Public ing

PRACTISING DEMOCRACY THROUGH PERFORMANCE

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From "Relational Aesthetics" and "Participatory Art" to **Publicing**

The discussion around the position and role of the spectator in theatre and performance is certainly not new. One could say that it coincides with the nature and function of theatre itself. The way spectators are positioned in relation to the artwork has shifted regularly from ancient times to the present day. Focusing on contemporary art forms, which relate more closely to our topic of interest, one could, for example, mention the work of theatre artists Antonin Artaud and, later, Bertolt Brecht or Jerzy Grotowski, and more recently the work of Augusto Boal or Eugenio Barba. Similar issues of concern have been discussed in the visual arts, through different terms and mostly in the frame of performance art. Since the sixties and seventies, avant-garde artists anticipated the migration of their work from the canvas—the still sculpture or museum space—to live-art frames placing the human body (the bodies of the makers and of the audience) at their centre.

At the end of the nineties, French curator Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) treated this turn towards human relations and their social context with the term "relational aesthetics." Already in the name, the emphasis on aesthetics is obvious, stronger than any emphasis on the structural, dramaturgical, or even ethical or sociopolitical aspects involved in such endeavours. In the frame of aesthetic choice, the interaction of an artwork with its audience is considered to be an important element of a work that recognises the significant agency of the spectator. This interaction includes the physical or verbal interference of the spectator in concrete, preselected moments—moments entirely controllable by the artists, very often without their previously informing, let alone asking for the consent of, the audience. Such interactive approaches to artistic creation, which are still quite popular, have more recently received open critique, for example by Lauren Wingenroth, who takes issue explicitly with artists' manipulative and sometimes abusive behaviour towards

the audience, for the sake of a certain interactive aesthetic choice on the part of the maker (2018).

Some years after the work of Bourriaud, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new turn in the way art approaches its audience and sociopolitical context became prominent. This time, discourse moved from the interaction towards "participatory" processes, in what Bishop has called the "social turn" (2006). The interest here extends beyond aesthetics to cooperative modes of work, active engagement of the audience with certain social issues, etc. Such works, which in the USA are referred to as "social practices"—a term in which the concept of art is completely absent—have been criticised by Bishop (2011, 14:45) insofar as they remain indifferent to the aesthetic value of the artwork by overemphasising its social goals. At the same time, the ethics involved in artistic works that "land" out of nowhere for a certain (often short) period of time in an area or community—with the ambition to intervene in important social processes through practices that are left incomplete—have also received severe criticism.

What I would like to refer to here as **publicing** suggests both an active use of "public" as a verb, and an *ongoing process* of creating this public (indicated by the *-ing* ending). The term relates to artistic actions that acknowledge the value of the aesthetic choices involved therein, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to the experimentation with the structures and practices belonging to the actions' sociopolitical context—towards the line of thought suggested by the social turn in art. At the same time, the aim is not to reproduce normative social functions or to solve "real" problems, but to challenge established norms in the "style" in which the specific society each work is placed in constructs its imaginaries, and thereby open space for the emergence of alternative social configurations. In this sense,

publicing proposes an ongoing process—always in progress, always negotiable among the different agents involved in it—of coproducing visible forms of another public space *through* art. And it acts both as a theoretical concept and as a practice that expands the line of "relational aesthetics" of the nineties and of the "social turn" of the noughties into the third decade of the twenty-first century—and in a way that meaningfully responds to current sociopolitical needs, which the pandemic of the last two years, with the social restrictions it imposed, has made even more urgent. The first part of this book focuses on the term and practice of **publicing**, providing conceptual ground for the texts of the invited guest authors presented in the second part.

Working Principles for Performance as **Publicing**

I would like to close the first part of the book with an attempt to articulate a series of working principles for performance as **publicing.** Cvejić and Vujanović address a prevailing cynicism in art that recognises a disagreeable state of affairs without engaging with a critically constructive stand from which to suggest alternatives (2016, 36). At th e same time, art sociologist Pascal Gielen writes that in recent decades, art in the "creative" city, where "anything goes" (as long as it sells), is always carefully calculated in space and time, in close connection with investing capital and the CCTV cameras that meticulously register any possible real unrest. In such consumer-friendly public spaces, artists are creative entrepreneurs who don't cause any "trouble," but rather help solve problems. It thus seems that when artists overcome their cynicism and do engage in actual propositions, they become the "realists" and "pragmatists" of the city, placing participatory art at its centre, celebrated by politicians of all political orientations, who happily enlist inexpensive artists to solve problems caused by their own neoliberal policies (Gielen 2015, 288–289). The four principles below are suggestions for a constructive, yet less "pragmatic" or normative, approach to artistic creation that could contribute to a necessary shift in the "style" in which Western neoliberal communities imagine themselves, towards directions actively productive of different forms of public space and time.

locality

The first principle relates to the specificity of each distinct sociopolitical context art places itself in. Locality plays a decisive role in art's efforts towards collective speculation. In order for "counter-imaginaries" to emerge, artists have to focus much more attentively on the particularities of the specific contexts they create in. The time of the abstract globalisation that has established the "successful" careers of numerous "international" artists across Europe and beyond—to the extent that there's often no meaningful difference in attending a festival in Brussels, Vienna, or Berlin—while imposing on them a lifestyle of exhausting movement around the world (where you meet many but you actually connect to nothing and no one) seems to have come to an end, especially after the pandemic. Bruno Latour insightfully discusses the "inside" political perspective in his recent work (2018). According to the French philosopher, there is an alarming social danger in the dominant "global" perspective that views Earth abstractly from outside, far and above, missing the complexities that constitute the social imaginaries of each one of its communities, which are particular to that community only. He insists on the need to shift our attention to the micro-level and the complexities of its "inside" as soon as possible.

Such demand goes a step further than the older demand of conceptual art and other art genres in questioning the artwork as an autonomous object and approaching it in relation to its context (mostly the financial and institutional context of its production). Here, the need is to look more carefully outside the window of the art venue or studio. Moreover, this look should not be a general or abstract one, but it should examine and rework with concrete elements of that context. This means that artists are asked to take the risk of creating open structures that will allow their work to come in dialogue in very specific ways with what lies "outside the window"—and to develop structures that can be seriously affected by the particularities of that "outside"—to the extent that projects may fail in certain cases.

attention

The second principle derives directly from the first one. If the need is to observe and work with the complexities of locality, we will definitely need to develop much stronger skills of attention. At the POST-DANCE-ING conference (2019), Jeanine Durning talked about "a virtuosity of attention and a virtuosity to attending to those details that are not seen and do not take discernible form." She defines art as "the word we use for the kind of attention you can bring to where you are, rather than where you want to be or where you think you should be," emphasising once more the value of the complexity of a local here and now (Durning 2019). Georgelou has also discussed the relation of art to attention, especially in times that demand quick eyeballs that constantly engage, process, and evaluate, training us masterfully in a continuous process of surfing the surface. In this frame, the need to re-skill ourselves, as makers and audience, in spending time exercising contemplation and navigating the world becomes prominent (Georgelou 2019, 94–95).

Performing arts acting as sculptures of (more or less expanded amounts of) time within the frame of their events constitute ideal territory for (re)training our ability to understand, practise, and reconfigure attention and the temporalities involved in it. The creation of structures that provide insightful frames for an attentive approach to the "style" in which our communities are and can be (re)imagined could therefore be seen as another necessary principle of work. Important aspects to pay special attention to, in a very material sense, include the space an event takes place in and the modes of sociability it enables; the (preparation) processes that precede an event and participants' entrance into it; the forms that will take place for its duration; participants' exit from the event; the way the event will continue after its end, and the possible new common spaces that could depart from it.

speculation

The third principle relates to the directions such attention moves towards. As we have noted, "political" art has for many decades focused exactly on the task of intervening in its social context, most often aiming at immediate, tangible outcomes as results of these interventions—at the same time that governments across Europe also demand significant measurable impact from artists. Here, I would like to suggest a radical shift to fewer "useful" or "hopeful" and more "unreal" or "speculative" artistic interventions.

Dunne and Raby's scepticism towards "hope" in their observation that our dreams today have been downgraded to "hopes" invites elaboration. Under the provocative title Fucking the Regime of Hope in Choreography, choreographer Malik Nashad Sharpe argues that although hope is necessary for humans as a territory hospitable to their "good," "useful," "positive" sides, and it is necessary for attaining a state of optimism, this state can also be seen as a dangerous and rude one, especially for majorities who suffer most in this world (2019). Aligning with the views of Dunne and Raby, the choreographer posits that hope fails to address or shift things in the world, discouraging immediate action. What if we took a radical performative turn, though? What if art can actually do nothing about dismantling or disarming hate, nothing to challenge established forms power? What if we were not hopeful?

Once we move away from the limiting promise of hope and enter a politics of hopelessness, we might be able to at least start to articulate ways to expand the possible. If social imaginaries are already present in a society, ready to crack the surface and pop up at unexpected moments, then art needs to practise the fractures through which such appearances will take place. This will not happen via "hope," via a normative approach that will reply to "real" problems. In neoliberal times that demand "effective," "profitable," "rational" products, one has to respond with frames that move against dominant social intensities, in ways that do not offer "good solutions" to anything, that move less "properly" and more imaginatively. In other words, we have to reply speculatively by finding ways to crack things open. Drawing on this principle, art cannot and should not wish to produce ends or wrap things up in neoliberal ways. On the contrary, art should work for the (im)possible, not in the utopian sense, but more in terms of aiming

to expand the possible by revealing what lies under it and could become its alternative. Approaching artistic creation as the construction of such "unrealistic" practices, structures, and narratives could cultivate the unfinished thinking of emergent communities regarding other possibilities in the world. Placing such speculative, imaginative acts between the normative and the fictive can offer (micro)shifts to what is expected of people when they are together.

Seeing such estrangement of known social frames as a principle for **publicing** does not mean pointing to an aesthetics of fakeness or extreme theatricality. The proposal is rather to develop unexpected experiences that act as what André Lepecki calls "broken compasses" that misguide or misdirect, allowing one to be lost, but still getting somewhere (2011, 193). The need in this case is for finding ourselves in a state of not knowing where to go next, but nevertheless going without being afraid to escape the clichés involved in an otherwise well-known frame or practice. Estranging, defamiliarising society from its habits can help remove the preconceived

norms that overflow it, clichés that relate to the way we think about what should be done, how, when, where, and with what outcome when we get together, until these clichés start to disappear and something else starts to emerge.

It is only through forms that shift known social settings (such as the random group meeting in a café, as in the case of The Practice of Democracy/ An Analogue Campaign) that complex relationships can appear, capable of overturning the more obvious ones. Such appearances force those witnessing them to reimagine frames that are otherwise taken for granted, acting as "earthquakes" that shake things up, disarrange and destroy logics, revealing unforeseen, often unrecognizable, threads, connections, and relationships. In return for the possible unpleasant surprise, annoyance, or unrest that such acts may cause, we may instead meet alterity as we let go of the horizon of expectation. Such speculative forms provide a certain type of alienation as a process that subverts our established categories and challenges us to think again by threatening the known with the unknown.

disruption

Closely related to the attempt to defamiliarise known social frames and practices is the need for this speculation to act as a disruption to a city's usual rhythms. Gielen has argued for a certain kind of disorder that needs to be increased in city life in ways that will make the otherwise banished-from-the-street politics appear again (2015, 276). Contemporary cities, according to Gielen, are designed to host relatively homogeneous communities based on sameness, protected from any possible "disruptive interruptions that may come from a problematic outside world" (2015, 277). Subsequently, urban life lacks real challenges, irritation, dissensus, and conflict, arranged according to "functional," "efficient" manners that serve its conflict-free communities. This lack of confrontation of the unexpected, the contradictory, and the unknown results in the deactivation of a truly public space, as Castoriadis defines it.

The city-dwellers of such cities hardly need space anymore to account for or negotiate how to co-shape their lives and environment; in other words, they hardly need a space to engage in everyday politics anymore. When nothing is questioned or challenged, politics and democracy become a strictly private affair that can be taken care of in the voting booth. This is exactly why politics are today banished from the street, for Gielen. When the public space no longer provides a platform to confront the alien, the strange, or people with different ideas or beliefs, it is automatically neutralised in a political sense; when public space allows us precisely not to meet others but to ignore them or pass them by, it simply ceases to exist. Politics then withdraws from daily life, and the public space becomes depoliticised (Gielen 2015, 278).

What can be the function and role of art in this case? It is to pull the city-dwellers of such depoliticised contexts out of their comfort zones, Gielen posits, by projecting curious, unknown, unexpected images and performances into the urban space—in other words, by "making the public space anew" (2015, 280). It is exactly through such interruption of what is regarded as "normal" that a city can be recharged politically. Precisely in this movement against "normality" lies the political character of the artwork and its power to regenerate the public space. Unfortunately, though, the sociologist concludes, not all art in public space is truly *public* art, given that the majority of this art is anything *but* disruptive and so too anything but political (Gielen 2015, 283). What can stand today between the interruption produced by the more and more often encountered "fun" public events set up in the streets with the aim of easily attracting as many people as possible, and the massive, important political protests that create sharp ruptures, and sometimes serious unrest, in a city's public time? It is exactly at the point where pleasurable events that satisfy our expectations (without our questioning anything) meets important political action undertaken by citizens that performance as **publicing** is placed, sharply counting its distance from the former, while cultivating and supporting critical processes closely related to the latter.

Gielen suggests that a truly public art cannot emerge only from the mere interaction among people, but rather through constituting a provocation that will cultivate the necessary conflicts, negotiations, and dissensus that form the basis of democratic autonomy, always in the present tense. Such art is not built on the abstract homogeneous identity of its population, called "the people." On the contrary, it works with the daily reality of a multitude of heterogeneous cultures, religions, and classes, navigating an extremely fluid domain where movement and change are the rules, in order not only to criticize but to build alternative platforms to stand on. These platforms act as a disruption to the city, affecting its usual rhythms, displacing it from its norms every once in a while. It is in this way that artists can claim community's right to make space and time public again, similar to the Athenian ecclesia and agora in the way Castoriadis discusses them. Their experiments, always hybrids between artistic and social settings, take all risks such disruptions may entail, based on an astute analysis of the diverse urban social fabric they are part of—including the courage to destroy it if necessary. Only in this way can politics appear again in the city streets, as Gielen also notes. From thereon, other imaginaries may pop up from the possible resonance of art's impact on civil society: imaginaries able to overturn established hegemonies.

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