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Roberta Weiss-Mariani: Winner Takes All

An interview with Christoph Büchel, co-author of the "Capital Affair" project

For once, visitors to Zurich's Helmhaus were meant to encounter empty gallery rooms – that is, had the artists Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti had their way. Just as Zurich's famed Protestant reformer Huldrych Zwingli had his way in the 16th century, when he insisted on having all images removed from the churches. On the other hand, the invitation to visitors to scour those very gallery rooms in search of CHF 50 000 concealed within the premises would surely have inspired that unswerving puritan of olden times to take strong punitive measures, since the ban on gambling was part and parcel of the sumptuary laws under his strict control.

In the meantime, the joys of gaming have become socially acceptable even in Switzerland. Here the ratio of casinos is one for every 323 000 inhabitants, landing the country at the top of the European hit parade. Not to mention several recently granted licenses for private casinos. Then, too, there are the millions that (still) flow annually into the state-licensed lottery pools on behalf of public interest, cultural and charity projects. So it is with an unfettered conscience that thousands of citizens can invest many a hard-earned penny in lotto or toto (football pool) tickets. Would we pay heed to the recent and rashly decided injunction by Zurich's greenhorn of a mayor, Elmar Ledergerber, only the art venue remains closed to the practice of gambling. But there you have it: on what grounds can such a ban be erected in an era where the citizens of Zurich have long since abandoned the ancient Zwinglian sumptuary laws? A perilous enterprise indeed, particularly in times when the national constitution upholds that artistic freedom is a basic right. So it comes as no surprise that the mayor has become entangled in a major financial and socio-political debate that reveals the unconvincing reasoning behind his point of view. Quite obviously, he has given too little thought to the consequences of such a decision in a city that ranks culture as a major status factor: the smart of a temporarily closed museum has been underestimated, as has the corresponding loss of revenue hitting commercial activities linked to museum attendance. The figures speak out for themselves: fifty thousand less for the museum, and a loss of something like ten times that amount for various businesses and municipal employers – tourist firms, restaurants, book stores

and other museums. A full-fledged inquiry into this matter would no doubt be highly revealing. All the more so since the project involves two Swiss artists whose worldwide fame holds the promise of attracting crowds on a par with their renown. And since, moreover, this sort of hide-and-seek game is likely to bring in visitors who normally do not attend museums. Plus the fact that citizens are being offered a chance to seek their luck not in a casino but in the gallery rooms of Zurich's Helmhaus, meaning that – who knows? – they might even end up enriched by unexpected deliberations over the meaning and value of museum art ...

Like most of the works dreamt up by Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, "Capital Affair" is a provocative piece that raises explosive, highly topical questions. While they have been able to realize many of their ideas in other cities, their conception of "Capital Affair" has met with obstruction. Why is this so? Does the explanation lie with the very nature of their artistic project, or with the city of Zurich's political and cultural bodies?

Roberta-Weiss-Mariani (RWM): What exactly, Christoph Büchel, does your "Capital Affair" project consist in?

Christoph Büchel (CB): The project consists in making use of the CHF 50 000 production budget as raw material and hiding this fund within the Helmhaus's empty gallery rooms. It was hidden under the supervision of a notary public, and whoever, before the end of the exhibition, might have found the document entitling them to it was to be awarded the money. Otherwise, the production budget was to become the artists' property. Should a visitor have found the money before the official closing date, the exhibition was to come to an immediate end. Should it have remained unfound until the official closing date, it was to be retrieved by the artists on that day, again in the presence of a notary public. The fund was hidden so it could be found by any visitor (and, by the way, to this day it remains in its hiding place!). Any damages caused by the search were to be paid for by a specifically determined percentage of the entire exhibition budget and admission fees.

RMW: What considerations went into your project?

CB: The project is based on the financial underpinnings of a publicly-funded exhibition institution.

Foregoing the visual presence of a display of artworks, our project focuses on the psychological presence of one of the prerequisites for such an exhibition, namely its mere production budget. This invisible premise, representing but the possibility of bringing the exhibition into existence, is what we condensed into the concealed production budget fund: so to speak, a black hole within the white cube of the empty museum, sucking in all activity and greed.

The project was to have been developed through the visitors who, in their search for the production budget in the alleged emptiness of the gallery rooms, would have left traces of the mental and physical work they put into this play pitting them against the artists.

During the exhibition's putative "opening", where in fact at the same time its closedown had to be announced, it was really interesting to observe visitor reactions: how they scratched up the walls with their house keys, sought to screw open fuse boxes with their pocket knives, stood around in the empty rooms swinging a pendulum, or avidly scrutinized their surroundings, all the time mutually observing each other and discussing the matter among themselves. What is it that visitors look for in an art show: meaning, satisfaction, entertainment, an enriching experience, intellectual capital, social capital, cultural added value?

The language we use is one that everybody speaks: money, that universal exchange value. Switzerland has accumulated heaps of money and spends a great deal of its time doing so. It is also very pretty good at seeking and hiding it. Yet the country handles this omnipresent topic with kid gloves.

How much should art and culture cost? What are they worth to society and the nation? Politically, this is most commonly defined in terms of equating the intake from entry fees with the outlay of a government-funded cultural institution. You



could say that, in this light, this exhibition definitely fits the populist bill.

RMW: In your opinion, what makes "Capital Affair" so provocative, and who is it meant to provoke?

CB: When money is used as the content and theme of a show, you've got to

expect people to react. But there's no telling how they will react, as witnessed by the mayor's attitude. No direct provocation or umpteenth art scandal was intended. It was meant more in the sense of a catalyst for debate, something which crowd-pleasing shows rarely achieve.

Of course, we did at first expect some resistance from the political authorities backing the Helmhaus. But once we had submitted the project to the city of Zurich's cultural director and he had consented to it in full, it seemed logical to assume that the city would not feel targeted.

RWM: You conceived "Capital Affair" specifically for Zurich's Helmhaus. Could you have set up the same show in a different city?

CB: No, I don't think so, since Zurich – where Zwingli once held sway and today became a world banking and money capital – is in an ideal position to give form to our theme spatially. As is the Helmhaus, not only because it is an institution entirely subsidized by state funds, but also because of its dimensions, its «Reformation»-imbued gallery rooms and its central location. The political impact of our show would have been enhanced by its taking place within the land of banking secrecy and hidden accounts. A land boasting the luxury of a vote on what to do with the surplus funds liberated by its gold reserves (a plebiscite on the question was scheduled during the show's supposed run).

The mayor, who wants to allot our exhibition budget to Dresden's flood-damaged Semper Opera House, would like to relegate our show to some other city. My own opinion in the matter is that funds from the City of Zurich's cultural budget

cannot be used to carry out Ledergerber's populist tactic of, in typical fashion, directing emergency funds to such a highly bourgeois cultural institution. To do so would mean once again exceeding his political sphere of authority.

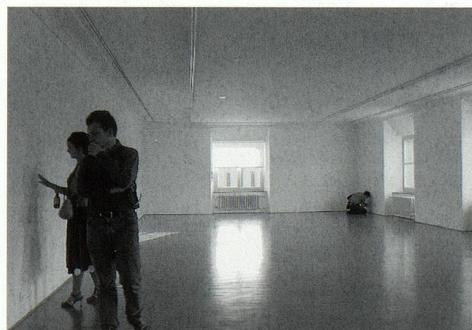
RMW: The "Capital Affair" show was to run from August 23rd to September 29th. It was not until the show's opening day that the mayor announced his decision: Was it a surprise to you? And what was your reaction to his proposal to cut the budget by 60%?

CB: The evening before the opening, there had been a session with the cultural commission and Ledergerber, where the latter had expressed the desire to hamstring our show at the last minute. Nevertheless, the final decision taken on his own the next day, with respect to the show's content and form, came as quite a surprise to us for several reasons: its timing (right before the opening day press conference), its authoritarian and extortionist terms, and the fact that the project had long before been approved by the cultural commission. Of course, it was a politically-calculated manoeuvre by Ledergerber to keep our reaction time to a minimum. The decision communicated to us two hours before the press conference stipulated that either the show would be cancelled altogether or else the production budget would be reduced to CHF 20 000, and this barring any and all negotiations to find an alternative solution.

His "proposal" to reduce our budget was an attempt by Ledergerber to place the burden of the show's cancellation on our shoulders: He hoped to announce to the press that he had not forbidden the show, but could only regret that it had been called off. Had we consented to his "proposal", the mayor would have set a precedent with the 60% cut in the consented production budget of CHF 50 000 – a precedent potentially dangerous for projects by other cultural players dependent on state-subsidized institutions. Not to mention the fact that we ourselves would thus have discredited the contents of our project.

RMW: During the planning period, your project was discussed by various groups and persons, including Simon Mauer, the Helmhaus curator. When clture was reached on these museum discussions, both the city of Zurich's cultural commission and the museum's board of directors stood clearly behind the project. The new mayor made his decision without granting the slightest consideration to the city's cultural decision bodies: people who have years of experience behind them in dealing successfully with all sorts of artistic projects and who, in our opinion, are endowed with sufficient political acumen to estimate the impact of a provocative artistic project on the public. This bodes evil for future exhibitions as well. What recommendations would you give artists and curators for future shows at the Helmhaus?

CB: Certainly, it's no picnic to be that institution's "mayor-dependent curator" in the current political climate. The only thing I could suggest from my learning experience with "Capital Affair" is that the Helmhaus detach itself politically from the office of the mayor in order to safeguard a certain freedom of choice as a public cultural institution, which is the case in other cities. For a mayor to automatically, and without any specialized skills in the matter, take on the role of cultural chairman, carries the oft-substantiated threat of translating political and commercial dependencies and fears, together with a political image neurosis, into cultural policy. This makes culture an instrument of personal and political empowerment. As already underscored, democratic tradition implies that public cultural facilities are entitled to a free hand in setting up their programs. Interference by politicians in such institutions' decisions not only restricts their so-called artistic freedom – in which I have never dared believe – but even renders the established cultural authorities useless. Current debate over cultural budget reductions is not, as common wisdom would have it, merely a matter of curbing unsolicited performances: Rather, it represents direct interference with the institution's programming and constitutes an offense against matters of State. Our project did have a certain impact in a conceptual, media-oriented and politico-cultural sense, albeit at the cost of the show itself. However, we feel that the actual exhibition, had it been allowed



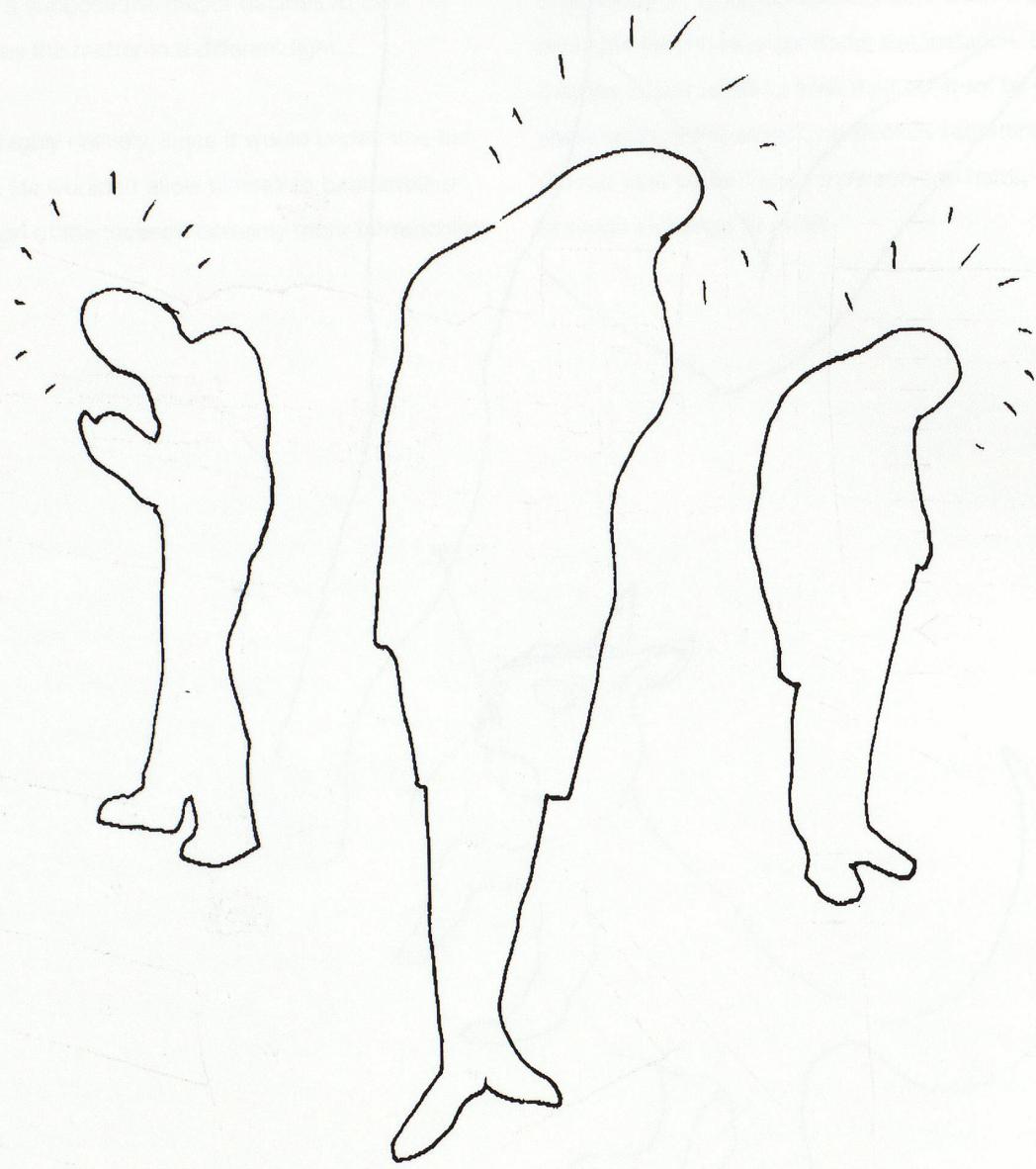
to take place, embodied far greater potential for arousing debate.

RMW: The museum doors have remained closed, although "Capital Affair" is still filed under "pending matters" at the mayor's office. Let's suppose the mayor decides to think his decision over, to see the matter in a different light...

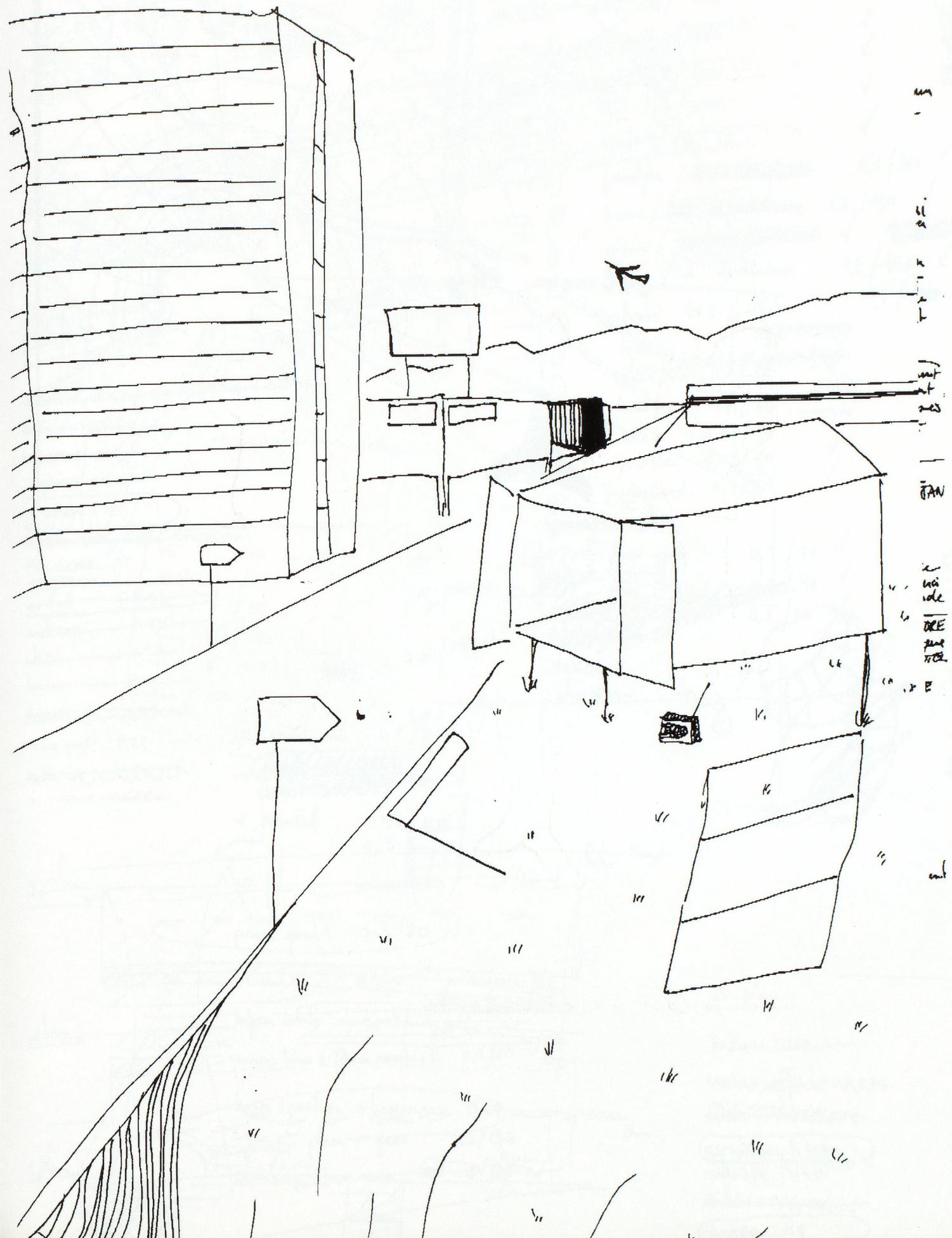
CB: I think that is highly unlikely, since it would undermine his political credibility. He wouldn't allow himself to beat another retreat in the fashion of the recent if certainly more far-reaching

Zurich Theater House fiasco. I assume that the mayor's office has its reasons for waiting for the dust to settle, not the least of which is that a cold wind has swept in on the cultural scene in this self-anointed cultural capital city. And that the latter's chieftain himself realizes that he has infringed on his fellow politicians' so dearly held constitution. Someone who singlehandedly undertakes a radical budget cut on a show's opening day, who plays himself up as a curatorial last instance, and who claims that the artists failed to fulfill their contract by not setting up a show while at the same time publicly regretting that the show did not take place – such a person can hardly be expected to undergo a change of mind!



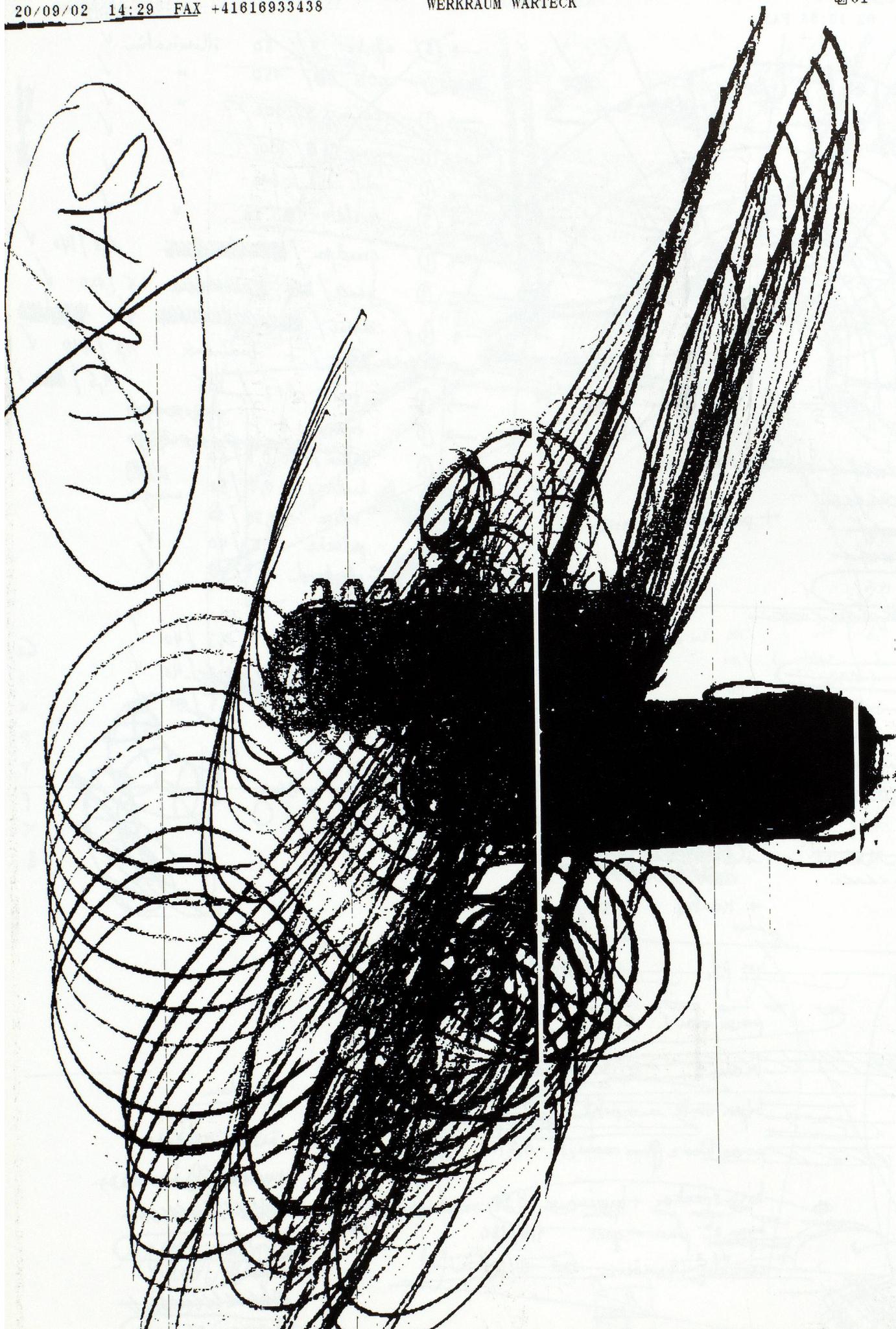


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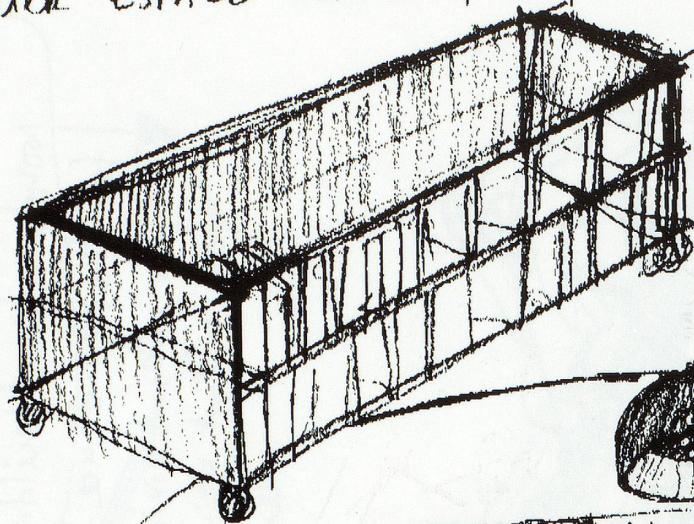
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