

Calling Assemblies

The Many as a Real Fiction

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The so called financial crisis that is ongoing since 2008 brought one question to the forefront of political struggle: What is the relation between the many and the few? This question is not only raised each time the crisis proves to foster the concentration of capital in the hands of the fewer and fewer, it is also raised when given instruments of representative democracy, given procedures of political representation, which were designed to make the few stand, speak and decide for the many, prove to be dysfunctional once more. On a different scale, the scale of our own agency as cultural workers in art and activism, the relation between the few and the many is at stake with regard to how we organize resistance and alternatives. How is the relation between the few and the many articulated in our own work?

In the following I would like to discuss this question with regard to a new art of assembling that has been developed in performance art/live art during the last two decades and, more specifically, in regard to the gathering *The Art of Being Many*. To begin with, I will focus on one particular strategy that geheimagentur, who acted as a host to the gathering, has been using since 2003: the strategy of ›real fictions‹ and its relation to what I would like to call ›improbable assemblies‹.

IMPROBABLE ASSEMBLIES IN PERFORMANCE ART/LIVE ART

Since 2003, most of geheimagentur's projects have tried to open up passages from an economy of shortage to an economy of gift and abundance. Many of these projects were situated between reality and fiction and used the tension between the two as a space for experimentation. They employed an as-if-it-were-real-approach to interventions into the everyday by trying to make a desirable, seemingly fictional, association as real as possible.

The first real fiction geheimagentur produced was the *Bank of Burning Money*, which opened its counter at the bottom of the towers of Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt in 2004. Eight years later, one of the most *real* real fictions was the *Schwarzbank* Oberhausen, the *Black Bank* of Oberhausen, a bank that issued its own currency and consisted of a network of shop owners, cultural workers and other citizens of the bankrupt city of Oberhausen.

Sooner or later, most of these real fiction projects took the shape of assemblies, assemblies of the network of alternative bankers coming together in the theatre of Oberhausen, but also more improbable ones such as, for example, assemblies of those who give each other alibis to cope with neoliberal working conditions, assemblies of tricksters or assemblies of real and wannabe pirates.

Geheimagentur has not been the only art collective that experimented with improbable assemblies in the past two decades. On the contrary, I would like to argue that the mode of the »as if« allowed for the development of a whole new art of assembling, an art that at the same time changed and rearticulated the relations between the few and the many in performance and live art (cf. Peters 2013).

One important aspect of this experimentation has been the address, in other words: Who is called to assemble? I first witnessed an experiment with the address when I took part in the *Conference of Fare Dodgers* by the collective Hygiene Heute in 2002 (Kampnagel Hamburg). Invited and addressed were fare dodgers of all kinds, but at the same time usual audience members, who were addressed »as if« they were fare dodgers and therefore were free to decide for themselves if they actually identified with how they were being addressed.

In cases like this it becomes evident that the address resembles a performative paradox or maybe the paradox of performativity itself. Michael

Warner described it in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*: To address a specific public is to presuppose its existence, though it is actually only produced by the address itself, which potentially calls it into being (Warner 2005). In regard to this paradox, working on a real fiction is similar to calling an improbable assembly: It means postulating the existence of an organization, an institution or a network, whose existence is desirable, yet improbable. It means acting *as if* the respective group actually existed, and thereby calling it into being. This may sound simple but it is not. It is magic, and like all magic, it sometimes works and sometimes does not.¹

In other words, nobody knows beforehand how real a real fiction is going to be, because in order for it to become real, wishful associations and improbable assemblies have to be collective endeavors, happenings which involve friends and strangers.

This is why a real fiction is not about the few performing *for* the many. It is about a few people who start to act *as if they were many*, to act *as if* the entities and practices, the wishes and necessities in question already existed, and thereby they might turn out to *be* many later on. To allow for different degrees of realness to develop, the *as if* has to be a strictly performative one, a gesture of presupposing something which is thereby possibly transformed into collective action. The performative *as if* generates a space for playful experimentation, because even if a real fiction remains fiction and does not become very real, and even if something happens that is very different from what was expected, it can still be an interesting piece of art, a

1 For example, when geheimagentur made the series *Molotov's Magical Lantern* in 2010 at Deutsches Theater Berlin, the *Circle for the Socialization of Magic* was meant to be called into being. Night after night a suitcase with a considerable amount of cash was put on stage and performers made it clear that everyone was able to claim it and take it away if he or she would only be willing to act as a member of that circle. Nobody did. Then again, when geheimagentur opened a *Casino of Tricks* and an *Academy of Tricksters* postulating that to survive neoliberal capitalism we all have to become tricksters, indeed a huge amount of people turned up and confessed to be tricksters, happy to talk to each other, collect and exchange knowledge as tricksters. Of course, in most projects the result is somehow mixed – some features of a real fiction stay fiction, others become surprisingly real, and others again are completely different from what was expected.

good performance. One could call this ›the gift of cultural production‹. Obviously, this gift is twofold and can be critiqued in terms of commodification. Nevertheless, it creates an experimental space in which we are able to go for the improbable in the first place and to face results just the way they turn out to be.

The ›as if‹ enables the few who start to act as if they were many to imagine the spatial, temporal and dramaturgical shape an assembly might need to take and to set up gatherings accordingly. Beyond the address, other important aspects of this performative shaping of improbable assemblies are the mode of theatricality that is underlying an improbable assembly, the setup of the assembly in terms of material space and media tools, and the modes of participation that are encouraged. All of these aspects were crucial for hosting *The Art of Being Many*, so I would like to describe briefly what is meant by them: Though ›theatricality‹ might be a controversial term at first sight, in this context it just refers to the fact that there are many formats and practices of assembling, which are historically and socially established, such as, for example, church services, sports matches, assemblies in court, in the ballroom, school assemblies, party conventions, stockholders meetings, and so on. Now, all of these formats come with their very own theatricality, i.e. with protocols of elements, proceedings and conducts to be performed. In recent years, many performance art/live art projects focused on these given formats of assemblies and used the performative ›as if‹ to explore each and every one of them for experiments in the art of assembling: examples include Rimini Protokoll, who simulated a world climate conference in the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg in 2014, or SheShePop, who famously devised a ballroom night (*Warum tanzt Ihr nicht?* 2004), or Reverend Billy, whose New-York-based *Church of Stop Shopping* is one of the most well-known endeavors between art and activism in recent decades. What makes it rewarding to work with existing forms of assemblies is not only that the theatricality of society itself is uncovered, but that, instead of being an audience watching the few performing for the many, people can take part, experiment and interact as participants of an assembly. By shifting formats of assemblies from their given place in society it can be experienced that new forms of assembling emerge through hybridizing given practices of assembling. This does not only happen in the context of art, but also in the square occupations, where traditional practices like drawing a lot to determine a speaker, or assembling people for dinner, or square dancing (while wearing

gas masks on Syntagma Square) were merged to collectively create new kinds of assemblies. To some extent geheimagentur assumed this technique in hosting *The Art of Being Many*, which in itself was a hybrid of many other formats of assembling – conference, manifestation, general assembly, theatre performance, party and so on.

Moreover, recent performative research has shown that assemblies are shaped not least by their use of material space and media, and that therefore different forms of assembling can emerge when spatial and media conditions are changed. Important work on this aspect has, for example, been done by the collective LIGNA, who introduced the use of radio and headphones to assembling in public and thereby invented a completely new format that allows a gathering to extend far beyond the copresence of conventional assemblies (see LIGNA's essay in this volume). Similar techniques have been used by Mobile Akademie/Hannah Hurtzig for the conference *Die Untoten/The Undead*, creating an uncanny mixture of copresence and coabsence that suited the topic of the gathering perfectly. These experiments lead geheimagentur to make use of headphones and three simultaneous audio channels as media for *The Art of Being Many*. In this context the scenography of an assembly hall can be understood as the basic medium for an assembly: Most assembly halls suggest a specific relation between active and recipient participants and organize attention towards a single center or the front. The assembly hall built for *The Art of Being Many* differed widely from this established model by allowing for several different focal points and directions.

It goes without saying that the aspect of participation is crucial for every assembly. But while in most given forms of assemblies the question of how to participate is always already answered, the hosting of an improbable assembly requires a radical rethinking of the aspect of participation. This starts with the question of what is at stake in an assembly: what kinds of desires and interests are present?

Though all the assemblies geheimagentur called over the years differed a lot from what usually happens on theatre stages, they, of course, still depended on the economies of cultural production. Therefore, these economies have often been a starting point: Many of the assemblies were called to make collective decisions about how to use the means of production in a current project. Of course, not only money, but also cultural economies of attention and credit have to be taken into account when it comes to cultural production. And this is particularly problematic when it comes to projects that are made

possible by collective efforts, by a public consisting of friends and strangers. Because if in the end these collective efforts of the many are assigned to the few artists who are signing the work, this is quite plainly a capitalist accumulation of symbolic capital. To avoid this, *geheimagentur* was founded in 2003 as a free, anonymous label, a multiple name that can be used by anyone who has participated twice and is willing to stay anonymous when using the group's name. In other words: *geheimagentur* as a label (translated: *>secret agency<*) was invented to hide relations between the few and the many from the machines of cultural accumulation. To keep it that way was, and still is, a lot of work. Members of *geheimagentur* have often been treated like fools when they refused to send in personal CVs to appear in programs or to identify the *>head artist<* of the collective for the press. No wonder it was very special for members of *geheimagentur* to witness how this very gesture of refusal became so important to real democracy movements all around the world. It felt as if radical activist self-defense, the critique of cultural and political representation merged and produced something beautiful: the movement of the willingly-not-represented, the unrepresentable many. If *geheimagentur* has ever been part of a movement, it was this one.

As a concept, *>the many<* has been used in leftist writing as an equivalent for what has been called *>the multitude<* in post-operaist thinking (Hardt/Negri 2004). In this context, *>the many<* have replaced a more established and coherent concept of the political subject. As such, the many rise up against the ongoing concentration of power and capital in the hands of the fewer and fewer. At the same time, the many are what emerged after the bubble of individualism crashed: The many failed to be autonomous subjects and then stopped feeling guilty about that. The many are those who finally realized that, as individuals, we are precarious, fragile, and totally incapable of living, whereas, on the other hand, as many we are totally capable of producing a common life together. And finally and most importantly, the many are those who are not reducible to the few, which is why they organize horizontally, not vertically. However, to know all this *about the many* is something else than to act *as many*, or to act *as if we were many*. So, what was at stake at *The Art of Being Many*, if not the *many* themselves?

TO ACT AS IF WE WERE MANY

Whereas the reality of real democracy movements stays, of course, unquestioned, *The Art of Being Many* was still a real fiction project, as it presupposed the existence of a trans-European crowd who felt addressed by the words »Dear Many«. The Many – are they we, you, them? How do we relate to us, them, you – as many? What is implied in this notion of »the many«, and what kinds of agency unfold as soon as these implications are transformed into action?

Geheimagentur started to use this phrase in gatherings like the *Agora 99* in Rome (2013) and conferences like *The Abduction of Europe* in Madrid (2014), in assemblies of *Embros Theatre* Athens and in preparatory meetings in Hamburg with about two dozen participants from Germany, Greece and Spain. This was initially related to the excitement of calling for peers: the many as peers who had witnessed and engaged in moments of assembling that made the word »democracy« sound important again, peers who refer to this shared experience as a starting point for a new *art of being many*. And this art as such seemed to start with the many organizing themselves as the many. Therefore, early on in the project, means of production were distributed, decision-making was decentralized and self-organization was installed wherever possible: About a year before the assembly took place, seven working groups were founded to each autonomously plan one part of the assembly, including the question of who should be invited and how to use the limited amount of money for fees. To allow people from abroad to take part in this process, a web platform for exchange among the many was installed.

Interestingly, and rather typically for structures labelled as »self-organization«, a certain relation between the few and the many took shape in what followed. It can best be described with the formula »doers decide« that is quite essential to what is called »activism«. »Doers decide« has its beauty because it counteracts a lot of the established power relations in an unpredictable way: Who happens to become part of a specific »doers decide« constellation is often very different from who was meant to do it, may it be in terms of institutional authority or in terms of experience. The few who end up deciding will often be an incomprehensible gang like – and this is just a random list – a student of urban design, a transgender punk performer from Mexico City, a woman engineer employed at the theatre that hosts the event, an honorary

member of the black block, an intellectual from Athens, a local witch, a digital nerd and a professor of theatre studies. But whoever it happens to be, the few are usually not happy at all to be few in moments of decision-making. Instead, they send messages to peers calling for help, expertise, opinion, time and attention. But often these messages remain unanswered. There is no way to argue that the few who end up deciding in a self-organization-regime of the ›doers decide‹-pattern are in any way specifically legitimized, authorized or capable to do what they do. This is why none of them would usually want to claim a leading role, would like to be seen as deciding *for* the many. On the contrary, the decisions are essentially based on the assumption that they are taken *as if* the few *were* many. Before this background it becomes difficult to make individuals accountable. Whether that is a downside has yet to be discussed. Yet another downside is much more obvious: If doers decide, they necessarily quiet the voices of the ›non-doers‹, the exhausted, and the otherwise engaged. In this sense activism stays true to its name and is regularly firing back on those who end up deciding.

An alternative to this trap seemed to be to put as much energy as possible into a setup that would enable the many to decide once they would finally arrive on the scene. It goes without saying that distributing decisions and preparing for choices to be made by the participants instead of determining a certain program was done to undermine the representational structures usually in place in conferences and theatre festivals long before participants arrive. Thus, this became geheimagentur's main strategy in the preparatory process for *The Art of Being Many*. For example, with regard to the material and media setup of the assembly: As the ›how to‹ of assembling itself was at stake, this just could not be decided beforehand. Instead, the ›doers‹ prepared a heterogeneous structure and environment that allowed for a variety of very different conventional as well as experimental approaches to assembling. The architecture and equipment of the assembly hall did not suggest a specific direction, a specific organization of audience and speakers, but allowed for many different ones. Installations, lights, public address and media systems – they all were designed and installed to allow for a multitude of choices to be made on the spot. And not only the participants in producing *The Art of Being Many* in the different working groups were meant to make choices, but all the participants including those who only attended the two public days. To achieve that, the assembly hall supported very different forms of participating – from being fully engaged to just being physically present

while listening to music over the headphones or going in and out of the sauna covered in blankets.

Of course, geheimagentur was aware of the fact that this was likely to create a multi-layered, always slightly diffuse situation, as opposed to a concentrated focus on one thing happening, one person speaking, one event to be witnessed. This was willingly accepted, and might very well have been the one choice geheimagentur did not share with or delegate to the many. It shall therefore be explained in the following: To opt for a diffuse situation, instead of a clarified and unified one, has its background in a political culture shared by several art-and-activism-groups from Hamburg and Berlin involved in *The Art of Being Many*. I would like to describe this political culture starting from a Facebook post by Margarita Tsomou, commenting on the atmosphere at the OXI-assembly in Athens in July 2015. As a prelude to her enthusiastic description of that assembly, she wrote:

Especially for Germans it is difficult to imagine a progressive, popular crowd, which is moving beyond fascist culture and beyond leftist rituals. I'm sorry for all those who can only understand the following descriptions as romanticisms.

Though ›Germans‹ (in as far as they exist) certainly do not generally have a problem with crowds of whatever kind, what Margarita states here is probably true for people from the radical left who have participated in the so called anti-German-discourse. This discourse was strong in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Berlin and other places in the 1990s, when many activists had to fight to stay true to the historical legacy of the Shoah, while being confronted with the rise of a newly united, highly self-celebratory German nation. And, yes, as a participant of this discourse, I personally cannot deny that whenever I find myself in a crowd that celebrates itself and unifies in the act of identifying a common enemy (regardless of the kind of enemy), or as part of an assembly that is meant to be an authentic and natural political communion beyond all technical and rhetorical agency, I start to feel intensely sick. However, I would like to insist that this mindset is nothing to feel sorry for, instead it is an intrinsic, legitimate and necessary part of a post-20th-century-political approach and, more importantly, it is motivating the use of the notion of ›the many‹ – the many *being many* instead of ›one‹. In practical terms: The way geheimagentur organized the process and set up the assembly hall was heavily informed by a concept of the many as an intrinsically not unified and non-

unifiable, not homogeneous crowd. Geheimagentur acted as if the many were a crowd that was strong exactly because it allowed for diversion, even dispersion, due to its resistance against being reduced to the one – the one focus, the one belief, the one community, the one external enemy to fight.

THE LEGITIMACY VACUUM AND OTHER OUTCOMES

However, in the actual gathering the concept of the non-unifiable many came alive in a very different, much more conflict-driven way than expected.

Regarding the material and media setup: By the means that had been provided to enable choice, diversion and dispersion – above all by the headphone-system – many of the many felt cut off from an immediacy that for them seemed to be essential to a ›true assembly‹.

Regarding the theatricality of assemblies: Not only from the immediate feedback, but also from critical reviews which were circulated after the gathering through the mailing list of participants, I learned that the wide and rather inclusive understanding of assemblies, which underlies the performative art of assembling, differs significantly from the emphatic and sometimes rigid understanding many of the participants had of ›the assembly‹ as the format of ›true democracy‹.

Regarding participation: Unfortunately, it proved to be difficult to talk about or experiment with this difference in perception and strategy, as, when confronted with the demand to decide about the spatial, temporal, visual and auditive shape of the assembly, many of the participants didn't feel liberated and empowered at all. On the contrary – and in contrast to what was intended and predicted – they felt forced to participate in the production of a spectacle. Thus, during the assembly, it became a major task to acknowledge this different view concerning the modes of production that were at stake in *The Art of Being Many*. These modes of production, of course, differ a lot from those of other cultural workers in art and activism, who face conditions of severe austerity and therefore might have perceived the sheer amount of technical equipment and institutional support as symptoms of a different economy, as a mode of production that belonged to the winning side in the battles of austerity.

So, instead of working together on one very diverse assembly of the many, what happened during the four days of *The Art of Being Many* was

that a lot of very different assemblies were called and held. Thus, the subtitle of the gathering – »an assembly of assemblies« – proved correct in a surprising way. Instead of working on one assembly as a forum to share experiences from many other assemblies, the assembly itself seemed to split into many other assemblies. Each of the seven working groups found a very different way to use and at the same time counteract what was perceived as the prearranged setup, and thus each session of the two-day-long public assembly was yet another specific assembly in itself. Furthermore, beyond the given structure of working groups and sessions many other assemblies of different kinds were held. One of them was the assembly of those who wanted to play table tennis instead of attending the official assembly, another one was like a committee of critique that proved to be telling with regard to the first aspect discussed in this text, the address.

This committee of critique took place on the evening of the second day, the night before the public part of the assembly started. In this assembly I was personally charged with the infringement of illegitimately calling an assembly of the many and of trying to stage a fake assembly. I felt that the verdict was not spoken until the next day, when a Greek activist at the end of the first plenary session finally said that »It didn't look like it, but it is a real assembly«. Nevertheless, the committee of critique left a staying impression: It was as if the many were calling a bluff. And, of course, we were, I was, guilty of bluffing. For what legitimizes anyone to call the assembly of the many? Can there be a proper answer to that, or is there not necessarily a vacuum at this point?

Antonio Negri und Raul Sanchez-Cedillo have referred to this problem in their recent publication *Towards a Constituent Process in Europe* (Negri/Sanchez-Cedillo 2015). In their introduction to the volume Isabell Lorey and Gerald Raunig point out:

The problematic aspect of constituent power as a constituent assembly is the decision how the assembly itself comes about, mainly with regard to the question of the assembly's legitimization. Who is calling the assembly and who is called to assemble? How can the inclusion of the excluded take place as a process of social exchange, despite all asymmetries, and how can it – as a radical inclusion – encompass a potentially infinite multitude? (Lorey/Raunig 2015: 26)²

2 Translation by the author.

This made me think of how the initial moment of Occupy New York has been described as a media prank: Apparently, it was impossible to make anyone accountable for calling the first assembly (Graeber 2014: 19-23), and at the same time the situation was so diffuse that it produced innumerable accounts: Everyone could have been behind it.

This was a highly privileged situation, as it prevented that a certain, and therefore necessarily wrong, relation between the few and the many was already articulated in the act of calling the assembly. The constituent process that starts with the assembly of the many presupposes itself (see Elise von Bernstorff's introduction to *The Charter of Europe* in this volume). Calling an assembly of the many is often equivalent to this failure of self-presupposition. As simply identifying the few who have called it and asking them to legitimize their action can already lead to failure, as there is no way of legitimizing calling an assembly of the many when individual, or, more precisely, biopolitical, identification is complete. This is the essential reason why it is illegal to hold a public assembly unless there is one person officially signing responsible for it.

So, by calling the bluff and exposing the legitimacy vacuum the committee of critique indeed threatened to turn the whole assembly of the many into a fake. What came along as critical questioning was in fact a performative speech act. The many called a bluff which geheimagentur wanted to pull off together with them, as if we were many, with everyone knowing all the cards. In this sense, the real-fiction-strategy, the performative as-if, was a suggestion how to respond to the legitimacy vacuum, how to turn the regress of legitimization into a process of performative research.

Instead, by calling the bluff and therefore by splitting the many into the few who called and the many who had illegitimately been called, the committee demanded ›transparency‹ and attacked the anonymous ›we‹ of geheimagentur that had been the group's initiation to the movement of the unrepresented many in the first place.

Under this unexpected attack it collapsed for the first time in twelve years. And that is when the many became ›them‹, became those who were sitting in front of me, in front of us, the few who had to defend themselves in what in that moment felt like a strange hybrid version of a communist party tribunal. Nevertheless, the many as ›them‹ were peers, peers who were finally there, seriously present, in an admittedly very immediate, very true,

and at the same time kind of cruel form of an assembly, discussing what really was at stake here.

IN RETROSPECT

In the light of the Greek summer of 2015 I started to suspect that what had happened in this incident was something else, was not about us, was not a mistake and not even a misunderstanding, but a splitting of the many that is still going on. A splitting that rearranges the unrepresentable many of 2011 along the lines of renewed but conventional economical, national and representational boundaries, within a Europe divided into rich and poor nation-states.

However, what *The Art of Being Many* wanted was to acknowledge the constituent moment of the many that we had witnessed in the first part of this decade. It wanted to help with instituting it as a legacy that we, the many who had witnessed it, will treat as a continuous source of inspiration and that we will not forget. To be true to this legacy – in the current political situation – will not be easy. On the contrary. In my opinion, living up to it implies a leap of faith in the many, understood as a faith in each other. In the many as us, who are still there, still working in, with and against institutions, may it be theatres, universities or political parties. And we will continue to be many as long as we defy the temptation of organizing along the questions of who is to blame, who stands for whom and who owes us what.

We will go on trying to resist these questions, since what we learned from the movements of 2011 is still valid: Modern representative democracy has a basic ubiquitous flaw. It relies on reducing the many to the few. Therefore, it produces a very specific form of the many, one that is controlled by biopolitical regimes in the form of statistical data. This form of the many is produced for no other reason than to easily reduce it to the few. This reduction is organized and legitimized by seemingly rational procedures of counting, dividing, collecting, distributing and, therefore, of representing. But now we understand and will not forget that the many are actually not equal to the statistical figures of biopolitics, that they are not identifiable as counted members of parties or nations. The given procedures for producing and then reducing the many to the few have turned out to be invalid, as they notoriously fall short of the potential, the richness, and the essential horizontality

of the many. Therefore, the question still remains to be answered: How to not reduce the many to the few?

And again: From my limited experience I would like to start by admitting that most of the time we are not many. We are actually few. Even in those moments when we seem to be many, as, for example, in the Occupy Movement, *›we‹ have never been the 99 percent*. Compared to this claim we have always been few. But we acted *as if we were many*.

And in doing so we found that the relations between the few and the many can actually be quite different than they are in traditional politics; they can be reversed, in fact: to be a few who act *as if they were many* is not the same as being a few who speak for the many, who embody the many in leading figures, or who supposedly represent the interests of the many. Instead, to act *as if we were many* performs an awareness of the many, who are actually there with us, though many of them, unfortunately, couldn't make it here. It is a way to act that bears witness to the abundance of people, beings, things, and ghosts who are always already present in our action, enabling it, framing it and carrying it on.

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