

# 'THE CRISIS IN CULTURE'

*Jeremiah Day on Fugazi and Hannah Arendt*

Jeremiah Day is an artist and PhD-researcher. He graduated from the University of California Los Angeles, and attended the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam from 2003-4. Currently he is affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Master's department of the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht. In 2011 Day taught a research seminar on Hannah Arendt's 'Crisis in Culture' at the VU as part of his ongoing research. In a series of events from May 16 to May 19 Day brought together international scholars and practitioners to break open new lines of thought on the connection between Arendt and contemporary cultural practice in a number of reading groups and discussions.

What do a punk band and a political- and cultural thinker have in common? Following a series of events in Amsterdam (May 16 – May 19) centered on the work of Hannah Arendt, Jeremiah Day discusses the influence that the American band Fugazi and the German philosopher have had on his artistic practice.

When Amsterdam and Berlin-based American artist Jeremiah Day was a teenager, he was really ‘into’ Fugazi, a post-hardcore band from Washington D.C. that radicalized the punk movement’s Do-It-Yourself-ethic. The influence proved lasting, both on a personal level as well as on informing his work. The screening of the Fugazi documentary *Instrument* (director: Jem Cohen, 1999) marked the launch of a reading group that was part of Day’s PhD-research concerning the role of contemporary art in the political realm. The reading group revolved around Hannah Arendt’s little-known essay ‘The Crisis in Culture’ (1961). Many might fail to see the relationship, but to Jeremiah Day the connection between the influential German-American philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975), and the legendary post-hardcore band Fugazi (1987 – on hiatus since 2003) is abundantly clear. In this text, Day discusses the connections he sees between Arendt and Fugazi, the correlation of ethics and aesthetics, and punk’s ‘politics from the inside out’.

Jeremiah Day: The decision to screen a documentary about Fugazi as an introduction to a reading group on Arendt (September 20, 2011) was of course a bit of a provocation - to insist on seeing Arendt’s work not as dry dusty philosophy, but rather as part of a present-day and active engagement. In terms of Fugazi, it meant to insist on taking the band seriously, and not in the way a cultural anthropologist might, but considering them as extremely thoughtful, strategic and effective cultural practitioners.

In terms of me personally – I was really ‘into’ Fugazi and their record label Dischord when I was a teenager, and so it’s tough to say where the influence starts or stops. In one way, I’m still guid-

ed by their example in the way that I stated above – I try to emulate their thoughtfulness, effectiveness, and commitment. It's important to note that Fugazi, often referred to as 'fiercely independent,' have some guiding ethos to their practice. I have been inspired by their ethos, but more importantly I think Fugazi helped inspire me to even realize that things like an ethos existed. Practically, Fugazi's ethos for them meant a unique approach to the standard forms of the distribution and performance of music.

**Some of the loose rules the band worked with:**

- all concerts should be available to people of all ages. If that means that it is not legally possible to sell alcohol, then there's no alcohol served
- concerts should cost 8 or 9 US dollars - originally this was 5, but inflation crept up
- the band works with Dischord records, the label founded by Ian MacKaye (the singer of Minor Threat and later Fugazi), and their records can be purchased by mail order for 8 or 9 US dollars
- the band doesn't make, sell, or authorize t-shirts, stickers, or other kinds of merchandise
- no interviews in publications that advertise alcohol or tobacco
- in general the performances have very simple, over all lighting, with the 'house lights up', or the crowd relatively well lit

In Ian MacKaye's current group, The Evens, they only play venues without a traditional PA, or public-address amplification system, and in this way avoid almost entirely all the conventional venues which professionally host music performances, instead playing libraries, outdoors, clubs, and people's homes.

The point (as I understand it) is to avoid the way the 'music business' treats music like just a product, and the experience of it to be just another form of consumerism. But the strategy is not an ivory-tower asceticism or to make critical reflections, but rather to build up a working counter-model. The critique of business does not mean to avoid it, or to be a purist. Musicians who work with major record labels must always negotiate the pressure to evaluate their work in terms of its

commercial appeal. By starting their own label, the musicians that work with Dischord records avoid that, but the space for creativity is actually achieved not by running away from business, in fact it is through taking an unusually active role in the distribution of the work. It's a bit counter-intuitive: in order to preserve freedom with the art making process, one takes even more responsibility for the business part. Thus it's not a question of purity or morality, but of practice and principles. Their records, after all, appear in record stores - they're not boycotting. As MacKaye says: 'I'm a construction worker - not a destruction worker.' His disagreement with the status quo is the basis for building his own kind of cultural practice.

In this way, for many years, I avoided the conventional contexts for visual art, and now often curate or organize reading groups. Working in connection with site, trying to wrestle with non-fictional subject matter, working with improvisation (and with music, in the case of my collaboration with Bart de Kroon), are also strategies for re-negotiating the white cube and its tradition. But most importantly, I also emulate the 'construction worker' attitude, as it has the added benefit of not getting stuck in the mud of cynicism.

In terms of aesthetics and ethics - I think Fugazi influenced me to see the two as inter-connected. Also it must be said that, even in the title of the group (coming from the Vietnam war slang - Fucked Up Got Ambushed Zipped In) or in their songs that deal with themes like sexism and militarism, the band describes politics from the inside out, as a full-blooded lived in and lived through struggle, not a concept or image.

Arendt is primarily a political thinker, but unlike most thinkers on politics, she did not pursue grand concepts or ideas, but rather thought from the bottom-up, through examples of events, stories, struggles. But most relevant for the connection with a musical group like Fugazi was that Arendt wrote of the way that art and culture can be instrumentalized, in our time mostly as entertainment to be consumed. Fugazi, and the broader community around it with Ian MacKaye as its most articulate spokesperson, not only were conscious of the forces turning them into mere products on the shelf, but put a great deal of thought into how to deal with this. And in this way too they were perhaps a bit "Arendtian" - they are political not only because they sing about politics,

but because they take judgment and responsibility for their circumstance, and can then see it through concrete actions.

The reason the house lights are up at the Fugazi concert is the band can see the public, so that 'we're all in here together.' And of course the consequence is that the public *appears*, can be seen, and not as passive spectators huddled in darkness but as a plural group of individuals, recognizing each other, to be negotiated, sharing the same ground – this is a kind of distinction that Arendt would appreciate, I think.