Amplification and Assembly

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In September 2014, we were part of the gathering *The Art of Being Many* at Kampnagel Theatre in Hamburg. The assembly took place in the theatre – as a piece of theatre – aiming to share experiences, ideas and practices of assembling, and to reflect upon and develop *the art of being many* in the wake of the *real democracy* movements. These political movements, which have occupied public spaces, gathered neighborhoods together and established blockade camps across the world since 2007, have been fueled by a critique of the politics of representation. This critique has led to new formats of assembling, and, consequently, new questions of form (»*how do we gather?*«) have become a central focus of political activism. How are decisions made collectively? How do we avoid appointing leaders? How can we suspend political agendas that have been generated outside of the assembly and thus the influence of political parties, unions and other organizations? How is co-existence organized in the camps, how can a comfortable atmosphere for speaking and listening be produced, and how do we transparently document an assembly? These questions become crucial when the aim is to map and test out direct democracy in the here-and-now of the assembly, instead of demanding it from political figures. The idea of *The Art of Being Many* was to bring together the expertise of (performing) artists, activist strategies, artistic/theatrical notions of assembly, and the experiences of international political movements, under the assumption that these elements already overlap and are interconnected. What we experienced was a chaotic, inspirational and hybrid encounter of performance, transnational congress, party, camp, tribunal and festival. Was it an assembly – or a representation of an assembly? Even now, we cannot say for sure.

Together with the group *Ligna*, Hannah Hurtzig (*Blackmarket, Mobile Academy*), Tanja Krone (from the band/performance group *Maiden Monsters*), the sound artist Ernesto Estrella Cozar and others, we developed the panel *Sound/System/Voices* - addressing voices, music, and the sound of the assembly, its acoustic and technical parameters. In our contributions to this panel we also took into consideration the relationship between assembly and amplification (of the voice). Since then, our respective artistic and research work has been accompanied by questions such as how voice amplification technology and techniques assemble people and things in political and religious contexts or how co-existence is acoustically *voiced*. Today, almost one year after *The Art of Being Many*, we take this as an opportunity to meet and to talk about our respective projects and the meaning of *amplification**.

1. Speaking in Chorus as Amplification

SK: In our respective work, speaking in chorus plays a role as a practice of connecting individuals to a community: Assemblies are brought about, initiated and performed through choral speech.

In your research for the project *Global Prayers*[1], you describe choirs in religious contexts who generate acoustic communities in very different ways. ›Speaking in tongues‹, or *glossolalia*, for example, is a completely individual form of speech, which doesn't even come close to shared language, and yet it allows a collective acoustic space to emerge. In collective prayer, a religious community also arises where all involved are familiar with a particular text, the rhythm of its speech, and the melody of it.

In my own artistic work, I question how regimented such choirs must be in order to function. I am therefore interested in whether you know of choral

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1   The interdisciplinary research and art project *The Global Prayers Congress: Faith in the City* (2010-2014) researched manifestations of religion in urban space, changes in the city through new religious movements and also the influence of daily urban life on religious practices. International case studies and artistic projects produced by researchers and artists (in, among other places, Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Istanbul, Beirut, Mumbai and Berlin) were realized through various forms such as exhibitions, symposiums and publications (cf. www.globalprayers.info, accessed March 12, 2015).

systems of interaction that do not have such a unitary structure, or that may emerge spontaneously, without a leader?

KW: Even if glossolalia appears to be a very individual thing, it is still a highly regimented form of speech. I first listened to a *speaking in tongues* session in 2010 in Lagos at the *Holy Ghost Congress* of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Over a period of many days – and, above all, nights – there were ritual ceremonies, sermons and choral singing. There is a clear trigger at a particular point during a service: The preacher will say »Now, speak in tongues«. Speaking in tongues means that the voice of the holy spirit speaks through the person, often using fragments of words in mostly unintelligible ›foreign‹ languages. Each person speaks alone, often accompanied by a form of movement, a different corporeality – almost like a choreography, or perhaps an improvisation of spiritual confrontation. These individual voices with their various rhythms and intensities come together in the space to form a single sound. One can imagine no greater individuality, and yet it creates a communal experience, a shared space, which is occupied by individuals. But is that a choir?

SK: In my opinion, speaking in chorus requires collectivity from the outset – a type of synchronizing. For example, it is the starting point for a shared motivation to take to the streets in political demonstrations. You know the slogans, the chants, and you are already ›in the swing of things‹ through the shared rhythm of walking. Speaking in chorus *amplifies* this collectivity, often also through its tactical orchestration. In demonstrations, there can be something like a standing in for one another through the voice, for example in the »*Haut ab!*« (»Get lost!«) chants of protestors confronting police.

KW: It seems to me that in a religious context, this collectivity of speaking in tongues is set up above all through the space and the occasion of the church service or religious ceremony. But also through a shared ritual structure: Everybody knows what she should do when the prompt to speak in tongues is announced, even as each person carries out this task in a completely individual manner. In communal speech, for example, when praying the rosary, each participant knows the text exactly. The text is internalized, and there is – similar to demonstration slogans – a ritualized rhythm of speech. When speaking in tongues, it is individuals distributed randomly in the room that

become a community through a sort of acoustic arena, while in communal prayer, words spoken aloud mutually amplify one another.

SK: I could imagine that speaking in tongues also leads to a mutual strengthening in the sense that others in the space open themselves to the same state of being, the same intensity. That could lend itself to a choral amplification even when it isn't in unison, or through a shared slogan.

KW: In relation to individual voices and shared speech, there is another level we haven't touched on yet that emerges in your project *Megafonchor*.[2] The ›megaphone choir‹, which was also performing at *The Art of Being Many*, draws on interviews with people who have lived in Hamburg's Esso Houses – their personal statements and perceptions of life in the houses and in St. Pauli, in a rapidly changing area of the city. These individual voices are then spoken in unison by a megaphone choir. How did you go about bringing the individual voices together into a choir?

SK: It was important to me that the voices arose from private speech, a form of speech that is intended neither for public announcement nor political statement. Even when those interviewed were politically active in Hamburg's *Right to the City (Recht auf Stadt)* movement, or in the *Esso Houses Initiative* (*Initiative Esso Häuser*), in the interviews they spoke only for themselves. We often looked for phrases in which it is clear that the speaker is struggling

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2   The *Megafonchor* sings with the ghostly voices of a vanished place. Twelve women take interview statements of former residents, tenants and contractors of the so-called Esso Houses complex of Hamburg's Reeperbahn in St. Pauli and set them to music, amplifying them with megaphones. In 2009, the buildings were bought by the major corporation Bayrische Hausbau, which speculated from the outset on their demolition. The Esso Houses, with their affordable apartments, shops, legendary nightclubs, bars and last but not least a gas station, functioned as a village square that had become an important part of St. Pauli's everyday life. Due to the impending danger of collapse, the Esso Houses were evicted in December, 2013. The megaphone choir played a role in the demonstrations against the rapid gentrification of the St. Pauli district. It contributes to the political debates around the Esso Houses, which still continue in the wake of the buildings' demolition. (cf. Baumgardt 2014)

to find the right words. Not the eloquent, rousing speech that is familiar to us from political agitation, but phrases that are built primarily in dialogue. Similarly, the *Human Mic* of New York's *Occupy Wall Street* movement allowed private narratives, for example of a personal struggle with debt or an eviction, to become political speech through speaking in chorus. In *Megafonchor*, private statements are amplified and multiplied through speaking in chorus over the megaphone. Through their contextualization with other statements, and strategically transforming the space of performance into a public address system, individual speech becomes a political statement.

KW: Which creates a further form of amplification, in that the individual voice becomes a public and political declaration. How did those who recognized their own words in the megaphone choir's amplification system respond?

SK: The megaphone choir loops together, locally, the speech of individuals who have not necessarily met one another. It is only through amplification in chorus that an acoustic assembly of these speakers can come into being. Some of those interviewed attended the megaphone choir performances later. The choir was in fact perceived by many of the inhabitants and shopkeepers of the Esso Houses as an amplification or a reinforcement of their strength. Although the megaphone is usually a device used to control and command, for us this was about amplifying what was already present in the political movement. When it came to protesting against the demolition of the buildings, we performed with the megaphone choir at many of the demonstrations. But also after the demolition – even before the *Planbude*[3] came into being – in that first moment of failure of resistance, when we all were asking ourselves how we would collectively deal with the situation. Even in that moment, the megaphone choir played an important role as an opportunity to mourn for this failure, onsite, not alone but together, and – without any resignation – to ask one another how we should persist. The megaphone choir

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3 Since October 2014, PlanBude collects ideas, analyses and opinions for a central new building complex in the ESSO-Häuser-Area at Spielbudenplatz. In two containers, placed right at the construction site, PlanBude offers a wide range of planning-tools to allow all neighbors to get involved with the planning process. (cf. http://planbude.de, accessed August 27, 2015)

performed an obituary for Esso Houses on the demolition site, which had the function of a farewell ritual for the municipality. It was a housing-funeral.

KW: This is then an even further amplification of the voice: The private becomes political – through vocalization in space, a publicness of the voice can arise, resulting in its amplification to a collective through shared listening.

SK: Yes – even though the megaphone choir doesn't exactly invite participation. The artist Christoph Schäfer made a drawing of the megaphone choir with the slogan »Bewaffnet eure Wünsche!« (»Arm your wishes!«)[4], because aesthetically, the megaphone choir has a militant element. There is a certain unpredictability in the way we move about a space. This, however, means that people become very attentive, and listen very carefully.

KW: You say unpredictability, but here you are speaking from the perspective of the listener or the audience. The performance of the choir itself is very controlled – every step, every movement is choreographed. This rigor of the apparatus, these precisely controlled sentences, the metallic sound of the amplification devices, the movements – even the black clothing – produces a counterpart with which you confront yourselves. This stages an assembly of watching. There is no shared form of speech as initiated by the human mic, where all become a part of the shared action of repeating speech in chorus.

SK: Yes, the megaphone choir is not a spontaneous action. Rehearsals are quite long and the performance depends on a rehearsed precision that you would not normally achieve in public space. The human hic, in contrast, functions more instantaneously. In New York's Zuccotti Park, the use of loudspeakers was forbidden, making a different form of amplification for speeches necessary. They also didn't want a spokesperson. So the human mic was the appropriate form of amplification. Those present in the crowd scarcely perceive the speaker – she remains anonymous – and all repeat what has been said, and in this way disseminate a form of speech across a crowd.

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4   The drawing and a documentation about the megaphone choir were presented in the exhibition *Utopian Pulse: Salon Public Happiness* (Wiener Secession, 2014 and Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2015). (Cf. http://christophschaefer.net/tag/salon-public-happiness, accessed January 21, 2016)

Mostly, this speech takes the form of very simple sentences. The act of speaking, repeating and recapitulating acquires something preachy – as with *call and response* – which also has a religious origin. As does the choir itself, which derives from the Greek word *chorus* for a place of ritual assembly. The human mic played on the religious form – that was both desired and intended. It's not clear where the human mic had originally come from and when it was invented. David Graeber mentions it as something already familiar to many Californian activists who had already used it as a tool during WTO actions in Seattle in November 1999 (2013: 50-51). But during Occupy Wall Street it became an effective and specific mode of assembly. Attempts to translate it to our context, to apply a human mic in Hamburg, more or less produced frustration, functioning only in the form of an acknowledgement or as a kind of joke. Still, the concept of the megaphone choir is based on an artistic research about the human mic as amplification.

2. AMPLIFICATION AS A FUNCTION FOR LOCALIZING, SPATIALIZING AND POSITIONING VOICES

KW: Sound, therefore, has a particular place: the church, the street, the demonstration or the Spielbudenplatz, the square next to the former Esso houses. How are these respective sites changed through the amplification of the voice?

SK: The Spielbudenplatz was once a public square, but it has become increasingly privatized or at least far more commercialized. This is demonstrated by its redesignation as a ›Business Improvement District‹, a means to define and optimize the square as a zone of consumerism. It becomes clear who should spend time there, and above all who, in the future, should *not* spend time there – who are the undesirables – the homeless, for example. Similarly, one street further across in the Brauereiquartier – a city quarter that went up overnight to make quick money – it becomes very clear what exactly is changing in St. Pauli in terms of acoustics. If you do something loud, it immediately causes a clamor. Due to the high density of the buildings, the architecture becomes a space that resonates sound, that amplifies. The space is not designed for stopping or lingering, but for walking through,

shopping perhaps, but not for talking to one another. This would be acoustically uncomfortable.

KW: Materiality and architecture allow, make possible, forbid or prevent particular actions. The megaphone choir is a good tool to make this evident. When I made a soundwalk with a group around the Spielbudenplatz on the invitation of the *Planbude*, it became clear how much various spaces subtly regulate acoustic behavior. The soundwalk was about acoustically probing and perceiving the space without adding anything. Along the Reeperbahn, close to the facade of the buildings, there is a zone between inside and outside, a zone for the enticement or invitation to consume. This is above all evoked by sound. It is possible to hear the music and the people inside. Because of the awnings over the street, there is a sound barrier. Here, people are also camping in the entrances of buildings. When taking time to get to know the acoustics of spaces, or the aural architecture, it becomes possible to find out what rules of behavior, ideas and strategies are inscribed through the acoustics of a space, or how the different characteristics of the spaces are in a way amplified through sound as on the Spielbudenplatz or in the Brauereiquartier.

SK: To set up a situation on the Reeperbahn in which people are able to properly listen, stand still, or pause for thought is a really difficult thing to achieve. This is a zone where tourists throng. It is a zone for spectacle, for getting drunk, for falling from one bar into the other. In the initial moment, the megaphone choir, as a performing group of women, fulfils the promise of the event character which the street now embodies: »Hey, check it out! I bet they're all gonna get undressed at the same time! Check it out, something's going on over there!« But strangely enough, catcalls and commentary come to an end very quickly. The megaphone choir works first with a high pitch and then with absolute silence – with silence and stillness; moments in which you absolutely cannot know what will come next. Of course, the cars going by cannot be silenced. Still, there were moments where it felt like you could hear a pin drop. Even I got goose bumps. I was surprised that such a thing was even possible. On the weekend – on the Reeperbahn!

KW: The Reeperbahn runs parallel to the Brauereiquartier and represents its acoustic opposite: a space that is permanently filled with sound and practically demands that you shout, and shout *along*. To set up something like the megaphone choir in a place like that, so that you are silent and listen, challenges the space. However, you have also performed in completely different places with the choir, for example in the theatre. What happens then? How would you describe amplification with respect to space there? Do you bring the Spielbudenplatz into the theatre?

SK: The megaphone choir, at its core, is about the *transportation of voices* from one place to another. I think that because of this, it also works in the theatre – because from the beginning it is about translation, or transmission. The conflict around the Esso Houses is well known in many regions as an example of the effects of gentrification. Its symbolic character is there already anyway, and this aspect becomes amplified when we speak our texts on stage. The stage opens the texts up for other associations and poetic shifts. And it offers a space for comparisons with other past and present conflicts about public space, its commercialization, exploitation, and about rising rents – particularly when we perform in other cities or in places that exhibit a similar set of problems.

KW: Another question could be what sorts of conflicts might arise through the amplification of voices and sounds in urban space? The megaphone choir points to certain conflicts and prevents them from being forgotten. But there are also examples where conflicts arise *because* of the reverberation of sound through space. And by that, I don't only mean neighbors complaining about a noisy local bar. There are several examples from the research around the *Global Prayers* project which point to conflicts such as: Which religious voices are present in space? For example, in multi-religious cities, the call of the muezzin causes confrontations – even though it is invisible and ephemeral. In Singapore, the muezzin's call to prayer has for this reason been relocated to the radio, and therefore into the home – from public to private space (cf. Lee 1999). The Istanbul municipality of Galata, which is a traditional quarter with many mosques and a particularly high frequency of muezzin calls, has for the first time seen an institutional struggle about sound: How loud can it get before it has to be turned down? And who has the right to determine that? This is particularly interesting because over the last six to

seven years, Galata has been subject to a kind of turbo-gentrification. On the one hand, new inhabitants complain that the call to prayer is too loud, affecting their quality of life through what they perceive as being regular and insistent interruptions. On the other hand, long-time residents are disturbed by men and women who have begun to hang about on the streets drinking, by the short skirts of the women, and also by the intensified level of volume, the new and different voices and sounds on the street.[5]

S.K. In both examples the issue is clearly not first and foremost the question of sound levels. The notion of amplification can be helpful in order to understand what such conflicts are actually about, notions that our discussion has already touched on: the amplification of voices as a means to bring about a community – as a point of initiation, a staging and a tactical reinforcement of this community – but also as a definition of acoustic spaces as territories.

KW: Places are not only acoustically demarcated – they also expand themselves acoustically. The borders of the territory shift themselves as an amplification of the influence of a particular grouping. Unlike the visual, sound projects itself beyond that which can be seen. Political demonstrations, too, occupy space acoustically. You are speaking of a particular *positioning* of arguments.

SK: Even though acoustic characteristics of spaces and their effects are rarely consciously perceived, and even though sound appears to be ephemeral, the repercussions of voice amplification are nonetheless unexpectedly powerful as a form of localization and also as a form of acoustic occupation and consecration of space. The determination of protest routes and the conscious selection of particular sites for political demonstrations also have a lot to do with the targeted positioning of arguments through reverberation, through the movement of loudspeakers, megaphones or choruses. In my research on the media-historical development of the microphone and the loudspeaker (cf. Kretzschmar 2014), it became clear to me that a linear history guided by the

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5   (Cf. comments on gentrification processes in Istanbul, e.g. https://gentrifica tionblog.wordpress.com/2010/09/29/istanbul-islamisten-und-die-kultur-der-gen trification, accessed September 2, 2015)

unitary aim to amplify sounds or the voice does not exist. Rather, the discoveries of the telegraph, the telephone, media for recording, replaying, saving and composing sound and voice have all played a central role in the development of the technologies used for voice amplification in the political space today.

KW: And also in order to transport sound from one place to another as a deliberate transmission, translation and expansion of voices. The telegraph, the telephone and radio are completely different technologies that send sound from one place to another: modes of dissemination, connections between spaces as well as the production of forms of assembly, modes that are not restricted to any single location. Rather than sharing one containing space, they operate across a multiplicity of spaces and assemblies.

3. AMPLIFICATION, PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

SK: In radio, it is clear that the loudspeaker transports something or somebody absent into a different space of reverberation. However, the acoustic manifestation of an absence is no less relevant when amplification systems are put to use onsite, for example in religious or political assemblies. Amplification is the acoustic configuration of that which is displaced through the separation of voice and body. By implication this always already calls into being something which is *not* present: an absence through which the speaker then also begins to embody and to localize the assembly of listeners. Assemblies are more than just a collection of bodies, things and materials present in space. It is also crucial for all present to exhibit a distrust of political representation, and a fundamental skepticism about how those who are absent are addressed, how they are spoken about in the instance of the assembly.

KW: Each assembly yields new themes that are specific to that assembly and define its character – the manifestation and representation of those who are absent become something that binds the assembly together. This occurs frequently through sound. In street protests, themes are brought up, spoken out, chanted, called and provoked, and through all this they acquire presence. How did you perceive the role played by sound and the amplification of voices at *The Art of Being Many*?

SK: The transmission of all contributions through headphones turned it from assembly into meta-assembly. In fact, the sound produced by the headphones tends to isolate the individual. Listening is shielded by headphones, which soften external noise, making you more aware of your own breathing and your own body. This creates an individualized acoustic space from which you begin to observe the assembly. Because there are various audio channels, it is not possible to be sure whether your neighbor is listening to the same contribution as you are, or whether she is part of a completely different sub-assembly. This dispersal and isolation led me to a state of constant reflection on the assembly in which I found myself. It amplified a permanent interrogation of the situation of assembly itself.

KW: The simultaneity of various acoustic arenas separated out those who wanted to follow any one particular lecture, discussion, sound happening or music. The fragmented assembly presented a permanent and enormous challenge to those present. Granted, the entire A*rt of Being Many* assembly took place in one space. But it became very clear just how crucial shared listening and shared speaking is. This acoustically fragmented situation demanded a sustained level of concentration in order to appreciate the existence of a communal experience, or indeed of an assembly at all. As a result, you find yourself constantly asking: What kind of assembly is this, anyway? Where am I here, and with whom am I assembled? This was a probing of the limits of the assembly, including its possible failure. As an assembly that reflected on the act of assembling – and its necessary conditions – *The Art of Being Many* called upon the communal, but at the same time it made apparent these perforations in the collective imagination; what this assembly is and what it means.

SK: The form of voice amplification intensified the theatricality of the situation, so that you often felt *as if* you were a part of an assembly. This distracted the attention from a specific content that should have been discussed. The artificiality of the event was above all irritating for those who came from the field of activism and direct political work, for whom the self-reflexive nature of the assembly was largely irrelevant. For many discussions, the sound concept and the artificiality of the situation were counter-productive obstacles to be overcome. This gave reason for justified criticism. On the

other hand, the idealization of presence that is shared by many movements organized through assemblies was radically called into question.

* *amplification*: multiplication, potentiation, reinforcement, recruitment, backup, boost, gain, enhancement, strengthener.

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