

## From I to We and back and beyond

When we talk about 'we' this evening, when we talk about the collective, then there is still – a quarter of a century after re-unification – dissent between East and West, at least in those generations who were born before, say, 1970. Your 'we' is not the same as ours, and the term 'collective' has a different meaning for you than it does for us. At least looking back on the 1980s, which are the issue here. This has to be clarified when an event is called “We vs. I – Collective artistic approaches in East Berlin in the 1980s.” We would probably not have phrased it like that. But when I speak here about 'we' then that is also just a construct: when you look at it closely, it collapses into diverse individuals who had different experiences in the East and who today are in different positions.

“The GDR, 'the workers' and farmers' state' in all its self-appointed pretentiousness, abused progressive ideas with its political rhetoric to legitimise itself: the inhuman reality scornfully demolished and discredited them,” wrote Jürgen Habermas in 1991, and (unfortunately) he was right. This is particularly applicable to the word 'collective', for 'co-operative', the first person plural or the communitarian in general.

At the start of the 1960s in the GDR there was one of the many attempts to establish an official slogan. It was *From I to We* and basically meant nothing more than the old *the common good before the private good*. The slogan became relatively popular, and recently the German Foreign Secretary even used it publicly to mock the SPD's election campaign slogan *Das Wir entscheidet* (The We Decides). *From I to We* was ranked in popularity right behind *Corn, the sausage on the branch* or *An egg a day*. *From I to We* as a demand, a command even, meant one thing above all: Yes to agricultural collectivisation, whether the farmers wanted it or not, and it meant that culture and literature should show collective processes in industry and agriculture as being beautiful. The prime example here is the *Bitterfelder Weg*, most of you will have heard of it: it means poets produce and workers paint. The reference to history is only important in this context in order to understand the resentment in the East. For twenty years artists and writers had to work to return from the *we* to the *I* and to defend this *I* against the pressures of a collective in the name of something. Up until the 1970s this was a serious confrontation, which resulted for many producers of art in censorship or flight to the West. There was an *I* and a plural *You*, strikingly rendered in the poem »You all built me a house« by Wolfgang Hilbig in the 1970s, which we thank the Staatsgalerie for having posted on Facebook (another huge, questionable, global community in which one person rakes in the cash in the name of the many).

ihr habt mir ein haus gebaut/ laßt mich ein andres anfangen./ ihr habt mir sessel aufgestellt/ setzt puppen in eure sessel./ ihr habt mir geld aufgespart/ lieber stehle ich./ ihr habt mir einen weg gebahnt/ ich schlag mich/ durchs gestrüpp seitlich des wegs.

saget ihr man soll allein gehen/ würd ich gehen/ mit euch.

(From: Abwesenheit. Gedichte, S. Fischer, 1979)

[*You all built me a house / Let me start another. / You all put out chairs for me / Put dolls in your chairs. / You all saved money for me / I'd rather steal. / You all made a path for me / I beat a path / through the undergrowth beside the path.*

*If you were to say one should march alone / I would march / with you.]*

Whether you call what established itself in the 1980s underground, *bohème*, the Other or the subculture – this thing that we who are sitting here belonged to, more or less – it established for the first time a counter-public sphere in our own country and not in the West. Not that there weren't groups over there, it is just that no-one seriously called them collectives: that always implied the rest, "...for Socialist work." One of these groups was called *Zersammlung* [Wordplay with the German word for *gathering* (*Versammlung*) and the prefix *zer-*, which adds a negative, conflict-ridden emphasis], a fitting choice covering all the bases, togetherness and argument. The *Zersammlung* occurred during a time in which the opposing *You* described by Hilbig has already become a *Them*. And *They* were no longer interesting. Dead Indians on even deader nags, you could laugh about them, even if the laughter – particularly in the provinces – stuck in your throat. The duality of *I* and *We* also dissolved at the latest in the mid-80s, when everything began slowly to crumble and the punks didn't yet know that *No Future* applied to the state and not to the punks themselves. *I is another* became a harmless phrase, the *I* instead burst into countless minuscule quasi-crystals which could no longer be re-assembled as a whole. Post-Structuralism arrived in the East, in the form of works by Foucault, Derrida, Barthes or Lyotard, passed from hand to hand or copied on typewriters, and together with everyday life in places like Prenzlauer Berg or Dresden's Neustadt, which the city had already abandoned and which the State was about to give up on, these created in retrospect a bizarre mixture. Free spaces at the fringes and frozen time everywhere.

The terminology began to get interesting again after 1990, when the 'collectives of Socialist work' lost first the attributes of a collective and then the whole word in the firms and offices, and were compelled to become teams, before the individual members were played against one another and were then sent individually to the unemployment office. The word 'team' was so stupid, and 'staff'

didn't sound much better, and so the term 'collective' enjoyed a renaissance amongst those who had, until recently, been the underground, and now at least wanted, could or needed to remain a subculture. I remember that we, the editors and writers at *Sklaven* and *Sklavenaufstand*, intentionally and proudly called ourselves a collective. Guillaume Paoli, the anarchist Corsican who hung around the *Sklaven* during the '90s, wrote in retrospect: "There was no *we*, there was a gathering of individuals, made necessary by the times – or at least the neighbourhood *intelligentsia*, because they had enough free time to do what intellectuals most love to do: the usual game of conspiracy, suspicion and betrayal. But we were in agreement on this: success was not important. It was just sloth and a certain predilection for failure." What annoyed us about so many Leftist West collectives we encountered at the time were the discussions and the pillory of moral arrogance to which someone was always being subjected whose crimes, compared with the crimes of the world, were pretty harmless, to put it mildly. Their idea of the term collective was often even more foreign to us than any collective of Socialist work. But how did Habermas put it in 1991, referring to the end of the GDR and the discrediting of the Left: "I'm afraid that this dialectic of invalidation is going to be more harmful to the Germany's mental hygiene than the entire resentment of five or six generations of anti-Enlightenment, anti-Semitic, falsely Romantic, petty German-jingoist obscurantists." Before we had a chance to gather ourselves and take a look around, there were Ich-AGs [state-financed projects to promote self-employment] and advertising slogans which got right to the point: *At the end it's me that counts!* The so-called free artist has become by now the role model for the neo-liberal society, considering that postmen, hairdressers, ice cream salesmen and security personnel now live with service contracts, no social security and without standard pay. Artists are mercenaries in an army of creative service providers, always hunting down new projects, contracts, advance payments, which are always just sufficient to cover existing debts: part of a so-called creative economy – the very term is every bit as mendacious as 'collective of Socialist work.' Despite that, and with cautious optimism against better judgement, the question remains: are all the alternatives redundant? And are the experiences of then valid in the world of today? And if yes, then which ones, and why?