everyday life before it becomes large, politicized and perceptible. Mustafa Dikeç, a French intellectual, has explored how political thinkers and philosophers trouble space in their concepts of politics and democracy. This space of everyday life, of our everyday experience, the lived space of assembled bodies. Among the thinkers were Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Ernesto Laclau, and Hannah Arendt. And Dikeç came to a conclusion that I don't want to deprive you of: space, says Mustafa Dikeç, is essential for thinking about the political - that is, what we conceive of as democratic action. Space, he says, is a mode of political thinking - space is a mode of political thinking. It is all the more

gratifying when this space is thought of in many ways, encompassing both the virtual spaces, the discursive social spaces of the telephone, and the places of real encounters. Benoît Maubrey and his team have succeeded in doing just that.

Just as Hannah Arendt once said about the table that it gathers people and opinions, sound sculptures can also gather people and opinions. The struggle for democratic values and how these are inscribed in the space, however, is the task of all of us, and not only that of the artist.