

The Potential of the Contradictory in Digital Media – The Example of the Political Art Game *PoliShot*

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Abstract

When they created *PoliShot*, a political Dada game and interactive installation, the authors were confronted quite unexpectedly with the question what is morally or ethically tolerable in digital games. When it was exhibited, it provoked shocked and concerned reactions from curators and visitors alike. The stumbling block was the use of violence, or more specifically, asking the players to act violently in the game. The authors take their experiences as an occasion to enquire into and discuss the contradictory of the actual and the virtual; of concept and content. They attempt to draw historical and contemporary parallels and reflect on how art production is not limited to the work, but includes the artists and the audience as essential players in a dynamic system of meanings, motives and interpretations, full of (un-) intended and (un-) anticipated conflicts, provocations, break downs and shifts – creating exciting and challenging opportunities for play.

Introduction

Despite questionable content, shooting games of all kinds continue to be extremely popular (see e.g. Fritz & Fehr 2003, JIM-Study 2012, Kolokythas 2013)¹. Roughly speaking, these games reward the player with a high score for skillfully shooting enemies of some description. For Fritz (1995:23), the games realize the players' disposition towards speed, aggression, instant reward and action². Murray (1997:146) observes that »fighting game[s]« have technically developed a »tight visceral match between the game controller and the screen action« which affords the player a very direct »sense of agency« and »requires very little imaginative effort«. Although the settings of the games are overwhelmingly violent scenarios, only few people appear to outright refuse to play them, i.e. reject the act of shooting. Fritz & Fehr (2003:53) see the reasons in the players' wish to realize power, dominance and control; which are closely linked to violence – often articulated as the injuring of an opponent (suffering is however not part of these games). Many players find the games fascinating because they can relate their life situations to the patterns in the games (ibid.:51). If the playing of violent games was motivated by the need or possibility to safely act out, to release or to channel aggressive and destructive impulses, if the games had a compensating

¹ Fritz and Fehr (2003) find that games with violent, aggressive and warlike content are the most popular ones. The first-person shooter «Call of Duty» is, according to the German JIM-Study (2012:49) one of the favorite games of 12 to 19 year old boys. At present, eight of the games in the top-ten list of PC-World (2013) are shooting games.

² 'Schnelligkeit, Aggressivität, [...] rasche[r] Erfolg und [...] Lebendigkeit' (Fritz 1995:23)

and regulating function³, they would presumably be accepted by society as useful and valuable tools.

But this is not the case. On the contrary, the games are suspected of having adverse effects on their players and on society in general. They raise fears about connections between violence in games and violent behavior in everyday life, that is, if one is motivated by the other⁴. Much attention is regularly directed towards the issue after so-called school shootings, such as Littleton (US, 1999) and Erfurt (FRG, 2002). However, Kunczik and Zipfel report in their study (2010) no *significant* correlation between violent actions in play and violent actions in everyday life. While their findings indicate that it is *possible* that medial violence influences the recipients' aggression levels, the effect is only moderate and temporary (Kunczik & Zipfel 2010:13). Violent medial representations are also only *one* factor in a complex network of reasons and causes for the occurrence of physical violence, and computer games have no greater impact than other media (ibid.).

What is striking about violent game scenarios – with the exception of military games about the most popular wars (e.g. World War II, Vietnam, Afghanistan) – is that they are mostly set in *invented or fake* scenarios with very limited artificial and stereotypical situations. Games in which the players perform political assassinations (as in *JFK Reloaded* (2004)) or first-degree-murders (e.g. for reasons of greed or jealousy) are nearly non-existent. The question why such games are not realized (for lack of player interest or because of moral considerations?) remains open for now.

We were confronted quite unexpectedly with the question what is morally or ethically tolerable in digital games, when we created *PoliShot*, a political Dada game and interactive installation, in 2009. When it was shown in the »Art in Action«⁵ and »Computer Art 2.010«⁶ exhibitions, it provoked surprising (i.e. shocked and concerned) reactions from curators and visitors alike. The stumbling block was the use of violence, or more specifically, asking the players to act violently in the game. We take this experience as an occasion to enquire into and discuss the contradictory of the actual and the virtual; of concept and content. We attempt to reflect upon the blendings and blurrings of moral/ethical, psychological and also historical boundaries in digital media, and to (re-) trace the influence the computer's particular medial character had and has on these.

PoliShot: PoliticalGame and ArtMedium

PoliShot was initially created in the University course *Art in Action*⁷. The course addressed practical and theoretical aspects of play, interaction and art; more specifically, it was focused on digital games, interactive installations and the Dada art movement.

³ The catharsis theory (proposed for instance by Harvey Carr) maintains that games are played as a means to purge or drain antisocial energy (Carr in McLean & Hurd, 2012:28; cf. Retter 2003:11); it has not been convincingly proven (Kunczik & Zipfel 2010:4).

⁴ The interest appears mainly focused on the direction *game to ordinary life*. But Kunczik & Zipfel (2010:10) indicate that people with aggressive personality structures also prefer violent games.

⁵ *Art in Action* exhibition, Weserburg – Museum für moderne Kunst in Bremen, March 18th–April 5th, 2010.

⁶ *Computer Art 2.010* exhibition, with works from the *Goldener Plotter 2010* competition, Innovationszentrum Wiesenbusch in Gladbeck, August 29th – September 26th, 2010 and Städtische Galerie – sohle 1 in Bergkamen, April 1st – July 3rd, 2011.

⁷ Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath, Bernard Robben, Susanne Grabowski. *Art in Action: Computerspiele, interaktive Kunst und neue Schnittstellen* (Computer Games, Interactive Art and New Interfaces), Course, University of Bremen and University of the Arts (Hochschule für Künste), Bremen, Winter Semester 2009/10.

The participants of the course were asked to develop »Dada games as interactive installations«. The games should involve typical Dada ingredients (such as collages, sounds and sarcasm) and three specific components:

- A mascot, for fun (in *PoliShot: Kurt Schwitters*);
- A household appliance as control device (in *PoliShot: An electric iron*); and
- A certain *sweetness*, based on individual interpretations (in *PoliShot* the use of cute objects such as a pink swim ring or Mrs. Leyen's braids).

Additionally, the games were to be multiplayer games with at least two players, winable by one of the players (or a team of players), and based on exciting and fast-paced game play. *PoliShot* is designed for four players who support the fight of Dadaists against political lies and political »crimes«.

We were offered to exhibit the student works at the *Weserburg: Museum für moderne Kunst* in Bremen. For this opportunity we revised *PoliShot* from a technical demo, which demonstrated the mechanics of a shooting gallery-style action game: Cardbord figures popped up; 1920s gangsters were to be shot, molls were to be spared. It was a kind of first-person shooter⁸, involving the basic components hero/player, opponents, weapons, levels, health, score and time. This is mentioned because the original game's mechanics provided us with one of the main associations in *PoliShot*: It reminded us of the well-known Dada event *L'Affaire Barrès*. That performance included a stage on which a person symbolized by a puppet was accused and verbally attacked.

»L'Affaire Barrès« and the context to *PoliShot*

In early April 1921, flyers distributed in Paris announced a trial to be held on May 13th. The famous and notorious writer *Maurice Barrès* was accused of *crimes against the security of the human mind* [»*Verbrechens gegen die innere Sicherheit des menschlichen Geistes*«] (Hörner & Kiepe 1996:5). The Dadaists *Aragon* and *Breton* were disappointed and enraged about the popular writer's exuberant patriotism and the contradictions in his political positions (ibid.:17–24). It was a mock trial, but addressed a serious dilemma: Does somebody become guilty who betrays the libertarian ideals of his youth by adopting and advocating conformalist ideas only to gain power and influence (ibid.:91). Typical Dada elements in this process are the theme of morals, and the fact that the accused was represented by a puppet; atypical was Dada's role of judge. The trial's accusation was not only directed against Barrès, but also against Dada itself, and the trial became a trial of Dada (ibid.:95).

The ensuing discussions drove *Breton* to question the *future of any revolutionary attitude* [»*Zukunft jedweder revolutionären Haltung*«], a position from which the Dadaist *Tzara* decidedly distanced himself (ibid.:114). Conflicts between a number of Dadaists escalated, and as a result, several of them turned to surrealism (ibid.:112, 94). The process led to an internal éclat that broke up the most provocative artistic movements of the time.

PoliShot is, in a way, an updated, digital, interactive version of the *L'Affaire Barrès*: We were intrigued by the idea of a public art trial with the accused party being and being not (re-) present (-ed), and by the possible overlap of art and play. While not staging a public trial, we developed an interactive installation to be shown in public places. It was concerned with

⁸ It was a 2D game with a fixed player perspective and unmovable position in the game world; not a 3D world which can be traversed, etc.

morals, more specifically, political lies: An common everyday topic, we thought of questions of responsibility, corruption, clientele politics, social imbalances, etc. *PoliShot* was intended as a mock trial against the politicians of our time in which we addressed their lies to protect our human minds. We made public their »crimes« in the areas of social, education, family, environmental and foreign politics. As in Dada's mock trial, the presence of the accused is not required; indeed, it would get in the way of things. Instead, we developed our own version of proxy puppets. This process was predicated on the notion of transformation across boundaries, that is, mixing references to the historical Dada event with today's politicians, political issues, interestes and positions, and creating a playable game. The game is meant as an »as if«, but in contrast to the *L'Affaire Barrès*, participants in the game are asked to act, according to the simple and rigid rules of the first-person shooter: Defend yourself! Shoot and win! The actions of the players are not only supported by visuals, but also by sounds and physical devices.

***PoliShot*: The Dada game installation**

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The setup of *PoliShot* is shown in Figure 1. The installation consists of a projection, an ironing board, various input devices, two sets of headphones, and additional items; a Mac *PowerBook* fitted to the underside of the board is running the game software. The interaction devices mix Dada traditions with gaming conventions: Players can choose between an iron, a joystick or a mouse to control the game. The plastic flower, the artificial grass, the swim ring and the slingshot supplement the setup; these items draw a (non-digital, tangible) connection and create a passage between the game world and everyday life.



Figure 1: The *PoliShot* installation

Before the game starts, it informs its players about its content, setting, win conditions and controls (Figure 2). The navigation is straight forward: Mouse clicks or joystick button presses select a scene and a mock weapon. In the game, a left click shoots, a right click reloads. All players do is to select, to (re-) load and to shoot – very simple actions which

reference, slightly ironic, the conceptual plainness of shooting games (which paradoxically have developed technically way beyond the level of *Wolfenstein 3D*, and have become highly complex and sophisticated).

In the game, Dadaists oppose politicians because they hate liars, depression, oppression and weapons. They seem to be members of the helpless society for which they standing for – but this is just an illusion. The task of the players is to help the artists by silencing the politicians with mock weapons (e.g. a silicone gun) or flatten the cardboard figures with an iron. Attention! There are not only politicians popping up (quickly and easily identifiable by their carrying weapons, and being depicted (partly) in color, Figure 3), but also Dadaists (unarmed, and displayed in black/white, Figure 4) whos shooting results in a decrease of truth, articulated as a score deduction.



Figure 2: Title screen



Figure 3: Collaged puppets: Politicians



Figure 4: Dadaists

The game is made interesting and challenging for players of different calibres by offering a range of »weapons« with different properties (Figure 5). The *slingshot* is the most challenging device for the most daring and skilled artists: It needs to be (re-) loaded for every single shot. The *fun gun* shoots six rounds per reload, and is targeted at medium cool Dadaists. The *silicone gun* sprays 40 bullets easily all over the place, which is not very demanding, and every amateur artist can manage. Depending on the success of the player, one of two screens is displayed after the game (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Selection of mock weapons

PoliShot draws its subject matter from German politics. We see *PoliShot*'s murderous content as a play on the violent anti-social politics and decisions which were made at the time in Germany. The five political areas which are addressed in the game, are articulated as different levels or scenes (Figure 7). Prominent protagonists of German politics feature in the game as cardboard puppets, shooting at the player. The puppets of the politicians can be recognized and assigned to political areas through their clothing and props (for instance, the puppet of the minister for family affairs poses in pajamas with a teddy bear). The politicians' collages are fabricated from historical and artistic material, the collages of the Dadaists contain almost only historical photographic material. The figures are made the Dada way as provocative and sarcastic collages. All game objects and scenes are ironically or sarcastically distorted. Even the in-game action with cardboards popping up randomly (Figure 7, last image) can be seen as complementing the collaged scene. The super mixer computer was used to combine new and old materials, methods and contents.



Hurra, victory!



Defeat

Figure 6: Win and lose screens

PoliShot uses the metaphor that politicians »bombard« the public with empty speeches and nonsense programs which are full of lies and contradictions. The players, as members of the public, fight (fire) back. But leaving apart the metaphors, players shoot at human figures which look like well-known politicians. So literally taken the game is blatantly violent and its statement dubious.



Social politics (Harz IV): Organized poverty for the masses



Environmental politics: More nuclear power to the people



(Non-) education politics



Foreign politics: Oh, nice! Weapons and war



Family politics: Restrict yourself



In-game screen shot (family politics)

Figure 7: Political areas/scenes

PoliShot: Blending elements and blurring boundaries

PoliShot blends dadaistic, political and playful elements and blurs their boundaries. Several mixes occur; we observe an interesting moment of interplay between the mixture of formal boundaries and the mixture of content.

Blending of *forms* and *contents* blurs *actual* and *virtual* boundaries

One of Dada's prominent innovations was the collage. While at first materials such as newspapers, brochures, leaflets, posters, beer mats, etc. were used to create new compositions, soon the photo collage was added to the repertoire. We used the technique of the photo collage extensively to create the visual assets for *PoliShot*. Dadaists enjoyed to combine things that ordinarily did *not* belong together, e.g. a woman's head on a man's body. Both parts exist in everyday life, but their combination is a freak. This newly discovered area created entirely new aesthetic possibilities. We locate *PoliShot* within this area. The players' recognition of well-known people or objects, such as Frau Merkel's face and the swim ring, invites feelings of familiarity and trust; the unreal composition by collage causes irritations and feelings of strangeness and distance. Both raise questions of the reality or validity of images, as well as social rules and norms (e.g. showing *Frau* chancellor in a short dress). They show and open up a possibility to play with potential but not actual images and actions. It is this play with incompatibilities and contradictions which point us towards new possibilities and suggest ways to overcome restrictive structures.

The computer-supported medium of play even offers participants a simultaneous experience of times, techniques and worlds that is not available elsewhere. The collage in *PoliShot* emerges as a method of what Bolter and Grusin (2004) term *remediation*. That is, the combination of different times, arts and media to create a sort of hypermedium that is experienced directly and unmediated by the player (cf. Bolter & Grusin 2004:13). The medium is one of transformative compression.

Another aspect of the abstract, symbolic or metaphorical representation is the blending of action and content, or a blending of interpretations. While we offer players to use a representation of a mock gun in the game as a means of self-defence, some people use guns to attack. While we use the act of shooting as a metaphor and a functional game mechanic, some people use the act of shooting as a means to commit crimes. While we shoot on collages and caricatures of politicians which are permanent placeholders, some people shoot politicians.

We were surprised and irritated by some players' literal reading of the game as a politicians murder game. But maybe it has to do with a phenomenon Georg Christoph Tholen (1997) terms a *digital difference*, which refers to the contradictory positions of representation and construction. Media not simply reproduce copied content, but essentially construct specific aspects of the world (cf. Tholen 1997:115f.). A representation is given a meaning by somebody where, actually, there is nothing to mean, because the *image* or also the representation of a gun (e.g. a device such as a mouse, joystick or iron) is far from *being* a gun (see chapter *Cake* in this volume). Nevertheless an actual situation is constructed immediately, as real as it can be. The medial world of play *is considered* as a real and unmediated world.

Fritz and Fehr (2003:57) demonstrate that adolescents have their own systems of assessment for physical and virtual violence that are appropriate to their situation of life. They insist on the computer game as a value-free space which adheres to different rules, laws and principles than ordinary life (ibid). They differentiate clearly between both worlds – much more so than many adults do (ibid.). This position identifies the problem of mixing up actual and virtual worlds as a generation problem. It is probably not the only relevant explanation or possible interpretation, but at least it supports our experiences – the people who most resolutely opposed the showing of *PoliShot* were certainly not young adults.

Games and art can be understood or misunderstood, create or solve conflicts, console or confuse, just like other media. But what they specifically offer, is to open associative and interesting spaces for experiences, observations and conflicts with ourselves and the world around us. These irritations make us become aware of the possibility and necessity to reflect upon the world and actively change it at the same time.

Blending of *contents* blurs *moral* boundaries

At the heart of *PoliShot* is the recognition and the flattening of bogus political programmes. For instance, the social reform that became known as *Hartz IV* was described as a programme to create wealth and prosperity⁹, but it turned out to be, in fact, the very opposite (which is the topic of the scene in the game, figure 7). In the game, the player is asked to interact with the politicians responsible for such nonsense, who continue to offend and »attack« people with their meaningless, misleading and absurd talk (signified by them carrying different weapons). The game is then understood as a symbolic (gun) battle between participant and politician.

The act of shooting was seen by some players as a dubious, questionable, objectionable or alarming activity. »I am not going to kill any politicians«, as people put it. We were surprised by this feedback, because we did not expect people to focus selectively on some parts of the game while disregarding others; e.g. accepting the weapons in the game as guns, but ignoring the ironic collaged images; or interpreting the game mechanics as killing, but rejecting the critical artistic/Dada context the game offered. If anybody was metaphorically murdered in the game it was the player and society, and not the other way round! How did such a reversal occur? Or did the fact that it did happen mirror how successful political manoeuvres direct people's attention at one aspect while diverting it from another? To focus on the violent side of the game offered an easy way to ignore the rest of it. Or was it the moment of participation that people rejected, being subconsciously aware of them being guilty of active participation or tacit acceptance of making a mess of real life?

We had trouble to understand why some players regarded the digital shooting of cardboard collages with photos of the faces of politicians as a »morally objectionable act«. If the installation asked people to »shoot at politicians« and if the work should be removed from the show was debated at length with the jury of the *Goldener Plotter 2010* exhibition. Finally, the jury decided in favor of the freedom of art, and to include the installation in the exhibition.

The controversial discussion prompted us to reflect upon how *violence* is part of the game. Is it not violent when certain political decisions cause problems and hardship for (some parts of) society? Is violence simply another word for power and potency and are they not everyday aspects or attributes of every society? Are the crummy mock weapons in the game not rather an admission of people's limited individual powers and also an indication of our non-violent position? Should they not express our powerlessness against power? We believe our game can be seen as an artistic and non-violent way to express people's dissatisfaction with and their alienation from politics, and to draw attention to its deplorable state. Fritz and Fehr (2003:54f) support our approach when they explain that (actual physical) violence is rooted not in media use but in situations created by society, e.g. through deceptive political propaganda strategies or cultural repression and suppression. In this case, medial representations follow reality: When people perceive everyday and normal violent reality as

⁹ For information on the Hartz IV program which started out as a labour market reform see www.sozialhilfe24.de/hartz-iv-4-alg-ii-2/was-ist-hartz-iv-4.html (in German).

unbearable, unacceptable and morally wrong, commodified medial representations of violence offer a way of compensation, for instance, in computer games (ibid.). Weapons and violence are then the expression of misguided and futile attempts of the players' (self-) empowerment. Violence is not glorified or trivialised but appears as a necessary and appropriate method to gain influence and control in play (ibid:57). *PoliShot* only offers the players the possibility to answer violence with shooting; and no other alternatives. It intentionally mirrors the lack of options in ordinary (political) life.

Because of our experiences we asked players specifically about their opinions with regard to moral concerns and discussed the issue of games' violence with them. We made three observations:

- 1) Politicians are granted sovereign rights. When players recognized the faces on the cardboards they came into conflict with a moral code that forbids murder, particularly of members of the government, church or one's own family (interestingly, nobody either recognized the artists or had quarrels shooting at *them*). People would feel uneasy if their parents, partners or children were featured in a violent game. An artistic setting has no relevance in these cases. We have to keep off the political grass, otherwise anarchy looms.
- 2) If the figures are not identified or recognized as politicians, for instance, by children, teens and players not familiar with German politics, people had a great time enjoying the game and no problems whatsoever to play. For this group of players the virtual representation is object, never subject. Relevant is only the game mechanics: Survival outdoes morals (cf. Fritz & Fehr 2003:54). The shift from virtual object to subject is triggered by the recognizable heads on top of the collaged or distorted figures. Some players found the heads problematic, especially when they sympathised with the (real life) politicians. Fritz and Fehr (ibid.) note that the display of virtual violence can become a problem if it is too closely modelled on the ordinary world.
- 3) For most players, the artistic context is not present during the game. Relevant are rather players' individual contexts which are employed to assess, judge and condemn the game. Generally speaking, players with a pedagogical background reacted sceptically or disapprovingly, and players who were professionally or voluntarily involved in politics reacted bewildered or irritated.

The game is not located in an empty space, and context and frame are not to be disregarded. The game was intended a work to be exhibited in art museums. It was not designed for children, and it was not distributed for general use. It became obvious that delicate or touchy political or public affairs are observed or examined quite closely and critically, even when they are presented and addressed in an art context, which is generally seen as free and liberal. Why appears art suspicious when it takes up topics and themes routinely covered by other media? Art was always used as a way to point out and to comment upon problems of society. It would be surprising if this does not include violence.

The intensity and ferocity of the reactions that can be provoked today by an art project hit us quite unprepared. In the following section we will therefore deliberate if effects like these are probably part of the orchestration of art in our »Society of Spectacle« (»*La Société du spectacle*«, Guy Debord 1996).

Querulousness in play, art and the world around us

Is the occasional public excitement or outcry about art merely an act or does it reflect a society's actual moral rules or ethical boundaries? It might prove to be integral part of the process how art is produced, perceived and admitted into popular culture.

Why make art if nobody cares? Why play if things are just as they are in ordinary life? Are art as well as play not predicated on being *different* than ordinary life? Are freedom and irrationality not paths to places where nobody has been before? Phantasy and insanity drive people to do what can be done – to provoke, to reject and to show what people could not see and experience otherwise. Art and play are serious, in their own ways, clearly divided from and smack in the middle of everything else, severely limited and dangerously boundless.

Art and play are free from moral obligations and constraints – anything goes! (See chapter Cake in this volume.) An artwork or a game can realize things that can or should not be realized in the real world; they experiment without consequences beyond themselves. We act as-if, and have a tremendous time even when hundreds of heads roll or cute little lemmings are blown to pieces. We do and we can do because it is possible, and we simply follow what is inside of us, or outside, and it is alright. Or is it not? While *PoliShot* was finally allowed into the exhibition, its chances to be awarded the prize of the jury were low, to say the least. This appears to indicate the existence of a blurry line between what is within and what is without accepted boundaries of taste and convention. Traces of this deviation between good art and bad art can easily be found.

Media artist Jens Stober's first-person shooter »1378 (km)« (Figure 8) was met with considerable criticism, e.g. from the director of the Berlin Wall Foundation¹⁰ Axel Klausmeier. The game's setting are the 1378 km of the former inner-German border. Players can flee the GDR, or ambush refugees as an East German border guard. The game was blamed for featuring crude and degrading content (cf. Berliner Morgenpost 2010). It addresses topics such as the no man's land, defection to West Germany and the order to shoot the so-called *Republikflüchtlinge*, which Schober intends to use to generate interest in very recent history. The game's release was planned for the twentieth anniversary of Germany's reunification in October 2010 (cf. Majica 2010), but after much controversial discussion the »serious game« was only released with several months delay (cf. Süß-Demuth 2010).



Figure 8: Screenshot »1378 (km)«¹¹

Similarly to *PoliShot*, *1378 (km)* was quickly accused of being amoral because players engaged in the act of shooting. But much of German history is inhuman and tasteless. Why should this be concealed or hidden by a medium aimed at inviting a critical historical debate?

¹⁰ www.stiftung-berliner-mauer.de/en

¹¹ Image source: www.chip.de/ii/9/4/8/2/6/4/0/923888a171e4d7de.jpg

The game is not about slaughtering people and can only be won by not firing a single shot (HfG 2014, cf. Süß-Demuth 2010). The hasty public rejection of the game suggests a political interest in selecting the topics that are suitable for art. For this observation it does not matter if the game was indeed intended as an art work, or merely as a history education project.

It is clearer in the case of Jonathan Meese's work that the reaction to a work of art is an intrinsic part of it. The well-known Meese performed a *Hitlergruß* twice during a panel discussion about art's megalomania [*Größenwahn in der Kunst*] at the University of Kassel just before the launch of the *documenta* 2012 and argued for his signature project, the »Dictatorship of Art« [*Diktatur der Kunst*] (cf. hr-online 2013). Predictably, this led to a debate about whether declaring something as art guaranteed a free ride outside the law¹² (cf. *ibid.*). Following the incident, Meese was actually legally indicted, but later acquitted, because he could convincingly demonstrate that the action was part of a performance and not at all expression of a political attitude (cf. *ibid.* and Ackermann 2014). While the judge indicated that art does not suspend or invalidate the law, she saw Meese's act as a work of art rather than a political demonstration (hr-online 2013). The incident could well have been staged to attract publicity (Reichwein 2013), and political statements appear to work exceedingly well for this. Art is certainly attracted (if not asked) to explore borderline areas (see chapter *Playing on the Edge* in this volume). Where one person might use the breaching of morals to invite critical discussion and reflection, another person might mainly or purely seek attention and increased market values.



Figure 9: Jonathan Meese in a typical pose¹³

There is little doubt about the intentions of Damien Hirst. A trespass of moral values is turned quite directly into monetary valuables. Ulrich characterizes Hirst's work as »not a friendly art which appeal to a majority, but one with which at most only the victorious minority of society can identify« (Ullrich 2011:113, our transl.). Art had become a way of »creating icons of capitalism and celebrating its power« (*ibid.*:112, our transl.). Most strikingly, this is celebrated in the work »The Love of God« (Figure 10). Hirst had a platinum cast of a human skull fitted with 8601 diamonds; the work was produced at a cost of an estimated 50 Million British Pounds (about 75 Million Euros) in 2007 (cf. *ibid.*:91). Any increase in attention that can be directed at such a work can be measured in price: Not *action art* but *auction art*, according to Peter Weibel (2008) – 'the price tag is the art', as proposed by British journalist Nick Cohen (Riding 2007). But if »The Love of God« was only about (the diamonds') value, why a skull, and why the title? Is it blasphemy? Wolfgang Ullrich (cf. 2011:97) explains that art's *dignity* is fueled by foreignness and divergence from common tastes and norms, and offers a glimpse of a different world. But today the dignity of the transcendence of everyday life had been

¹² In Germany it is forbidden to show Nazi symbols such as the *Hitlergruß* in public (§86a StGB).

¹³ Image source: Ikono 2013

transformed into a dignity of potency, that is, art not primarily created by artists but demanded by people who have the potential to pay for them¹⁴ (cf. *ibid.*:98). And this clientele appreciates if the irrational high price of a work is reflected in its motif (*ibid.*:102f.).



Figure 10: Damien Hirst: For the Love of God (2007)¹⁵

The skull was not selected by accident. As symbol of death, it represents so much existential pathos that can easily be combined with an incomprehensibly high price tag. The project appears to be similar to a potlatch, where the value of a gift indicates the giver's position. Hirst's art is a curious confluence of money, power, life and death, and a demonstration of his position in the capitalist society (*ibid.*:102). Finally, Hirst continues a well-established tradition of art: To show people's influence and wealth (*ibid.*:103) – all the art works described above play in one way or the other with structures and balances of power – as *PoliShot* does.

Conclusion

Initially, people were drawn to play *PoliShot* by the collaged visuals, and were curious to play it. This was intentional; but starting from the surface of the game, we wanted players to experience and discover on their own the irony, the sarcasm and also the bitterness of the situations the game is based upon which are to some degree masked. We were attempting this with the means Dada afforded us. Contradictions are used to point out contradictions. Art does not show things that exist anyway but things that are hidden otherwise, says Paul Klee (cf. Klee 1990:76). Art and play refer to the ordinary world and simultaneously distance themselves from it. Both play with the world and against it, and create meaning. Dada's sense was nonsense. This is reflected by the trivial game play of *PoliShot*. It would quite easily be possible to change the game to make it more sophisticated and elaborate, and less offending or more absurd. For instance, the shooting could be replaced by some other action. The sound could be more dadaistic, cardboards could actually be ironed, bullet holes could be turned into letters and words, etc. But we like the moment of provocation the original design provides. That is something people have to cope with. Otherwise there would be a dictatorship of mainstream morality and gentle ideas of decency. Only obvious slapstick would be tolerated to be critical, or established high art, both far removed from everyday experience to avoid treading on anybody's toes or trespassing the boundaries of good taste. Rattattattattattattattatatattatata! Dadaists aim to bewilder the world, and Dada is the very essence of scandal and provocation.

¹⁴ Although in this case, it remains questionable if Hirst was able to successfully sell the work.

¹⁵ Image source: Ullrich (2011:91)

But the point is not to bemoan on how art is misunderstood in society. It is easy to propagate the independence of art when it is not seen as intended by the artist: Context, reactions and side effects are disregarded. Art becomes actively marginalized. Russian curator Andrej Jerofejew says that Russian politicians would prefer to see modern artists neutralized in some kind of zoo, out of the way, and not doing any harm (Rasche 2013). In the times of Dada, art was regularly and severely attacked from all directions with all means and mechanisms. When looking at examples of contemporary art production (Jonathan Meese and Damien Hirst), it appears that today's art critique is in many cases expressed rather politely and moderately if at all. Art is increasingly seen as something disconnected and free from everyday relevance. Does this reflect the tendency to perceive art simply as a thing? But art is more than a thing: It is a system which includes the artist, the process, the work, the reception and the critique, and which is embedded into society. It is part of this system that different parts can contradict each other. This is not a problem to avoid but a challenge to accept, and a game to play.

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