

A short overview of the campaign “Kulturarbeit ist Arbeit” arranged by the KUPF – Kulturplattform OÖ during April and July 2008

I would like to give you a short overview of the campaign “Kulturarbeit ist Arbeit” best translated as “cultural work is labour” which happened during April and July 2008.

I would like to follow along 4 points, starting with a brief description of the organisation KUPF, talk secondly about the initial points of the campaign, tell you then what happened during the campaign, and close with some perspectives and questions.

1. A short description of the KUPF – Kulturplattform OÖ

The KUPF – Cultural Platform Upper Austria is the umbrella organization representing the cultural policy interests of over 100 cultural initiatives in Upper Austria.

The KUPF sees itself as taking an active part in cultural policies. It acts on behalf of its members to secure conditions for regional cultural initiatives, to improve these conditions and further develop them in cooperation with activists and protagonists.

The cultural-political self-conception of the KUPF goes beyond the geographical borders of Upper Austria and the subject matter of independent cultural work; gender equality is a leitmotiv of its work.

The KUPF speaks up and takes action:

- * where tendencies hostile to culture become perceptible;
- * where culture and cultural work are in danger of being exploited by (party) political interests to maximize populist votes;
- * where culture and cultural work are subordinated and sacrificed to economic interests.

The KUPF’s Tasks

The KUPF’s work rests on three pillars:

Cultural Policies

For the KUPF, cultural politics means: actively taking part in shaping cultural policies to ensure, improve and further develop regional cultural initiatives in all their diversity.

Union

The KUPF – Cultural Platform reacts quickly to legislative changes, focusing attention on the social contexts of self-determined cultural work. It supports cultural initiatives if problems occur in cultural work.

Service & Consultation

The KUPF is an expert in all issues of cultural work and passes this expertise on to its member initiatives.

The member associations are the foundation of its work, the three pillars of the KUPF are based on their needs.

The KUPF – Cultural Platform Upper Austria works on behalf of its member initiatives and their interests, building on their practice and experience!

2. Initial Points for the campaign

It is difficult to name one initial point for the campaign, and the focusing on the topic of cultural work as work, as there where several different points, and I would like to mention just a few:

– The public perception:

The public perception of the work of cultural initiatives is limited mostly to "cool" venues and similar events. This is a purely consumerist aspect which fails the importance of working in regional cultural initiatives. The regional cultural initiatives create platforms which make different possibilities of social developments imaginable, and act as social "experiment sites".

– The governmental perception:

Politicians understand culture and art not infrequently as entertaining location factors, which temporarily drown smouldering social conflicts, and are pacified in the media perception.

But social negotiation processes normally do not run peaceful and friendly and colourful, but conflictual and fierce.

And if minorities, however they may be defined, make such noise, the smooth functioning of the hegemonic structures is at risk.

But this is precisely the mission of cultural work, to question hegemonic structures, to act as a megaphone for differing opinions and approaches, and thus constitute or even grow social conflicts more acute. (Partial) solutions are to be developed by other sides, especially by the politics.

– Linz 2009 – European Capital of Culture

During the year 2007 it became more and more clear, that the focus in the development of the program for the European capital of culture lies on presentable projects, and that the cultural initiatives of Linz are judged by the management of Linz09 primarily according to neoliberal, quantifiable, marketable criteria. This negates the continual foundational work that the cultural initiatives has been doing for years under precarious working conditions.

3. What happened

Based on these initial points the campaign “Kulturarbeit ist Arbeit” discussed mainly two topics related with cultural work.

The first topic is the reflection of the work cultural workers and organisations do, besides the public perception. We didn't focus on the work relating to the arrangement of “cool” events. We did focus on the part which isn't seen by the public. The negotiations inside the organisations, the work on developing, trying, changing and upholding democratic values. We did focus on cultural work as work on the society, on the creation of structures for social participation. And also we discussed the different structures built and kept alive by cultural initiatives.

Referring to the structures, it is obvious that there are two approaches: Some of the “older” cultural initiatives have succeeded in keeping these structures and spaces alive. Other “younger” initiatives are no longer looking for stable structures, but develop other, fleeting forms of organisation, such as loose work-groups around specific projects, which dissolve after these projects are finished. So nowadays it is not about own spaces, but primarily about public spaces. More precisely: It is about spaces which facilitate public, be it public spaces in a literal sense or rooms which are made public. In these spaces cultural work can be politically and thus socially relevant.

Connected with these topics was a call to the cultural initiatives, to become more aware on these parts of their work, reflect these matters and make it a main theme in their working process.

The second topic was addressed to the policy-makers in the regional and local governments. We tried to sensitise them, to change the view on cultural work. We tried to convince them, that cultural work always has a democratic surplus, which needs to be acknowledged and rewarded. The importance of regional cultural work for the development of social, democratic places of confrontation has been emphasized in several appointments. We made our point in the fact that the general conditions are bad and are spiralling downwards. This conclusion affects not only the modality of funding, by which projects are funded instead of structures, but also the general dismantling of the public sector, which leads to the fact, that many cultural workers can no longer

afford their voluntary work and dedication. People who have to hop between several precarious jobs, have little time for unpaid labour.

The visual / graphic output and the give-aways made for the campaign can be seen during the fair.

The red thread running through the campaign however was the term “Kulturtäter” which could be translated as “cultural offender”.

By using this term, which is not anchored in language use, we tried to

a) Determine Cultural Work as a file of actions

and

b) To name the confrontations and questions of hegemonic structures in the cultural field

4. Perspective / Questions

The official and public part of the campaign ended in July 2008. But the work on the subject continues. As cultural work is work which goes beyond the current status of employment and wage work, it will be necessary further on to emphasize, that the formative basic conditions have to be moved and have to be changed. The necessity of this process has to be made clear and addressed to the cultural initiatives themselves, as well as to the policy makers. This is the work that has to be done now. We are aware, that this will be a long process, and it cannot be done within 3 month. But the kick-off is on, and it will take a lot of energy and stamina to bring this struggle to a positive ending. Yet there are some questions, which came up during the campaign, and are important also in the context of self-reflection our goals. I would like to address these questions to the pane:

- Is there a democratic surplus in cultural work?
- How is it possible to broaden the discussion on social, democratic values developed by cultural workers?
- Is it necessary to point to the fact, that cultural work isn't just leisure activity, or could it be enough just to know about?
- Is there a difference whether the work on the society, the democratic surplus, is done by voluntary workers or professionals?