The Labour and Leisure of Performing the Many

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Although the so-called real democracy movements of the early 2010s may not have been as successful and influential as many people have wished for, the various movements, networks, and events have managed to highlight the term ›democracy‹ again in academic and not so academic discussions. The claim can be made that they have questioned the very meaning of the term by trying to put something like a ›real‹ democracy into practice in the social spaces they squatted, occupied, and transformed: as a quasi-reenactment (cf. Lütticken 2005; Roselt 2012) of the coming together on the *agora* in ancient Greece. In this understanding, the real democracy movements have tried to make democracy work in new fashions – albeit just for a short while and by raising questions instead of looking for answers. Then again, one might retort that the nametag ›real democracy‹ has only been attached to an old hobby-horse of the radical left, bottom up self-organization, and that trying to practice ›real democracy‹ inside global capitalism is an invalid (or at least highly ineffective) form of criticism.

The following considerations[1] will not take up these discussions. Rather, they will examine the discursive effects produced by the equation of democ-

1 This text is based on a paper first presented at a June 2014 workshop entitled *The Labor and Leisure of Performance*, organized by Giulia Palladini at Erfurt University. Another version of it was presented at the May 2015 *Art and Reproduction*-workshop organized by Dorothea Walzer and Jenny Nachtigall at Humboldt

racy with gathering on the *agora*: the disruption of prevalent political metaphors, Hannah Arendt's theory as a prominent but problematic example of the assumptions under debate, and finally the ways the 2014 congress *The Art of Being Many* in Hamburg took up and negotiated these questions.

Equating democracy with the practice of assembling shifts two sets of metaphors traditionally associated with politics: that of labor and that of theater. The work and labor of democracy now has to be undertaken by each and everybody – not only by those this work is delegated to so that everybody else can carry on with their work-lives, i.e. wage labor. One of the catchphrases of the real democracy movements pinpoints their allegedly anti-representational character: ›direct‹ instead of ›representational‹ democracy. A delegation of power is not supposed to take place; those who delegate cannot just watch and listen to those who speak and act for ›us‹. In the 18th and 19th century, the bourgeois theater with its picture stage (*Guckkastenbühne*) came to stand in as a metaphor for a public seeing and feeling itself represented by the fiction displayed on the stage (cf. Habermas 1989: 51-56). The critique of the leisurely gaze of an audience passively taking in what is presented to it on stage has long been a starting point for political theory from Rousseau to Rancière and beyond (cf. Rousseau 1968; Rancière 2010). It has also been at the heart of theatrical practices that aim at transforming the traditional performance/audience-relationship (in the vein of, on the one hand, Brecht, or, on the other hand, Artaud (cf. Bishop 2012; van Eikels 2013: 104-146)). Usually the goal is to activate the audience, i.e. to pull them out of some poisonous stupor dreaded as the death of any political life from Plato to *The Matrix*. The rhetoric of the real democracy movements falls pretty much in line here. Would the dawn of a democracy as we have not yet come to know it mean the end of a certain kind of theatrical leisure, then? That is: the end at least of what movement and theater activists alike have long denounced as some sort of political laziness?

On the one hand, these questions gain new weight in the age of structural mass-unemployment and a still prevalent 1990s rhetoric of self-entrepreneurship (i.e. self-exploitation (cf. Bröckling 2007)) in ›the system‹ as well as in political activism. Would not a more active political or theatrical participation just become appropriated by the system in no time at all? On the other

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hand, there is a certain arbitrary character to any attribution of ›labor‹, ›work‹, or ›leisure‹ to a given action. My labor may be your leisure depending on personal tastes, cultural codes and potential wages involved (cf. Galbraith 2004: 17).

The theory most constantly referred to when talking about what happened on the squares is the one developed in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958). The book was reworked and published as *Vita activa* in German in 1967: Arendt places democracy most firmly on the side of leisure. While in the ancient Greek polis women and slaves keep busy with the labors of daily life the ›free men‹ leisurely gather on the *agora* to stage the play of democracy. But the evocation of Arendt does not seem wholly unproblematic when conflating gathering and democracy, to say the least. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt outlines a brief theory of Attic democracy: The male slave holder minority does indeed gather on the public square to discuss and decide upon matters of public life, often on matters of peace and war. Provocatively and a little tongue-in-cheek, Arendt puts aside the justice and gender aspects of this gathering. Rather, male chauvinism is of the essence here. In her version of the by now well-rehearsed story of ›the fall of public man‹ (cf. Sennett 1992), Arendt laments the retreat into the private sphere in Western history. In her mind, politics and democracy need a public sphere. Individuals need to expose themselves to one another on the marketplace: not as today's staging of one's inner life but as a way of caring for the common good (cf. Arendt 1998: 50-58). Conveniently, exposing oneself in ancient Athens means having the chance of gaining fame and honor. The male slave holders take part in public life because it gives them the chance to become remembered by their peers in myth, poetry and drama, for example for their battlefield heroics (cf. Arendt 1998: 175-188). Presenting oneself in one's singularity on the agora means vying for modes of remembrance through oral mimesis, reproduction, repetition. Arendt stresses the »frailty« (Arendt 1998: 188) of this mode of potential recording and reproduction. More stable means of reproduction (e.g. archives containing written law and documentation of precedents) seem to obstruct the respective singularity of the staging of democracy. Fragility and fleetingness seem of the essence here. There's no reenactment required, and none at all called for.

This is the point in Arendt's argument where leisure comes in – and the place of leisure in this line of thought is probably aligned to the non-reproducibility of democracy: Modes of non-work and non-labor are hardly ever

mentioned in Arendt's *The Human Condition*. But, as critics such as Paul Ricœur and Dirk Baecker have pointed out, non-work is the implicit focal point from which Arendt describes different ways of human activity throughout the book (cf. Ricœur 2006: 42; cf. Baecker 2002: 227-228). Aristotle's famous line from his *Politics* that leisure is the basis for the good life, happiness and knowledge (cf. Aristotle 1944: 1337c) is never quoted but it constantly lingers in the background: To Arendt, publicity, politics, and democracy are linked to the human activity of »action« (cf. Arendt 1998: 175-247). Such action can be neatly distinguished from labor and work. Labor upholds the cycle of life. It consists of the daily reproductive work assigned to the hands of women and slaves in the shadows of the private (cf. Arendt 1998: 68-73). Work builds permanent structures sheltering from the inconsistencies and violent tendencies of nature: houses, the marketplace (cf. Arendt 1998: 136-174). Inside the stable sphere opened up by works, action (i.e. politics) can take place. Therefore, all the male battlefield heroics are a matter of leisure: To Arendt, they are uncontaminated by labor and work. Arendt considers the exclusion of work and labor from politics the great achievement of ancient democracy. (With a bit of a twinkle in her eye, though: She doesn't see a desirable model for the present here.) So, when it comes to the direct democracy of the assembly, Arendt does not dwell so much on decision-making processes. Rather, she describes a leisurely theater of democracy: The ancient *agora*/market-square turns into a giant performance space where every man is at once performer and part of the audience. Democracy as an assembly starts with the mutual appearance to one another. The theatrical metaphors are especially prominent in some additions made to the German 1967 version of *The Human Condition*:

> Der politische Bereich im Sinne der Griechen gleicht einer solchen immerwährenden Bühne, auf der es gewissermaßen immer nur ein Auftreten, aber kein Abtreten gibt, und dieser Bereich entsteht direkt aus einem Miteinander. (Arendt 2003: 249).

In my translation:

> The political realm in the sense of the Greek resembles such a perpetual stage on which there are, in a certain sense, only entrances but no exits. And this sphere emerges directly from being together. (cf. Arendt 1998: 197 for the original English without this passage).

According to the metaphor of democracy as »a perpetual stage on which there are only entrances but no exits«, democracy is conceived as a theater of leisure. Labor and work have no room in Arendt's democracy. And this is not the least of the reasons she considers the labor and jobholder societies that emerge in the 19th century doomed, or at least inherently non-political: as something that should remain backstage upholding the scaffolding but is instead dragged into the glaring light of the performance space (cf. Arendt 1998: 126-135). In passages, which are as fascinating as troublesome, Arendt imagines an originary democracy without predetermined procedures, rule-books and basic laws (i.e. without means and media of reproduction), but nevertheless able to make decisions in the name of the common good and never tipping into injustice and violence (cf. Arendt 1998: 192-207). Possible objections as to the sustainability of such a democracy are brushed aside with a nod to the »hardly […] surprising swift decline« (Arendt 1998: 197) of the ancient democracies: They vanished because they could not and would not make an effort to reproduce themselves.

Arendt's notion of democracy has not only been heavily criticized as ›naïve‹ (cf. Habermas 1977; cf. Butler/Spivak 2007). It has also been praised for prefiguring performative and contention-oriented concepts of politics (cf. Butler/Spivak 2007). But what is of interest here is her notion of democracy as an anarchic theater of leisure: a mid-Grotowsky-style performance where everybody is a performer and where the work/labor-dimension of the very word ›performance‹ (as in ›measurable result‹) is conspicuously absent: Democracy equals the gathering as many which equals the leisure of mutually performing in front of one another. But leisure does not mean ›without result‹, though. On the contrary, Arendt describes political action as highly effective in her 1963 book *On Revolution*: She retraces or re-imagines the self-organization of local councils from the American Revolution via the Russian ones up to contemporary uprisings in Eastern Europe. Arendt gives emphasis to the »spontaneity« (Arendt 1963: 266) of a democratic self-organization only determined by »the elementary conditions of action itself« (Arendt 1963: 271). While to Arendt, such spontaneous self-organization can be observed everywhere where people come together in political action, it is later oppressed by professional revolutionaries, political parties and administrative apparatus (cf. Arendt 1963: 265-279). To Arendt, a participatory democracy of the many is able to function inside of practical economic constraints

as well. But in *On Revolution*, Arendt does not elaborate on what has happened to the labor and work aspects of everyday life when the activists are not ›free‹ male slaveholders in the first place. Nor, for that matter, on what happens to the theater aspects of democracy.

As far as the theater of politics and its labor and leisure dimension are concerned, Arendt's theory does not quite do justice to the events on the various squares in the early 2010s. At *The Art of Being Many*, different approaches to both were put to the test. First of all, Arendt's implicit and explicit attributions of labor and leisure seem quite arbitrary to begin with: The self-presentation on the public square, the constant jostling for attention and influence, the efforts invested into fame and honor etc. come across as quite laborious tasks, even when coded as leisure in antiquity. From an Arendtian perspective, the Syntagma Square or Occupy Wall Street assemblies would not make the cut as performances of democracies. The spontaneous self-organization in the Arendtian register consisted not in the least part of an organization of the chores that kept the camp afloat: Who's to provide food and how? Who's to cook? How to camp on the square? Where to wash? What about lavatories? On the squares, the labor of keeping up the cycle of life and the work of providing relatively stable structures did not take place on the outside of a leisurely performed democracy but proved to be its very centre (cf. Mörtenböck/Mooshammer 2013: 49-66).

The Hamburg event did not go as far as to reenact decision-making processes on this fundamental a level. But there was a sleeping camp next to the assembly hall and basic food was produced onsite, partly in the assembly hall: Show Case Beat Le Mot, in their own words ›Germany's oldest male performance collective‹, cooked vegan food (thus undermining the Arendtian gender stereotype). As one member of the preparation team put it: »Whenever I take part in a large gathering where I don't know anybody I join the kitchen crew. That's the perfect way to bond; that's the perfect way to get into the swing of things.« In this description, communal cooking provides a common space and a relation to one another where there was none before. It is the basis for negotiating everything else; Arendt's leisure of democracy might start as kitchen work after all.

Secondly, Arendt pits leisure against leisure: the good performance leisure of democratic action against the bad leisure of the passively gazing theater spectator. As if such a gaze was altogether leisurely in the first place. Sitting through a boring play can be laborious toil, and so can be acting in

one. One does not even have to think of endurance performance pieces as popularized Marina Abramovic. Everybody who takes part in assemblies on a regular basis (academics going to university meetings included) knows that gathering shares similarities with endurance performance pieces. They just go on and on. Often, one has to sit through them until the very end. This aspect was very faithfully reproduced in *The Art of Being Many*: The two-day-congress went on for twelve consecutive hours a day. But in contrast to what Arendt's image of a stage with no exits suggests nobody was forced to stay for the whole time. As in a lot of recent endurance pieces people came and went whenever they wanted. And there were multiple occasions to disperse into different sub-groups or simply disengage.

There are various moods and states of mind occurring when gathering. Sometimes it becomes undecidable whether a gathering of a few (or many) people leisurely hangs out or toils through time. Enduring an assembly means going idle over long periods of time: doing nothing or just going along with the flow. But going along with the flow can also mean becoming a part of the very ›working‹ of the assembly. And such working can revert back into the leisure inherent to the festive mode of gathering: into a joyful mood that takes over but is, at the same time, always in danger to tilt over into a pervasive foul mood or even the transformation of the assembly into an angry mob. The last panel of the first day of *The Art of Being Many*, *Vogue and Voodoo*, tried to stimulate and experiment with various ways of intoxication: The panel dealt with intoxication as a state in which passivity and activity, leisure and labor cannot be told apart but are instead both ostensibly present, as emphasized e.g. by Walter Benjamin in his essay on surrealism (cf. Benjamin 1979). Not surprisingly, the *Vogue-and-Voodoo*-panel was the one that in retrospect for quite a few of the ›many‹ seems to have ›worked best‹ as a theatrical and performative event. Partly, this might have been the case because this panel was billed as a transition to the after-show-party and, therefore, did not succumb to high political expectations.

And thirdly and perhaps most importantly: Somewhere between labor and leisure, *The Art of Being Many* put an emphasis on the various notions of repetition and reproduction so conspicuously absent in Arendt. The reenactment dimension of *The Art of Being Many* rattled many political activists; this was a ›performance art‹-aspect, and worse: a cultural-industrial spectacle, which to them undermined the political necessity as well as the spontaneity of a ›real‹ assembly. The invitation to ›come to Hamburg and gather‹

seemed to be a mock invocation only because what happened turned out to be very much on the side of the playful. Given the seriousness of the struggles of many of the participants this point seems justified. On the one hand, it was obvious that the reenactment did not treat its originals as museum pieces. The reproduction rather reflected the devices and means of assembling: a proto-Latourian laboratory of the stages and things used in an assembly (cf. Latour 1994). Everything was mediated; not even face-to-face-interaction was ›real‹ because of the three-channel-headphones everyone was wearing. One could stay inside the assembly while stepping out into the sunshine; one could zoom out of the assembly while staying bodily present but switching to a DJ-channel, etc.

And by highlighting the fact that this was a reproduction a blind spot of not only Arendt's political theory came into view: that the political – or for that matter, an assembly – cannot be reduced to spontaneity but that it relies on repetition, reproduction, procedures, ceremonies, rituals, media and so on. The dividing line between the participants at *The Art of Being Many* did not so much run between activists, artists and those who were bored but between those who thought this was a valid point, those who did not and those who did not care. Political assemblies were not turned into ›art‹ (or not only turned into something that went by the name of art in the technological sense of the term: *téchne*, *ars*). At some points at least, they were examined in their material and technical conditions: the interdependencies between gathering and the respective assembly spaces, the timing of assemblies, the moods of assemblies, the sounds of assemblies, the documentation of assemblies, the fictions assemblies make up about themselves in order to come into being. It is in this vein that *The Art of Being Many* can be called (in Esther Pilkington's words) a »rehearsal assembly« (Pilkington 2014). A rehearsal follows a script sometimes or it is based on an idea. But under the pretense of art or that of being only preliminary it can become a try-out for the real thing. And one never knows when it is over, or, in the case of a collaborative effort, who decides when the rehearsal actually turns into the real thing: when political leisure turns into political labor and perhaps the other way round; or when something ›new‹ emerges from a space in which social practices can be reflected, tried out as well as put to the test.

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