

# Un/Easy Resonance

## The Critical Plural

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*The following considerations will examine the un/easiness in the experience of a human microphone in three steps: 1. Current political philosophy tells us to start from singular experience; 2. Artistic research scrutinizes the human microphone as a bodily technique of a critical mass; 3. Additional philosophical positions discuss the many with respect to the question of difference. Ultimately, my three readings will resonate with my singular experience as part of a human microphone.*

## I AS IN EMBODIMENT

Everything is illuminated, enlightenment has gone full circle, we can see everything but are hardly able to act on it: This is how the Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés (2006) pictures the vantage point of critique today. We know so much about the world, but can do so little, she claims – a point of view, of course, that reaffirms the spheres of visibility and information on the one side and agency and embodiment on the other by a division that is in itself heir to our history of rationality. But there is more to Garcés' demand of an »embodiment of critique« than this old duality suggests. It is about the one and the many, the singular and the plural.

In our highly individualized culture, new forms of communalities need to be conceived, or are emerging already and need to be recognized. While the individual life, the singular existence, is being privatized through various economies, the questions about possible forms of being together become

more urgent. Where problems are individualized, there is hardly a ›we‹ to share them. In a networked society, every single one *is* insofar as she is connecting, connected to other nodes, investing in communication; the ›I‹ no longer exists unless it is networked – a form of being together that Garcés describes as ruled by control and (self) repression. The traditional mode of critique had pictured its starting point as distanced from the world, from a position that is no longer possible today ... therefore, it comes as a surprise when Garcés turns to the individual once more: »To ask for this ›we‹ requires starting from the only thing we possess: our own experience.« (ibid: n.p.)

How could that be, considering that these ›selves‹ cannot even conceive of themselves outside of all networked economies? Should we return to the contaminated category of ›personal experience‹, as if deep inside and beyond the intellectual there was a realm of the genuine? No. It is just that it is the only thing left to do, the last remaining position to take off from. »The fragmentation of meaning contains this paradoxical virtue: we are obliged to start with ourselves.« (ibid) Garcés proposes to »attack the ›I‹«, to challenge the privatization of the existence of the ›I‹ and, at the same time, to make use of it. »The quest for the common today requires the courage to drown oneself in their actual experience of the world, even if it is naked and empty of promises. This is what it means to embody critique.« And the notion of embodiment, here, is in no way a metaphorical one. »[T]he problem of critique is no longer a problem of conscience but of embodiment: it does not concern a conscience facing the world but rather a body that is in and with the world.« (ibid)

Garcés, then, turns to a range of political events and movements from Barcelona; I want to follow her provocative »enunciation« (ibid) of the embodied singular experience in remembering one that I had during a demonstration which made use of the human microphone.

## I AS IN HUMAN MICROPHONE

The human microphone regained political and theoretical popularity during Occupy Wall Street's occupation of Manhattan's Zuccotti Park in the fall of 2011 (cf. Graeber 2011, 2013; Geiges 2014; Bryne 2012; Blumenkranz et al. 2011; Schwartz 2011; Mörtenböck/Mooshammer 2012). When cut off from

electricity and in need of amplifying their voices to communicate, the protesters of OWS reactivated a tactic from the 1970s and used the form of the ›human microphone‹ in their assemblies. Whoever spoke had to pause after some words, so that the people standing close enough to hear would repeat together what had been said. Many voices amplified one and could be repeated again for those standing even further away. Response had to be slow and was managed through hand gestures and lists of speakers. The human microphone was seen as a tool of real democracy where everybody should have a voice, as opposed to only one voice being heard as representative of the many. It can be described as an assemblage of bodies and techniques, of spatial and vocational politics.<sup>1</sup>

»Democracy, not representation« is the interpretational formula of OWS discussed by political theorist Isabell Lorey. She unfolds the European model of democracy as grounded on principles of the representation of the people, designates these representational principles as an enclosure of a ›power of

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- 1 Not everybody had equal access to the human mic, though. As activist and participant observer Michael A. Gould-Wartofsky (PhD candidate in NYU's sociology department) wrote after taking part in OWS, collecting heaps of footage, writings, photographs, and conducting 40 in-depth-interviews, race and class issues often excluded the non-educated and the non-white from resources and participation. The group POCupy demanded diversification of OWS and argued that to speak of the 99% was not coherent at all in economic terms, as an average white US-household owned 20 times as much as the average black one (Gould-Wartofsky 2015: 98); a Jamaican participant at Occupy Oakland was quoted saying the occupiers would not speak for those who needed it most; facilitators or organizers mostly were young white people with an education that made it easier for them to handle the new modes of communication. Michelle Crentsil, member of POCupy, reported: »We could walk through the park and yell ›Mic check!‹ And we're like, ›People of Color Working Group!‹ And all of a sudden it gets all muffled and nobody's repeating you anymore. I remember that one. That one really hurt.« (ibid) Gould-Wartofsky continues: »Operational funds flowed freely to every group but the POC. Many who had come to the occupation to speak out found their voices silenced, their views sidelined by the facilitators and the drafters of key documents – often on the pretense that they had not gone through ›the right process‹ or spoken to ›the right people‹. [...] Throughout the occupation, I often witnessed white speakers seize the People's Mic from people of color.« (ibid: 99)

the many»<sup>2</sup> (Lorey 2012: 30) and of the fear of the masses (ibid: 16-20, 27-28), and she explains the occupations as a symptom of a »desire of the many«<sup>3</sup> (ibid: 27) towards a non-representational democracy in search of its form. Lorey's emphasis on depicting a proper, underlying will of the people and her clear-cut interpretation of a somewhat murky situation notwithstanding, the scope of the activists' critique becomes palpable. One does not have to follow the romanticizing idea of a »creative power of the multitude« or the idealized, homogenizing look at the incidents (where *desire*, *praxis*, and *process* stand for an opposite of representation) in order to appreciate the challenge the absence of an explicit agenda poses for traditional political theory and practice.

One of the most disturbing characteristics of Occupy Wall Street was the denial of the customary list of demands protesters usually take to the streets for<sup>4</sup> (supported by Slavoj Žižek (2011a): The vacuum within the hegemonic discourse should not be refilled too early in order for something really new to be able to emerge). The second characteristic, closely related to the first, concerns the ways in which to discuss, to take decisions, and to test new procedures of not only letting some chosen representatives speak, but to radically include the many. The new keyword is »horizontalism«.

Philosophers of various genres discussed the human mic in terms of the singular and the many (cf. Nancy 2000; Kastner/Lorey/Raunig 2011; Marchart 2013), artistic research analyzed its sound practices (Woodruff 2014; Kretzschmar 2014), and it might be related further to cultural histories and discursive figures like the chorus, interpellation, or call and response (Bergermann forthcoming).

»Composer-theorist« Jeremy Woodruff wrote his PhD at the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh in 2013, comprising a composition

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2 Translation by the author.

3 Translation by the author.

4 Another one would be the slogan »We are the 99%«, as Jens Kastner argued: You cannot assume a unity of the 99%, neither theoretically nor empirically, but a unity should be considered as one always »under construction«, in constant *becoming*. Nonetheless, it is the majority who suffers from the financial crisis, so one might think of a metaphorical 99% (a metaphor for »almost everybody«). The majority, however, does not share *one* point of view, not a *single* voice (Kastner 2012: 67).

and a written work about the human mic<sup>5</sup> and performance artist Sylvie Kretzschmar from Hamburg writes her doctoral dissertation in the context of an academic/artistic PhD program. Kretzschmar argues that public address systems (PAs) produce a certain space and choreograph speakers as well as the public/the collective. There is a certain authoritative trait here, as PAs configure whose voice is amplified, and, in that way, they ›dictate‹ the structure of the public. Amplification organizes participation and silencing. The new assemblies of the 2010s rely heavily on the voice in that the spoken word is part of a multimedia network of computers, smartphones, and the social media and in that the idea of ›direct democracy‹ calls for presence and orality.

## MODES OF MERGING

The use of the human mic starts with somebody shouting »mic check«, and the crowd answers »mic check«, as if one was talking into an amplified microphone. The second repetition of the phrase, as Kretzschmar and Woodruff mention, does not only wait for the first one to end, but also pauses for as long as the sentence was, thus (automatically) producing a rhythm in a collective use of speech melody, asserting that there was a simultaneity of sending and receiving where words were received through the ears and sent out through the mouth/voice.

This, of course, calls to mind not only the old concept of the proximity of *logos* and *phone*. The romanticization of a collective experience amounts to the final realization of the figure of hearing-oneself-in-speaking, or rather: hearing-oneself-and-the-other-in-speaking. A set of hand gestures is supposed to indicate if the listener/speaker objects or agrees, even while repeating what was said, so that speech never has to be disrupted. It is left open how, then, possible objections can be seen by all, how they might affect the flow of speech etc.; the author even welcomes the amplification (not only of sound, but also) of affect through the human mic (Kretzschmar 2014: 155); the crowd would be ›bodily taken over by the spirit of the speech‹<sup>6</sup> and

5 I thank artist Anna Bromley for this information; cf. Bromley 2013.

6 Translation by the author.

would »throw back this enchantment immediately«<sup>7</sup> (ibid: 157).<sup>8</sup> »Authenticity«, in any case, remains coupled with the voice (even though the »pathos of presence« goes hand in hand with an overload of documentary practices, pictures, protocols, video clips etc.). Even the gross simplification of transmitted messages in the human mic does not worry its advocates, who argue that it was within the pauses between repetitions that people would think and formulate precisely that the need of short messages would lead to a concentration and compression of content, and that the slowing down of communication, the conscious deceleration, would postpone the moment of political positioning, in a step back from points of view that seem available all too readily (ibid). The linking, even short-circuiting of traditional polarities – understood as a new political aesthetics – belongs, I would argue, to the human-technologies-imaginary-network called human mic.

Jeremy Woodruff's »Musical Analysis of the People's Microphone« starts from the mic's »political speech« using »the fundamental linguistic/musical principle of imitation.« (2014: iv) Woodruff examines musical parameters of the tones of voice in the human mic, this »crossover between music and speech«, to find its »musical tactics« (ibid: 1)<sup>9</sup>; he considers the specific words of messages less important than the sound and »its musical dimension in political struggle and society« (ibid: 7), identifying synchronizing effects

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7 Translation by the author.

8 »Die Menge wiederholt die Worte, ist dadurch vom Geist des Gesagten körperlich besessen und wirft diese Be-Geisterung unmittelbar zurück.« – In political theory, the importance of the *liveness* of speaking has been underlined since the French Revolution, as orality has been seen as an antidote against the corruption of the Ancien Régime; Mladen Dolar, then again, has criticized the »political fiction« that democracy was a question of immediacy and as such a question of the voice.

9 Woodruff used mobile phone videos (by protesters, via YouTube, or leaked police videos, illegally uploaded by Anonymous via web torrent) to measure wavelengths, time codes, frequencies, volumes, the kilohertz measurements registered in a chart, inventing scales of »intensities« ranging from 1 to 8. Close »readings« of recordings minutely describe the pitches in the sound, the more assertive phrases (in which the leader cannot be heard, the repetitions vary more; they are more in unison where people share the same opinion), etc.

of this speech.<sup>10</sup> In his final analysis, the human mic is a sonic tool moving between unison (harmonies, repetition, sameness) and dissonance (alterations, differences). While identically embodying a message, there is, at the same time, »a critical distance from the source voice«, there are measurable »differences in types of critical distance« within the »process of dissemination and invention« (ibid: 142). Black feminist activist and theorist Angela Davis, in her use of the human mic, criticized its unifying mode of speaking and proposed to produce »dissonance, not unity, a noise in the system«.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, more often than not, the opposite has been praised.

Woodruff asserts that the human mic often delivered »more lyrics than prose« (ibid: 9). Kretzschmar states that the sense of the messages was often acoustically diverted into the bodies of the many »up to the suspension of the sense of the words.« (Kretzschmar 2014: 157) Mattathias Schwartz, the *New Yorker's* conservative commentator, conceded that the point of OWS was its form and the slogan »We are our demands« (2011: n.p.): The medium was the message, form followed function. Some writers hail the suspension of difference, as if Derrida's well-known critique of phonocentrism had been overcome: Extend a repetition of something spoken to many people, and regardless of the space in-between them, a sort of hearing-oneself-in-speaking, or hearing-oneself-and-the-other-in-speaking, would occur, collectively. However, Derrida's reading of Husserl brings up a differentiation between the outer and the inner perception of one's own speech act which allows for the perception of the spoken words as self-produced and thus to perceive the other as the own (Linz 2006: 58; Derrida [1967] 2000); the break (*caesura*) is fundamental here.

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10 Again, this seems to happen automatically: To form »resonant bodies« – a term by Brandon LaBelle – would appear to be hardwired in the human species and its »sonic unconscious« (ibid: 18).

11 Angela Davis at Zuccotti Park, 30.10.2011: »How can we be together/ In a unity/ That is not/ Simplistic/ And oppressive...«. In: Woodruff 2014: 145. Cf. Žižek's (2011b) speech at Zuccotti Park, »Don't fall in love with yourselves«, September 13, 2011.

## I AS IN WE

While a romantic desire of merging the one and the many may be part of the imaginary of the human microphone, there are other images and readings as well: The manifold (*Mannigfaltigkeit*) of voices, as Gerald Raunig notes, promotes an ongoing enfolding of the utterance (2012: 123-124). The single voices are not in *uni-son*, but resonate in different ways: in synchronization.

This is not to say that the synchronized parts need one common pulse generator. Kai van Eikels finds collective forms that have no representation as a whole (as group, party or even ›movement‹, and even without the parts being aware of being a part) to be necessary (2013: 12) and, what is more, finds the difference between the ›parts‹ of these collectives to be essential, too: without it, there would be no synchronization.<sup>12</sup> When passing information in a synchronized manner, bodily affections can very well ensue; but instead of naturalizing or somatizing their effects, van Eikels sees the synchronized elements as oscillators. There is not only a relation between the elements, but also a relation to the element itself (ibid: 164). It is not nature that governs affects – oscillators pass their meanings horizontally among each other. Could there be a better description of what happens during the use of the human mic?

Another conception of ›parts and the whole‹ also reads like a theory of assemblies and their manifestations. A retroactive reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of being-with addresses the one and the many of the assembly. His notion of being-with conceives of no temporal (or logical, or any other kind of) priority of one over the other; there is no ›we‹ prior to the subject, and no ›I‹ before the community. Existence is always already coexistence, the singular does not come after the plural and vice versa: The world

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12 In talking about the politics of the streets, Judith Butler reminded us that »we can only be dispossessed because we are always already dispossessed«; Greek philosopher Athena Athanasiou replied that it is not the same to ›be‹ dispossessed, on the one side, and ›to become‹ or ›be made‹ dispossessed, on the other. The language of philosophy here is just not *in sync* with the language of political life (Athanasiou / Butler 2013: 5).



is »singularly plural and plurally singular« (2000: xiv).<sup>13</sup> The price for this ›horizontalism‹ is mediation: In theorizing the ›with‹, there seems to be little to no concern for the ›through‹; difference is not crucial. There is no *mi-lieu*, writes Nancy, nothing in between the one and the other, no instrument, no medium: »Everything passes between us.« (ibid: 5)<sup>14</sup> The materiality of communication gets out of focus here, but even speech acts are based on such a materiality. Seen from Nancy's perspective, the sound of the human mic may be eventful, but it passes through bodies, space, resonances without any impediment whatsoever.

## MODES OF UNI-SONIZING

Van Eikels sees no need for a common script for the many; Nancy sketches community as the effect of a continuous passing, but Raunig goes for a different interpretation. He proposes a Deleuzianian »new schizo-competency« in making use of the »social-machinic relations out of which the enunciations of the multiple emerge« (2013: n.p.; cf. 2012: 124-125). Whoever says ›I‹ in speaking, listening, repeating, speaks as a machinic subjectivity; this ›I‹ does not aim at a perfect, unequivocal unison, but enunciates her own position, blurs author and audience, produces noises and multiple sounds as well, not in accordance but in consonance (2012: 125). And this holds true for the

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13 »The Being is singular plural. You always start within the alterity of someone. Co-appearance does not mean to come out into a light, but being in the simultaneity of being-with, where there is no being as such (*an sich*) which was not instantaneously *with*.« (Nancy 2000: 107).

14 »This ›between‹, as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge. Perhaps it is not even fair to speak of a ›connection‹ to its subject; it is neither connected nor unconnected; it falls short of both; even better, it is that which is at the heart of a connection, the *interlacing* [*l'entrecroisement*] of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot. The ›between‹ is the stretching out [*distension*] and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning. [...] ... there is no intermediate and mediating ›milieu‹.« (ibid: 5).

scholars whose desires are part of this machine as well, be it Woodruffs frequency measurements, Lorey's chain of revolutions, Kretzschmar's melting pots of sounds and activism, Raunig's notion of the manifold.

Of course, it is easy for myself as a scholar to comment on these philosophies, explain my reservations regarding figures that merge positions, or explain preferences for a diversity of antagonisms. The greater challenge, however, is posed by Garcés' quest for »the courage to drown oneself in [the common's] actual experience« (2006: n.p.). The experience of reading and thinking can feel like drowning oneself or at least like diving into something. But this is not the experience Garcés describes. Being part of a demonstration that used the form of a human microphone – as a means to express solidarity with the Occupy movement, although loudspeakers were available<sup>15</sup> – was an experience that made me feel very uneasy, and, following Garcés, I briefly want to consider that un/easiness.<sup>16</sup>

To cut a long story short: International capital pours into cities in search of places for investment, and expensive housing estates expel people from their homes; housing becomes the site for a struggle between public concerns and the free play of capital. Cutting it even shorter means taking demands for a change of these policies to the street. One protester does it, and then we all do it, on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg. – Repetition. – The first impression was the feeling of obeying a rule, of simply repeating words, following the sound of one leader, and reminded me of the church I went to as a child. – Trepidation. – Coming of age and saying I had been part of the very act of rejecting repetition. Besides, I was critical about the fact that, at that time, it was likely to have the same small range of male (and white, eloquent, smart)

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15 The anti-gentrification demonstration *SOS St. Pauli*, Hamburg, November 28, 2011.

16 The uneasiness does not stem from a rejection to be part of a group, or of a mass of people as such; I mostly like to identify with a certain bunch of people, and I would follow Nancy insofar as »[w]e do not have to identify ourselves as ›we‹, as a ›we‹. Rather, we have to disidentify ourselves *from* every sort of ›we‹ that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this *insofar* as ›we‹ co-appear. Anterior to all thought – and, in fact, the very condition of thinking – the ›thought‹ of ›us‹ is not a representational thought (not an idea, or notion, or concept). It is, instead, a *praxis* and an *ethos*: the staging of co-appearance, the staging which is co-appearing.« (2000: 71).

speakers at the mics (though I agree with their analyses and postulations); I was part of a choreography I had not opted for. (Of course, walking in the line of a demonstration has a similar quality of following. But at least it visually translates something to the public whereas the Reeperbahn's human mic did not have to translate anything acoustically to the protesters). The ›I‹ I am used to prefers to consider itself as someone expressing ideas more sophisticatedly; this vanity feels more at home in gestures between irony and appropriation, in a non-space, as in joining the male gay guys at Christopher Street's parade in singing Udo Jürgens' song ›Aber bitte mit Sahne‹ (›With cream, please‹).

Of course you could argue that it was up to me, that it was my freedom to choose whether I wanted to consider myself as a symbolic speaker, as part of a staging of solidarity, etc., but it did not work. I was not able to perceive the situation as hearing myself (and the others) in speaking, to enjoy the sound in and over the distance between the statement and its repetition. Difference, I feel, is as little a given as is unity. I could not work through, learn, perform, and join a mutual understanding of this practice with my own practice of speaking at that time. To me, one learned practice is as embodied as another one, so my reaction might have been different. Even if I would have agreed to Garcés' concept of starting at my individual privatized self, I could not find it there. The ›I‹ on the street, that the writing I is trying to reconfigure, was neither addressed or enunciated through the human mic nor became aware of itself in rejecting the repetition.

If there is a process of unfolding the I and the many through practices and exchanges, learning to be part of this process must have changed during the last decades. I am part of a generation that was politically socialized during the 1980s and 90s, and my model of a praxis of ›the one, the many and their techniques‹ would be karaoke, with its form of repetition that is at the same time devoted and blunt. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, now, develops new modes of being (part of) a critical plural. The art of being many is practiced not so much in actualizing a past and expressing itself in its critical and changeful repetition, but in actualizing a present. So, in practicing, the many are produced, and the ›I‹ will be produced, as in hindsight, though ›[t]he one never enters into an exchange with the multiple as unity, as identity‹ (Raunig 2013: n.p.), not as the known I, and: ›the subject of enunciation of critical thought‹ today is ›an anonymous and ambivalent subject‹ (Garcés 2006: n.p.). Therefore, the ›I‹ that I know will not have been the same, and ›embodied critique‹,

which emerges when the self is drowned in the actual world, will be a distributed body. In writing about it ›now‹, I make up the utopian move I was not able to perform on the street. *As critique*, Garcés' »actual experience of the world, even if it is naked and empty of promises« does not sound as poetic and full of resonating harmonies as many writings about the human mic did. Being many, or rather: having produced the many by becoming the many does not necessarily sound like a song. I beg your pardon: The assembly never promised me a rose garden. – But many roses.

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