

Peter Tamm Loves the Navy

Interview with the Hamburg based artist and activist Cornelia Sollfrank about the project TammTamm – Artist inform Politicians, Tone Hansen

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A national economy in crisis, a conservative government and massive cutbacks in the social and cultural sector, as well as for local artist funding, public libraries and women's shelters, together with an increased interest in culture as part of private-public city development, creates the political and economical backdrop for the collaborative action Tamm Tamm – Artists Informing Politicians. In a loose group of more than 100 artists, each has adopted one of the 121 members of the City Parliament in order to inform politicians about possible consequences of the planned privately owned, but publicly financed international maritime museum in Hamburg Hafen City.

The City of Hamburg has given a 30 million grant to the private foundation Peter Tamm Sen. Stiftung, in order to build the "International Maritime Museum". Since the mid 90's, hacker, cyberfeminist, conceptual and net.artist Cornelia Sollfrank has been investigating world-wide communication networks and transferring subversive artistic strategies of the classical Avant garde into the digital medium. Her special interest lies in experimenting with new models of authorship, in continuing all sorts of artistic appropriation, and in deconstructing myths around geniality and originality. Recently Sollfrank started to make artistic contributions to the discourse on copyright and intellectual property. Another focus of her work deals with collaboration, networking, and communication as artistic practices. Sollfrank is the initiator and organizer of Tamm-Tamm.

Tone Hansen: Could you give some background information for the action TammTamm?

Cornelia Sollfrank: The initiative "Tamm-Tamm – Artist informing politicians" has been going on since August 2005. The basic idea is that each of 121 members of the Hamburg city parliament be "adopted" by an artist with the aim to open up a discussion about the planned museum. In a personal dialogue situation, the "godparents" intended to inform their "godchildren"—the politicians—about the background of the museum and ask them about their individual reasons for their vote. Each *TammTamm* participant was free to set his or her own focus regarding their reasoning, as well as their aesthetic realizations. The action was made possible by the publication of the little book *tamm-tamm, I* which for the first time has provided reliable information on the content of the collection and on the background of the collector. The results of the action, meanwhile, range from painting, photography, audio and video material, drawing, collage, and all sorts of texts, including documentation of the media echo (e.g. 30 newspaper articles). Daily news on the

development of the action is publicized on the website: www.tamm-tamm.info

T.H.: I would like to come back to your collaboration with other Trade Unions, but first: It is obvious that private gifts is somehow challenging the very idea of the private sphere, but why this action against this specific museum?

C.S.: The decision to build the museum was made in February 2005 by the city parliament without any votes against the project. Location of the museum is *Kaispeicher B*, the oldest warehouse in the ancient harbor warehouse district, built in 1878/79. The conversion of the warehouse into the *International Maritime Museum* started in June 2005 and is ongoing. The *International Maritime Museum* will be a private museum, run by the *Peter Tamm sen. Foundation*. To build the museum, a private-public partnership has been agreed between the foundation and the city of Hamburg. Head and sole decision-maker of the foundation is Peter Tamm. He will be the one who has full and final authority over the museum's concept and realization. The contract between the city and the foundation allows Peter Tamm to exclusively design the museum and decide upon its content. The city even signed away its right of veto. The city contributes 30 million EUR as well as the historic building, the foundation contributes its huge collection of naval objects which includes 27 000 model ships, 35 000 ship design plans, as well as an endless number of uniforms, maps, nautical instruments, and paintings. Tamm's private collection will form the core of the new museum.

Within the *Peter Tamm sen. Foundation*, Peter Tamm is the decision maker. For more than 40 years Peter Tamm worked for the international Springer media group. Actually, his wish had been to make a naval career, but the war ended too early, when he was only 16 years old. So he turned to journalism and started his career in the print media writing about naval issues. For 23 years, Tamm held a leading position within the media group—being top manager of the daily boulevard newspaper *bild-Zeitung*—and building his prestige of being “right-wing” mainly in the late 60's and early 70's, campaigning against the political left (students' movement), thus augmenting sales as well as his own influential position. The militaristic jargon he prefers to use, as well as his authoritarian leadership, added to his image as extremely national-conservative and “anti-democrat”. During the 1970's he was one of the most powerful as well as best-paid managers in Germany. During that time, he spent a fortune to expand his maritime collection. Additionally, he went on buying up small publishing houses specialized in more or less right-wing and militaristic literature. Although Peter Tamm never studied at any university, the city of Hamburg awarded him in 2002 the title of honorary professor. The *Institute Peter Tamm*—what he calls his private collection—and the title “professor” allow him to fabricate scientific qualifications which allegedly qualify him to run a publicly financed museum. Currently, the Tamm collection is on display in one of his private villas. Visitors can make an appointment and will be led through a confusingly large and hardly arranged collection. All exhibits are shown without any information, explanation or contextualization. Without a doubt, the collection breathes the spirit of a passionate collector, but it is hard to imagine how the transformation of this partly charming and partly frightening chaos into a scientific museum will be pulled off—and who will be able to manage it.

T.H.: I would like on two aspects; the first concerns the local situation in Hamburg taking the TammTamm as the leading example. The second concerns changes within the political sphere as a whole, with a special focus on the implementation of New Public Management and its idea of a minimal state, a trend going through the whole western world. But firstly, how did the TammTamm – Artists Informing Politicians come about, and what kind of concept has been developed for this collaborative action?

C.S.: The background of the action is an ongoing critique of local cultural politics over the recent years. Since 1999 several formations of artists and cultural producers have intervened into political decisions, mainly fighting against cuts in the funding of independent art projects and artist-run-spaces. One spin-off from these activities was the establishment of two mailing lists through which local artists and cultural producers, who are usually reluctant to organize, can easily keep in touch and stay informed about what is going on. We have one public list, called “echo” for art, critique and cultural policies and another closed list for discussing strategies, called “echo-intern”. This information infrastructure, in which currently about 450 people participate, is the backbone through which we recruited participants for *TammTamm*. As a lot of people oppose to the planned museum– but for very different reasons—we were able to gather a broad variety of protesters and arguments from a wide range of scenes.

T.H.: What appeals to me is the fact that you take the privileged role of the artist as a starting point for your collective engagement. What has been the reaction from the individual politician?

C.S.: I am not sure what you mean by the “privileged role”. In fact this action includes artists, academics and cultural producers of different backgrounds, as well as anti-fascist groups. We all work together on this case, and I think we all consider—at least as a part of our role—to follow political and social developments, to intervene if necessary, and to make use of our know-how in aesthetics, writing and media production to create or support campaigns like this.

T.H.: Nevertheless, the use of one to one conversations, the idea of the artists giving a gift, an invitation a provocation that is individually oriented towards the singular politician is a new form of activism. This might resemble the hidden work of a lobbyist who work against each politicians in order to create both an intimate relationship, but also to influence on decision processes through close contact. But then you have chosen to let all communication take place in an open public platform. Could you elaborate a bit on the choice of method?

T.H.: Has there been any official reaction against the actionist form?

C.S.: With our action we were able to create a broad public discussion, not necessarily with people in the street, but within the political class. As the contract had been signed when we started we were not able to stop the museum project, but we clearly pointed to the lack of scientific competence regarding the museum concept and forced the

foundation through a massive public attention to come up with a more profound concept and certainly not to display unreflected admiration of nationalistic and right wing weapon cult. There has not been one singular official reaction to the action because each Member of Parliament was addressed individually and in diversified forms. The responses range from “no reaction” to lively and productive encounters. One interesting observation was that in the beginning, members of the conservative party, cdu, were unwilling to talk to us. They tried to avoid the individual meetings by sending back an official statement written by a spokesperson of the party, an “expert” in the field. Of course, we could not accept this, but only when they realized that their refusing to talk did harm to their public image as open-minded politicians in touch with their voters, some of them agreed to meet for conversations.

T.H.: But surely, cultural workers either artists or film makers has an easier task raising a voice in the media. Some would even say that artists have a duty in doing so. I would also guess that ways of working within the project has been influenced by the way the protest has been organized?

T.H.: And the response from the owner of the foundation?

C.S.: Peter Tamm himself reacted on the public relations front using the Springer press empire’s newspapers bild-Zeitung and Welt am Sonntag. In back-to back coverage, these newspapers tried to make a storm out of the fact that one participant in the TammTamm action, a filmmaker, is a former member of the raf (Red Army Fraction). Exposing the evils of public protest, the articles also pointed an accusing finger at the teacher’s union, which had supported the project. I would like to share Rahel Pufferts’ estimation on this. She says: “Obviously helpless, Peter Tamm had to grab yesterday’s targets to fight a new form for protest. But by doing so, Springer and Tamm only proved once again, how anchored they are in the past.”

T.H.: I am curious to know how the collaboration with The Teachers Union came about. As I have understood, they published the book Tamm-tamm – Eine Anregung zur öffentlichen Diskussion über das Tamm-Museum that gave you the facts and knowledge needed in order to form a more efficient opposition?[1]

T.H.: What kind of political reasoning or arguments has been presented to make the Parliament donate a large amount of money to a private foundation, without securing any political control?

C.S.: First of all, the whole project has to be seen in the context of urban planning and city development. My thesis is, that without *HafenCity* we would not have to face the Maritime Museum in such a large scale. In the context of the *HafenCity* the municipality was desperate to find a museum concept able to fill the huge building designated for museum use, namely the oldest warehouse in the area. To bring in the maritime collection of Peter Tamm seemed to be the perfect solution for everybody, as Peter Tamm was also looking for a space to expand his collection to a museum format. The most important arguments for the museum were the improvement of the cultural and recreational value of

the city, as well as the size and the uniqueness of the collection. All our arguments against the museum, like the contested quality of the collection, its militaristic and nationalistic tendency, the lack of scientific competence on the foundation's side to develop a proper concept, the construction of the private-public-partnership in which the public has no say, and the well-known right-wing publisher Peter Tamm as a representative of the new, "growing city" of Hamburg, all these arguments have not been heard or accepted.

T.H.: It seems to me that the process lacks initiative from the political system itself. You might think that establishing a large project like this would spark a long discussion of the need for such a museum, its profile and the possible advantages for the city. Is old school democratic processes put aside, in order to actively support private initiative?

C.S.: That is true. There was no transparency or public discussion during the decision making process. At the time when the parliament voted for the building of the museum, in February 2005, there was no public information (catalogue or web archive) available about the nature or quality of the private collection that would form the basis of the museum. It turned out that many of the politicians—none of whom voted against the museum – had any idea about the collection or the possible consequences of the planned museum. That is the reason why our action was not directed against the collector, but against the politically responsible members of parliament. What might be another reason for the kind of decision making is the fact that Peter Tamm—although retired for more than a decade and mainly acting in the background– still today holds seats in a number of supervisory boards and is part of an extended and influential "Old Boys Network" which includes important media representatives as well as politicians of all parties. That simply means that he has the right friends that help to make his dreams come true. And I am not sure if democratic processes and transparency are something desired by him or his peers.

T.H.: In that case, is this just a symptom of a larger process ongoing in society, where the state is becoming an accountant within its own system, always looking at processes subsequently? Do we see a minimalist state that interferes as little as possible and actively subsidizes private efforts, a passive state that takes very little responsibility for its own actions?

C.S.: That is the pleasure of contradiction: state-funded and state-enforced state minimalism. By paying an upfront amount of EUR 30,000,000, the politicians seemed to feel relieved of any further financial involvement, as the museum will be run by the foundation subsequently. But in this special case, one should know that it was also a condition of the collector that he would only run the museum if there would be no influence from other parties on the content and the concept. And another point of our criticism was the open question—what would happen if the museum would not achieve the expected financial success? Then, of course, the state/city would be forced to jump in and take responsibility, like it already happened in a number of other questionable private-public partnerships.

[1] *Tamm-tamm – Eine Anregung zur öffentlichen Diskussion über das Tamm-Museum*, Informationskreis Rüstungsgeschäfte, Hamburg, Friedrich Möwe, 2005. ISBN 3-938372-03-6