

Assemblies in Theatres, Biennials, Museums

The Failing Necessities of ›Being With‹

GIGI ARGYROPOULOU

Bruno Latour, in his essay »A Philosophical Platform for a Left (European Party«, written in 1998 and referring to the era after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe, argues that »we are slowly shifting from an obsession about time« to »an obsession about space« (Latour 1999: 99). The challenge for the Left party no longer is to make the revolution, but »to explore co-existence between totally heterogeneous forms of people, times, cultures, epochs and entities« (ibid). This is precisely what the Right cannot do, as for Latour they are unable to absorb the »new obligations of co-existence« (ibid). Nearly ten years later, in 2007, The Invisible Committee, an unidentified collective, published a text under the title *The Coming Insurrection* (2009) as a call to arms against the destructive forces of capitalism. The introduction concluded with a question, a question that seemed a precondition for political action and change. This question was: »Where do we find each other?« (Invisible Committee 2009: 21) David Harvey in his book *Rebel Cities*, published in 2012, argues that if a viable anti-capitalist movement is to emerge then past and current strategies of spatial resistance need to be re-evaluated. He proposes as key the question of »how does one organise a city« (2012: 135) if the anti-capitalist struggle is to revitalize in the coming years. He also stresses that a central tension lies in a simple structural dilemma: How can the »Left fuse the need to actively engage with, but also create an alternative to, the capitalist laws of value determination on the world market?« (2012: 138). How might obligations of coexistence contest the desire to find each other?

How might these collective becomings redefine ways to organize the city or notions of togetherness offer alternatives to »the capitalist laws of value determination« and models of an »experience economy« (Pine/Gilmore 2001: 77)?

From the fall of the Berlin Wall and the resulting lack of alternatives to a series of post-Millennium political events such as occupations, demonstrations, uprisings and insurrections across different locations, such questions have been posed, challenged and rehearsed, as citizens activated the public spheres, ephemerally and through discontinuous trails of praxis. This article seeks to focus on intersections of art and politics and the failing desire to produce alternatives to the capitalist laws of value determination in order to examine questions of togetherness, co-existence and the emergent and failing necessities of ›being-with‹ others in diverse space-time configurations.

In the arts and urban practice, the ›social turn‹ explored structures of togetherness and relationality and demonstrated a wider engagement with ›obligations of co-existence« in cultural production in the urban milieu during the last couple of decades. Those works across the fields of visual art, performance theatre and architecture varied from community-based art to one-on-one intimate encounters, to happenings and gatherings, to site-specific performances and interventions that sought to occupy a ›specific environment‹ or which arose in close relation to particular socio-political situations. ›Real‹ people and/or communities were often invited to be part of such work either as participants or even as collaborators. Often, there is an attempt to create a localized temporary community, an ›in situ‹ assemblage of people. In *Living as Form*, Nato Thompson argues that the ›social turn‹ has shaken up the foundations of art discourse and notes that »these cultural practices indicate a new social order – ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theatre and visual arts« (2012: 19). Nicolas Bourriaud's theories fundamentally informed these discourses of relationality, sociality and co-existence. In his book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), Bourriaud takes the realm of human interactions and their social context as a theoretical horizon. He draws on examples of artistic practice in the 1990s to propose that art no longer seeks to represent utopias but rather to construct concrete spaces. Bourriaud describes art as a »social interstice«, borrowing the term from Marx, who used it to describe exchange spaces which can escape from the dominant capitalist economy. Bourriaud continues to argue that »it seems

more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows« (2002: 45). As Bourriaud argues:

This is a society where human relations are no longer ›directly experienced‹, but start to become blurred in their ›spectacular‹ representation. Herein lies the most burning issue to do with art today: is it still possible to generate relationships with the world, in a practical field art-history traditionally earmarked for their ›representation‹? (ibid: 9)

While the work of Bourriaud has been criticized by many with regard to the artistic quality of his examples, to notions of inclusion/exclusion and also concerning the question »what does democracy really mean in this context?« (Bishop 2004), since the 1990s a series of works sought to explore whether it is possible to create »relationships with the world, in a practical field art-history traditionally earmarked for their representation«. At the same time, notions of performativity, theatricality, experience and encounter frequently utilized in the arts also offer a fruitful perspective on the emerging neoliberal concepts of ›participation‹, which are recuperated by the marketing industries, by neoliberal institutions and power structures. In their 2001 text entitled »All The World's a Stage!«, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore write: »consumption is an experience, every business a stage, and work is theater. In the age of the experience economy, customers themselves become the product. They demand ›experiences‹ that can transform their behavior, even their lives« (2001: 77). In a recent lecture, Slavoj Žižek also discusses this contemporary obsession with experiences that are carefree and contends that »we want coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol and love without the falling« (2013). Žižek further argues that this desire for experiences without their »dangerous counterpoint« is a paradox of our times and for him is an attempt to domesticate, erase and contain such experiences. Might practices within the social turn that emerged as a response to the social conditions of late capitalism then appear to slowly assist the conditions which they were seeking to oppose – especially as they were favored by art institutions worldwide that seek to demonstrate audience impact and participation, inclusion of communities, and action in the social realm, often offering smooth ›social experiences‹ of controlled participation?

However, during these years a series of political events across diverse locations invited unexpected modes of ›participation‹ that challenged the limits of the ›social turn‹ and the role of art within this changing landscape. In 1993 in Vienna, the artist collective WochenKlausur created a mobile medical clinic for homeless people as a socially engaged artwork. In 2011 in Athens, over 480 self-organized medical centers appeared, exclusively organized by citizens in order to serve the needs of the many unemployed, uninsured, impoverished patients in times of crisis. During these twenty years the socio-political conditions have significantly shifted, that which formally appeared as a socially engaged artwork, an artists' intervention in the social realm, in times of crisis materialized as a bottom-up collective need. A series of political events across different locations practically tested the possibilities and ›obligations of co-existence‹ and The Invisible Committee's earlier question was given ephemeral answers in the mobilized public spheres in squares, streets and occupied buildings. Assemblies often served as a mode of organization that supported a horizontal coming together and a collective decision-making. However, Harvey's earlier question of ›how does one organize a city‹ and how the Left might ›create alternatives to the capitalist laws of value determination of the world market‹ often remained unanswered as these emerging modes of coming together faced multiple challenges from within and in the face of repressive mechanisms.

In September 2014 in Hamburg, a camp was set up inside Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik to host 400 artists, activists, researchers and participants for an assembly of the assemblies. A designed environment sought to facilitate the meeting in order to share ›experiences from real-democracy-movements and artistic experimentation, we want to explore new ways of coming together‹ (The Art of Being Many 2014: n.p.). In recent years, and especially post-2011, a series of artistic events sought to engage with the political landscape to support awareness, or social change. For Boris Groys, this phenomenon of art activism is new and centered on ›the ability of art to function as an arena and medium for political protest and social activism‹ (2014: n.p.). As he argues art activists want to change the political and social conditions ›by means of art‹ (ibid). The assembly of the assemblies took place over four days in Hamburg in a designed environment inside a theatre and with the promise of a final presentation to an audience on the last two days. Seeking to resist individual presentations of diverse experiences and create hybrid explorations across different groupings and themes, the format

functioned in some cases as artistic projects and in others as discussion forums and debates. The opening document stated: »Together they will prepare an assembly for about 400 people which is going to last for two days from noon to midnight. [...] It is meant to focus on what can be done together« (The Art of Being Many 2014: n.p.). However, during these days many questions emerged and remained unaddressed: What is this ›together‹? How is it constituted? When might togetherness be possible, desirable and needed? What might be the needs of these diverse participants? What formats might accommodate practices of sharing and ›being-with‹? What is the role of time in an encounter? How can an assembly based on past experiences of other assemblies function here and now, in Hamburg? Unclear intentions regarding time and duration, aestheticization and spectacularization in the structure and the process led to a confused and unclear mode of getting together. Bishop's question in regard to relational work and Bourriaud's theories seemed somehow relevant: »What does democracy really mean in this context?« The potential of coming together is always related to the reasons and urgencies that bring us together as well as the quality of this time together that, as Bobjana Kunst writes, »renders life possible (or impossible)« (2010: n.p.). In recent years, the format of the assembly is increasingly utilized in art events. Somehow, the assembly in the theatre or in the museum appears to politicize the whole event and offer a space for horizontality and collective decision-making. However, such instances bear the danger to actually contribute to the contemporary obsession with ›experiences‹ and support neoliberal modes of controlled participation rather than produce a politicized event. In order to explore ephemeral alternatives to the capitalist laws of value determination and market rules, it might perhaps be worth considering forms of resistance to the capitalist modes and uses of time, energy, production and consumption.

As more and more cultural workers today – both inside and outside institutional frameworks – seek to make artworks about and engaged with the political closures of our times, we might be witnessing a political rather than a social turn. Cultural workers implicated in contemporary political debates are producing diverse forms of practices that could be characterized as political theatre and art in a wider sense: works that in some cases take the form of critique and critical reflection, in others direct involvement in social movements, building autonomous and alternative ecologies of living. This ›political turn‹ is also apparent in the increased number of biennales, festivals,

theatre programs and conferences that seek to address political and social realities, calling for works about revolt, crisis, conflict, occupation etc. Rancière argues that art and politics each define a dissensual reconfiguration of the common experience of the sensible and claims that despite a century of critique directed at the mimetic tradition, the assumption still appears to be that

art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside of the workshop or museum and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by denouncing its own participation in that system. (2010: 135).

Might the artistic experimentations of the so-called social and/or political turn then be viewed as useful exercises of political and civic intervention? Or might we argue that such practices have been incorporated into the system as an extended new set of values, attitudes and structures, reaffirming what Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have argued often happens to artistic practice and critique? How might such attempts redefine the role and the potential of performance practice in the political field?

In a documentary by Stefanos Mondelos under the title *FACK MSUV/ Performing the Museum as a Common/ and the Common as a Museum* (2015), we witness the creative process of an international activist/artist gathering in an art museum in Novi Sad in Serbia. The museum was occupied with the permission of its director and run as a commons for a week. In Mondelos' documentary we follow the process from the initial declarations to the final outcome.

Despite the initially good intentions, in the documentary it seems that the final outcome fails to radicalize the museum. On the contrary, it appears the museum somehow institutionalizes the participants. As the documentary reaches its closing point we see the outcome, the public sharing: a social gathering, performance works, mini interventions in the city streets and the museum. Somewhere in the documentary a man reads a text and quotes Walter Benjamin who in 1934 argued that »political commitment however revolutionary it may seem functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer (or the artist) experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only in his mind and not as a producer«.

As the museum is turned into a place of the commons and the theatre into an assembly, and the political turn is again incorporated by biennials and

institutions, we might want to rethink what art and activism can do when they are reperformed or resituated inside neoliberal structures. In places of struggle in recent years we have witnessed new ways of thinking art and politics as new emergent hybrid forms rehearsed new configurations. In order to continue such explorations rather than erase or domesticate these experiences, it might be worth rethinking how acts, interventions and practices might retain their subversive potential inside other structures across arts and politics, processes and events. How might limits, borders and practices be displaced, pushed, destroyed and reconstructed out of specific needs, desires and interventions?

Natasa Ilic gave a talk in an occupied space in Athens, Green Park. A space that emerged out of a series of failing collective struggles, interventions, occupations and destituent acts in the years of crisis. Ilic discussed a series of projects by WHW in a variety of contexts and proposed to reconsider the ›usefulness‹ of art – »art might be useful because it is useless« (2015 n.p.), Ilic suggested. At a time when artistic and activist practices seem to be able to offer too much and at the same time have minimum effect on the contemporary situation, this impotential position might offer a starting point for thinking, acting and practicing at this moment in time. Reclaim the space and time of art as a mode of questioning the political instead of vice versa. Then perhaps the »obligations of co-existence« and the possibility of finding each other outside the capitalist laws of value determination might begin to rehearse impotential, emergent configurations through new uses of time, space and productivity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bishop, Claire (2004): *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* (<http://roundtable.kein.org/files/roundtable/clairebishop-antagonism&relational%20aesthetics.pdf>, accessed August 30, 2010).
- Boltanski, Luc/Chiapello, Eve (2007): *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Verso.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas (1998): *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les presses du réel.
- Groys, Boris, (2014): *On Art Activism*. In: *E-flux* (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism>, accessed January 15, 2015).

- Harvey, David (2012): *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London and New York: Verso.
- Ilic, Natasa (2015): *Things Can't Go On Like This: Oh But They Can, They Can*. Unpublished Talk presented at Green Park, Athens, November 28, 2015.
- Invisible Committee (2009): *The Coming Insurrection*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Kunst, Bojana, (2010): *Prognosis on Collaboration* (<http://kunstbody.wordpress.com/2009/03/29/prognosis-on-collaboration>, accessed 10 September 2013).
- Latour, Bruno (1999): *Ein Ding ist ein Thing – A Philosophical Platform for a Left (European) Party*. In: *Soundings: A journal of Politics and Culture* 12, pp. 12-25.
- Thompson, Nato, (ed.) (2012): *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art 1991-2011*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Pine, B. Joseph/Gilmore, James H. (2001): *All the World's a Stage!* In: *FUTURE - The Aventis Magazine*, January 2001: pp. 76-81.
- Rancière, Jacques (2010): *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, London: Continuum.
- The Art of Being Many* (2014) (<http://the-art-of-being-many.net>, accessed January 10, 2016).
- Zizek, Slavoj (2013): *Love as a Political Category* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44IhiCuNw4>, accessed November 10, 2013).



