

Introduction

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Human microphones, neighbourhood assemblies, camps in public spaces, mass protests organized through digital media – the first half of this decade has seen many new forms and ways of assembling. Most of these assemblies took place in the name of ›real democracy‹, with ›real democracy‹ not being a fixed political program but rather a new practice of getting together and of sharing that seemed to constantly reflect on its performative protocols and media strategies. Since the year 2000, new forms of political gatherings have also been an important focus in the arts. With projects like Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Chance 2000*, the exhibition *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel or LIGNA's participatory *Radioballets* reclaiming public space we have witnessed the development of an experimental art of assembling. The Hamburg-based collective geheimagentur has taken part in this research for more than a decade. In this context, »The Art of Being Many« has initially been the title of a position paper written by geheimagentur for the International Forum of the Theatertreffen Berlin in 2008. In this paper, geheimagentur analyzed and criticized current strategies of audience participation in terms of their economical, political and aesthetical implications. For a long time, copresence, the simultaneous presence of artists and public audience, has been understood merely as the basic premise of performance and theatre. But with the development of participatory performance art the form of the assembly turned from a premise into an experimental setup: If and how a public assembly emerges as part of a specific performance became a core question of participatory art. In other words: In art and activism, the assembly as such has been revisited, redefined and reclaimed as the basic mode of political participation. On these grounds

The Art of Being Many became a research project aiming to collect experiences and knowledge produced by these innovative practices and experiments.

In September 2014, artists, activists, researchers and participants from all over Europe and beyond gathered in Hamburg, Germany, for an assembly of assemblies. Sharing experiences from real democracy movements and artistic experimentation they came to explore new ways of gathering: collective insights into the materiality, the timing, the agenda, the desires and the catastrophes of being many. This book presents some of the outcomes of this gathering. However, the following texts are not supposed to archive what happened at the Hamburg get-together and to draw up the balance. By putting together theories of assembling, materials taken from the event as well as reflections on the contexts from which *The Art of Being Many* originated, we rather aim to contribute to the art of being many as an ongoing research program into a new theory and practice of gathering.

The Art of Being Many of 2014 took place at Kampnagel Internationale Kulturfabrik. In a huge hall of the former factory building, which has been turned into a cultural center in the 1980s, the assembly became a laboratory of itself: a collective of friends and strangers with many voices and bodies including those of ghosts and things. Many of us met for the first time, but we all had something in common: We had witnessed moments of assembling that made the word ›democracy‹ sound important again. These assemblies may not have brought about the political changes many of us had hoped for. Nevertheless, we are convinced of their importance.

Speaking about ›the many‹ (instead of the masses, of the oppressed classes, of ›the people‹ or of various minorities) invokes new concepts of collectivity by renegotiating their modes of participation and (self-) presentation and by rewriting rhetorical, choreographical, and material scripts of assembling. This renegotiation happens necessarily between politics and cultural practice, between art and activism, and thus in a notorious zone of conflict, of doubt and of self-critique: After all, is it not most of the time a feeling of NOT being many that is common to both art and activism, i.e. of not being enough people to bring forth the necessary changes or to win the important battles? And even if art and activism share a desire for being many, does this make them good accomplices or is not rather the opposite true? Is their alliance not always linked to the risk of reducing the many to an economic feature and a spectacle (cf. Bishop 2012)? Participation, presumption, social

media, data mining – in all of these fields the many are treated as a resource, and success is defined as providing access to this resource one way or another.

But the desire for being many reaches beyond this necessary critique. For good reasons it rises up against the cultural tyranny of the individual which has long been captured and redesigned as the self-optimizing subject of cognitive capitalism. It rises up against the economics of attention, of knowledge, of cultural credit and its imperatives of the big name, the keynote, the star, against the principles of scarcity and accumulation. It rises up – most importantly – against the ongoing concentration of power and capital in the hands of the fewer and fewer, against the reduction of the many to the few, the reduction of the many to the statistics of control, security, austerity and biopolitical representation.

When the many actually emerge and start to engage in the constituent process of becoming a ›we‹, terrible and wonderful things can happen. The wonderful part is that, in such moments, the most important things can be reinvented: care, dignity, and the power to change our lives collectively. So, how to learn, how to embody, how to continue to be many?

The Art of Being Many was initiated by geheimagentur in cooperation with a research network of sociologists, activists and philosophers (initiated by Vassilis S. Tsianos) from Greece, Italy, and Spain, who examine new approaches to cities in crisis in the current age. These two groups also cooperated with the Hamburg postgraduate research program *Assemblies and Participation: Urban Publics and Performance*. Running from 2012 to 2015 at Hafencity University, Fundus Theater and K3 – Centre for Choreography, this program fostered art-based research into assemblies and political participation. In addition, activists, academics, and artists (including Martin Jörg Schäfer) with interests in the political dimension of theatre and performance studies were also included.

Initiated by this network, the assembly itself was prepared in a collective curatorial process. Open, transdisciplinary and transnational working groups were created, each preparing one panel of the assembly (about 150 people altogether). This preparation continued for the year leading up to *The Art of Being Many*, mainly via the project website. Finally, the working groups met for two days in order to collectively prepare the assembly for about 400 people. This event lasted for another two days, from noon to midnight, respectively.

As an assembly of assemblies *The Art of Being Many* was not meant to be a series of individual presentations, acts and keynotes but wanted to focus on what can be done together: no audience, no performers, only those who were part of the assembly for those days and only that which they wanted it to be – a congress, an endurance performance, a conference, a meeting point, etc.

This volume cannot document this event in all its complexities, and does not even try. Instead, it collects texts and documents of three different kinds in the corresponding parts of this publication:

- Theoretical essays outlining the discussion that currently links political struggles with questions of how to assemble as many.
- Material from the gathering in Hamburg: texts and scripts that were presented at the assembly, but also documentations, reflections, and critical reviews.
- Texts which give insight into the context – with regard to judicial, financial, organisational or aesthetic aspects of an art of being many.

As a gathering and as a research program, *The Art of Being Many* differed considerably from other meetings, discourses and endeavours in the context of what is called ›political resistance‹: Instead of referring to immediate political demands and necessities, the agenda of *The Art of Being Many* referred primarily to seemingly formal and technical aspects of assembling. Nevertheless, these aspects were conceived as inseparably intertwined with the political stakes of real democracy. The performance dimension of the art of being many was understood as a retraining and remaking of our senses in order to allow us to understand how radical social transformation is possible and how it already takes place. Thinking and acting in terms of resistance makes us confine ourselves to practices of reactive opposition. But what we saw in the first half of this decade was a series of eruptions which announced something that by far surpasses the political semantics of resistance. How can we understand that people who had been partaking in ›oligarchic democracy‹ (and worse) all their lives suddenly *practiced* real democracy in so many places all over the globe? They did not so much ›resist‹ something but rather created a new situation that allowed those »who have no part« (Rancière 2004: 30) to enter. Historically, mass movements have often been discussed as something threatening, for instance by being portrayed through the image of *infection* (cf. Stäheli, 2011). Today, it seems important to foster

a theory of the democratic potentiality of assemblies that both resists pathologization and is capable of understanding moments of uncontrollability as opportunities. In this context the ›assembly‹ is a modality of communality and of togetherness; it is linked to an explicit criticism of political identity primarily understood via *representation processes* (cf. Negri/Hardt 2009; Rancière 2004). In this context, the material and operative way of functioning, the ›architecture‹ of assemblies, moves to the fore: the affective dynamics as well as the media and cultural techniques of the many. For good reasons, assemblies of real democracy movements have incorporated an aspect of slowness and carefulness when it comes to the process of organization and decision-making (cf. Papadopoulos/Tsianos/Tsomou 2015). The difference they have inscribed into the political sphere has very little to do with the pathologic realism of so-called post-democracy (Crouch 2004), whose main point of criticism is the alleged lack of sustainable political organization and optimal institutionalization of the interests in question. Assemblies of real democracy movements have not engaged in the discourse of being disenchanted with politics but created a kind of real-democracy infra-politics, an assembly infrastructure against the tyranny of neoliberal crisis management. Criticizing the limits of given forms of political representation implies interrupting unsubstantiated ontological assumptions about people's capacities to represent themselves and the world. Therefore, assemblies of the many insisted on becoming their own politics. Their concepts, demands, affects, and ways of working transgress given mechanisms of control in a way that can only be understood if we give up on binary oppositions like form and content, matter and idea, means and goals.

Nevertheless, during the gathering in Hamburg in 2014 it proved ambitious to engage in an embodied and at the same time reflective exploration taking the assembly itself, its practices and bodies, its affects and setups, as starting points. It did not only presuppose that the working groups, which were involved in the curatorial process and the participants present at the assembly would all want to make and find connections between seemingly formal aspects and more common political questions instead of focussing on their individual presentations and accounts of things done elsewhere. It also produced clashes between given assembly cultures in the absence of an overall directive, for example by creating conflicting juxtapositions: People who wanted to continue talking about experiences with severe police violence were confronted with flashing lights and a dancing encounter of queer

voguing and Somalian folkdance that turned the forum into a stage. People who wanted to discuss transnational perspectives of debt resistance were confronted with others organizing a local sauna in the same spot. People who wanted to share moments of commoning were confronted with the complicated technical setup of the full-blown performance space at Kampnagel Kulturfabrik.

Readings of clashes like these notoriously fall short of the complexity that had brought them about in the first place. Conflicts of reflective assemblies cannot be explained or dealt with by relying on identity schemes like ›artists vs. activists‹. People on either side of these clashes are artists or activists or both or neither, and will find themselves on the other side of that same distinction soon enough. Whoever calls the many to assemble, whoever calls an assembly that cannot rely on any preexisting practice of the assembly, has to be ready to encounter irritation, confusion and conflict and has to withstand the temptation to pacify, exclude or resolve.

The initiating network started this process by drafting questions and titles for the seven panels of the assembly. This collection of questions and titles became an outline for a research program that, as such, is still standing. It is included in this introduction not in order to enable the reader to measure aim and outcome but rather to provide an inducement for further thought and action.

materiality and decision

What is the material makeup of democratic decision-making? What media, which kinds of props do we use or could we use to decide as many? Obviously, if and how we decide collectively will influence the character of a meeting: consensus or majority? Hierarchical or horizontal? Analog or digital? Soft or loud? By lot or oracle? Intoxicated or sober? How do we decide how to decide? What is the relation between the body of the assembly and our individual bodies? Do we have to be in one place to be an assembly? How are things and bodies arranged in the space of an assembly? What proceedings are suggested by spaces specifically designed for assembling? And what happens if other spaces are reclaimed for an assembly of the many?

This aspect is reflected by Kai van Eikels' essay on consensus and the specific dynamics that make assemblies of the many differ from others, and by

Ulrike Bergermann who analyzes media figurations of the ›critical plural‹ focussing on the example of the human mic. In both cases, the assembly does not negotiate a (political) content disconnected from its form. Rather, democratic form and contents turn out to be inseparable.

timing and breaks

Timing is crucial for assemblies – for the structure of the assembly itself, but also for its formation: When do we get together? What kind of events trigger the getting together of the many? How do assemblies of the many interrupt temporal governance? How to turn an assembly that is allocated a certain timeslot into an assembly that takes its time? How do we measure and organise our time? Assemblies are often determined by a certain relation to the future. How is this future represented, predicted and referred to? Time seems always too short and too long in assemblies and is linked to a feeling of both urgency and boredom. Is there a way out of this predicament?

In the second part of this volume, an experiment in collective timekeeping is documented that took place at *The Art of Being Many*. Moreover, the script of the audio guide created by Random People for *The Art of Being Many* can be read as a documented experiment with the extended time of gathering.

blockades and panic

Many assemblies of real democracy movements took the shape of metropolitan blockades. They turned urban space against itself by blocking the movements and connections sustaining it. Thus, the blockade of Syntagma square, Placa del Sol, Tahrir Square or Gezi Park seemed to give birth to a new frame of time and space in politics. What is the possible shift in power relations between police forces and protesters if the public assembly in urban space turns into a collective experience of blockade? Is metropolitan blockade mobilizing space as a direct means for political action?

The various accounts and analyses given by activists belonged to the highlights of the event. In this volume, you will find the above questions and their theoretical implications explored in the text by Marios Emanuilidis as well

as in the essay by Vassilis S. Tsianos and Margarita Tsomou on assembling bodies as a new politics beyond representation.

vogue and voodoo

What are the ceremonial dimensions of gathering? How do the trance-like states come about that are sometimes experienced when coming together as many? What do they do to you and me and friends and strangers? By what rituals are they produced and/or abused? What are the stimulants, the techniques of sampling and appropriation that lead to enhanced states of self-presentation or self-loss/transcendence? What are the links between representation and trance? Who is speaking in whose name and why?

A unique answer to the questions asked in this session was given by Orgy Punk's performance *Tear Gas Democracy* that is described in his text and depicted by Enrique Flores' respective drawing. Moreover, Martin Jörg Schäfer's article on the labor and leisure aspects of »performing the many« also addresses the modes of non-work prevalent in assemblies. In addition, the second part of this book includes two texts presented during the panel. Both Giulia Palladini (with respect to the manifold figurations of foreplay) and Martin Jörg Schäfer (with respect to the ceremonials of gathering) address notions of multiplicity and togetherness in considering the buzzwords ›vogue‹ and ›voodoo‹.

sound, systems and voices

How is public space, how is the assembly as a forum constructed by voices, sounds and soundsystems? How are temporary collectives produced acoustically? How are imaginations of political community linked to sound machines and rhetorical techniques? To ask about the sound of assemblies means asking how humans and technical devices are assembled to become hybrid public adress systems.

The sound of assembling has been a focus in the work of many in the network of *The Art of Being Many* and is fairly well represented in this volume. In their text on the »art of being uncanny« the collective LIGNA gives an account of their approach by linking critical radio theory to the theory of gathering. In the form of a dialogue, Sylvi Kretzschmar and Kathrin Wildner

exchange their explorations of sound in religious assemblies, of public address systems and urban space and link it with their experience of the September 2014 assembly. In addition, the script of a meditation exercise specifically devised for *The Art of Being Many* by Ernesto Estrella is included in this volume.

affects and documents

In recent years, the video image and other diverse forms of archives of political movements have become protagonists of assemblies in their own right. How do places and documents affect each other? What are the respective narratives and struggles? How are lines of memory entangled by travelling images? How are strategies of contemporary image production and distribution driven and rescripted by social movements? Are these affects and documents able to facilitate transnational catenations between collective practices?

Chis Zisis' and Gigi Argiropoulou's contributions in the second part of the book give a vivid account of the respective panel (as well as a detailed critique of the assembly altogether). In the third part of this book, Nanna Heidenreich's article on reactualization and activation in mobile cinema explores some of these questions further with respect to a current example. Apart from that, other contributions to this panel could not be translated into the medium of text and therefore have not been included in this book. However, there is one very special contribution that did find its way: the drawings by Enrique Flores. Witnessing and partaking in the 15M-movement on Plaza del Sol in Madrid, Enrique Flores has dedicated his work to the depiction of the assemblies of the real democracy movement. Leaving his former work for big media networks, he has become one of the most important and most beloved chroniclers of real democracy. Due to their unique combination of respect and precision his drawings often seem to be the most reliable transmission of what happened, or what happened in-between. Thus, they build a precious pictorial archive of recent European history. We still feel very honored that Enrique followed our invitation to come to Hamburg and draw *The Art of Being Many*. Therefore, we decided to reproduce ten of the drawings he made in September 2014 as the only images included in this volume.

real fictions

To assemble in new fashions often feels as if one is engaging in some kind of real fiction: just made up, but yet entirely real. The many themselves are a real fiction. What are possible elements of creating, sustaining, nurturing, and embodying this real fiction? How is it different from other real fictions? When do we consider ourselves ›to be many‹? What is the reality and what is the fiction in the relation between the many and the few? What other real fictions are created and can be created by the many? Can ›real fiction‹ even be understood as a strategy? Are real fictions embodied by the many ready to counteract other real fictions like austerity or oligarchic bureaucracy or the nationstate?

Various aspects of these questions are explored in texts by Ilias Marmaras, Brett Scott, Brigitta Kuster, and Elise von Bernstorff. Ilias Marmaras discusses the relation between the ›many‹ and ›the people‹ as conflicting real fictions in the Greek situation. Brett Scott's text provides information about hands-on-strategies of the many to counteract the financial system, i.e. the most powerful real fiction of our time. Elise von Bernstorff's text discusses constituent processes as real fictions and introduces the Charter for Europe, a document written by participants of real democracy movements from all over the continent. Her text serves as an introduction to the current state of the charter, which is reproduced in full.

On a more general level, questions around the many as a real fiction and assemblies as performances have been crucial for geheimagentur's own approach to *The Art of Being Many*. They are explored in greater detail in the opening text by Sibylle Peters: »Calling Assemblies«.

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