

Right-wing government targets Public Netbase t0 – A short summary

In February 2000, the coalition between the christian-conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) led by Jörg Haider, gained power of the Austrian government. Since then, the critical art and culture scene has been subjected to an array of repressive policies. One of the chosen targets of the new government has been the renowned Viennese net culture institution, Public Netbase t0, which due to the sudden withdrawal of almost all subsidies is now struggling to survive.

Public Netbase t0

Public Netbase t0 began in 1994 as a small but active cultural project and has grown into one of the most esteemed media-culture institutes in Europe. Embedded in a solid network throughout Austria and Europe, Public Netbase fosters and creates vanguard projects at the crossroads of technology, art, and culture. The institution also runs a non-profit internet provider, supplies artistic experience in the field of electronics, and tries to encourage medial competence. Additionally, one of its main concerns is contributing to the (cultural) political consciousness-raising regarding the possibilities and dangers of the internet.

The formation of a governmental coalition by the ÖVP (People's Party) and the FPÖ (Freedom Party) brought the art, culture and new media centre Public Netbase t0 into a difficult situation. Already in 1998 Public Netbase was the target of a campaign of slander and defamation conducted by the FPÖ, although this was subsequently stopped by a court ruling in favour of Public Netbase. At present, though, a large number of net projects of organisations critical of the government are hosted by Public Netbase's Internet server t0, a fact that has made Public Netbase the object of suspicion and rejection and a constant topic of political controversy.

The Museumsquartier – a venue without a future?

When Public Netbase received a note requiring it to relocate from its offices in the Museumsquartier by 30 April, 2001, 1200 art and culture projects were temporarily facing the termination of their work. As the notice did not contain any statements regarding a possible return to the Museumsquartier, nor any mention of alternative quarters, Public Netbase had to assume that the intention was to destroy the material foundations of one of the most successful cultural institutions of Austria.

The programming of the Museumsquartier

Since Public Netbase is forced to move from its offices in the Museumsquartier due to the refurbishment of the buildings, while being kept in the dark about any possibilities of returning, doubts emerged as to the overall objectives of the Vienna Museumsquartier.

A structural plan concerning a future „Quartier 21“, drafted by art journalists and curators Markus Wailand and Vitus Weh, marked a clear turn in this development.

The plan, which has meanwhile been approved by Federal Minister Gehrler (ÖVP) and the Board, provides for an additional segment of contemporary, critical and independent cultural production in the Museumsquartier. This amounts to a positive response to the request of all users to establish the Quartier 21 independently from the general management of the Museumsquartier, as the latter would have meant a substantial restriction of institutional self-determination.

One of the more important points of the plan is the offer of a two year's lease contract, starting in March 2002, to Public Netbase t0, whose work has enriched the Museumsquartier over the past years and has attracted international attention to this venue.

Quartier 21 – the remaining problems

The enthusiastic responses with which this preliminary decision concerning Public Netbase's future in the Museumsquartier met must not obscure the problems with regards to some the plan's detailed provisions. These concern two key issues: Firstly, Public Netbase has made it clear in all its previous statements that because of the amount of technical infrastructure required, a centre for media art needs at least a five years contract, any shorter duration would be inappropriate for its purposes. The plan that has been approved provides only for two years, following which a group of experts will decide on an extension.

Secondly, the rent and overheads indicated in the plan would, in the case of Public Netbase, amount to almost half a million Austrian Shilling. This is an order of magnitude far beyond what could reasonably be expected. However, decision makers in cultural policy have so far remained silent in this matter.

Political decisions

The response on the part of political decision makers to the situation in the Museumsquartier has mostly been one of indifference, ignorance or passivity. Above all, there has been no readiness on the part of the Austrian Federal Government, majority proprietor of the Museumsquartier, to express a clear political will in favour of a critical cultural production in the Museumsquartier and to put the necessary structures into place.

Up to now, a willingness to negotiate has been signalled only by the City of Vienna, which, in a city council meeting in June 2000, moved for the continued residence of Public Netbase t0 in the Museums Quarter. Moreover, the Vienna municipal authorities acknowledged the cultural importance of Public Netbase t0 by indicating willingness to step in with additional financial support should Public Netbase's existence be in danger.

Attempts on the part of the federal ÖVP organisation, and its leader Wolfgang Schüssel, to influence the autonomous Vienna subsidiary out of consideration for the FPÖ have failed. The result is that a majority of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals capable of ensuring the continued existence of Public Netbase t0 at least until the end of 2000 has been able to form in the city parliament.

Endless political harassment

While the City of Vienna has acknowledged the innovative work of Public Netbase and came to its support, the responsible politician in the Federal Government, State Secretary Frank Morak (ÖVP), is still engaging in a deliberate delaying of crucial decisions concerning public subsidies. This began on 24 May, 2000, when Public Netbase was informed that the Federal Chancellery had put a private auditing office in charge of an examination concerning the proper use of public money by Public Netbase. Franz Morak claimed to be acting upon a recommendation by the Advisory Committee for Media Art. This committee reacted promptly and publicly with a direct denial of having suggested any action of the sort to the Secretary of Art. The Advisory Committee stated that it is not responsible for making such recommendations, and criticised sharply the arbitrary action against Public Netbase t0.

It is a matter of fact that the hiring of a private financial controlling agency is a waste of public monies, considering that the use of earmarked subsidies is annually investigated by the responsible government agencies. On top of the mere waste, the legality of such methods is highly questionable, and definitely not customary in the cultural field.

Until today, Secretary of Art Morak has not been able to allay the suspicion that the aim of such actions is to directly repress an active, critical, and futureoriented cultural organisation.

This suspicion is further nourished by the fact that the auditors finished their work as early as September 2000 and stated in their final report that no irregularities had been detected.

Although Franz Morak had announced a decision regarding Public Netbase's request of a public subsidy, submitted as early as October 1999, once the audit report was available, no decision has been taken to this day. Instead, Public Netbase received a package of new questions in early 2001.

This continued and arbitrary delaying of a decision on the subsidy request of the year 2000 has amounted to a serious threat to Public Netbase's existence. The resulting financial bottleneck is a threat not only to the entire organisation, the responsible managers and the cultural programme, but also to the plans of the Museumsquartier as a whole.

International solidarity in the face of national repression

It cheers to see the amount of international support in the face of repressive government policies. While State Secretary of Art Morak and other People's Party (ÖVP) and Freedom Party (FPÖ) politicians are trying to ruin Public Netbase through defamation and heckling, the solidarity and support from outside of Austria continues to gain in importance.

An example of exceptional appraisal comes from the Institute for Applied Autonomy. In response to the attempts by the federal government to intimidate the critical art and culture scene, the American artist group awarded, during the Prix Ars Electronica 2000, a prize in the amount of 50,000 ATS to Public Netbase for its government critical works. This is an important sign of international support that allows Public Netbase to continue tirelessly the battle against the extreme Right and its inhumane policies.