

OLIVER RESSLER



Elections are a Con

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A censored poster project by Oliver Ressler

2011

On November 21, 2011, I received a funding commitment from TKI – Tiroler Kulturinitiativen / IG Kultur Tirol, that resulted from an exemplary transparent juried process. The posters with the terse slogan “Elections are a con” were to be displayed over a period of two weeks in Innsbruck (Austria) as a series of city-light posters.

The slogan “Elections are a Con” (*Elections piège à cons*) was coined in May 1968 in Paris. The German version of this slogan, shaped by a specific historical setting, would be placed over a photograph that shows the Tyrolean Alps. Comparable images appear repeatedly in the background of posters from political parties competing in Austrian elections. The poster series “Elections are a Con” would lack the usual portraits of politicians and constitute a blank space. Instead of meaningless election advertising, one could read the matter-of-fact statement that “elections are a con”.



"Wahlen sind Betrug" (Elections are a con), poster censored by the provincial government in Tyrol, Austria, 2011

Surprisingly, I was notified on December 21, 2011 by an email from the Cultural Department of the Tyrolean provincial government that "after another thorough examination of the submitted documents and in consultation with a member of the provincial government of Tyrol, Dr. Palfrader, my project would not be supported." Despite repeated requests, there has been no explanation for this unusual decision to override a work, which was selected by a jury in a lengthy process. The only "response" was a short e-mail on December 23, 2011 by Mag. Nagiller Wöll of the cultural department of the government of Tyrol, in which she stated that she had explained the reasons for rejecting it in a conversation with a representative of TKI.

In that conversation, Mag. Nagiller Wöll explained that the Tyrolean provincial government could not support my work, because the text on the poster would be wrong. Elections would not be a con, but election advertising (!).

The Tyrolean government claims for itself the right to judge something decided by a jury meeting openly in front of an audience, without apparently being able to understand the contents of a clear project description.

The project description had the following explanation:

"Walden Bello was arguing that Western democracy is an ideal situation for insuring the continued power of elites; because it allows elites to contest with each other, while at the same time shutting out the dispossessed, the impoverished and workers, while paradoxically offering them the illusion of having a participation in building their own future and having a participation in the political process.(1) Elections have mutated so that today's system of representative democracy has become an increasingly meaningless ritual, while self-appointed elites in international trade organizations, the World Bank and transnational bodies such as the EU increasingly make the real decisions away from public discussions."

The Tyrolean provincial government acts against the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of art and tries to determine what artists have to say publicly and what not. The prevention of unwelcome political work has a name: censorship

For the first time in the 10-year history of TKI open, the province of Tyrol (Austria) denied funding for an artistic work selected by a jury of experts.

In the ensuing media discussion, the Tyrolean provincial government unsuccessfully tried to justify its decision that bordered on censorship. The cultural councilor of the provincial government Dr. Palfrader of the People's Party (ÖVP) claimed that the "Elections are a Con" artistic work is "factually incorrect" (*Tiroler Tageszeitung*, 18 January 2012) and "not experimental" enough (*Radio Freirad*, 1 February 2012). At the request of the news magazine *Profil*, Palfrader explained that not everything "that claimed to be art, can also be funded" (*Profil*, 23 January 2012).

After the media displayed little enthusiasm for the arguments of the cultural councilor of the provincial government, the ÖVP Tyrol retaliated during Innsbruck's city council elections by using the party newspaper *Tiroler Weg* to print in large letters "Culture is not a self-service store" on an unauthorized reproduction of my poster design. At the very least, they implicitly accused me of the "misuse" of public funds through the unjustified acquisition of public money. In small text next to my work, they printed a note not clearly explaining the context to the reader and they listed "'spurious' reasons for blocking funding for a project already approved by the jury" (2).

Not only did the provincial government of the Tyrolean People's Party ignore for political reasons a jury's decision, but they even misused my artistic work in the electoral campaign for the Innsbruck city council. This was the final straw, and a lawsuit was filed against the Tyrolean People's Party (ÖVP).

On 16 July 2012, the provincial court in Innsbruck ruled that the Tyrolean People's Party must under a court directive refrain from unauthorized reproductions or

modifications of the poster “Elections are a Con” and must remove, according to their power of disposition, all existing copies of their modification of the artwork “Elections are a Con”. The accused party (ÖVP) must also retract allegations that I have “misused” cultural subsidies. In addition, the defendant must expressly state to the plaintiff that the report in *Tiroler Weg* 1.12 published in the context of the plaintiff-made poster “Elections are a Con” did not allege a dishonorable or illegal conduct.

The announcement of these obligations in the *Tiroler Weg* could not be achieved, because the publication has ceased to exist.

Postscript: It seems impossible in the holy land Tyrol to display artistic posters with the text “Elections are a Con”. This text does not seem to be a problem with a version for a project in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.



"Elections are a Con" (Georgian version), poster, 59,4 x 42 cm, 2012



"Elections are a Con" (Georgian version), poster, 59,4 x 42 cm, 2012. Installation view: "Undergo. The Parallels", GeoAIR, Tbilisi, 2012 (photo: Nini Palavandishvili)



"Elections are a Con", wall text, 2011. Installation view: "Art in the Name of...", Galerija PM, Zagreb, 2011 (photo: Elvis Krstulović)

(1) David McNeill in the 8-channel video installation "What Is Democracy?" by Oliver Ressler, 2009

(2) Complaint filed by my lawyers Ploil | Krepp | Boesch, 9 May 2012