

NineTeenEightyFour

After exploring 1989 with its democratic revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe as a pivotal year in the 20th century, we are now presenting an exhibition that has less to do with historic events than with George Orwell's most successful novel. The participating artists from Europe and the USA show us that the related issues and problems are as relevant as ever, albeit no longer in the sense of the totalitarian control of fascism and communism.

Of course even today we have unsettling government and corporate control associated with issues like surveillance cameras and Internet espionage. Today, too, power is created, projected, and maintained by a vigorous manipulation of language. At least in Western democracies - with their traditional division of powers - an attempt is made to ensure appropriate limits through legal regulation. However, it remains astonishing and worrisome to many that despite our efforts to encourage and maintain diversity and dissent in democratic societies, we end up all too often debating side issues of minor importance rather than negotiating and disputing existential issues. How can it happen that the tabloid media, for example, are mostly interested in the private affairs of public figures that essentially have no meaning in relation to the condition of our lives? How can our attention be diverted from the major issues of war and peace, global environmental survival, and great inequities in the standard of living?

Open society?

We must ask ourselves repeatedly whether our established order, the separation of powers, and the rule of law live up to the global challenges currently facing democracy and individual and collective freedoms? Many of us feel that this order no longer always resembles what we liked to call an "open society," but we do not really know why, or where exactly the problem lies.

The Internet, for example, is notoriously capable of outrunning legal measures. Just recently, the *New York Times* reported in depth about how easy it is to fish for personal information stored in Internet clouds and use it to create illegal personality profiles for individuals and groups of individuals. Today, various specialized statistics programs are capable of reconstructing Social Security numbers from generally accessible data on the Web, especially of the younger generation ("How Privacy Can Vanish Online," March 17, 2010). The fact that Facebook pages are also used by colleges for assessing students and by employers for assessing employees is already a broadly discussed phenomenon, as is

the abuse of selling data on the Internet. It's all too familiar: we post and blog, surf in social networks, and leave cookies behind because we want to be part of the new virtual "communities." On the one hand, we're intrigued by the anonymity that the Net offers and on the other hand, we readily repress the fact that it is only presumed. Often, the spy is no longer the government, but the market research institutes studying our susceptibility for the next supposedly necessary products and services. But this, too, is just one aspect of the problem.

"If you see something, say something."

Today's mechanisms of control and linguistic dominance have become much more subtle: they are fueled by our intrinsic needs for community, security, and consumption. Hyperbolically, we could even say that in our postmodern, democratic, achievement-oriented society, systems of both self-censorship and linguistic control have been internalized via sociocultural conventions. We develop euphemistic phrases that underplay the human tragedy of certain events. Ultimately, it's always easier to simply accept civilian deaths resulting from misguided missiles as "collateral damage." The same goes for our callous complacency that refers to "restructuring industries" as a code word for the dismissal of tens of thousands of employees. For Europeans, the advertising slogan "If you see something, say something" is a particularly telling example of the post-9/11 sentiment in New York. While it is entirely legitimate in light of the USA's overpowering experience with terrorism, the slogan has other connotations against the backdrop of European history, where it is reminiscent of totalitarian, government-sanctioned denunciation. We ourselves, then, are accomplices of control, and yet we need to acknowledge that democracy has to be able to defend itself. Still, even generally accepted sociocultural mechanisms of societal control should always be questioned, because democracy can be jeopardized from this side as well.

There's one more thing we can learn from this exhibition. The fear of control, or of the loss of control, for instance through globalization, feeds conspiracy theories, surreal explanation patterns, and even occult fantasies. Nothing is easier than to give oneself over to higher powers and transform helplessness to veneration. From the high priests of Egypt to medieval witchcraft, in the third millennium, the irrational is still a determining factor and enlightenment is a process to be experienced each day. Not only in the arts.