

Cadaveri eccellenti 1.

Notes on a multimedia installation and art event by Costantino Ciervo

Text: Matthias Reichelt

Frederick II was born 300 years ago and died in Potsdam in 1786. He succeeded to the throne after the death of his father Frederick I in 1740. All through his youth Frederick II rebelled against his father's authoritarian regime, who seemed to confuse education with military drill and hardness, something his long-suffering son was only too familiar with.

He much rather concentrated on aesthetics and surrendered himself to the Muses. He played the flute, composed music and wrote poetry and sought contact with intellectuals of the time, such as the French writer and philosopher Voltaire, with whom he was able to discuss Ethics and Morals. Inspired by those thoughts, he studied the political work *The Prince*, written by the Florentine politician, philosopher and writer Niccolò Machiavelli 200 years before Frederick was born. Young and idealistic, and under the influence of the Enlightenment, he wrote the *Anti-Machiavel* in 1739/40, aged 28.

In his introduction he is denouncing Machiavelli: 'Machiavelli planted the seed of destruction within political life and set out to undo the rules of healthy morality.<sup>2</sup> Further into the foreword, the reader is left in no doubt about Frederick's humanistic intentions: 'I dare take on the defense of humanity against this monster intent on destroying it.<sup>3</sup> Strong words! Machiavelli had actually attempted an objective and clear description of power with all its mechanisms and structures. Not at all concerned with Morality, he was much more interested in the results of successful as well as unsuccessful exercise of power. When a ruler was able to keep control over all his underlings and the many diverging interests teeming within the different societal groups, and keep them in check as well as play them against each other when needed, without causing a rebellion, then he was considered successful, maintaining a governable empire, whose internal peace protected against external enemies. An empire riddled with open conflict, and a ruler failing to keep his subjects under control, was much more vulnerable towards enemies and the power of the ruler in danger of disappearing.

Machiavelli was most of all interested in the success of keeping together a functioning empire as well as in the misfortune, which could lead to the collapse of the same. Whether this was achieved with either diplomacy or lies and violence, made little difference to him. We have to remember that his work is nothing other than the result of his historical studies and is not to be interpreted as a guidebook on how to rule. His approach is made clear in the foreword: 'Just as those who take on the landscape, climb down to a lower level, in order to observe the shape of the mountains and their height and those who climb up the mountains to observe the valleys, so recognise the Great the nature of the people; but in order to know the Sovereigns one has to be of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Machiavelli's personal stance was often confused and uncritically identified with the idea of power attained by any means justified. When in fact he offered a dialectical examination of power. The execution of power as well as the maintaining of power within different social groups and classes and their conflicting interests were at the heart of it.

Ernst Bloch describes the work as follows:

'... a pure doctrine on conquest and domination. Morality is seen as ineffective. It is no more useful than absent mindedness in the art of fencing or the arrangement of the pillars during the building of a fortress... rationalised technique of political victory, that is what this rather less cynical but artificially isolated book of practices is about.<sup>5</sup>

A number of other philosophers and political scientists have dealt with Machiavelli's observations on ruling with Fortune and failing regents who were using their power misguidedly.

Next to the previously quoted Ernst Bloch, these were fellow Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Antonio Negri. Costantino Ciervo, who had been invited by the Fluxus+ museum to examine the figure of Frederick the Great, an invitation triggered by his 300th birthday anniversary, decided to concentrate on the timeless phenomenon of power and its execution within various regimes. Power and the rebellion against it are the red thread running through Ciervo's work. Two life size mannequins are at the core of Costantino Ciervo's multimedia installation, both of them representing Frederick the Great. Porcelain plates serve as heads onto which a video beamer, positioned in the hands of each of the mannequins, is projecting the computer- animated image of Frederick II.

Each figure is projecting its own image, just as each person has to make its own individual decisions within any specific context. One of the Frederick-dummies is quoting passages from Machiavelli's Prince, while the other one is quoting from Frederick's own Anti-Machiavel. One of the Frederick's is representing the time after the accession to the throne as Prussian king, whose relationship to power was naturally a very different one to the one experienced by the much younger Frederick, who still free from duties to reign, wrote the Anti-Machiavel.

Both dummies are representatives of the same ruler at different periods in his life.

On the one hand we have the successful ruler, consciously utilising his position as military general, in order to fight the three Silesian Wars and turn the Prussian Kingdom into the fifth largest in Europe.

On the other hand there is the impetuous aesthete, who far from his duties as a ruler, is dedicating his time to the ideas of the Enlightenment, Ethics and Morality. Both characters are divided by the phenomenon of power.

Up to this day the perception of Frederick II is divided, or even contradictory. On the one side he is the bonvivant, interested in culture and philosophy, as a ruler introducing reforms such as the abolition of torture and censorship, at least in the feuilleton. While on the other side he is a militarist and imperialist in the Machiavellian sense. Different times, different duties. 'The times they are a changing.'

The older Frederick is negating the ideas of his former self as a youthful prince. This particular dichotomy is at the centre of Ciervo's Frederick-projections.

The artist has completely covered the bodies of both dummies with chickpeas. They are giving the appearance of a skin disease or a suit of armour, hinting at the gathering of tiny heads in a huge crowd of people seen from a bird's eye view: the people as a protective shield. Ciervo is deliberately toying with this ambivalent image. Different associations are what the artist is hoping for.

A historical and simply retrospective engagement with the Prussian King is something that Ciervo is happy to leave to the colourfully illustrated tourist guides. He isn't interested in that view. His interest lies in the present and its acute political situations, either locally or globally. This is something that can be easily witnessed by the audience on the eight monitors placed behind and to the side of the two Frederick-sculptures. In alternating succession the 42 dictators, defined and selected by the NGO Freedom House, a Washington based civil rights movement, can be seen on the screens. The artist, with some special software, brings the faces, carefully researched on the Internet, to life. Baschar al-Assad, Robert Mugabe, Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukaschenko and many other dictators are silently gazing at the audience, only occasionally displaying facial movements. A blinking of the eye or a sniffing at something; their movements are minimal, as if they were intently listening to the quotes from both Machiavelli's Prince as well as Frederick's Anti-Machiavel. Ciervo is building a historical bridge between power and the loss of it. To look at the many reasons for this erosion would take too long here.

The most obvious sign for the loss of power is the visible uprising of the disaffected, which, under threat of death, choose to rebel against the oppressor.

Developments like these have been at work in Egypt over the past few years and consequently more recently in other Arabic countries.

On a large wall projection Ciervo is showing different film sequences, depicting various street uprisings, such as the ones in Leipzig in 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall as well as in Cairo in 2011.

It is difficult to say whether these are revolutions aiming to achieve equal democratic rights and freedom or whether they are simply trying to modernise the systems in the interest of a neo liberal and global economy.

A skepticism that was also shared by Ernst Bloch in his work *The Principle of Hope*, thus emphasising the importance of hope and optimism: 'A thousand wars are only met with ten revolutions; so difficult is it to walk upright. And even where the revolutions have been successful, the oppressors usually appear exchanged not abolished. A critical analysis shouldn't just take into consideration obvious non-democratic systems but must also take a closer look at the parliamentary western democracies.

In 2008 José Saramago, the Portuguese winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature wrote: 'Life teaches us that a political democracy, even if it seems solid in its internal structure and its institutional mechanisms, can turn out to be of little value unless it forms the basis of an effective and concrete economic democracy as well as an equally concrete and effective cultural democracy.' In the face of Economy's primacy and the dominance of international corporate companies, the question arises: who is the sovereign?

In the case of Greece it definitely isn't the Greek people anymore. But the question is also interesting for the whole of Europe. The 'well being' of banks is greeted with more importance than the social conditions of the majority of the population. The recent rescue of so many banks under a dubious mantle of collective loss is nothing more than an accelerated distribution of wealth from the bottom to the top. Who is the sovereign here? And how democratic are the circumstances, apparently

allowing this to be 'alternative-less', while at the same time poverty is rapidly increasing. All these are rhetorical questions, which Costantino Ciervo is putting forward in his performance.

With an installation, especially built from 220 plates, listing the names of the internationally most lucrative and influential corporate enterprises, as well as the names of 100 political activists, he is trying to find solutions to the most important social, economic and ecological problems. This wall-installation entails the problems as well as the solutions. Ciervo's intention is to attack those problems with an angle grinder, while a soprano is singing the names of the various enterprises, waiting for an echoing choir from the audience. Once the oppressing companies have been eradicated in this militant-anarchic fashion, Ciervo only leaves the names of the activists untouched, which are posing as survivors in this playfully revolutionary process staged by the artist. The remaining plates spell the letters time, standing for the conviction that time ultimately belongs to the people proposing solutions.

English translation: Anita Tscherne

Note.

1. Political thriller directed by Francesco Rosi in 1976, with Lino Ventura, Max von Sydow and Charles Vanel; also known under the title *Illustrious Corpses*. It was shown in various German cinemas across West Germany as well as the former GDR. The film offers a subtle examination of a conspiracy plot striving for civil war, questioning who the real leaders of the state are.

2. Frederick II of Prussia: The Anti-Machiavel, chapter 2, from Projekt Gutenberg:  
<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/5318/2>

3. *ibid*

4. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 3, from Projekt Gutenberg:  
<http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/121/3>

5. Ernst Bloch: *The Principle of Hope*, volume 3, p. 1110, Suhrkamp 1970, Frankfurt/Main

6. *ibid*, volume 2, p. 551