

The Art of Being Uncanny

LIGNA

1

LIGNA were never interested in performing *for* somebody; instead, we like to establish an apparatus that enables the collective of listeners to become a collective of producers producing a situation which is not controlled by us. In *The Art of Being Many* we held the same talk twice. Simultaneously, two other members of the working group on sound in assemblies, Kathrin Wildner and Ernesto Estrella, gave talks. We were interested in the mediated, heterogeneous situation. We did not know if someone listened, we were not interested in centralizing the situation, we liked the fact that no one could listen to all three contributions to *The Art of Being Many*. At the same time, the audience was invited to listen to the same talk twice. And, as we heard at least from one listener, the talk was for sure not the same the second time. Strictly speaking, it was another text. Therefore, it could seem inappropriate to publish an edited version of our talk in this volume only once.

2

LIGNA is a collective, originally from Hamburg. We met in the local, non-commercial radio station FSK, *Freies Sender Kombinat*, where parts of our group regularly attended the assemblies that organized the station and discussed its political agenda. There were lots of different groups involved. Free radio in the 1990s seemed to be a good place to argue about the failures of 20th century left wing politics. As one might imagine, this involved many struggles, even exclusions, since free speech in the perspective of the station

could not mean to reproduce freely all the sexist, racist, antisemitic or even fascist speech acts that are so common in German society. But though political opinions were diverse, most people agreed that through free radio one could enable a direct relation to the audience, that you could address their consciousness and change it by conveying information, by talking: By only paying attention, by only listening closely, they might change the world...

This notion of direct communication relies on the idea of the presence of the voice in radio, a notion that has a rather dubious history in radio theory (cf. Frahm 2013: 206-212). The idea – though bizarre, and not quite intuitive – that the medium of radio does not change the voice but preserves it and therefore can have a certain, direct impact on the listener, has also been applied to assemblies. Assemblies often rely on an idealized concept of the act of receiving, in which nothing else but the understanding of the message takes place: since we are now here listening. A listening without distraction and beyond all power relations. A notion of speaking and listening that does not acknowledge the mediality of language but relies on the presence of the one who speaks and the one who listens.

Our collective started with a critique of these notions. To talk, not only in radio, but in radio most visibly and audibly, means to become absent. To talk does not mean to gain, but to loose presence, even in a gathering. The materiality of language, the situation of communication, the historical constellation we are in – they all escape the control of the one who speaks. Every act of communication is subjected to this residue of mediality, which disrupts the animated continuum of expression from the speaker to the listener. We would like to call this process, this disruption, *Zerstreuung*. *Zerstreuung* – we prefer to use the German term here as authors like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer introduced it in its fascinating ambivalence, since it has all the connotations of dispersion, distribution, dissemination, but also of distraction as associated with entertainment.

Zerstreuung is often devaluated while the presence of the present is appreciated. A famous example might be Jean Baudrillard's critique *Requiem for the Media*. While Baudrillard does not agree with Hans Magnus Enzensberger's notorious hope to use media for emancipation, he comments on Enzensberger's examples:

In effect, an immediate communication process is rediscovered, one not filtered through bureaucratic models – an original form of exchange, in fact, because there are

neither transmitters, nor receivers, but only people responding to each other. (Baudrillard 2003: 286)

It is our impression that this rediscovery of an immediate communication process indeed fuels many assemblies. The exciting presence of responding people seems to make a cut through the cybernetic model of communication with its feedback loops to control the outcome, a situation of production that produces something uncontrollable. In the assembly society seems to become a public situation of presence and thereby it excludes all the specters that could haunt this situation and would ask for a very different response and responsibility. We do not want to denounce the desire to look for a model of communication that gets rid of the nowadays dominant cybernetic model that still controls not only most of our communication (here we agree with Baudrillard) but all areas of the everyday. But is the celebration of presence (and the exclusion of the rest, with everything that disturbs this pure presence) really the only alternative? Or can we think of models which assemble, or disperse, differently, and thus open a space that welcomes the specters, the uncanny materialities of the non-present, which ask for a different responsibility as well as for a different economy?

3

We, as a small collective, cannot provide an answer. But we know that for Baudrillard's notion of response focused, concentrated listening is vital. Dispersed listening, *Zerstreuung* – as we established it in the parallel broadcast at *The Art of Being Many*, and as we tried to establish it in performative interventions in public space many times – often is seen as less valuable than a centralized assembly. Most would agree that a demonstration on a street is more powerful than a dispersed crowd. Direct communication is valued more than remote communication, concentration and contemplation more than *Zerstreuung*.

But why is this devaluation of *Zerstreuung* so common, why is it reproduced in many left wing discussions and organizations? We would like to answer rather simply: *Zerstreuung* makes the act of communication uncontrollable. For sure, there are many discourses (the importance of the author),

norms (talking in a way that makes ›sense‹), projections (the intention is governing the field of understanding) and regimes (everyone is *one* subject and not several) that try to reassure us once and again that we could control this previous *Zerstreuung*. (And, for sure, everyone who is arguing in favor of the capitalist economy is convinced that we can control ›the system‹ and its previous accumulation, to make it more human and so on). But we cannot. Though discourse, norm, projection and regime are meant to repress this fact, it is still beyond our control. This is what makes it uncanny.

Why uncanny? Here we come back to radio: Our voice is in a way always already ›dead‹ when people are listening to it. It has lost the ›spirit‹ we were inhaling to speak, and instead gets possessed by other spirits. We as speakers are drowned in the materiality of the spoken word – structurally dead. Or you might say: The spoken word gains a life of its own, which we, the speaking subjects, are unable to dominate – like a specter. And though this may seem to be a disadvantage, that our word is severed from us, functioning like a continued castration, we should remember that through this process the spoken word can haunt situations no one has ever dreamt of (cf. LIGNA 2006).

4

From our point of view, it is decisive how we deal with this uncontrollable and uncanny moment in assemblies. Most traditional strategies for assemblies repress the mediality of the voice and try to replace it with the idea of the presence of speaking, the presence of the community, that recognizes itself here and now. The evil spirits of mediation are often exorcised by expelling the media in favor of authentic face-to-face communication. This argument is often used, as Baudrillard does, in coalition with the critique of mass media and culture industry and not seldom tries to find an isle of pure communication within the dirty ocean of mass media.

This traditional strategy can be understood as a certain way of producing the subject of the assembly. There is a certain interpellation, emanating from what Louis Althusser calls an ideological state apparatus that is at work in the mode of recognizing each other as subjects and the assembly itself as a community.

Could we think of other kinds of productions, other modes of production of the subject, other modes of speech acts and other modes of producing an

assembly that are taking the *Zerstreuung* into account without controlling it (since in the last instance this is structurally impossible)? Could we welcome or even enjoy this uncontrollability of *Zerstreuung* instead of repressing it? Could we think of a society without this kind of an ideological state apparatus?

We would like to pose these questions again, since our impression of the event (or spectacle or assembly of assemblies) *The Art of Being Many* was that these questions remained undiscussed and that still a certain kind of communication, of understanding, of image production, of media usage (as pure means and not as a means without an end) seemed to be so natural. Again, we do not know an answer, since we are convinced that answers could only be given historically and collectively, in practice.

These questions concern the power of the assembly, as well as its structure. For sure, and we would like to stress this, an assembly provides a certain important empowerment. The presence of people, the humming of many conversations, the being together, the enabling of a certain speech act in a newly produced public of course provide a certain apparatus that allows a certain, otherwise unknown agency. But as exciting as this kind of assembly can be, we would like to emphasize that today's society is ruled by a dispersed spectacle, with an everyday-life that is reproduced in a dispersed manner. Considering this power regime, would it not be apt also to think of modes beyond the gathering, modes of a different *Zerstreuung*, modes that are always already at stake in a gathering, an assembly, already at stake while we talk – modes of multiplied absence.

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Thus, LIGNA as a collective has been looking for strategies that, rather than producing presence, are multiplying absence. Such strategies start from a dispersed situation of reception (as the precondition for radio), which has been called (Enzensberger quoting Radio Alice) the »dirty« situation (Enzensberger 1982: 52; A/Traverso 1977: 119). Is there an agency in *Zerstreuung*, an empowerment through dispersion? Could the constellation of dispersed individuals be turned into an association that has political impact?

With *Zerstreuung* or the *radio ballet*, as we called it, we developed a format that we did not regard as a gathering, but a public dispersion, a collective *Zerstreuung* in privatized public spaces – where every gathering would face immediate measures, like being expelled by security or police. In a way we were bored with being expelled by security guards and all the images of security services expelling people (as well as images of water cannons as they were screened at length during *The Art of Being Many*, reproducing a certain stereotype of struggle), even if we acknowledge that these fights cannot always be avoided, for example when you try to prohibit the construction of another shopping mall that destroys a park. Nevertheless, this kind of direct confrontation often produces victims, even martyrs, and with it the logic of resentment and repression.

Some of our interventions such as the radio ballet try to establish a different starting point. They enter the already existing shopping malls that we see as a central space of capitalist economy, its production and reproduction: There we learn how to behave ›correctly‹, there we learn to follow rules, outspoken ones such as house rules and implicit ones such as how to do window shopping, at what pace, with what kind of gestures and so on (cf. Frahm 2011). And we learn to behave as a commodity and to unconsciously enjoy this active subjection. Our performances propose that we should visit – or rather haunt – these places with a different kind of *Lehrstück*, being empowered by a collective, invisible and conspirative practice of radio listening. The audience or participants are listening to a radio broadcast via headphones. The program reports observations about the place, intended to sharpen the sense for the ways in which perception and bodily experience are shaped in shopping malls (one important issue is the so called Gruen effect [cf. Baldauf, Margreiter 2006]). The program furthermore analyses the rules and norms of the space and proposes gestures and actions that are not complying with them.

However, the synchronous listening surely already produces a certain deviation since listeners are not listening to the shopping mall music anymore but to dead (recorded) voices. When the listeners for example stop at the same time, since one of the voices proposes this simple gesture, they produce an enjoyable and uncanny situation. On the one hand, they just repeat the most common and normal gesture of this kind of space – stopping in front of a shop window; on the other hand, this gesture normally does not occur in a synchronized manner. The synchronized collective repetition of this gesture

could be understood as a parody of the many not synchronized repetitions of this gesture that happen constantly. Listening to the radio, the listeners play, or more precisely, act, as Brecht put it, in the »third person«, with a certain distance that makes different postures possible (Jameson 1998: 58). They become empowered in the moment they stop believing in the notion of free will, the presence of the ›own‹ decision, the autonomous subject, but challenge the power relations of the everyday. By listening to the radio ballet they explicitly follow voices while they ›normally‹ mostly obey ›other voices‹ unconsciously. The radio program also enables the listeners to test different gestures, which they would not dare to try out individually: walking backwards, lying down, exchanging notes, hiding, running. Collectively, they establish a different agency for the duration of the broadcast: In the shopping mall all means have an end, all gestures in one way or another obey the imperative of shopping (even if malls such as the largest Dutch mall Hoog Catharijne in Utrecht nowadays advertise that they also provide the ›non-shopping experience‹). The gestures of the radio listeners are means without an end. In this dirty situation, they and their gestures provide a »pure means« (»reines Mittel«) and indirectness (»Mittelbarkeit«), as Giorgio Agamben reads Walter Benjamin (cf, Agamben 2000), and evoke an agency that does not function by presence, but by mediation and absence.

During such interventions the dispersed crowd is able to temporarily change these spaces and to appropriate them at least for the duration of the radio program. The listeners turn into a conspiracy of flâneurs, acting intransparently for the video surveillance. They are watched, but what is watched is hard to believe. Through dispersion, they are there and not there. Thus, the listeners are empowered to act collectively beyond the repression of the control apparatus. By exploring this agency below the radar, the surveillance apparatus can be experienced as powerless. These interventions may not challenge the system of power in the same way that squatting does, but they make us consider how ongoing interventions could be established that let the apparatus of control appear powerless forever.

Everyone who performs the gestures in this mediated situation performs the isolation in the crowd that is the essence of modern life. But spread out all over the place, acting synchronically, this dispersed collective action changes the situation for everybody – for the participants as well as the passers-by. This allows us to not only analyze these non-places, how they shape our subjectivity and how they design a certain everyday-life; moreover, by

proposing different agendas, we find ways of producing other subjectivities, other modes of production. What would a dispersed assembly look like, what kind of agencies could a dispersed assembly develop, an assembly that performs activities which traverse the regimes of power and control and neutralize their power? How to develop not only the art of being many, but the art of being uncanny?

(please repeat)

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