

**Instituting Dissensus:  
The Democratisation of Cultural Institutions  
in the 21st Century**

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## **Declaration Statement**

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

## Abstract

### Instituting Dissensus:

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Konstantinos Pittas

In a time characterised by the increasing erosion of democratic institutions, processes of depoliticisation, and the imposition of a consensual order, this PhD thesis explores different modes of engagement with cultural institutions, focusing specifically on instituting practices as a model for the reinvention of democratic politics. Building on contemporary political philosophy, post-structuralist theory, and cultural studies, it begins by analysing both *dissensus*, as the democratic principle that entails the never-ending redefinition of the members of the society (meaning, whose voice is heard and recognised as a legitimate partner in the debate), and *antagonism*, as the founding moment and constitutive element that grounds the social (in the form of the exclusions that have been eventually naturalised). It demonstrates that dissensus is an inherently aesthetico-political phenomenon that has very distinct performative and spatial characteristics, since it involves the staging of equality, the introduction of new radical imaginaries, and the recalibration of the aesthetic register. Although dissensus is considered a fleeting moment, a rapturous incident, and a disruptive event with no ‘proper’ place, I set out to conceptualise the possibility of instituting dissensus, claiming antagonism, and channeling them towards the democratisation of cultural institutions. This entails the attempt to envisage an open, dynamic, and self-reflective model of a “dissensual institutionality” that can safeguard the continuous inscription of a multiplicity of social demands.

Drawing on my ethnographic research in Europe and the U.S., this theoretical construct is then tested out through a series of under-researched empirical cases. The examined case studies include attempts of decentering and deterritorialising

hegemonic machines and mega-institutions (such as documenta 14 in Athens, which foregrounded decolonial narratives and dissident histories from the periphery); endeavours of inventing new flexible organisational arrangements (such as alter-institutions in Athens, Paris, and Bochum that introduced novel parliamentary formats and decision-making processes); and, finally, modes of critical engagement with solidified institutional structures that set out to seize, reform, or even dismantle them (such as artistic activist initiatives in the U.S. that center-staged questions of toxic philanthropy, museum sponsorship, and labour rights). My investigation of 'instituting dissensus' ends by drawing some useful conclusions on the possibilities and limitations of the respective strategies, methodologies, and practices that take place within, at the threshold of, or outside institutional structures, in the attempt to enact new egalitarian political imaginaries.

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## Introduction

### Research Question and Relevance

For political theorists, the engagement with questions of culture and aesthetics constitutes by no means an unprecedented phenomenon. Indeed, the long lineage of thought that engages with questions of aesthetics, politics, and culture can be traced from the aesthetic writings of European romanticism (see Schiller 2004), through the different emancipatory conceptualisations of the aesthetic realm of the Frankfurt School, to the postmodern political tradition's infatuation with questions of culture.<sup>1</sup> However, the systematic exploration of political life from an aesthetic angle has lately gained such prominence in academic debates that we could speak of an 'aesthetic turn', or, more aptly, 'return', both in political thought and in international relations (Kompridis 2014).<sup>2</sup> Can this 'return' to the aesthetic and cultural realm provide renewed understandings and novel ways of theorising democratic politics? In a time of severe crisis of imagination that renders the post-political consensual order almost uncontested, can a strategic shift to arts and cultural institutions provide the fertile ground for the articulation of new social imaginaries and for the recalibration of democratic politics?

Situated within this broader context, the starting point of my doctoral research constitutes the urge to better understand the multifaceted relations of aesthetics, culture, and democratic politics in our current 'post-democratic' predicament.<sup>3</sup> A multiplicity of newly introduced terms and modes of artistic practice provide us with possible pathways to conceive the crossroads of aesthetics and politics. Distancing

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<sup>1</sup> For the relation between critical theory and the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic realm see Adorno 1973; 1997; 2007, Marcuse 1987, Benjamin 1969, Horkheimer 1995, Berman 1989, Boucher 2011, Bürger, Huyssen, and Zipes 1981, Dews 1987; 1989, Duvenage 2003, Ingram 1991, Jay 1973; 1992, Wolin 1994, Roberts 1991. For the politics of postmodern aesthetics see Lyotard 1984, Jameson 1983; 2000, Foster 1985; 1998, Dumm 1988, Eagleton 1985; 1988; 1990, Huyssen 1981, Dallmayr 1997, Kellner and Best 1997, Menke 1998, Poster 1989, Wellmer 1991, Benjamin and Osborne 1991, Callinicos 1989, Carroll 1987.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hinderliter et al. 2009, Bleiker 2001; 2009; 2018, Hutchison 2016, Sylvester 2001; 2009, Callahan 2015, Moller 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The notions of post-democracy and the post-political are examined in more detail in Chapter 1 (see, for instance, Crouch 2004, Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014, Rancière 2014).

my project from accounts that reduce the debate into a sterile polarisation between 'political' and 'apolitical' art, or 'socially engaged' and 'socially detached' art that fail to capture the complexity of the aesthetic realm and its multifaceted relations to the political, I endeavour to construct a more clear-headed analysis that advocates for the necessity of a consequential change in our understanding of both the political and the aesthetic.

At the core of this research lies a normative premise that since aesthetics and politics revolve around the symbolic ordering of social relations and the constitution of specific orders of visibility and sense, they should be conceived as inherently intertwined. For Rancière (2004: 8), aesthetics can be understood as a system of forms that determines what can be registered by sensory experience: 'It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience'. Following Rancière and Mouffe, this thesis accepts that both aesthetics and politics are intimately imbricated since they each encapsulate not only modes of reconfiguring the sensible, the audible, and the perceptible, but also means of safeguarding the practice of democracy. Since for Rancière (2010: 54) 'democracy implies a practice of dissensus, one that it keeps re-opening and that the practice of ruling relentlessly plugs', one can conceive dissensus as an aesthetico-political phenomenon par excellence that lies at the heart of politics.

However, in this thesis I shift the emphasis from singular cases of artistic and cultural interventions that attempt to temporarily disrupt the dominant (police) order to critical 'instituting' practices and diverse modes of engagement with institutional structures that have set out to democratise them. My theoretical investigation into what I name a 'dissensual institutionality' is complemented by empirical qualitative research and by my own professional experience in the field of contemporary art and architecture. My thesis delves into four broad subjects of inquiry that remain inadequately addressed by academic research:

- How can arts and cultural institutions articulate democratic imaginaries that oppose the post-political order?
- In what ways can cultural institutions bring to the fore specific sociopolitical claims, stage societal antagonisms, and take sides in the divisions that arise?
- What methodological tools and modes of engagement can be deployed to start envisaging dissensus as an institutional mode of activity?
- What kind of spatial relations, interpersonal interactions, and collective meanings are enacted during these critical modes of engagement with institutional structures?

By attempting to disentangle these questions, I aim to contribute to critical political theories that engage with questions of aesthetics and culture, by revealing the foundational role of cultural institutions in the articulation of egalitarian fictions, in shedding light on underrepresented social actors, and in the radical democratisation of society. In addition, this thesis aspires to generate a novel way to theorise the relation of aesthetics and politics through the lenses of an interdisciplinary approach (drawing on art history, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and urban theory) and through establishing a dialectical relationship between the micro-scale and the macro-scale. Finally, I aim to contribute to policymaking by addressing questions of democracy, equality, and accountability in institutions, not limited to the cultural realm.

### **Critical Literature Review**

There are numerous possible avenues to conceptualise the crossroads of aesthetics and politics. Scholars have approached this relation from various perspectives, ranging from art theory (Bishop 2004, Stallabras 2004), philosophy (Rancière 2008; 2009, Holmes 2008), and politics (Mouffe 2013, Marchart 2019), to sociology (Duncombe 2016), social movements (Raunig 2007, Benford 1992, Shepard 2011), and performance studies (Vujanović and Piazza 2019, Shannon 2011). A growing

body of literature has been interrogating the political potential of artistic work in fostering the construction of counter-hegemonic modes of identification, while others have examined how critical artistic practices engage in the public sphere to challenge the neoliberal imaginary (Weibel 2005, Svetlichnaja 2016). In addition, some scholars have shifted focus from the semiotic dimension of artistic communication to the embodied, affective, and relational aspects of the aesthetic (Lind 2005, Thompson 2011), while others have investigated the tactical efficacy and performativity of artistic activism (Serafini 2018, Raicovich 2021, McKee 2016) and the cultural realm as a multifaceted network of production, circulation, and consumption (Sholette 2011, Haiven 2018).

Despite the recent infatuation of political theorists with the field of aesthetics, the democratising potential of arts and cultural institutions has remained understudied. Public institutions and museums have a long history of instituting categorisations and taxonomies of visibility as well as constructing orders of things and peoples, providing the modern state with an ideological backdrop. This view aligns with the traditional Marxist understanding of institutions as apparatuses of the dominant ideology.<sup>4</sup> Since institutional apparatuses and technologies have been generally perceived as spaces that construct an ‘order of things’, classify people according to ‘scientific’ or ‘objective’ principles, and produce (or ‘discipline’) various forms of subjectivity, critics have examined their operation as ‘distinctive institutional articulations of relations of truth and power’ (Bennett 2017a: 341).<sup>5</sup> In addition, many have focused on questions of representation in museums and cultural institutions, foregrounding the contradictions between their progressive exhibition

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<sup>4</sup> If we are to follow Althusser (2014), all major social institutions—private or public—including parties, schools, trade unions, churches, and cultural associations, belong to the Ideological State Apparatuses, hence embody the ideology of the dominant class and serve as instruments of class domination.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly crucial for public institutions that by articulating ‘truth’ statements (underpinned by notions of historical progress, evolution, scientific rationality, etc.) provide the modern state with a continuous ideological backdrop, fostering in this way the construction of ‘imagined communities’ and the naturalisation or reproduction of social relations (Anderson 2006). In addition, as Bennett (2017b: 371) noticed, the museum’s ‘exhibitionary complex’ perfected a self-ordering technology of looks ‘in which the crowd comes to commune with and regulate itself through interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power’, thus creating a self-monitored public and democratising the eye of power.

content and the ways their operation directly replicates and consolidates structures of capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, etc. Others have highlighted the institutions' ability to co-opt, appropriate, and neutralise critical content (Steyerl 2009). Lastly, for many scholars, institutions tame conflicts and domesticate antagonisms, hence the task of radical politics is to interrupt this dominant logic that is embodied by institutions, to breach their walls, and to interrupt their 'instituted' or alienated arrangements.

Despite these limitations that pertain to the hierarchical nature and regulatory arrangements embodied in and through institutions, critics have also recently started to envisage arts and cultural institutions as allies in liberation struggles, agonistic platforms where the neoliberal hegemony can be contested, and discursive surfaces that can challenge colonial powers and the predominant narratives of the West.<sup>6</sup> Against the myth of 'museum neutrality', these scholars imagine institutions as politicised agents that partake in large scale social movements and take sides in ongoing struggles (see Raicovich 2019). For instance, an emerging body of literature has stressed the importance of decentring the artistic canon, diversifying the exhibition content, and decolonising cultural institutions as a form of critique to the predominance of Western cultural narratives and as an opportunity to introduce new theorisations of cultural difference (the cultural or ethnic other, the subaltern, the postcolonial, the Indigenous).<sup>7</sup> Many authors have highlighted the crucial role of artistic representation and cultural criticism in illuminating the nonsynchronous elements of previous social formations and in excavating the 'small' narratives and

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<sup>6</sup> In this respect, this study parts company with the recent scholarship's renewed interest in institutions and museums that concentrates solely on questions of representation, memory, ethics, and curatorial discourses (see Sylvester 2009, Luke 2002, Watson 2007, Yerkovich 2016, Möntmann 2006, O'Neill, Steeds, and Wilson 2017, Weber 2001, Herle 1997).

<sup>7</sup> For decolonial aesthetics and decentring the art canon see Mignolo and Vazquez 2013, Petrešin-Bachelez 2018, Demos 2013; 2016, Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012, Kolb and Richter 2017, Muñiz-Reed 2017, Tlostanova 2017. The broader preoccupation with otherness in the artistic realm had been previously framed under the premise of an 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary art (see Rutten, Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013, Morphy and Perkins 2006, Schneider and Wright 2010). For the 'archival turn' in contemporary art see Merewether 2006, Foster 2004, Simon 2002. This has been partly a response to critical theory's lack of engagement with postcolonial studies and theory, which according to critics still 'remains wedded to problematically Eurocentric and/or foundationalist strategies for grounding normativity' (Allen 2016: xii).

the ‘minor’ collective utterances that have been overwritten by the dominant culture.<sup>8</sup>

However, the political premises of such aesthetic strategies have not gone uncontested. A strand of criticism has argued that by holding out the ‘mirror of recognition’, there is a danger of aestheticising, functionalising, and commodifying the ‘counter-culture’, the different, and the ‘other’. Indeed, when objects, styles, subcultures, and subjectivities are decontextualised and abstracted from their original code, they enter the realm of semiotic production and thus can be reinscribed in the vocabulary of exhibition/sign exchange value and be co-opted by dominant discourses (see Holmes 2008, Foster 1985).<sup>9</sup> For Eagleton (2016: 35), the zeal for pluralism, difference, diversity, and cultural recognition ‘has served to displace attention from various more material issues’ and ‘has become a way of not talking about capitalism’. In this respect, it has also been argued that the same hegemonic cultural institutions that set out to confer recognition, risk reproducing the same colonialist, racist, patriarchal, and class power dynamics that they aim to transcend.<sup>10</sup> Since these questions remain pertinent, this thesis will yield a more accurate understanding of the ways in which cultural institutions can play a role in foregrounding the ‘underrepresented’, while illuminating the structural contradictions that the domestication of the ‘other’ entails and the complicity of hegemonic discourses in withholding the ‘permission to narrate’.

Another form of politically motivated art that engages with museums and cultural institutions and that has gained prominence over recent years is activist art.

Scholarship on artistic activism tends to focus on three main aspects: its temporary mise-en-scènes that makes it less vulnerable to cultural commodification (Message

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 26) declare that ‘only the minor is great and revolutionary’, while Foster (1985: 187) argues that any ‘collective arrangement of utterance’ that disrupts the institutional or established functions of language (the major) resists semiotic appropriation by ‘being innocent of any passion for the code’ (see also Foster 1996; 1998, Deleuze and Guattari 1994, Lyotard 1984, Jameson 1991)

<sup>9</sup> In addition, it remains undertheorised under what conditions the unclassified ‘other’ is presented and on whose terms it enters the Western museum since there is the risk of exoticising it (or what has been termed ‘ideological patronage’, see Schneider 2008, Spivak 1987, Foster 1985).

<sup>10</sup> See Coulthard 2014, D’Souza 2018, Mignolo 2007.

2014, Weibel 2015, Bavo 2007, Holmes 2009b); its power of transgression and prefiguration of alternative subjectivities and social interactions (Serafini 2018, Maeckelbergh 2011, Graeber 2002); and its disruptive appropriation of public space (DeLaure and Fink 2017, Evans 2019). Indeed, according to Swyngedouw (2011: 377), the construction of egalitarian political spaces can be claimed ‘through the (re)-appropriation of space, the production of new spatial qualities and new spatial relations, both materially and symbolically, and express what Castoriadis would call a radical imaginary at work’.

Žižek (2004: 75) relates Rancière’s ‘magic, violently poetic moments of political subjectivisation in which the excluded put forward their claims to speak for themselves’ to flash mobs, a contemporary form of aesthetico-political protest. However, the limits of such strategies have been also underlined, noting that this form of intervention has now become part of the ‘spectacle’ and that the new modalities of experience and subjectivity that are proposed fuel social atomisation.<sup>11</sup> Although some of these participatory performative interventions have been praised for bringing political protest into cultural institutions and for turning passive spectators into collective and politically engaged agents (see Serafini 2015, Duncombe 2016), such an approach is often limiting, especially when institutions are used merely as tactical targets for interventions that leave institutional power structures intact. In this respect, in this thesis I depart from an analysis of such isolated tactical interventions by proposing to conceive institutions as sites of continuous struggle, sites to be strategically occupied, seized, and reinhabited.

Another body of literature has focused on the notion of participation in contemporary artistic practice, encapsulating a new wave of politicisation through aesthetic means.<sup>12</sup> In his ‘relational aesthetics’, Bourriaud (2002) theorises a model

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<sup>11</sup> This coincides with what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 425) have called the ‘third spirit of capitalism’ to illustrate how the ‘artistic critique’ of the 1970s (the aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture in demand for liberation, authenticity, and autonomy) was successfully absorbed by capitalism by offering ‘a certain form of liberation that masks new forms of oppression’.

<sup>12</sup> One could just mention here the scholarship on participatory art, relational aesthetics, socially engaged art, experimental communities, and collaborative art (see Laermans 2012, Wright 2004, Lind 2005, Fotiadi 2011, Kester 2004; 2011, Billing, Lind, and Nilsson 2007, just to name a few).

of choreographed participatory experiences and staged intersubjective encounters where art constructs 'microtopias' of equality and erodes the distinction between artist and spectator, institutional and social space. Kester (2011) takes it a step further, advocating for the abolition of the concept of individual authorship in favour of a socially collaborative art form predicated on an ethics of interpersonal interactions and on a compassionate identification with the 'other'. However, as critics like Deutsche (1996) and Bishop (2004: 67) have eloquently noted, the constructed relations in such participatory models are not intrinsically democratic since not only do they rely upon simplistic oppositions (active versus passive, author versus spectator, individual versus collective), but more importantly they 'rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness'. Bishop (2004: 79) advocates instead for a 'relational antagonism', a 'polemical grounds' for amplifying the sensation of unease, discomfort, and tension between viewers, participants, and context, while 'exposing that which is repressed'.<sup>13</sup> My contribution takes these critiques as a starting point in order to look into critical practices that instead of envisaging community as a pre-political and homogenous space where conflict is eliminated in the name of a consensual model, take antagonism and dissensus as the very conditions of democratic politics.

Lastly, a growing trend in radical cultural practice, instead of aiming at the dismantling of certain institutional forms, advocates the invention of a new institutionality, including 'alter-institutions' and 'institutions of the common' (see Baravalle 2018, Ribalta 2010, Degot 2015). These alter-institutional practices prioritise the visibility of socially excluded groups, construct new institutional architectures, and maintain a pedagogical impetus, while compelling traditional institutions to reimagine themselves. In this sense, instead of embracing anti-institutional movements or 'monster institutions' (Raunig and Ray 2009), these practices take their cue from the tradition of institutional critique and from Andrea Fraser (2009: 416) who argues: 'It's not a question of being against the institution:

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<sup>13</sup> Bishop (2012: 13) castigates the unconditional equation of all socially collaborative practices with artistic gestures of resistance, arguing that in that way 'there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond'.

we are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalise, what forms of practice we regard, and what kind of rewards we aspire to'.<sup>14</sup>

However, as thinkers like Castoriadis (1987) and Holmes (2004) have pointed out, institutions, once established, harbour the risk of outstripping their original functions and reasons for existing and thus turning autonomous in relation to the society that gave birth to them. In this respect, this thesis envisions 'instituting' dissensual practices where social exclusions are not naturalised and where social demands are continuously staged and amplified. I hope to establish that if we have any chance at disarticulating the post-political order, a new radical 'instituting imaginary' needs to be articulated and sustained, necessitating both the recalibration of traditional institutional forms and the invention of self-critical instituting practices that construct democratic spaces (that is physical, discursive, and symbolic) of conflict, antagonism, and openness to otherness.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Since the task of this thesis is to understand how existing institutionalised practices can be challenged, an aesthetic mode of apprehension imbues its methodological orientation, encouraging 'a critically oriented philosophical ethos' (Shapiro 2013: 9).<sup>15</sup> Such a methodological approach allows the researcher to interpret how aesthetic encounters can disrupt the habitual ways of knowing, seeing, and doing, thereby provoking critical thinking and creating 'the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds' (Shapiro 2013: xv). This critical mode of interpretivism that underpins my epistemological and ontological assumptions can be related to Rancière's (2008: 11) own version of critical artistic practice, which 'has a political

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<sup>14</sup> The four waves of the institutional critique tradition are analysed in detail in Chapter 4 (see also Alberro and Stimson 2009, Raunig and Ray 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, for Bleiker (2001: 519) 'aesthetics' should come as 'an important and necessary addition to our interpretative repertoire' (see also Busch 2009).

effect to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations’.

Since the cultural practices I examine have as their focal point ‘what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness’, my research is dependent on long-term firsthand experience (Bishop 2012: 6). Although the visual remains a predominant vessel of mediating meanings, being attentive to the invisible processes, dynamic relations, and nuanced discourses that are at play requires a plurality of methods that transcend strict disciplinary confines. In this respect, I adopt a pluralistic methodological approach that alludes to the concept of assemblage, ‘a rhizome, a type of loose network of methodological connections that has no central regulatory core but, instead, operates at various interconnected levels, each moving and expanding simultaneously in different directions’ (Bleiker 2015: 883).<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, the bulk of my research consists of an in-depth and comparative case study investigation of one mega-exhibition (documenta 14), three alter-institutions (the Parliament of Bodies, the Visible platform, and Jonas Staal’s assemblies), and two cases of artistic activism (Decolonize This Place and Not An Alternative), attempting to map different modes of engagement with institutional structures in the attempt to radically democratise them. The rationale behind my selection of cases is that they are all situated at the forefront of critical artistic and cultural practice, exemplifying an amalgam of unique strategies, approaches, and scales, but they remain underexamined by the academic community. Acknowledging that ‘ethnography has long served as a valuable companion to interpretive, critical and conceptual strands of political theory’, this research has been based on extensive fieldwork, participant observations, and ethnographic inquiries in order to understand how social actors think and ascribe meaning to their own behaviours and settings (Herzog and Zacka 2019: 765). Since all cases are situated within unique cultural contexts ‘composed of seriously contested codes and representations’, my

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<sup>16</sup> For assemblage theory and the concept of rhizomes see DeLanda 2002; 2006, Marcus and Saka 2006, Deleuze and Guattari 1988.

firsthand testimonies allow me not only to take a comparative stance, but also to unravel the respective discursive patterns, collective meanings, institutional structures, and conceptualisations of communities that are enacted (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 2).

In addition, my interdisciplinary approach is premised on mixed methods ‘that do not produce or demand neat, definite, and well-tailored accounts’ and on an open-ended mode of inquiry that allows issues to emerge organically along the way, ‘hinting’ at their most suitable mode of decryption (Law 2004: 11).<sup>17</sup> Participant observation was supplemented by 54 semi-structured interviews with artists, curators, institutional partners, and audience members not only to gain access to their intentions, motivations, and perceptions, but also to interpret the sensuous mediations, the conveyed meanings, and the preferred readings that are enacted during different modes of cultural production and reception.<sup>18</sup> Inevitably, critical discourse analysis played an indispensable role in interpreting the complex network of discursive formations that emerge and the institutional apparatuses in which they are embedded.<sup>19</sup> Discourse analysis allowed me to be attentive not only to primary discourse production, like technologies of display (objects, dioramas, framings of images) and the visual technologies of interpretation (labels, wall texts, catalogues), but also to secondary discourses, including curatorial statements, opening and closing ceremonies, newspapers reports, and magazine reviews.<sup>20</sup>

This methodological approach also indicates some points of consideration that I had to take into account from the outset. To begin with, I acknowledge the limitations of the research project and the integration of destabilising elements in its

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, visual analysis was deployed less for content analysis, than to grasp the ways in which cultural practices are inscribed by hegemonising discourses and the possibilities for alternative decoding formations (see Rose 2001).

<sup>18</sup> For a semi-structured interview sample see Appendix 3 and for a detailed breakdown of number of interviews per case study see Appendix 4.

<sup>19</sup> In the words of Foucault (1972: 49), the task of his analysis ‘consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents of representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the Foucauldian discourse analysis see Kendall and Wickham 1999, Lord 2006, Gill 1996, Rose 2001.

methodological arsenal.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, dethroning the seeming inevitability of scientific methods and deconstructing invocations of ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’ can not only challenge the acceptability of orthodox methods, but can also open avenues for a multiplicity of experimental, innovative, and progressive research approaches. ‘Methodological closure and intellectual fastidiousness suggest stasis and stagnation; raggedy methods, methods not fully conceptualized or completed, suggest intellectual life and disciplinary vitality’ (Ferrell 2009: 74). In other words, modesty, vulnerability, uncertainty, and committed engagement lie at the methodological core of this endeavour.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, instead of advocating intellectual arrogance and authority, this thesis advances an ethnographic sensibility and a non-extractive mode of research. Although I am positively inclined towards the object of my research, even identifying myself as a ‘critical friend’ of the cultural practices I examine, my aim is not to celebrate or castigate them. My objective is rather to gain a more nuanced theoretical understanding of the different modes of engagement with institutions based on a more finely grained empirical analysis of the strategies employed. Indeed, according to Herzog and Zacka (2019: 764), ‘adopting an ethnographic sensibility means being attuned to how individuals understand themselves as situated moral and political agents’. Hence, deep embeddedness into the environment, immersion into the specific circumstances of these politicised practices, and deliberately blurring the lines between participant and researcher proved crucial in gaining intimate knowledge of the processes under study and interpreting their actors’ interactions, meanings, and theoretical presuppositions.

This brings me to the last point of consideration. This study accepts the premise that the researcher is already immersed in structures of power and discourse, hence

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<sup>21</sup> According to Stavrakakis (2007: 10), ‘instead of repressing the paradoxical relation, the tension between knowledge and experience that marks our lives, we would be probably better off acknowledging this tension, repeatedly inscribing the limits of theoretical discourse within its own symbolic fabric’.

<sup>22</sup> For Law (2004: 11): ‘To live more in and through slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method. Multiple method. Modest method. Uncertain method. Diverse method. Such are the senses of method that I hope to see grow in and beyond social science’.

there is neither value-free knowledge, nor innocent method.<sup>23</sup> Hence, critical reflexivity becomes an integral part of the study.<sup>24</sup> I assume the responsibility not only to reflect on my own sociocultural embeddedness, biases, and theoretical presuppositions, but also to reveal how my positionality is being reflected and constituted throughout the research process.<sup>25</sup> To do so, I insist on challenging my own positionality by undertaking different roles during fieldwork. For instance, for my examination of documenta 14, a mega-institution of contemporary art that was decentred for the first time in its history, I assumed an ‘insider’ role within the dominant institution while recording the counter-discourses that emerged and that attempted to subvert the official institutional discourse. On the opposite side of the spectrum, for the two examined cases of artistic activism in the U.S., my field research turned me into an active participant/activist, embedding myself in the creative tactics that were deployed ‘at the threshold’ of the institution, while recording the stakeholders’ reactions from within the dominant institution. In other words, as my research on different modes of engagement with institutional structures was shifting, the same happened with my own positionality, allowing me to develop a more nuanced understanding and a more well-rounded perspective.<sup>26</sup>

## Thesis Plan

This research is grounded in two distinct strands of political thought that engage, either directly, or in a more implicit manner with aesthetics, namely, Rancière’s

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<sup>23</sup> For Bleiker (2015: 886), ‘Methods are inevitably embedded in social practice. While describing reality, they are also, at the very same time, enacting and constituting this very reality’.

<sup>24</sup> The researcher’s subjectivity and perspective cannot be left out of the research process. Indeed, the researcher must continuously reflect not only on her/his own culture, behaviour, and society in relation to the production of meaning, but also on whether his/her work perpetuates power relations and asymmetries or strives against them. In this respect, critical reflexivity ‘involves understanding that in saying something about the people you study, you are also saying equally as much about yourself, since all of your passions, thoughts, and feelings inform your curiosity and the selection of what you study’ (Ferrell 2009: 99).

<sup>25</sup> For Herzog and Zacka (2019) there are three dangers associated with fieldwork, namely, perspectival absorption, bias, and particularism.

<sup>26</sup> As Rose (2001: 161) notes, although reflexivity still poses a challenging task for discourse analysis, there are ways in which ‘the authority of the discourse analysis can be both marked (by acknowledging its context of production) and perhaps undermined (by rhetorical strategies of modesty)’.

theory of dissensus and the Lacanian Left tradition (including thinkers like Mouffe, Žižek, Dean, Castoriadis, and Butler). Their conceptualisations, despite their possible divergencies and shortcomings, have considerable potential for further elaboration, modification, and cross-fertilisation, especially when they are translated into an aesthetic context. These theories are juxtaposed both with Honneth's theory of recognition and Hardt and Negri's theory of the multitude. Accepting that the radical democratisation of society depends on acts of staging dissensus, Chapter 1 sets out to conceive dissensus less as a fleeting and eventual affair, than as a method and a democratic practice that can be continuously deployed. The chapter culminates in setting three criteria (taking sides, translatability, and self-reflectivity) for envisaging a model of 'dissensual institutionalism', which signifies a diversity of dynamic practices and a multitude of strategies (including decentring, performing, and reclaiming the institution) that have set out to democratise cultural institutions. This proposed framework of a 'dissensual institutionalism' is then put to the test in the following chapters: a series of case studies are examined, less to give a definitive verdict about whether they meet all the criteria that I introduced than to enrich my typology of institutionalism and refine my parameters of inquiry throughout the process.

Chapter 2 analyses the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of *documenta*, one of the most acclaimed mega-exhibitions of contemporary art, considered as the most controversial iteration in its history.<sup>27</sup> This was owed not only to its explicitly political discourse that highlighted the deadlock of the current post-democratic order, but also to the unprecedented decision to split the exhibition between Kassel, Germany, the event's traditional base, and Athens, Greece. *Documenta 14 (d14)* was criticised for the fetishisation of oppressed social groups, for perpetuating and grouping 'Otherness', and for privileging the invention of personal radical identities over more collective anti-hegemonic subjectivities. Distancing myself from such approaches and focusing on the Athenian leg of the exhibition, I develop a more nuanced analysis to assess the potentialities and shortcomings of an explicitly political discourse raised by a mega-

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<sup>27</sup> *documenta 14* took place in 2017 in both Athens, Greece (April 8-July 16) and Kassel, Germany (June 10-September 17).

institution, or 'hegemonic machine', in the attempt to decentralise and reinvent itself.

Chapter 3 constitutes a comparative study between three artistic alter-institutional platforms. It begins with the Parliament of Bodies that formed the public programme of documenta 14. Curated by Paul Preciado, who denounced the necropolitical institutions that are inherently intertwined with their sex-gender-race epistemologies, it examines how the Parliament of Bodies was turned into a platform of social, political, and aesthetic experimentation by presenting minor traditions and peripheral narratives, inviting Indigenous and queer activists, and hosting programmes like '34 Exercises of Freedom'. Subsequently, the chapter moves on to the Visible project, a research platform in contemporary art that promotes and sustains socially engaged art in a global context. Through its international semi-structured network of curators, artists, and activists, and the staging of temporary parliaments in collaboration with partnered institutions, Visible attempts to serve not only as a repository of knowledge, tactics, and modes of social engagement, but also as a public 'space of appearance' that connects cultural practices situated in specific localities to broader struggles. Lastly, the chapter discusses Jonas Staal's assemblies, summits, and training sessions that serve as artistic and political organisations and as fora for gathering, intimate politics, and self-representation. By providing meeting grounds for representatives from unrecognised states and for parliamentary and non-parliamentary movements, these novel self-governing formats investigate the many forms that the practice of democracy can take. The chapter ends by assessing the respective ability of these alter-institutions in forging broader alliances, rehearsing 'the political', and maintaining a self-reflective stance.

Chapter 4 switches gears and presents two cases of artistic activism in the United States. First, it explores Decolonize This Place (DTP), an action-oriented movement formation centred around Indigenous struggle, Black liberation, and Free Palestine. It focuses on the creative direct actions that took place at the threshold of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, foregrounding questions of

labour rights, toxic philanthropy, and museum accountability. It then turns to Not An Alternative (NAA), a NY-based collective situated at the intersection of institutional critique and activist art. Since NAA's emphasis has shifted almost exclusively towards institutions, treating them as sites to be seized and to be turned into counter-power infrastructure, I document their current artistic project, The Natural History Museum (NHM), that confiscates the vessel of a natural history museum to infiltrate the sector and apply pressure from within. The chapter ends by drawing some broader conclusions about the efficacy of artistic activism in reclaiming and democratising cultural institutions.

The final chapter sets out to make some general and comparative reflections, highlighting not only the potentials and limitations of the examined practices, but also possible points of divergence and convergence in relation to their strategies, modes of engagement, and theoretical underpinnings. The common ground of these practices is that they all critically engage with institutions by attempting to decentre, reimagine, and reclaim them. However, their different cultural contexts and theoretical presuppositions, their divergent modes of engagement, and their variance in scale illuminate not only their respective capacity to take sides in the divisions and to establish broader synergies with social movements, but also their flexibility in remaining 'instituting'. Lastly, the thesis stresses its contribution to the field and identifies possible pathways for future research.

# 1 Instituting Dissensus

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter lays the theoretical foundations that underpin the rest of the thesis. I start by engaging with different strands of thought that conceptualise the present predicament in terms of ‘post-politics’ or the ‘post-political’. A prominent place in this discussion is held by post-foundational thinkers like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Jodi Dean, Judith Butler, and Cornelius Castoriadis, whose work addresses not only the post-political, but also the relation of aesthetics and politics, either directly, or in a more implicit manner. Although deriving from different philosophical traditions, what their oeuvre touches upon, albeit varying in emphasis and with divergent terminology, is a conceptual demarcation between society-as-instituted or ‘politics’ and the absent ground of the social or ‘the political’. Following this line of thought, I argue that dissensus, antagonism, and exclusion are centre stage since ‘the political’ is encapsulated in those moments of disruption that ‘re-stage the anarchic foundation of the political’ (Rancière 2010: 54). In addition, this chapter demonstrates that dissensus should be conceived as an inherently aesthetico-political phenomenon that has very distinct spatial and performative characteristics and involves the staging of equality from the part-with-no-part, the introduction of ‘new radical imaginaries’, and the recalibration of the aesthetic register.

Indeed, democratic theory seems to oscillate between the interruption of any given order (the moment of dissensus, constituent power, the ‘instituting’) and the ensemble of institutionalised structures that organise human existence (the constituted power, the police order, the ‘instituted’). In this respect, I start conceiving dissensus, not only as a ruptural, extraordinary, evental affair, but also as a process, a method, and a democratic practice that can be continuously deployed and sustained. To do so, I argue that the radical democratisation of society through modes of dissensual subjectivation depends not only on the moment of disruption, but also on the moment of inscription, institutionalisation, and reconfiguration of

that order, which remains overlooked in Rancière's theory of dissensus. In addition, I maintain that although divisions and conflicts cannot be 'organised' or constructed intentionally, they must be built upon and amplified; for antagonism to arise, one must lay the groundwork by engaging in the longer process of political movement building and sustaining counter-hegemonic struggles. Indeed, if we are to believe Holmes (2008: 102) who argues that 'you can only have a real democracy when a societal concern with the production of the sensible is maintained at the level of a forever unresolved', what is at stake is how to 'institute dissensus', claim antagonism, and channel it towards the construction of a more democratic society.

For this purpose, I shift focus from singular ruptural events to the longer processes of consolidating collective antagonisms, and from the moment of dissensus to strategies of engagement with institutional structures that foreground division while 'taking sides'. Hence, what I call a 'dissensual institutionality' signifies my attempt to start theorising strategies, deriving from the arts and culture sphere, that set out to reimagine institutions not as hierarchical and regulatory arrangements, but as vehicles for social change and political grounds that remain open to contestation, antagonisms, and society's ever-changing demands. As it will become evident throughout the thesis, this mode of institutionality might refer to strategies of decentring (Chapter 2), performing (Chapter 3), or reclaiming cultural institutions (Chapter 4) in order to envisage them as a surface of inscription for a multiplicity of social demands. It also might refer to the long-term infrastructures that conceive political community as an open process and serve as mechanisms of translation between a manifold of seemingly incompatible struggles, allowing the distribution of the sensible to remain a constantly debated question. In this sense, 'instituting dissensus' points towards a commitment, not only to illuminate the gaps that permeate any structure of visibility, but also to crack them wide open, to take sides in the division, and thus to precipitate the radical democratisation of society.

## 1.2 Dissensus as the Return of the Political

According to an emerging body of thought, the last two decades have been marked by a process of depoliticisation and by the increasing erosion of democratic institutions. This new configuration has been described by different, albeit complementary, perspectives as the ‘retreat of the political’ (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1997, Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014), the imposition of a consensual order that corrodes the terrain for symbolic conflict (Rancière 1998, Žižek 1999, Mouffe 2005b), and the gradual replacement of agonistic debate with techno-managerial governance and technocratic procedures (Crouch 2004, Dean 2009, Bourdieu 2002). For instance, Mouffe (2005b: 64-89) argues that the post-political is synonymous with a hegemonic order that has cancelled out the space for agonistic confrontation and where the antagonistic dimension of the ‘political’ has been repressed. Similarly, for Rancière (2010: 42) ‘consensus is the end of politics’ since it reduces politics to the police. Affirming that democracy is premised on an anarchic government (meaning that governance should be open to anyone whatsoever), he argues that today ‘we do not live in democracies’ since they suffer ‘from the evils related to the insatiable appetite of oligarchs’ (Rancière 2014: 73). Although these diverse theorisations derive from divergent philosophical origins and employ different terminology (‘post-politics’, ‘consensus democracy’, ‘post-democracy’, ‘police order’, etc.), they point towards the same phenomenon: a situation where the space of antagonism, political conflict, and disagreement has been colonised by a consensual, corporate, and techno-managerial model of governance.

What all the key thinkers of the post-political share in common is their understanding that every social order is permeated by contingency and undecidability and is structured in such a way to conceal its lack of ground.<sup>28</sup> The core premises of this approach are crucial for the development of my own argument: firstly, there is no predefined essential (political) identity to be

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<sup>28</sup> These thinkers, including Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Cornelius Castoriadis, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, among others, share a post-foundational (see Marchart 2007) and social constructivist (see Stavrakakis 2007) grounding for their respective conceptualisations.

discovered, but only forms of identification or subjectivation; secondly, social reality is not exterior to the practices that gave birth to it; and finally, that a clear demarcation is drawn between politics and the political, or *la politique* and *le politique* respectively, described by Marchart (2007) as the ‘political difference’.<sup>29</sup> If we are to follow this schema, the political refers to the constitutive lack of ground, whereas politics refers to the practices, institutions, and technologies of governing that exist in order to establish a certain order and to mediate between potentially conflicting interests and power relations. Indeed, one could argue that a society comes into being and exists in a visible manner only through politics, meaning, through the always contingent and precarious attempt to institutionalise practices of encounter, spatial arrangements, modes of representation, and distributions of roles and activities. As Castoriadis (1987: 113) asserts, there is no question of a society without institutions, since ‘there is no way to do away with the necessity for arrangements and procedures that will permit discussion and choice’. However, politics tend to colonise the political by naturalising constitutive systems of exclusion, foreclosing the possibility of political conflict, and representing political community as a coherent unity.

This distinction between politics and the political is assumed by the Lacanian Left.<sup>30</sup> For Left Lacanians, politics can only exist through the symbolic order since every collective fiction (be it an ethnic, national, religious, or cultural collective fantasy of belonging) needs to be articulated and mediated through symbolic networks and associations. In other words, the imaginary, which exists through the symbolic, institutes society politically. However, there is always a gap, a void, or surplus that resists being symbolised and remains unaccounted by any given symbolic order. According to Swyngedouw (2011: 374), ‘[t]his remainder or surplus (what Lacanians call the “Real”)—i.e., that what cannot be symbolized by the existing interplay of

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<sup>29</sup> This corresponds to a distinction between the ontological and the ontic, or what Ricoeur (1965) has called the ‘political paradox’. For instance, Mouffe (2013) argues that every order is of a hegemonic nature, Castoriadis (1987: 112) asserts that ‘the social is an indefinite dimension, even if it is walled in at every instant’, and Rancière (2010: 148) contends that ‘the real is a matter of construction, a matter of “fiction”’.

<sup>30</sup> According to Stavrakakis’s analysis (2007), for key figures like Žižek, Badiou, Dean, Laclau and Mouffe, Lacanian psychoanalysis constitutes a primary and recurring reference point, whereas Castoriadis and Butler function as the external frontier of this emerging terrain.

political forces—disrupts and destabilizes and stands as guarantee for the return of the political'. Hence, there is always a tension between politics, as the instituted symbolic formation, and the political, as what remains unsymbolised and yet-to-be-instituted that ensures the impossibility of the total saturation of politics.

Similarly, in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical edifice, 'the political' is equated to the 'ontological dimension of antagonism' that can never be eradicated, whereas 'politics' refers to 'the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organize human coexistence' (Mouffe 2013: xii).<sup>31</sup> In other words, 'the political' is concerned with the construction of collective forms of identification premised upon a we/they antagonism and 'politics' pertains to the contingent construction of hegemony.<sup>32</sup> Based on this schema, which Mouffe (2000: 15-16) describes as the 'democratic paradox', she contends that an agonistic model of democracy 'requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics' since 'the condition of a pluralist democracy is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its perfect implementation'.

Castoriadis, for his part, asserts that since individuals cannot be transparent to themselves because the unconscious cannot be eradicated, there is no society that can be totally transparent.<sup>33</sup> Castoriadis (1987: 112-114) affirms that there can be no

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<sup>31</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis has contributed decisively to Mouffe and Laclau's formulation of their theory of hegemony. In their poststructuralist and neo-Gramscian rereading of Marx, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 111) adopt Lacan's understanding of the subject as constitutively alienated, incomplete, and split, arguing that 'the presence of the "Other" prevents me from being totally myself' and conceiving the relation that unfolds between such incomplete entities as antagonism. As Laclau (in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 77) notes, 'Although our analysis of antagonism is not derivative from Lacanian theory, it can overlap to a large extent with Lacan's notion of the Real as an ultimate core which resists symbolization'.

<sup>32</sup> According to Mouffe (2005; 2013), political identities are relational and the constitution of a 'we' is always premised on the demarcation of a 'they'. This is a revival of the Schmittian problematic according to which the relationship between enemy and friend lies at the heart of the political. According to Schmitt (1996: 35), 'the possibility which underlies every political idea' is 'the distinction of friend and enemy'.

<sup>33</sup> Although situated at the periphery of the Lacanian field, Castoriadis still provides a crucial contribution to our conceptualisation of the political, and especially in terms of the relation between the imaginary, the symbolic, and social institutions. Adhering to Lacan's basic tenet that 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other', he contends that 'the subject is ruled by an imaginary, lived as even more real than the real, yet not known as such, precisely because it is not known as such' and then extrapolates from the individual to the social level, demonstrating the political dimension of this configuration (Castoriadis 1987: 103).

society that would completely correspond to its institutions, without excess or deficit and that ‘there will always be a distance between society as instituting and what is, at every moment, instituted’. However, this distance is not society’s imperfection or deficiency, but on the contrary, it signifies the creative nature of history that prevents it from solidifying and petrifying into rigid forms and arrangements; this gap is ‘what makes a society always contain more than what it presents’ (Castoriadis 1987: 114). In this way, the conceptual demarcation between the ‘political’ and ‘politics’ seems, at least in my eyes, to find perfect resonance with what Castoriadis indicates as the constant tension between ‘instituting’ and ‘instituted’ society.<sup>34</sup>

The structure of the ‘political difference’ also resonates with Rancière’s conceptualisation. For Rancière ‘the political’ refers to society’s absent ground and ‘the police’ pertains to the set of institutions, arrangements, and distributions that maintain a certain hierarchical order or ‘distribution of the sensible’.<sup>35</sup> According to the police division, every part of the society has been accounted for, every group has been assigned a role, and there is a direct matching of functions, places, and modes of being; nothing remains unidentified, uncategorised, or without statistical determination. On this account, ‘politics stands in distinct opposition to the police’ since the former counts the part of those who have no part (the unaccounted for, the additions) whereas the latter is characterised by the exclusion of every supplement and the complete absence of any void (Rancière 2010: 36).<sup>36</sup> Thus, for Rancière (2010: 34), ‘the core of the question of politics, then, resides in the interpretation of this void and surplus’, conceiving politics as the radical rupture of the police order within a particular aesthetico-political regime. The essence of

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<sup>34</sup> According to Marchart (2018: 23), ‘society is instituted politically, and being instituted politically means being instituted through the labour of the negative, i.e. antagonism’.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, Rancière’s theorisation is schematised in a tripartite division, where the term ‘politics’ denotes the intersection point of the political and the police order (for this discussion see Swyngedouw 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Rancière is careful to distinguish his concept of ‘the police’ both from the usual connotations of the police as a repressive apparatus and from the Foucauldian variation, pertaining to the discipline of bodies. He notes: ‘Foucault conceives of the police as an institutional apparatus that participates in power’s control over life and bodies; while, for me, the police designates not an institution of power but a distribution of the sensible within which it becomes possible to define strategies and techniques of power’ (Rancière 2010: 94-95).

politics, which is equated with democracy, ‘consists in disturbing this [police principle] arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community’ (Rancière 2010: 36). In the sporadic disruptions of the distribution of the sensible and in the assertion of the presence of those who have no part, a ‘wrong’ is exposed and the axiomatic principle of equality is enacted. This paradoxical schema is the Rancièrian understanding of equality, the very essence of emancipation, as a retroactive structure that can only be postulated through its staging.

From my perspective, the common thread that brings together these theoretical diagnoses of the post-political predicament is an emphasis on the constitutive character of social division, antagonism, and exclusion. If for Laclau and Mouffe ‘the political’, meaning the impossibility to represent adequately the fullness of society, goes by the name ‘antagonism’, for Rancière (2010: 38), the essence of politics implies a practice of dissensus, which ‘is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself’.<sup>37</sup> For Castoriadis (1987: 201), the ‘social as instituted’ is always open to contestation by the ‘social as instituting’: the moment of society’s eruption through a new ‘radical’ imaginary, ‘the time of otherness–alteration is a time of bursting, emerging, creating’. Adhering to the basic principle of division and accepting that dissensus resides at the heart of democracy allow us not only to reconceive political community as a contingent and open process, but also to reimagine the spaces where political disagreement, conflict, and the polemic over the common can be performed. Dissensus can be understood as the constant redefinition and recount of the members of the society, a never-ending contestation about the nature of the community, whose voice is heard, and who is deemed a

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<sup>37</sup> Lyotard’s *le différend* (1988) seems to be an anchoring point for both Rancière and Mouffe’s theorisations. As Mouffe (2013: 11) notes, ‘neither Arendt nor Habermas is able to acknowledge the hegemonic nature of every form of consensus and the ineradicability of antagonism, the moment of what Lyotard refers to as “the differend”’. Although a conceptual proximity can be also traced between Lyotard’s ‘the differend’ and Rancière’s ‘the disagreement’ (1998), the latter has distanced his project from the discursive nature of ‘the differend’. Whereas ‘the differend’ indicates the misunderstandings, disagreements, and divergences between different discourses (i.e., the clash between regimes of discourse), Rancière’s notion of disagreement refers to a more fundamental conflict over the right ‘to speak’ and about the delimitation of what is sayable, hearable, and visible (i.e., the clash over the distribution of the sensible).

legitimate partner in the debate. The essence of politics consists in the ceaseless restaging of the power of the people that disrupts the police distribution of parts, places, and roles, and ‘in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself’ (Rancière 2010: 42). Hence, it seems that all those conceptualisations are premised upon the axiomatic *principle of dissensus* as a practice that continuously reenacts the anarchic foundation of the political.

This insistence on dissensus (and its aesthetico-political contours) parts ways not only with the Frankfurt School tradition, but also with recent theories of the multitude, as put forward by Hard and Negri, Virno, and others.<sup>38</sup> To begin with, both Rancière’s dissensual method and Mouffe’s agonistic approach reject the Habermasian model of communicative action and its basic tenet of political community as founded on the premise of an ideal agreement and undistorted communication.<sup>39</sup> The limitations of such a deliberative democratic model, premised on rational consensus, become apparent quickly since it does not take into account the fact that every consensus rests upon naturalised exclusions. Consensus assigns one-way correlations between a sensory experience and its possible regime of meaning, it heralds the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social, and it establishes a symbolic structuration of the community that has been deprived from its political core.<sup>40</sup> This understanding of disagreement, less as a confrontation between interests or points of view, than as the struggle for the capacity to take part in agonistic and polemical conflicts, should also be distinguished from theories of

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<sup>38</sup> The philosophical lineage of the Frankfurt School runs from Adorno (its founding father), through Habermas (leading figure of the Frankfurt School’s second generation) and his notion of consensus, all the way to Honneth’s theory of recognition that attempts to reformulate and extend the Habermasian paradigm.

<sup>39</sup> For Habermas (1984: 17), the ‘ideal speech situation’ is an intersubjectively deliberative process where participants, entirely free of domination, aim at mutual understanding grounded on *communicative rationality*, which ‘is oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus [...] that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims’.

<sup>40</sup> It is important to note here that Mouffe and Rancière have gone to great length to differentiate their projects from Habermas’s consensual approach. However, as Kester (2012) argues, the conversion of ‘antagonism’ (hatred between enemies) into ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries) that is advocated by Laclau and Mouffe necessitates some kind of prior ‘consensual agreement’. For his part, Stavrides (2016: 46), asserts that ‘What Rancière perhaps misses is that consensus can be a practice; consensus can be a project which takes different shapes and does not have to reach a final and definitive stage’.

recognition, as elaborated by third generation theorists of the Frankfurt School.<sup>41</sup> For instance, Honneth's theory of recognition shifts its focus from Habermas's notion of undistorted communication to the progressive overcoming of unsatisfied claims for recognition, opening the way for a diverse set of issues like marginal identities, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. Hence, he seeks to establish institutional forms of reciprocal recognition against patterns of cultural value that render invisible certain social groups. Critics on the Left have received the ascendant status of discourses on diversity, recognition, and multiculturalism with suspicion, underlying their often divisive, fragmented, and identity-based character in relation to broader egalitarian struggles and the obfuscation of more material and economic concerns.<sup>42</sup>

Rancière, on the contrary, differentiates the struggle for recognition of a stable identity (either culturally defined in the multiculturalist version or socially preassigned in Honneth) from 'a more radical, preliminary struggle over the recognition of one's very capacity to take part in dissensus, as a speaking being, a being with logos' (Deranty 2016: 39).<sup>43</sup> According to Žižek (2004: 69-70), in contrast to a dispute that presupposes already legitimated and pre-constituted interlocutors with fixed and stable identities (as per Habermas), dissensus, should be perceived as 'not a rational debate between multiple interests, but, simultaneously, the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognised as the voice of a legitimate partner'. It is out of this struggle that subjects are born, a process that Rancière calls subjectivation.

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<sup>41</sup> For these thinkers, concepts like 'politics of difference', 'struggles for recognition', 'multiculturalism', and 'claims of diversity' signal the predominance of culture in current debates and mark 'a new political imaginary that propels cultural identity issues in the broadest sense to the forefront of political discourse' (Benhabib 2002: viii). For the politics of culture and recognition in critical theory see Rockhill and Gomez-Muller 2011, Anderson 2011, Fraser 1995; 2000, Honneth 1996; 2001, Taylor 1994, Markell 2003.

<sup>42</sup> As we shall see in the next chapters, Fraser (1995) distinguishes between 'transformative' and 'affirmative' modes of redistribution, whereas Coulthard (2014: 22) draws a distinction between 'settler-state recognition' and '*resurgent politics of recognition*', arguing for self-affirmative modes of recognition that are 'opposed to relying too heavily on the subjectifying apparatus of the state or other dominant institutions of power'. For his part, Eagleton (2016: 30-31), highlights the role of 'diversity' in consumerist ideology, arguing that 'diversity is not a value in itself' and that 'there are times when what is needed is not diversity but solidarity'.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed comparison between Rancière and Honneth's theory of recognition see Genel 2016.

These two core principles, namely that dissensus foregrounds a more foundational societal division and that political subjectivation pertains to a process that exceeds sociological determinations and essentialist groundings, is what differentiates this approach from Hardt and Negri's theory of the multitude. For them, there is a predefined 'privileged' subject that wages the war against the Empire. However, this revolutionary agent is no longer the proletariat, but it goes by the name of the multitude: a set of singularities and a diverse agglomerate of subjectivities that are intertwined through mobile affective networks and fluid modalities of coexistence.<sup>44</sup> Against the neoliberal seizure and privatisation of what is common language, knowledge, information, and affects, the multitude not only emerges through various processes of commoning, but also produces various forms of commons (see Hardt and Negri 2009: 165-178). In the 'immaterial labour' and generative power (as an artistic, creative, and political force) of these potential subjectivities, in their various modes of becoming, and in the immanence of imperial transformation lies the revolutionary potential of the multitude to surpass capitalism (see Hardt 1999).

By adhering, however, to such an understanding of immaterial goods (such as information, affects, etc.) as already common, it conceals the antagonistic nature of the 'commons', the incommensurability of language, and the conflicts that pervade every system of meaning. What such an approach misses, as Dean (2012: 121-122) demonstrates, is that 'if antagonism is an irreducible feature of our setting, then division is common to communication [...] Communication is necessarily partial, filled with holes, inseparable from power and hierarchy, reliant on exclusion'.<sup>45</sup> This innate inability of the multitude to express division is targeted by both Rancière and Mouffe (2013: 78), with the latter dispelling fantasies of a reconciled society, absolute democracy, and immanence, since this would necessitate a 'redemptive leap into a society beyond politics and sovereignty where the Multitude can immediately rule itself and act in concert without the need of law or the State—a society where antagonism has disappeared'.

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<sup>44</sup> For this discussion see Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004, Negri 2011, and Virno 2004.

<sup>45</sup> This emphasis on the constitutive division that permeates every order of communication is a common point of criticism against both Hardt and Negri's theory of the commons and the Habermasian model of deliberative action.

In sharp contrast to the all-inclusive premise of the multitude and to a model of recognition that reifies identity, it is Rancière's notion of 'the part of those who have no part' that instantiates dissensus and signals the return of the political (Rancière 2010: 142).<sup>46</sup> For Rancière, politics emerge when the excluded (the Greek demos, the workers in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, the demonstrators in Leipzig in 1989) perform their very right to be heard, to be seen, and to be recognised as legitimated partners in the debate.<sup>47</sup> By enunciating their dissent and by protesting against the ruling elite, they disrupt the unity of the given, they penetrate the order of visibility, and hence recalibrate the coordinates of political community. By exposing the 'wrong' they have suffered, they 'perform the process of being counted and thereby initiate a rupture in the order of things', staging their equality and embodying the stand-in for the Universal or for society as such (Swyngedouw 2014: 170).

In this respect, the 'people', cannot be reduced to any empirical given, to the totality of the members of the community, to a predefined group or collective subject; it is rather the contingent emergence of an anonymous collectivity, 'the count of the uncounted', performed by anyone at any time. 'The people in this sense is a generic name for the set of processes of subjectivation that, enacting the egalitarian trait, dispute the forms of visibility of the common and the identities, forms of belonging, partitions, etc., defined by these forms' (Rancière 2010: 85). Following this line of thought, a political subject denotes the capacity for performing dissensus and foregrounding the latent antagonisms of the social. Indeed, it is the notion of the people as a manifestation of dissensus and as a split that demonstrates the structural division of the community that brings together the Rancièrian theorisation with the Lacanian Left. Both traditions insist that politics revolves around this gap, around the inherent divisions and antagonisms that cut through the social, and their

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<sup>46</sup> One of the critiques that have been levelled against multiculturalism (and the politics of recognition) is that it perceives agents more as social rather than as political actors. For this discussion see Fraser and Honneth 2003, Genel 2016.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, in one of his earlier works, Rancière (1989) describes the French Revolution of 1830s and 40s by examining the autobiographical essays and poems of French working class.

main preoccupation consists in safeguarding the principle of otherness in relation to political community.<sup>48</sup>

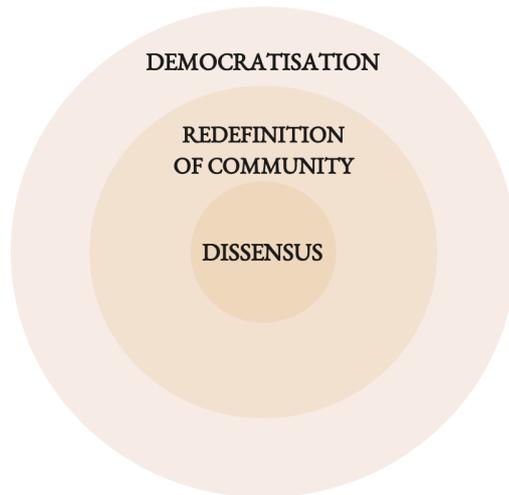
However, the striking novelty of Rancière's thought, separating him from the proliferating postmodern versions of otherness, is that for him, *otherness is built into democracy*; democracy by definition revolves around an infinite openness to the arrival of the other. In Rancière's words (2010: 53), 'otherness does not come to politics from the outside, for the precise reason that it already has its own otherness, its own principle of heterogeneity. Indeed, democracy is this principle of otherness'. Rancière's part-of-no-part has closer conceptual affinities with Badiou's (2012: 56) *inexistent*, those who have no say and 'who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future'.<sup>49</sup> Democratisation, then, encapsulates the moment when '*the inexistent has arisen*', when the unaccounted enter the field of visibility, 'when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in this same world with maximum intensity' (Badiou 2012: 56, original emphasis).<sup>50</sup> Dissensus then, signifies the democratic principle that safeguards the 'political', keeps community open to the arrival of the other, and maintains the distribution of the sensible always open to contestation. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the redefinition of 'otherness' has predominated contemporary art discourses and constituted one of the main political objectives and curatorial motifs of documenta 14.

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<sup>48</sup> In Laclau and Mouffe's postmodern democratic model of agonistic pluralism, 'agonistic encounter is a confrontation where the aim is neither the annihilation nor the assimilation of the other, and where the tensions between the different approaches contribute to enhancing the pluralism that characterizes a multipolar world' (Mouffe 2013: 41). Žižek (in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 99, original emphasis) remains sceptical of such a post-Marxist and postmodern understanding of the political that has been accompanied by the emergence of a series of particular and dispersed political struggles (economic, racist, sexist, religious, environmental, etc.), arguing that 'the postmodern emergence of new multiple political subjectivities certainly does *not* reach this radical level of the political act proper'.

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of the conceptual affinities between Rancière and Badiou's respective approaches see Hewlett 2007, Rockhill and Watts 2009.

<sup>50</sup> If for Rancière the part-of-no-part disrupts the distribution of the sensible through dissensus, for Badiou the restitution of the inexistent is conditional upon a rapturous moment that he calls an 'event'.



**Figure 1.1.** Democratisation through dissensus. Image by the author.

### 1.3 Performing Dissensus

Since dissensus concerns less the designation of a conflict between legitimated partners in a rational debate (the deliberative model of democratic politics) than a ‘conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or “bodies”’, it must be understood as an aesthetico-political phenomenon par excellence (Rancière 2010: 193). According to Rancière (2010: 140), the aesthetics of politics ‘lies in a re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation’, and the politics of aesthetics ‘lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience’. In a similar vein, Mouffe highlights the political dimension of art since it can play a crucial role in the maintenance or challenging of a given symbolic order, while also recognising the aesthetic dimension of the political, since it concerns the symbolic structuring of social relations. In this sense, Rancière and Mouffe are in agreement, at least in principle, that both aesthetics and politics constitute modalities of interrupting any given symbolic order, ways of modifying the division between the visible and the invisible, as well as

methods of shifting the aesthetico-political coordinates of the community. *They are both modalities of producing scenes of dissensus.*<sup>51</sup>

The question of visibility seems to be centre stage in the construction of scenes of dissensus. In Mouffe's agonistic model, critical artistic and cultural practices can be deployed in order to bring to light alternatives to the current post-political order. In Mouffe's words (2008: 12): 'critical art is art that foments dissensus; that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate'. She envisages critical practices (e.g., artistic counter-hegemonic interventions, artistic activism, etc.) that aim at giving voice to all those who have been silenced by the existing hegemony.<sup>52</sup> Following Holmes (2004: 549) who argues that 'art can offer a chance for society to reflect collectively on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding', Mouffe demonstrates that it is exactly this dimension of the aesthetic realm that capitalism deploys by increasingly relying on semiotic techniques in order to construct the types of subjectivation that it needs. She thus assumes a neo-Gramscian approach that views the cultural sphere as a site of hegemonic contestation where 'artistic and cultural practices can offer spaces of resistance that undermine the social imaginary necessary for capitalist reproduction' (Mouffe 2013: 88).<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Rancière (2010: 148-149) asserts that 'political and artistic fictions introduce dissensus by hollowing out that "real" and multiplying it in a polemical way', by revealing the injustice of a situation, and by rearranging the connections 'between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces'. For Rancière, an aesthetic experience has a political effect neither because it constitutes a direct

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<sup>51</sup> Such an understanding of a 'dissensual aesthetics' stands in stark contrast to a consensual conception of aesthetics, like in Habermas's case, for whom the discursive practices of collective aesthetic reception provide an indispensable mediation process towards mutually intertwined identities and universal consensus (see Habermas and Benhabib 1981; Habermas 1987; 1997).

<sup>52</sup> By acknowledging the limits of the aesthetic, Mouffe inscribes artistic/cultural strategies of staging disagreement into broader sociopolitical coalitions (a synergy between artists, cultural workers, activists, social movements, and parliamentary politics) towards her vision of radical democratic politics.

<sup>53</sup> Mouffe draws here on Gramsci's idea (1971) that the construction of any given hegemony and the definition of the 'common sense' take place in a multiplicity of places, what he calls 'civil society'.

call for collective political action, nor because it provides a call for awareness and a rhetorical persuasion about what needs to be done. Its political effect pertains instead to the construction of a ‘multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible’ (Rancière 2011: 72-73).

This approach has been translated into the art field, where it has been accepted almost unconditionally, obscuring some of the pitfalls of visibility and representation. Indeed, many contemporary artists have been deploying aesthetic tools and visual representation, seeking either to contest stereotypical depictions of oppressed groups or ‘to place the means of representation in the hands of groups marginalized by cultural institutions’ (Deutsche 1996: 230). Visibility, however, should not only be perceived as restricted to a mere dichotomy of ‘included’ and ‘excluded’ that either takes the form of a constant preoccupation with the ‘excluded’ in the realm of politics or is manifested in the widespread deployment of the themes of ‘inclusion’, ‘diversity’, ‘pluralism’, and ‘participation’ in cultural representation. Such a limited understanding of visibility (through representation) has urged many in the contemporary artistic and cultural world to declare that the sole task of art is to ‘render the invisible visible’.<sup>54</sup> This has also resulted in the co-optation of ‘the aesthetic strategies of counter-culture-difference and otherness, the rhizome, the proliferation of subjectivities’ and to their abstraction, ‘set to work in a semiotic economy, where what you sell are images and signs’ (Holmes 2008: 19). As will become evident throughout this thesis, dissensus should be interpreted as pertaining to a broader visibility, one that concerns the way bodies fit their places and destinations.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> As we shall see in Chapter 4, Rancière’s (2010: 149) assertion that all artistic practices, by the sole virtue of contributing to the distribution of the sensible and to ‘a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable’ is contested by thinkers like Marchart. For Marchart (2019: 14), Rancière’s political aesthetics is ‘actually antipolitical, as it provides the art field with ideological arguments against any explicit politicization’.

<sup>55</sup> Balibar (2009: 322), for instance, notes that this more extended notion of visibility refers to ‘a paradoxical scene where discourses are staged in their difference’ signifying ‘a stage on which the actors perceive themselves as bearers and speakers of antagonistic discourses’.

It is this more capacious understanding of dissensus that I adopt, one that exceeds the strict limitations of the artistic, semiotic, or representational realm and rather alludes to an aesthetico-political phenomenon with very distinct spatial and performative characteristics that takes place in the openness of the public sphere. Indeed, according to Stavrakakis (2011: 313), 'there can be no politicisation in isolation from the field of spatial representation: antagonism can only surface within space—conflicts between socio-political forces can only be articulated in and through spaces'. Space becomes political since it is where a wrong can be addressed and where antagonisms can be staged and choreographed (see Dikec 2005). Strong correlations can be drawn between space, politics, and the police, since 'the police' dictates a partitioned spatial organisation, a spatial arrangement where everyone has been assigned a proper place, a hierarchical order that clearly demarcates what belongs to the domestic place and what to the public sphere. In Rancière's words (2010: 37), 'the police is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation'. By contrast, dissensus consists in re-qualifying these spaces, disrupting the categorical configuration of places, and transforming a space of 'moving-along' into a stage for the appearance of 'the people'.

In other words, the space of the police is a space striated, rationalised, static, and geometrically divided into recognisable and identifiable parts, the sum of which equals the whole. By contrast, the space of politics is a polemical space where the unaccounted (the power of anyone) demand a new count, where dissensus is manifested, and where the universal (equality) is constructed locally. If we are to follow Rancière (2003: 201):

In the end everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done to it.

Rancière's writings seem to oscillate between two possible ways of interrupting any given distribution of the sensible that is sustained by a police order. At the beginning of his theoretical trajectory, dissensus seemed to take more the form of a contestation through argumentation, a 'speaking-out' by those who have been excluded, 'a multiplicity of speech events—that is, of one-off experiences of conflict over speech and voice, over the participation of the perceptible' (Rancière 1998: 37). It is the process of collective enunciation that forges a framing of a 'we' and shifts the cartography of the possible. It is through this process of turning what was considered until now as noise into a recognisable voice of the people (during which the *Ochlos* is turned into *Demos*) that a collective political subject can emerge. However, in his later aesthetic writings, he shifts his focus away from the predominance of the discursive, privileging new modalities of affectivity, performativity, and embodiment that can contest the distribution of the sensible.<sup>56</sup>

This allows us to conceive dissensus as an act not solely instantiated in the field of ideas and in the articulation of arguments, but also in the field of perception, sense, and *aisthesis*, and in the way bodies occupy spaces. Butler (2015: 170) advocates for the dethroning of the verbal from the privileged domain of political determination since not every political act can be translated into an utterance and since 'the enactment of political self-determination is necessarily a crossing of the linguistic and the bodily, even if the action is silent and body is sequestered'. Thus, one can argue that dissensus (and the political process of subjectivation) constitutes not an exclusively discursive exercise but also an embodied and performative practice that often eludes discursive or symbolic overdetermination. It is only through the embodied activities and collective acting of human bodies, as well as the performative enactment of a 'we' that the claim of equality can be instantiated (and public space can be produced).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> In fact, Deranty (2016: 49, 53) marks a clear shift in Rancière's trajectory, from the early phase of his writings where 'he shares with poststructuralist thinkers the rejection of what he calls with disdain the reference to "flesh and blood", that is any reference to the somatic or affective dimensions of subjectivity', to his later aesthetic writings, where he reintegrated 'the somatic and the prediscursive, with direct implications for politics'.

<sup>57</sup> According to Marchart (2019: 88), 'the human body is the most important medium through which a public space is carved out of the social'.

This, however, is not the case for Laclau and Mouffe, who remain adamant in their adoption of discourse theory that accepts that identities are discursively constructed. According to them, desires are mediated solely through language and ‘the social constitution of language makes the subject wholly dependent upon the overarching symbolic order as a result’ (Deranty 2016: 49). This of course hints towards a broader limitation of the structuralist and post-structuralist tradition to incorporate the affective/libidinal component in the processes of identity construction.<sup>58</sup> Assuming the discursive as the privileged domain of political self-determination perhaps explains why Mouffe assumes such a limited account of the aesthetic. Indeed, by rejecting the distinction between discursive and non-discursive, Mouffe envisions artistic practices that function solely at the level of signification and critical interventions in the consumption of mediated images in order to foster counter-hegemonic types of identification.<sup>59</sup> In this manner, she completely disregards the multi-layered nature of aesthetic experience; in her account ‘the complex process of representation is reduced to a kind of unmediated, theophanic epiphany’ (Kester 2012).<sup>60</sup>

There is another crucial divergence between their respective theorisations of dissensus and the process of identity formation. Rancière (2011: 72) argues that ‘political subjectivation proceeds via a process of dis-identification’ where the surplus of every count of the population refuses the places, functions, and destinations that it has been assigned to by the police order. It is through this

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<sup>58</sup> Eagleton (1991) castigates Laclau and Mouffe for heretically deviating from their mentor (Foucault) and for rejecting the distinction between discursive and non-discursive. According to Stavrakakis (2007: 18), it is only recently that Laclau started ‘incorporating the category of *jouissance* into the conceptual apparatus of discourse theory’ and that Mouffe began focusing on the role of passions in democratic politics and the role of affective libidinal bonds in the process of identification (see Mouffe 2005b; 2013, see also Jones 2014).

<sup>59</sup> According to Kester (2012): ‘Mouffe writes as if the truth of capitalism were a simple objective fact, as if the only thing preventing emancipation is an adequate knowledge of a clear and singular reality that has been deliberately suppressed. Once having received this truth, the viewer will naturally and spontaneously feel compelled to take up revolutionary struggle’.

<sup>60</sup> This of course falls into the long-standing debate amongst art critics over the question of the actual potential of critical semiotic techniques within the aestheticisation of everyday life, the image-saturated society, and the blurring of lines between art and advertisement where the viewer is in a state of permanent distraction (for this debate see Holmes 2008, Foster 1996; 1998, and Debord 1977).

process of breaking with preassigned identities and carving out a different space and time that a political subject emerges and crystallises. The part-with-no-part makes a 'false' nomination and enacts a 'wrong' identity: for instance, it can be encapsulated in the expression 'we are the people' that the protestors used in Leipzig in October 1989, performing an impossible identification, namely, the embodiment of society as such, but in that way revealing the injustice of the existing order. This schema is complemented by Laclau and Mouffe's approach that agrees in rejecting ideas of false consciousness and reification since there is no essential identity to be recovered, but only forms of identification. However, for them, 'to construct oppositional identities, it is not enough to simply foster a process of "de-identification". A second move is necessary'; a second moment of re-articulation that follows the process of dis-articulation is needed (Mouffe 2013: 93). Hence, whereas for Rancière subjectivation is perceived as dis-identification—the refusal of an identity that has been imposed by others—for Mouffe, a second move of re-articulation is necessary, which entails less the discovery of a true identity, than the construction of a new one.

This reading of political subjectivation reveals that dissensus is performed in and through space since it involves the construction of *a scene of appearance and enunciation* of anybody whatsoever, a theatrical stage where equality can be demonstrated, and a space where the police logic and the egalitarian principle meet and clash. *Dissensus takes place* then (and conversely public space is generated by conflict) by constituting a combination of linguistic and bodily performativity that comes into being when bodies assemble and exercise 'a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field' (Butler 2015: 11). It is through these bodies that an expressive and signifying force is emanated, one that is later inscribed in multiple virtual spaces and discursive surfaces. Hence, the 'performative practices of dissensual spatialization' refer not only to the discursive platforms, symbolic scenes, and linguistic arenas that can allow the exercising of the right to speak, but also to the construction of physical spaces that permit bodies to appear and to be forged together (Swyngedouw 2011: 375). 'Dissensual spatialities' pertain to the material terrains where new political identities

can be enacted and where new modalities of contingent and non-essential forms of being-in-common, beyond identitarian politics, can be performed.

These more contingent, fluid, and dynamic modalities of the spatial seem to be espoused by a Rancièrian point of view, whereas they stand in sharp contrast with Laclau's static and fixed conception of space that is devoid of politics.<sup>61</sup> As Dikec (2005: 181) explains, 'closure by space is the end of politics for Laclau. Disclosure in and through space, for Rancière, makes politics possible'. In a way, for Laclau, space functions as a container of politics, whereas for Rancière, not only subjects can be spatially constituted, but also politics needs to be spatialised since 'it consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it' (Rancière 2010: 37). It is Mouffe's later work that becomes more attuned to a more politicised reading of the spatial and to the agonistic possibilities of the public sphere. In contrast to Habermas's public sphere, conceived as a space of deliberation and rational consensus, her agonistic model defines public space as plural (including physical and virtual spatialities), a battleground 'where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of final reconciliation', and a democratic outlet for passions, agonistic confrontation, and dissensus (Mouffe 2013: 92). In a similar vein, for Deutsche (1996: 278), 'conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space. Urban space is the product of conflict'. As illustrated in Chapter 3, it is this understanding of social space as produced in and through conflict that is assumed by a number of alter-institutions that treat public space as theatrical stages where underlying antagonisms can be enacted and where exclusions that have been gradually naturalised can be unearthed.

Such a dissensual spatiality emerged, according to Swyngedouw, when in 1955, Rosa Parks, in Montgomery, Alabama, was commuting back home and refused to stand up and give her seat to a white man. By defying the directives of the driver, by refusing to relinquish her seat, and by occupying a space that was not destined for her, her action became visible, she managed to cut through the existing distribution of the

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<sup>61</sup> For this debate see Massey 1993; 1995; 1999, Dikec 2005, and Marchart 2019.

sensible, and ‘she simultaneously staged equality and exposed the inegalitarian practice of a racialised instituted order, despite the latter’s constitutional presentation of equality’ (Swyngedouw 2011: 374). In this respect, what is important for the development of my argument is that equality is staged not only by voices that surface, but also by bodies that disrupt the way they are allocated in destinations and ‘by just being bodies that show, through their activities and indeed at times through their utter passivity, their resistance to “the big Other” of the *partage du sensible*’ (Deranty 2016: 55). In addition, such ‘spatialities of dissensus’ are not predefined locations to be occupied and utilised, but social artefacts, places of encounter and crossing between sameness and otherness that come into being sporadically and cannot be separated from the collective acting that brings them about. A ‘spatiality of dissensus’ gives shape to a new set of social relations, consisting not only in a process of dis-identification from preassigned categorical identifications, but also in the instantiation of a novel ‘we’ that does not signify a pre-established collective subject but the performative enactment of the people that it names.

#### **1.4 From Disruption to Inscription**

From this perspective, dissensus and democratisation are inherently performative acts that forge a space for contestation where community can be challenged and reconfigured. They are actions produced unintentionally that inaugurate a new radical imaginary and a new order of perception where the part-with-no-part has entered the aesthetic register and it is now visible, audible, and sensible. Such political stagings pertain to highly intense and contracted acts that are always placed, localised, and manifested in and through space since a ‘political Idea/Imaginary cannot find ground and grounding without localisation’ (Swyngedouw 2014: 180). At the same time though, they are fleeting moments, rapturous and unrepresentable incidents, episodic encounters, and sporadic events

that do not have a 'proper place' (and are only recognisable a posteriori).<sup>62</sup> Indeed, democratic theory is torn between these two moments, 'that of the extraordinary, the moment of founding and of constituent power, and that of the ordinary, the institutional and constituted power' (Norval 2014: 196). This is the distinction that Castoriadis (1987: 112) draws between 'ordinary times' when the social is manifested in 'instituted' arrangements and solidified power structures ('history made') and those revolutionary moments when 'the social as instituting bursts onto the stage', signifying 'history in the making'. Is there a way, however, to conceive dissensus not only as a ruptural, extraordinary, and disruptive affair, but also as a process, a method, and a democratic practice that can be continuously deployed and sustained? This contribution seeks to shift its focus away from the short temporalities of the event that disrupts the instituted order to the 'instituting practices' and to a form of 'dissensual institutionality' that can serve as a surface of inscription where a multiplicity of social demands can be (re)inscribed repeatedly.

As it has been shown, for Rancière, politics can be instantiated only in these moments of disruption that reveal the tension between the absent ground of the social and any established (police) order. Rancière remains adamant that dissensus cannot be predetermined, it cannot be strictly limited to the established practices of government or to a formally demarcated space, and 'it does not, in other words, have a proper place' (Dikec 2005: 184). Performing dissensus can take place on the street, in the square, the park, the factory, the university campus, the town hall, the museum, and in numerous other forms of public space. To put it another way, politics cannot be institutionalised since democracy cannot be reduced to a simple matter of institutional structures and since it 'at once legitimises and de-legitimises every set of institutions or the power of any one set of people' (Rancière 2010: 52). The essence of politics is to challenge the very structuring principle of a given order by calling for a new institutionalisation.

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<sup>62</sup> This understanding of staging of the political as an event that escapes representation coincides with Laclau's (1990: 82) account who argues: 'The antagonistic moment of collision between the various representations is itself unrepresentable. It is therefore mere event' (see also Laclau 1992; 2001).

Rancière's rapturous picture of democracy, shared by many other post-foundational thinkers, points towards one of his main concerns, namely the incorporation of the newly articulated demands by the dominant order. This is why he refrains from explicitly addressing what happens after the interruption of an existing order. His fears are not entirely implausible, since newly articulated demands by the 'excluded' have been often co-opted and degenerated into the symbolic integration of minorities at the political level, or into issues of diversity and mere representation at the cultural level, creating 'niche markets, specialised consumer profiles, and an overall spectacle of "difference"—without effectuating much structural change' (Steyerl 2009: 18). Indeed, to make a clear demarcation between the 'excluded' and the 'included' belongs already to a specific partitioning. According to Dikec (2005: 177, original emphasis), 'identifying "the excluded" as *the excluded* is already to include "them" in the whole; nothing escapes the police, especially "the excluded"'. However, this insistence on the ruptural, extraordinary, and spontaneous qualities of democracy reveals some major weaknesses in Rancière's work, as critics have pointed out.<sup>63</sup> By insisting on the unbridgeable gap between the 'instituting' and the 'instituted' and on the too sharp distinction between politics and the police order, his theory of dissensus seems not to foresee its own social translation and institutionalisation, what critics have called 'Rancière's non-political understanding of politics' (Norval 2014: 200).

I would like to complement Rancière's otherwise brilliant theorisation by offering a different account of dissensus that addresses some of his blind spots. Firstly, I would argue that the construction of a new common sense, the inauguration of a new order of visibility, and the articulation of any novel political imaginary depend on a second moment—a moment of inscription and institutionalisation—which remains overlooked in Rancière's theory of dissensus. Rancière (2010: 61) only briefly points towards the question of inscription, noting that his account of democracy provides only one possible pathway to deal with otherness. He admits that his attempt entails the conceptualisation of democratic practice 'as the inscription of the part of those

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<sup>63</sup> For this discussion see Kompridis 2014, Norval 2014, Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck 2014.

who have no part—which does not mean the “excluded” but anybody whoever’, noting that such ‘an inscription is made by subjects who are “newcomers”, who allow new objects to appear as common concerns, and new voices to appear and to be heard’ (Rancière 2010: 60). However, he does not carry through a concise account of the egalitarian surfaces that allow a new object to be inscribed as a common concern, nor what happens after a dissensual action manages to penetrate the fabric of the sensible. Rancière seems, at least in my eyes, more interested in making disagreement visible and safeguarding the very principle of accountability rather than in channeling it towards a radical new ‘partage du sensible’. In this respect, dissensus requires a second moment since the *sensible* can be *partagé* towards both progressive and reactionary ends and since no one can guarantee that the new distribution will be more egalitarian than the previous one.

In addition to Rancière’s reluctance to tackle the issue of ascribing to dissensus any direction, his theorisation offers an inadequate account of the conditions that allow certain actions to be ‘registered’ as stagings of equality (e.g., what allowed Rosa Parks’s staging of equality to become a stand-in for the universal, pushing her to the forefront of the civil rights movement, in contrast to Claudette Colvin’s staging that went unnoticed).<sup>64</sup> Instead of perceiving dissensus solely as a disruptive, ruptural, spontaneous, and episodic upheaval, I would like to suggest that dissensual events also depend on the *longue durée* of prior political movement building and the latent and long-term processes of social transformation. To be inscribed, divisions and antagonisms must be built upon. Challenging any configuration of the sensible necessarily involves sustained pressure, a collectivity of agents, and the construction of a counter-hegemony that can lay the groundwork for antagonisms to arise. Indeed, according to Marchart (2019: 17), ‘social protest never disappears; instead, it moves in cycles between “manifest” and “latent” (i.e. more and less visible phases)’ and although stagings of dissensus might attract visibility, ‘these are just

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<sup>64</sup> I have in mind here the case of Claudette Colvin who refused to move to the back of the bus in order to give up her seat to a white person only nine months before Park did, an action that led to her arrest. Her protest, as the protests of a great number of women before her, has been largely left out of the history books. According to critics, this is perhaps owed to the fact that Colvin was still a teenager at the time, making her inappropriate to become an icon and a civil rights leader.

condensations of larger and much more protracted struggles'. Hence, from my perspective, without striving to establish interconnections between the interruption of any given order and its reconfiguration, without mapping the mechanisms of translation between the local (a singular staging of dissensus) and the global (the horizon of emancipation), and without envisaging the forms of democratic inscription and the institutional arrangements that can allow new demands to keep resurfacing, any account of democratic rupture remains unfulfilled.

In this respect, perhaps it is useful to turn to Badiou and Žižek, who although they share a similar view of the political as an eventual staging of dissensus and as a retroactively revealed moment of rupture that disrupts any given socio-spatial configuration, attempt to revive an emancipatory project under a 'communist hypothesis' that goes beyond the resuscitation of the project of political democracy.<sup>65</sup> For both of them, communism pertains to equality and constitutes an immanently practical and realisable possibility through sustained struggle. However, Badiou, contra Rancière, advocates for a militant commitment, endurance, and a 'fidelity' to the political truth procedure that starts unfolding after the initial rupture of the event. For his part, Žižek, argues that the inaugural event of staging dissensus involves a closed circuit between the particular and the universal. Put differently, it consists in inscribing a singular act (Parks's staging of a 'wrong', namely, racial segregation in public transport) into a broader horizon of democratic demands ('we are all Rosa Parks'), rendering it as a stand-in for the universal. In his own words, 'in politics, universality is asserted when such an agent with no proper place, "out of joint", posits itself as the direct embodiment of universality against all those who do have a place within the global order' (Žižek in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 313).

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<sup>65</sup> For this discussion see Badiou 2008; 2010, Žižek and Douzinas 2010, and Bosteels 2011a; 2011b. This communist hypothesis has been disputed by several critics. For instance, Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck argue that such a conception of society as being instituted by a political moment that radically disrupts the prevailing configuration to establish a genuine political society devoid of power and inequalities runs the risk of instituting a society where politics loses its meaning. In other words, by attempting to overcome the post-political condition and by leaning too much on the political moment, the communist approach risks annulling the tension between politics and the political. This is what Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck (2014: 91) call the 'purification of the political difference'.

Standing on the opposite side of the spectrum, Laclau and Mouffe attempt to construct a more mediated articulation between ‘politics’ and the ‘political’, since while acknowledging the constitutive character of social division, they attempt to envision those arrangements that would allow the intrinsic antagonisms of the social to be expressed and inscribed in an institutionalised manner. For them, ‘the central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an “agonistic” form’ (Mouffe 2013: xii). They attempt to mediate ‘the political difference’ by constructing the institutional terrains that will permit the translation of ‘antagonism’, meaning the hatred between enemies, into ‘agonism’, which signifies a struggle between adversaries and a civilised battle between societal views.<sup>66</sup> In this respect, the ‘radicalisation of democracy’ necessitates acknowledging that the people are multiple and intrinsically divided, and that ‘division cannot be overcome; it can only be institutionalised in different ways, some more egalitarian than others’ (Mouffe 2013: xiv). For Kester (2012), Laclau and Mouffe’s approach advocates ‘not the elimination of “conflict”’, but rather, the ‘taming’ and ‘domestication’ of dissent.

Laclau and Mouffe reject the more radical vision of Badiou and Žižek, arguing that the ‘myth of communism as a transparent and reconciled society—which clearly implies the end of politics—must be abandoned’ in favour of a Gramscian ‘war of position’ (Mouffe 2013: 84). They advocate for the articulation of different levels of struggle that can provide the basis for a type of ‘horizontal linking’, allowing alliances between parties, trade unions, and social movements. According to them, to overcome the risk of issue-oriented politics and particularism, the task of the Left is to establish a ‘chain of equivalence’ between competing groups solely on the basis of their structurally similar constitutive incompleteness, giving rise to unified hegemonic blocks and concretising counter-hegemonic struggles towards agonistic pluralism. Since universality constitutes an empty signifier (i.e., universality is

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<sup>66</sup> This passage from ‘antagonism’ to ‘agonism’ (meaning the institutional arrangements that can confer legitimacy to adversarial opinions), owed to Laclau and Mouffe’s adherence to democratic theory, is opposed by other more radical views of political change that acknowledge the necessity not only of agonistic debate and political participation in the public (parliamentary) sphere, but also of extra-parliamentary action that includes insurrections, insurgencies, and armed conflicts.

hegemonically constructed), the establishment of a relation of equivalence between a multiplicity of social demands depends on 'the elaboration of an emancipatory discourse which does not dissolve into mere particularism but keeps a universal dimension alive' (Laclau in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 207).<sup>67</sup>

One can discern some fundamental divergences between these two approaches. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is through the interaction between particular social demands that a more global social imaginary can emerge, having as anchoring points empty signifiers. For Laclau, class struggle holds no prominent role in this equivalential linking, since it 'is just one species of identity politics, and one which is becoming less and less important in the world in which we live' (in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 213). This form of universality, which is grounded on the level of the social imaginary, functions as a surface of inscription for a multiplicity of social demands that exceed their particularities. On the contrary, Žižek, who builds on Badiou and Rancière, does not seem convinced either by the hegemonic fiction of multiculturalism and tolerance, or by the notion of a 'rainbow coalition' that implies that all progressive struggles will be united through a chain of equivalence.<sup>68</sup> He repudiates Laclau and Mouffe since in their analysis 'the political' is domesticated within an institutionally demarcated space and parliamentary setting and at the same time class antagonism is forsaken, displaced, and disavowed.<sup>69</sup> His view is that in every series of particular struggles there is a key struggle that both sustains and provides the horizon for the rest. According to him, Laclau and Mouffe's version of postmodern politics implicitly presupposes a 'naturalised framework of economic relations' since the very idea of the political that they advocate depends on the

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<sup>67</sup> There are strong connections and overlaps between Laclau's notion of 'chain of equivalence' and Butler's notion of 'cultural translations'. The latter, advocates for a 'translative project' in the context of which a multiplicity of social demands and struggles can be articulated and find resonance with each other without been absorbed by a dominant discourse.

<sup>68</sup> According to Žižek (1997: 41), 'the "real" universality of today's globalization through the global market involves its own hegemonic fiction (or even ideal) of multiculturalist tolerance, respect and protection of human rights, democracy, and so forth'.

<sup>69</sup> As Kester (2012) argues: 'It is precisely through the intersection of conventional political participation (voting, "agonistic" debate and opinion formation in the public sphere, and so forth) and these decidedly "antagonistic" forms of extra-parliamentary action, that real changes in the distribution of wealth, power, and authority have been achieved. Thus, the "taming" of conflict advocated by Mouffe on behalf of an agonistic pluralism entails a misleading and incomplete view of societal transformation'.

depoliticisation of the economy and ‘since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism’ (Žižek 1997: 46). Whereas Laclau and Mouffe’s chain of equivalence is structured around the concept of the proliferation of new political subjectivities and social antagonisms, for Žižek (in Laclau, Butler, and Žižek 2000: 320), ‘class antagonism certainly appears as one in the series of social antagonisms, but it is simultaneously the specific antagonism which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others’.

Antagonisms might indeed arise unavoidably due to the relational nature of collective identification premised upon the demarcation of a we/they relationship, but this line of demarcation is not always singular and not always that clear-cut.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, politics revolves around drawing multiple lines of demarcation that not only might contradict, crisscross, and confront one another, but are also endlessly redefined and reformulated. This points towards the inevitability of taking sides, since in every political act we are confronted with a demand to take a position that is premised upon a fundamental choice. As Marchart (2019: 19, original emphasis) eloquently puts it, ‘For, at the end of the day, every political articulation puts a demand on us, it confronts us with the exigency, of a decision: Which side are you on? Are you Red or White, progressive or reactionary, pro or con? Are you part of the 1% or the 99%, the state or the people, the problem or the solution? In short: Do you want to belong to *us* or *them*’. Instead of solely foregrounding division and exclusion as constitutive elements of the social, this contribution underscores the necessity of unearthing the structuring principle of antagonisms and the inevitability of ‘taking sides’.

Since antagonism is inherent to universality, according to Žižek (1997: 50, original emphasis), ‘accepting the radically antagonistic—that is, *political*—character of social life, accepting the necessity of “taking sides”, is the only way to be effectively

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<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Rancière’s part-of-no-part offers the most convincing account to conceptualise the interruption of any given order by the unaccounted, since it does not take the place of a universal class (the proletariat, the Multitude, etc.) and remains capacious enough by not being restricted to a fixed identity, an empirical given, or the totality of the political community.

*universal'*. Adopting the necessity of taking sides and building from Žižek, Dean (2012: 120) asks: 'but if antagonism is a constitutive feature of human experience, should we deny it? Or should we claim it, occupy it, and force it in one direction rather than another?'.<sup>71</sup> In this sense, she attempts to inscribe moments of dissensus, from where the part-with-no-part arises, into a broader horizon—namely, class struggle—which, according to her, constitutes the fundamental antagonism that cuts through society. In Dean's theoretical edifice, militant organisational forms (like the party, councils, etc.) play a predominant role in bringing about communism, since, according to her, 'a politics without the organizational form of the party is a politics without politics'. In this respect, Dean takes Rancière's theorisation of the part-of-no-part a step further by offering a counter-thesis, a nomination that marks the people as a divisive and dividing force, a designation that builds collectivity (instead of fragmentation and individuation) while interrupting the setting in which it is brought about. Such a nomination, according to her, was the 'We are the 99%' slogan that emerged during the Occupy Wall Street Movement since 'instead of naming an identity, the number highlights a division and a gap, the gap between the wealth of the top 1 percent and the rest of us' (Dean 2012: 200). As presented in Chapter 4, this militant commitment to a 'communist horizon' and to the necessity of taking sides resonates with the politics of Not An Alternative, which advocates for institutions that remain divisive by foregrounding the fundamental antagonism between the ninety-nine and the one percent.

### **1.5 Towards a Dissensual Institutionalality**

Such a disruptive action, as the staging of the 'We are the 99%', not only 'seeks to produce a rift within the sphere of appearance' through critiquing the imbalance of power that constitutes that order and through creating a critical alliance amongst the unaccounted, but at the same prefigures unheard ways of being-in-common, constructs material and symbolic egalitarian spatialities (e.g., the assembly format), and enacts new radical imaginaries (Butler 2015: 50). What is important to note

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<sup>71</sup> For Dean's original interpretation and defence of Žižek's politics see Dean 2006.

though, is that it is through the carving out of a physical, material, and symbolic space and through the performative and embodied staging of equality, that the inarticulate utterances and the silenced fictions of the ‘unaccounted’ manage to be symbolised, while also marking a more fundamental societal division. In other words, ‘proper politics is thus about practices that lie beyond the symbolic order of the police’, hence about demands whose satisfaction depends upon the transformation of the whole frame of reference and symbolisation of the dominant (police) order (Swyngedouw 2011: 377).

This reading of dissensual scenes stands in sharp contrast with tactics like singular happenings, momentary disruptions, playful resistances, and micropolitical activities, often evinced by fleeting ‘artist’ interventions, that leave the symbolic order intact and serve only as a displacement of political struggles. This is the distinction that Žižek (1999: 264) draws between ‘performative reconfigurations’, meaning mere subversive acts that remain within the confines of the hegemonic field and ‘ultimately support what they intend to subvert, since the very field of such “transgressions” is already taken into account’, and the more radical practices that redefine and reconfigure the whole symbolic terrain.<sup>72</sup> In this sense, what is at stake is how to establish a dialectical relation between the moment of disruption of an existing order and its reconfiguration, and how to shift the emphasis from the enactment of temporary dissensual spatialities to the construction of more sustainable infrastructures for the appearance and enunciation of the unaccounted. What is at stake is *how to institute dissensus, claim antagonism, and channel it towards the construction of a more democratic society.*

As Holmes (2004: 552) argues, ‘if we want to regain any chance at a democracy, we must make the production of the collective imaginary into an issue, by derailing or deconstructing certain communications machines, while building others and

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<sup>72</sup> Fisher (2009), for instance, criticises the various aesthetic tactics of divergence and resistance since, although they are presented as radically innovative manifestations of subversion, they are in fact a mere reformulation of older revolutionary gestures. According to him, ‘what we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture’ (Fisher 2009: 9, original emphasis).

adapting the existing ones to meet new needs'. Indeed, the ideological triumph of neoliberal capitalism as 'the only game in town' has urged theorists like Jameson and Žižek to argue that today it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, suggesting not only that capitalism has prevailed as the only viable economic and political system, but also that human ability to even imagine its alternatives has dried up. In this sense, if there is any chance in disarticulating the neoliberal ideology and the post-political consensus, not only do we need to invent new fictions to shake up the 'instituted imaginary', but also, and more importantly, we must strive to develop the institutions and infrastructures that can sustain and amplify such radical imaginaries. Rancière (2004: 39, original emphasis) is not oblivious to the central role of fictions, admitting 'politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct "fictions", that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done'. This crucial remark reveals that for him the 'labour of fiction' pertains to the construction of 'commonsense', to the shifting and reweaving of the framework of perception, and to the forging of new relations between the individual and the collective.<sup>73</sup>

In this sense, and if we are to follow Castoriadis (1987: 114), according to whom, 'no society can provide itself with anything outside of this second-order symbolism represented by institutions', we can allow ourselves to conceive cultural institutions both as modalities of organisation with valuable material, economic, and social resources, and as discursive terrains and places of fiction that shape our self-understanding. Hence, what I call a 'dissensual institutionality' departs from the understanding of institutions as regulatory processes and hierarchical arrangements that 'domesticate' conflict, and rather denotes the practices that take place in, through, and at the threshold of institutional structures encapsulating an active struggle of sustaining the production of the sensible as a continuously contested question. It refers to strategies of engaging with processes of desymbolisation and

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<sup>73</sup> According to Rancière (2010: 141), '[Fiction] is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the "real", or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation'.

resymbolisation, of organising the material and symbolic infrastructures that can embody democratic imaginaries, and of functioning as surfaces of inscription that can allow the inarticulate voices of the part-of-no-part to be repeatedly reinscribed.<sup>74</sup>

However, before embarking on mapping such a ‘dissensual institutionality’, it might be helpful to introduce two contrasting approaches, Mouffe’s strategy of ‘engagement’ with institutions and the ‘exodus’ tactics of Hardt and Negri. In Mouffe’s account, a counter-hegemonic struggle should be waged *within* institutions (alluding not only to political institutions, but also to museums and cultural institutions) that can be transformed into agonistic public spaces and thus can contribute to the contestation of the neoliberal consumer ideology. Hence, she envisions existing institutions in an agonistic manner, as public fora and sites of struggle about the determination of ‘common sense’. She repudiates the ‘exodus’ strategy as disempowering, since it views all institutions as monolithic representatives of the state that need to be destroyed, limiting in that way any attempt to transform them and the spectrum of possible avenues of political engagement. ‘To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting in a way that subverts their form of articulation’ (Mouffe 2013: 100). Engaging with the key institutions of neoliberalism becomes an absolute priority, since organising new forms of the common outside dominant capitalist structures does not guarantee that the latter will progressively dissolve without any contestation.

On the other end of the spectrum, one can find theories advanced by Hardt, Negri, and Virno, who advocate for various forms of ‘flight’ (including withdrawal, desertion, evacuation of places of power, and nomadism) and strategies of ‘*exodus*’ *from* existing institutions in favour of the self-organisation of the multitude. As

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<sup>74</sup> My overall argument is partly inspired by Althusser (1984: 184), who viewed ideology (and the same goes for imaginaries, fictions, and representations) as a material entity: ‘an ideology always exists in an apparatus and in the practice or practices of that apparatus. This existence is material’.

Raunig and Ray (2009: xvi) explain, ‘exodus is not a naïve exit “out of every kind of institution”, but refers rather to the deliberations and actualizations of “institutions of exodus”’. Following Virno (2004: 70) who argues that ‘nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting’, post-operaist theorists (like Hardt and Negri) attempt to envisage a non-dialectical mode of resistance that goes beyond representational politics. In fact, Hardt and Negri (2009: 56) oppose notions like ‘counter-power’, advocating for a different mode of class struggle ‘which not only resists power, but also seeks autonomy from it’. In a similar vein, for Raunig (2009a: 8), ‘Flight and exodus are nothing negative, not a reaction to something else, but are instead linked and intertwined with constituent power, reorganising, re-inventing and instituting’.

This movement of flight, according to these theorists, is what allows ‘instituent practices’ to escape institutionalisation, closure, and structuralisation. By adopting a ‘dropping out’, perceived as a ‘non-escapist’ modality of escape, and by introducing novel and durable institutional arrangements that remain outside the confines of the state, such ‘instituent practices’ are prevented from becoming ‘institutions’ in the sense of constituted power. According to Hardt and Negri (2009: 196), the making of the multitude is dependent on a twofold project that ‘must bring the process of exodus together with an organizational project aimed at creating institutions of common’.<sup>75</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter 4, this insistence on anti-state politics and the negation of oppressive social organisations that are embodied by dominant institutions, is assumed by Decolonize This Place. Inspired by the prefigurative politics of the alter-globalisation movement, their creative tactics not only echo Graeber (2002: 68), who has highlighted the importance of ‘dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it’, but are also driven by an attempt to enact horizontal organisational instruments that allow self-determination and new forms of collective enunciation.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For Hardt and Negri, the creative, prefigurative, and constituting power of imagination (and the same goes for any immaterial and affective labour) plays a crucial role in this process since the artistic act ‘is definable as multitude’ (Negri 2011: 31).

<sup>76</sup> DTP’s strategy must be distinguished, for instance, from the idea of ‘destitution’ that the Invisible Committee (2017: 81) espouses, according to which, ‘the destituent gesture does not oppose the institution. It doesn’t even mount a frontal fight, it neutralizes it, empties it of its substance, then steps to the side and watches it expire’.

In this respect, this contribution ‘takes the side’ of Castoriadis (1987: 385-386), who argues that ‘the person who says he wants autonomy while refusing the revolution in institutions knows neither what he is saying nor what he wants’.<sup>77</sup> For Castoriadis, the individual imaginary and the social imaginary embodied in institutions go hand in hand, hence this embodiment can be attacked, reimagined, and reconfigured. In other words, if antagonism and division are a constitutive element of the social, and if the police order is not impermeable to confrontation, then it would be a sign of naïveté to perceive institutions as monolithic, unchanging structures that are impervious to contestation.<sup>78</sup> On the contrary, institutional structures must be seen as split, inherently divided, full of gaps and cracks. According to Not An Alternative (2016), institutions ‘are sites of struggle over who and what counts, over the ways we see and understand our collective being together’. However, institutions have fallen prey to the neoliberal hegemony and have been deployed as the ideological apparatus for maintaining and reproducing the subjects that it needs. By acknowledging that institutions are arenas where ideological struggles are waged, this thesis argues that institutions are worth reclaiming, reconfiguring, and occupying, ‘and should be occupied, to generate decisive conflict over the kind of society they help produce’ (Holmes 2004: 552).

A ‘dissensual institutionality’ though, does not allude only to the strategies that take place in the demarcated institutional arenas of a hegemonic or representative setting, as if engagement within and through existing institutions was the only possible avenue of political contestation and the sole locus of struggle. A ‘dissensual institutionality’ rather describes the dynamic processes that maintain a liminal distance from the institutions of the police order, while forging coalitions with social movements, activist organisations, and solidarity networks. It can allude to the

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<sup>77</sup> In other words, Castoriadis dispels any notion of ‘anti-institutionality’, advocating for a model of ‘self-institution’.

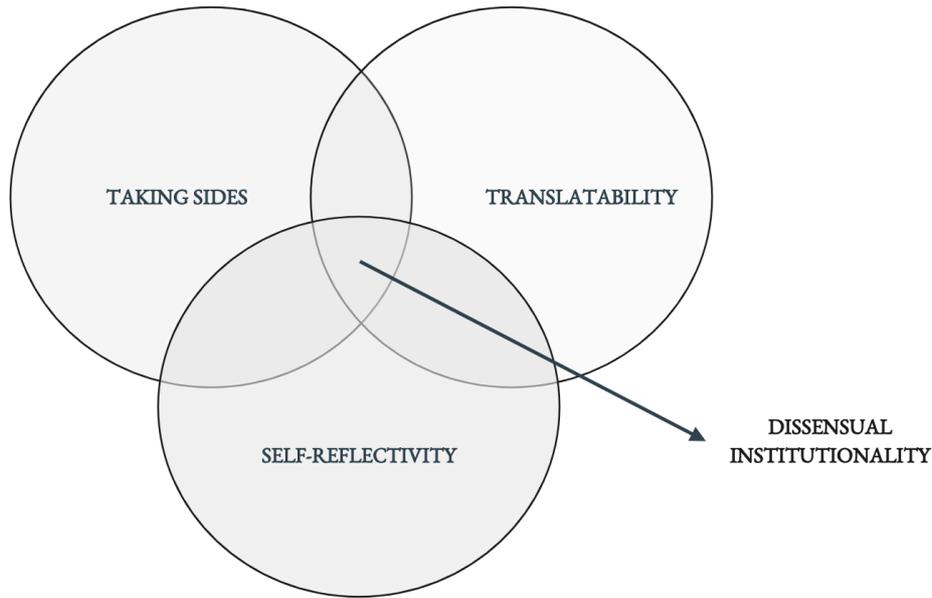
<sup>78</sup> This understanding coincides with Mouffe’s own account that argues that any given hegemonic order is always incomplete and thus remains open to contestation by the possibilities that have been excluded. In Mouffe’s words (2013: 132), ‘every hegemonic order can be challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, which attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to establish another form of hegemony’.

practices that utilise institutions' resources, concentrated collective power, and legitimacy status by leveraging them to build counter-power infrastructures. It can also denote strategies that are deployed both within and against the institution, acknowledging that there are many 'ways to use the institutional space without being *of* the institution, without taking on the institution's goals as one's own' (Shukaitis 2009: 167, original emphasis).

As it has been elaborated thus far, my attempt to theorise a 'dissensual institutionality' does not dictate a singular strategy but can take many forms, including the decentring, deterritorialising, and deconstructing of existing hegemonic institutional structures from within to turn them into 'counter-hegemonic machines' (examined in Chapter 2); endeavours of inventing new alter-institutional organisational arrangements or 'institutions of the common' that remain flexible and decentralised (Chapter 3); and to activist modes of critical engagement with solidified institutional structures to shake them up, seize, or even dismantle them (Chapter 4). Indeed, if 'instituting'—meaning a process, movement, and composition—stands on one end of the spectrum, then de-instituting and dismantling stand on the other end. In all cases though, by developing their own way of inhabiting, claiming, and reconfiguring institutional structures, these practices have both an ecstatic dimension 'erupting from the continuum of time when something absolutely new is founded' and an aesthetic since any active reconstitution of an institution entails the introduction of novel imaginaries and the inauguration of new orders of visibility (Kompridis 2014: xxiii).<sup>79</sup> This is what Castoriadis (1987: 112) means when he argues that the social is 'both what fills in the institution, what is formed by it, what continually overdetermines its functioning, and what in the final analysis founds it: creates it, maintains it in existence, alters it, destroys it'.

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<sup>79</sup> For Castoriadis, in the generative power of imagination and art, chaos is revealed and at the same time shaped, creating new worlds and unveiling the creative resources that lie within the human being. For Castoriadis, art, as any creative production, gives form to what cannot be formed, providing a 'window into chaos'. For the role of art and imagination in the political theory of Castoriadis see Castoriadis 1984; 2018.



**Figure 1.2.** A model of 'dissensual institutionalality'. Image by the author.

To determine whether a process, strategy, or mode of engagement with institutional structures instantiates what I have described as a 'dissensual institutionalality', I argue that it is useful to examine it using three main criteria, namely taking sides, translatability, and self-reflectivity. Firstly, a 'dissensual institutionality' signifies an attempt to enact and materialise more egalitarian social imaginaries, to operate as a stage where dissensual voices can be amplified, and to inaugurate different orders of visibility that run against the antagonistic divisions of society that are sanctioned in institutions through their alienating content. However, these practices not only shed light on the differential forms of power by which the sphere of appearance is constituted, but more importantly, they establish the terrains where political disagreement, conflict, and the 'polemic over the common' can be staged and performed. In order to unearth these antagonistic divisions of society based on class, gender, and race inequalities (the hierarchical distribution of places according to the police order) and to 'rehearse' the political through embodied and prefigurative

stagings, this model of ‘dissensual institutionality’ sets out to challenge the ‘myth of museum neutrality’ and accepts the necessity of taking sides in the division.<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, a ‘dissensual institutionality’ fights against the co-optation of the articulated social demands into issues of multiculturalist representation and visibility via diversity, as well as against ‘the symbolic integration of critique into the institution or rather only into the surface of the institution without materially altering the institution or its organization in any deeper sense’ (Steyerl 2009: 16-17).<sup>81</sup> In other words, a ‘dissensual institutionality’ alludes to the practices that are committed in effectuating structural change that goes beyond questions and procedural concerns of participation and inclusion, ‘as if the content of the politics were either given—a matter of identity—or secondary to the fact of inclusion, which makes the outcome of political struggle less significant than the process of struggle’ (Dean 2012: 56-57). Their focus lies less on the temporary satisfaction of a particular demand or the recognition of a specific fixed identity, than on the long-term processes of movement building and on the continuous attempt to connect localised stagings of equality to broader struggles. Put differently, the main concern is about opening up a broader horizon of imagination where a multiplicity of demands can be inscribed, while incubating a common ground where encounters between sameness and otherness can take place. The impetus of such practices is to translate differences between seemingly incompatible struggles (not restricted to the cultural field) and to forge broader critical alliances that express collectivity even if this is a divisive one.

Turning to the last criterion, an instituting practice should fight against its own ‘tendencies to closure and structuralisation’, and its inclination to become rigidified and institutionalised (Raunig 2009b: 176). In other words, there is a more

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<sup>80</sup> As I outline in Chapter 4, the myth of museum neutrality refers to museums and cultural institutions’ claim to present their information and objects from a ‘neutral’ ideological position.

<sup>81</sup> This is the case especially in contemporary arts and cultural institutions where the question of ‘democratisation’ degenerates into the implementation of a ‘proportionate’ display of artworks from underrepresented groups, and into the impetus for diversifying the audiences and hiring Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Queer bodies in order to shield the institutions from critique while avoiding to address deeper structural problems.

constitutive form of alienation of a society *in relation to* its institutions (i.e., irrespective of the alienating content of an institution). This occurs when the institution becomes autonomous from the society that gave birth to it and when a society cannot recognise in the institution something of its own creativity and imaginary. For Castoriadis (1987: 109-110):

We are instead thinking of the fact, of greater importance in its own right, that once an institution is established it seems to become autonomous, the fact that it possesses its own inertia and its own logic, that, in its continuance and in its effects, it outstrips its function, its 'ends', and its 'reasons for existing' [...] what could have been seen 'at the start' as an ensemble of institutions in the service of society becomes a society in the service of institutions.

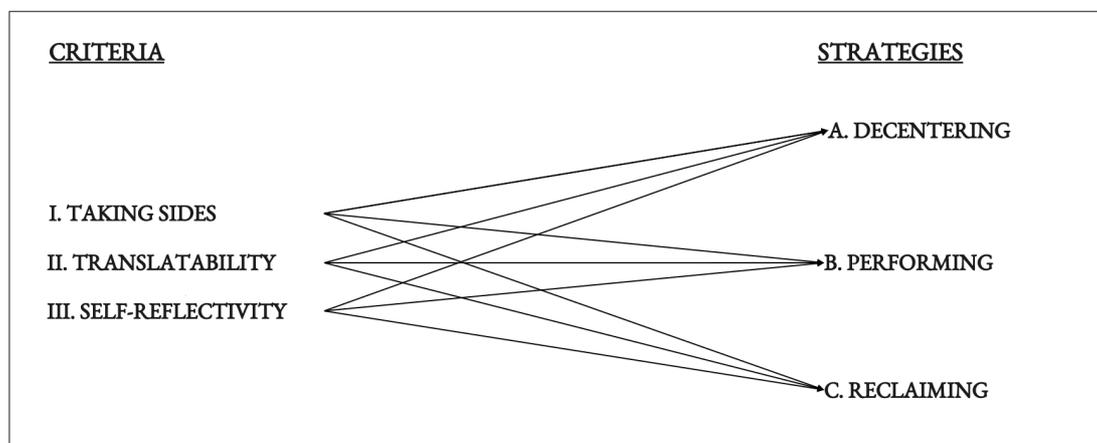
What distinguishes Castoriadis from the Lacanian tradition is that, although he acknowledges this ongoing process where every new social construct quickly degenerates into an alienating establishment, he simultaneously celebrates society's self-creativity, or what he calls the 'radical instituting imaginary'.<sup>82</sup> Where Castoriadis is still pertinent, at least in my eyes, is on the significance he bestows on the creative role of imagination (the radical process of creation *ex nihilo*) that operates in tandem with a self-reflective method.<sup>83</sup> This involves both identifying the discourse of the Other and bringing it to the conscious (on the level of the Self) and of acknowledging that 'symbolism can be neither neutral nor totally adequate', but a contingent formulation that attempts to cover the traces of its previously erected symbolic edifices on which it rests (on the societal level) (Castoriadis 1987: 121). Thus, a 'dissensual institutionality' alludes to a self-reflective and self-critical attitude; and to practices that constantly challenge their own biases and methodological tools, while striving to maintain flexible arrangements and open-

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<sup>82</sup> This stands in stark contrast with Lacan, who remains adamant in highlighting the constitutive alienating nature of human experience, rendering the project of autonomy inherently unfeasible.

<sup>83</sup> Stavrakakis (2007: 58), adopting Ricoeur's (1966) thesis, repudiates Castoriadis's theory of autonomy as 'anti-political by principle' since, according to him, Castoriadis is grounding the unrestrained power of imagination on an essentialist and overdetermining source. For an extended discussion on Lacan versus Castoriadis see Stavrakakis 2007.

ended processes.<sup>84</sup> As will become evident, this is even more urgent in the art and cultural realm that remains imbricated into a network of power relations and funding bodies characterised by various antinomies and contradictions. Perhaps it is this self-reflective ethos that can, against the spectre of post-democracy, keep the production of the sensible an always debatable question, allowing the part-of-no-part to be inscribed without being relegated to preexisting taxonomies and categorisations.



**Figure 1.3.** Towards a 'dissensual institutionality': criteria of analysis and strategies of engagement. Image by the author.

<sup>84</sup> As Weber (2001: 159, original emphasis) puts it, 'but institutions can be *more or less permeable* to these exclusions upon which they depend, and that structurally divide their inner identity'.

## 2 Decentring the Institution

### 2.1 Introduction

As has been illustrated thus far, a 'dissensual institutionality' refers to the strategies, methodologies, and practices that take place within, at the threshold of, or outside institutional structures, attempting to actively institute a more democratic imagination that confronts the post-political predicament. This chapter introduces strategies of 'decentring the institution' and its locus constitutes mega-exhibitions, which have been proliferating since the 1990s, indicating 'the massive expansion of the exhibition as a cultural dominant today' (Dimitrakaki 2012: 305). Indeed, art biennials have become important cultural events that serve as sites not only of artistic innovation that often redefines the art canon, but also of circulation and encounter for international artists, curators, and critics, as well as cultural exchange between the local art scene and the global art world. Hence, it comes as no surprise that biennials, triennials, and other large-scale and high-budget art exhibition formats have been analysed extensively from a number of perspectives, from art theory (e.g., Green and Gardner 2016, Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel 2013), to political theory (see Marchart 2019, Kompatsiaris 2019a), and to architecture and geography (Szacka 2019). While some have focused on the impact of globalisation on contemporary art (Harris 2011, Marchart 2014), others have underlined the biennials' impact on the host cities and regions by foregrounding the stimulation of cultural tourism (Vogel 2010), examined the exhibitions' production, structure, and format (Dimitrakaki 2013, Kompatsiaris 2019b), and questioned the pertinence of art biennials, arguing that today they are facing an impasse (Von Falkenhausen 2018).

With an estimated total of 100 to 200 biennials around the world, this recent trend of exhibition making, especially at the periphery, has signified a broader cultural phenomenon that has been called by many critics the 'biennialisation' of the art world (see Stallabrass 2004, O'Neill 2007). According to these critics, biennials have become an intrinsic feature of the neoliberal event-based economy, allowing

investors to penetrate new markets and generate money by creating a spectacle of the 'Other', while making little or no contribution to the structural improvements of the local scene. This also alludes to the broader phenomenon of art's instrumentalisation since mega-exhibitions and biennials 'have been consistently associated with economic opportunism and forced urban or even regional regeneration that benefits capital' (Dimitrakaki 2012: 305). Although such transcultural mega-exhibitions might promote ideas of democratic participation and inclusivity, cultural translation, and cosmopolitanism, they often obfuscate the economic hierarchies between cultures and the uneven power dynamics between centre and periphery.

Informed by these strands of thought, this chapter introduces the case study of documenta, a quinquennial event and one of the most critically esteemed exhibitions of contemporary art in the world. Founded by artist and curator Arnold Bode in 1955 in Kassel in the aftermath of the Second World War, documenta was conceived as an attempt to introduce the public to modern art against the spectre of Nazism and the repression of artistic freedom and cultural heterogeneity. This chapter focuses on the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of documenta (d14), its most recent and controversial iteration, owing not only to its explicitly radical, anti-neoliberal, and anti-colonial discourse, but also to the unprecedented decision to split the exhibition between Kassel, its traditional base, and Athens, in a period of continuous friction between Germany and Greece due to the latter's public debt. The exhibition involved the participation of 160 artists, the collaboration with 40 public institutions in Athens (and another 35 in Kassel), a public programme (the Parliament of Bodies), an educational programme (aneducation), and a magazine (*South as a State of Mind*). This unprecedented move in the 66-year history of the institution was explicated by its artistic director, Adam Szymczyk (2017: 26-27), in his manifesto-like introductory essay in the exhibition's catalogue:

The decision to conceive of documenta 14 as a 'theater and its double' (per Antonin Artaud) in Athens and Kassel—thereby moving its geographic and ideological center from its home in Germany—was a consequence of the

feeling of necessity to act in real time and in the real world. The world cannot be explained, commented on, and narrated from Kassel exclusively—a vantage point that is singularly located in Northern and Western Europe—or from any one particular place at all.

Hence, d14 turned into a platform of social, political, and aesthetic experimentation that set out to deconstruct the supremacist, nationalist, and colonialist premises of Western epistemologies. Since Kassel could not still serve as a vantage point to narrate or comment on the world, Athens was chosen as a paradigm and a metaphor in order 'to unlearn what we know' and to engage with minor traditions, dissident histories, and 'a plethora of other voices that scream for attention and should be listened to' (Szymczyk 2017: 32, 37). To this end, the exhibition brought Indigenous practices and techniques from around the world (e.g., Beau Dick), presented peripheral narratives drawing on vast ethnographic resources and archives of contemporary decolonial critique (like Sami artists), invited collectives that work at the intersection of art, activism, and research (Forensic Architecture) and organised discursive platforms with thinkers and philosophers (including Antonio Negri and Franco Berardi). In this sense, decentralising a powerful institution like documenta constituted an attempt not only to challenge the traditional view of Europe as dominated by its Western constituencies, but also to symbolically break with the Eurocentric understanding of the world, along with its hierarchical mechanisms of cultural production, representation, and consumption.

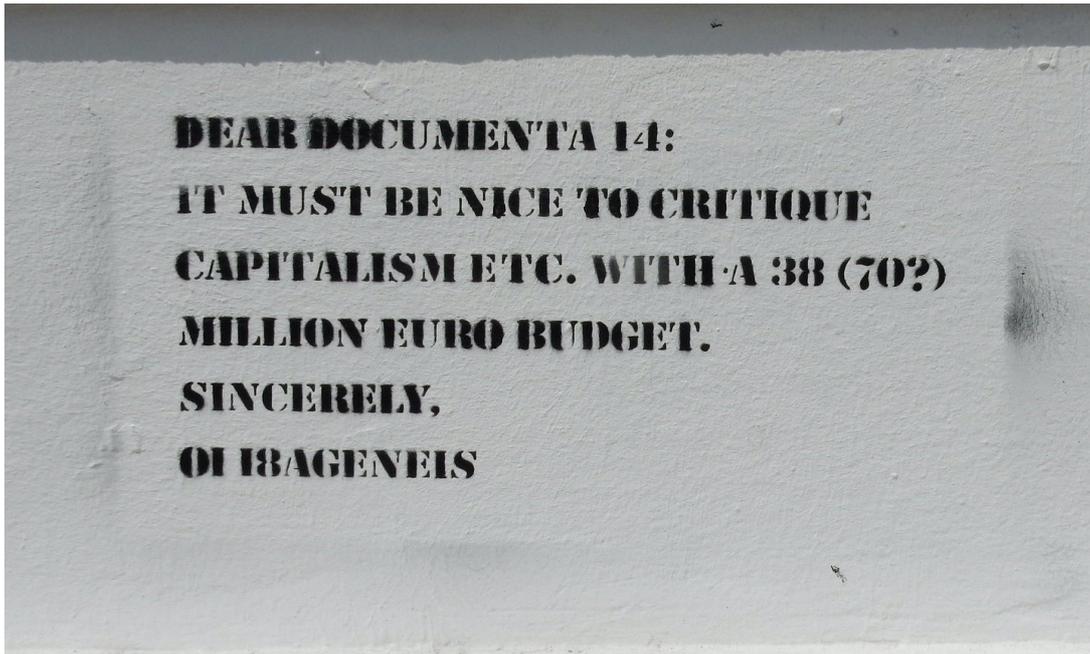
The decision, however, to choose Athens as a co-host of the exhibition, at a time when the city was undergoing a severe recession and a profound humanitarian crisis as the result of consecutive waves of austerity measures imposed by the German-led troika (a conglomerate of institutions comprised by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission), raised suspicion and fueled fierce debate in artistic, activist, and academic circles. And while Preciado (2017a), director of public programmes in documenta 14, stated that 'the exhibition is understood as a public service, as an antidote against economic, political, and moral austerity', many publications were quick to castigate the exhibition as a purely

extractive neocolonial process, a Trojan horse of German cultural imperialism, and a project where 'artists playing at being ethnographers' end up 'exoticising' or 'fetishising' the others 'as stand-ins for Western guilt' (Von Falkenhausen 2018).

Some critics debunked the overall impetus of 'Learning from Athens' (the exhibition's working title that remained until the very end) as overly didactic and condescending, while others perceived it 'as one of the most Euro-centric, perhaps even German-centric, documentas in years' (Gardner 2018: 34).<sup>1</sup> For his part, Yanis Varoufakis, ex-Greek Finance Minister, argued that organising documenta in Athens 'is like crisis tourism...It's like rich Americans taking a tour in a poor African country, doing a safari, going on a humanitarian tourism crusade' (Kahane and Varoufakis 2015). In a similar vein, the responses on the ground ranged from stencilled slogans that appeared sporadically in public spaces near the Athenian exhibition venues reading: 'Dear Documenta, I refuse to exoticise myself to increase your cultural capital. Sincerely, oi i8agenois', to a parody-like social media campaign, named 'Documena' and developed by local artists, that aimed to disrupt and critique 'the neo-orientalist and naively patriotic discourses of documenta 14's theoretical premise'. The controversy was only further exacerbated in the international press when the organisers of documenta faced accusations of possible embezzlement and mismanagement of public funds (for which they were later vindicated) and when the exhibition needed a government bailout of its own, with the city of Kassel and state of Hesse stepping in with emergency funding to keep it afloat. The street level responses followed suit: stencilled slogans reappeared this time reading 'Dear Documenta: It must be nice to critique capitalism etc. with a 38 (70?) million euro budget. Sincerely, oi i8agenois'.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general overview of documenta 14 in Athens see the issue 18/19 of *Field: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, edited by Elpida Rikou, Eleana Yalouri, and Apostolos Lampropoulos (see also Hickley 2017, Heiser 2017).



**Figure 2.1** Stencilled slogans, signed by 'the Indigenous', Athens, Greece. Photograph by the author.

Distancing from such overly simplistic analyses that reject altogether notions of 'displacing the centre', 'decolonising the institution', and 'deconstructing rigid hierarchies' as curatorial catchphrases, as well as refraining from evaluating the aesthetic outcome of the exhibition, this chapter sets out to address some more pertinent questions. For instance, can an institution that has been rendered synonymous with Western privilege be liberated from its Eurocentric foundations? Is a well-branded German institution, like documenta, equipped to address the power asymmetries and economic dependencies that permeate the fractured relationship between North and Global South? What happens when a big and powerful institution that is inexorably intertwined with Germany's cultural politics decides to move to a 'city in crisis' and to identify with the discourses of the oppressed other? Extrapolating from these questions, I hope to explore some more general problematics, namely the possibility of reconciling a cultural institution that encapsulates today's event-based economy with its leftist political commitments, with the articulation of an immanent critique of the system that feeds it, and with the adoption of an anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal stance.

To do so, I focus predominantly on the Athenian leg of the exhibition to map documenta 14's heavily charged political discourse production and its theoretical underpinnings, exploring how they informed the processes, tools, and methodologies deployed in the attempt to deconstruct the institution's very foundations and address the current post-political predicament. Subsequently, I delve into the institutional contours of documenta, demonstrating that rather than representing a monolithic entity, it comprises a multiplicity of competing interests, and it remains imbricated into a complex network of power relations, funding bodies, sponsorships, and rigid organisational structures. In addition, I explore the potentialities and limitations that were revealed by documenta's attempt to redefine Otherness and to adhere to a methodology of 'unlearning', highlighting that any form of knowledge production, even via unlearning, is predicated upon certain power asymmetries. A section is dedicated to documenta's strategic decision to collaborate only with Greek public cultural institutions, foregrounding that even the decision of re-spatialising documenta in Athens was not sufficient for its institution to reconfigure its hierarchical organisational assemblages. The last section is focused on the most prominent artwork of documenta 14, namely Hans Haacke's *We (All) Are the People* (2017), to illuminate the tensions, antagonisms, and counter-discourses that surfaced inadvertently due to documenta's displacement. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the exhibition failed, to a significant extent, to deliver on its ambitious promises by not managing to refine its mechanisms for the appearance, translation, and inscription of counter-voices, since this would have to be predicated upon a self-reflective ethos that was partially absent from documenta's presence in Athens.

At the same time, I set out to make a broader argument, namely that mega-institutions, such as documenta, are political grounds that can play a crucial role in the struggle for hegemony, and hence are worth being appropriated, occupied, and fought over, instead of being dismissed altogether as part of the art market establishment. On the one hand, mega-institutions, often regardless of their curatorial intention, instantiate in the best possible manner the various antinomies, contradictions, and aporias of the contemporary art world, hence using them as a

starting point can shed light on the nexus of art, politics, and late capitalism. On the other, mega-institutions can be also envisaged as ‘counter-hegemonic machines’ since they can provide the material infrastructure, the resources, and the symbolic capital to sustain a radical imaginary, allow the inscription of a multiplicity of voices, and serve as a potential common ground for alliance building. As Marchart (2019: 150, original emphasis) asserts, ‘For an exhibition to become a public sphere, something must be added: *a position*’. Following this line of thought, I argue that instead of defending its ‘artistic freedom’, as if mega-exhibitions can exist beyond money and politics, documenta needs to leverage the legacy, scale, and the attention investment that it has accumulated in order to ‘take sides’. In this sense, investigating the tools, methodologies, and processes deployed in the decentralisation of the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration of documenta can offer valuable insights into how to reimagine mega-institutions and even redirect them towards democratising ends.

## 2.2 Decentring a Hegemonic Institution and the Post-Political

We need Athens to deconstruct documenta, this is what we need completely.  
Every single aspect of this institution.

Paul Preciado (in Svarrer 2016),  
Curator of Parliament of Bodies

Before starting to analyse the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration of documenta, one must first unravel the artistic and political presuppositions behind the decision to split the exhibition, the multifaceted relations between the history of the institution and its present-day inner organisational structure, and the underlying reasons for choosing Athens as a co-host city over other prospective locations in crisis. According to Szymczyk (2017: 26), what we are facing is the proliferation of structures of domination (neocolonialism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism) that are ‘precisely the hegemonic order supporting the neoliberal war machine today’ and repressing any

manifestation of difference and dissent. In addition, for Szymczyk, 'Europe was kidnapped by the markets, democracy is closely bound to financial requirements' (in Tsomou 2015). It is this bleak reading of today's post-political order that led the organisers of documenta to attempt a response, arguing that 'democracy must be thought anew, reinvented, instead of just being disposed of, which can easily happen when authoritarian thinking prevails over the participatory model' (Szymczyk 2017: 31).

To do so, the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration of documenta turned its spotlight to its Southern neighbours and to Athens in particular. Relocating the German institution from its traditional base—broadly defined as the European administrative, political, and economic power centre—to Athens (viewed by the organisers as a step closer to the periphery), served a multifaceted purpose. Athens encapsulates not only what is considered to be the birthplace of democracy and the cradle of Western civilisation, but at the same time the place where these ideals have reached their present state of exhaustion, the place 'where the contradictions of the contemporary world, embodied by loaded directional like East and West, North and South, meet and clash' (Szymczyk and Latimer 2015: 6). The conceptual framework and the sociopolitical stakes of the exhibition had been put forward prior to the exhibition itself, through *South as a State of Mind*, an Athens-based journal that hosted documenta 14's publications for two years, serving as a 'counterhegemonic library for present battles' (Szymczyk and Latimer 2015: 6). In one of the editorial essays, Szymczyk describes Greece's 'state of emergency' after several months of ongoing humanitarian crisis and the palpable worsening of the financial conditions that had been unfolding since its 2009 debt crisis. This involved not only 'the near-collapse of the banking sector and the establishment and dissolution of the new left-wing government, under conditions created by European-imposed austerity programs' but also 'the largest global displacement of people since World War II' with millions of Syrians fleeing civil war and others escaping the violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and sub-Saharan Africa, all seeking a better life on the European continent (Szymczyk and Latimer 2015: 5).

In the same issue and perhaps in the only official text of the exhibition that addressed the topic head on, Dimitrakaki takes what might be considered as the exhibition's conceptual inspiration and translates it into concrete political stakes. According to her, neoliberalism, as the dominant mode of global governance and the prevailing ideology, has permeated every aspect of socioeconomic life to such an extent that even practicing democracy has become a revolutionary act. Hence, in a time when the European Union has openly declared the primacy of economy over democracy and politicians blatantly state 'elections change nothing', even 'the possibility of practising democracy has become a rupture in the normality of capitalism' (Dimitrakaki 2015: 181).<sup>2</sup> This brings to mind the Rancièrian (1998: 102) understanding of post-democracy as consensus democracy, 'a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests'. In this sense, such 'consensual forms of techno-managerial negotiation' reflect the depoliticising practices and the deadlock of contemporary representative democracy that have marked recent decades (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014: 3). If the reading of the situation at the time (spring of 2015) as a post-democratic order might have sounded too abstract, it required only a few months to be manifested in full swing. Syriza—a radical-left-turned-populist party—elected on the promise of saving Greece from another memorandum, hours after a popular referendum (July 5, 2015) where the Greek people overwhelmingly rejected a fresh new round of austerity, folded to the Troika and to the European demands. In this respect, Syriza's spectacular capitulation on the referendum instantiated the profound democratic deficit of European institutions that was diagnosed by the documenta organisers.

Stemming from this feeling of urgency for the withering state of democracy the world over and while 'conveniently' located in the midst of such cataclysmic sociopolitical and economic events (like the capital controls imposed on Greece on

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<sup>2</sup> Dimitrakaki's essay was inspired by the widely reproduced quote attributed to German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who famously stated after the Syriza party won the 2015 elections: 'Elections change nothing. There are rules.'

June 28, 2015), 'Learning from Athens' set out to provide a situated artistic response. According to Szymczyk (2017: 32), 'art can produce and inhabit space, enable discourses beyond what is known to all, and act to challenge the predictable, gloomy course of current political and social global events that keep us sleepless and suspended'. Hence, the exhibition aspired to tackle themes like statelessness and displacement, democracy and fascism, colonialism and otherness, queer and post-identitarian body politics, as well as austerity, debt, and neoliberalism. The organisers set out to materialise their ambitious plan by turning documenta into 'a participatory experience, and an exercise in presentist democracy' (Szymczyk 2017: 32).

The decision to uproot the institution from its traditional base was not unprecedented, nor was the attempt to imbricate art with questions of democracy, decolonisation, and the decentralisation of the West. In fact, it followed a long tradition of decentring the Western art history canon while adopting a 'zeitgeist-capturing emergency-response model to biennial curation that is typically associated with Okwui Enwezor's documenta' (Weiner 2017). Indeed, while Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's documenta 13 constitutes the most recent notable case of decentring the institution since it used locations in Kabul, Alexandria, and Banff (in addition to Kassel) and examined the role of art in relation to crisis, it was Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 that signified 'the first truly postcolonial biennial to be held in one of the "centers" of the Western art field, taking up and working with this dissident understanding of non-Western art' (Marchart 2014: 269). Not only did documenta 11 begin a spatial decentralisation with its five platforms in Berlin, Vienna, New Delhi, St. Lucia, and Lagos, but it also inaugurated a thematic decentralisation in contemporary art at large by renouncing the supposed purity and autonomy of art and by embedding the exhibition in discourses that exceeded the realm of art pure and simple. It is not by coincidence that one of its five themes was 'Democracy Unrealised' (see Enwezor and Wallerstein 2002).

In many respects, from its foundation by Arnold Bode in 1955, documenta's mission has been to promote conversations and interexchange in contemporary art while

combating the spectres of fascism and nationalism that were still tangible in post-war Germany, and especially in Kassel, a city known for its arms industries and tank production plants during the Second World War. In fact, the first edition exhibited artworks by artists who had been ostracised by the Nazi regime since their work had been condemned as 'degenerate art'. Bode even refrained from calling documenta a proper institution since, in his eyes, it resembled more of a 'happening' as it dissolves and must be reinvented from scratch every five years. According to Bode, documenta 'does not belong to the Establishment either—in our opinion. Its importance is probably due to the fact that it does not exist as an established institution' (in Floyd 2017: 82).

However, as documenta grew bigger, what might be called its 'anti-institutional trajectory' of the 1960s was 'domesticated' and integrated into the art world in favour of lasting and reliable organisational foundations that would not only ensure the artistic director's unlimited freedom, but also meet the raising expectations of the art market and the culture of spectacle (Green and Gardner 2016: 39). For reasons that will become evident in the following sections, it is important to note that documenta formally became a public institution in 1959 when documenta GmbH, a non-profit limited liability company, was founded by the City of Kassel. It was later supported and co-financed by the State of Hesse and the German Federal Cultural Foundation.<sup>3</sup> Documenta GmbH was later transformed into 'documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH' and is being controlled by a shareholder meeting, a supervisory board, and an executive management committee.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For further details on the history of the institution of documenta see Antwort 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The supervisory board is comprised by five representatives of the City of Kassel, five representatives of the State of Hesse, two representatives of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, and a statutory chairman who is the Mayor of Kassel.



**Figure 2.2.** Museum Fridericianum, where Arnold Bode exhibited 670 artworks in 1955, during the first documenta. Photograph by Heinz K. S., licensed under CC BY 4.0 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fridericianum\\_und\\_Friedrichplatz\\_in\\_Kassel\\_w%C3%A4hrend\\_der\\_documenta\\_14.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fridericianum_und_Friedrichplatz_in_Kassel_w%C3%A4hrend_der_documenta_14.jpg)).

As the institution of documenta was redefining its structure and organising principles, it was also establishing itself as an international brand that produces financial and cultural capital in its own right. The massive increase in its budget, augmented by additional financial support from private bodies, sponsors, and the ‘international friends of documenta’ (a private group of patrons of art), is exemplified by the 30.6 million Euros budget of documenta 13 and its 904,000 paying visitors, not to mention the indirect revenue that it generates for the city of Kassel every five years.<sup>5</sup> In other words, documenta cannot but be perceived as inexorably interlinked with the sphere of the economy since culture, under conditions of late capitalism, ceases to be a superstructural phenomenon but takes

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<sup>5</sup> 46% of documenta’s total budget was derived from admission tickets and catalogue sales, 34% was covered by public funding, and 20% was provided by sponsors and private donors.

up the role of an 'industry', an essential feature to the operation of capital.<sup>6</sup> In fact, documenta has been correlated with the economic sphere from its very foundation, as it constituted an attempt to breathe new life into the devastated and destroyed to the ground city of Kassel (after the allied forces' bombing in the Second World War) through a project of cultural revitalisation.

And while Enwezor's documenta 11 inaugurated the institution's more decolonised, decentralised, and international phase, it also consolidated documenta as a 'hegemonic machine', a powerful apparatus that comes 'with material infrastructure, economic resources and the power to define and redefine the artistic canon' and can mediate between the local, the national, and the translational (Marchart 2014: 273). In this sense, decentring a hegemonic institution like documenta can, not only play a crucial role in the decentralisation of the West and the legitimisation of certain decolonisation struggles, but can also generate significant financial impact by fostering city branding and strengthening the tourism industry of cities or regions previously deemed 'peripheral'.<sup>7</sup> However, the proliferation of biennials also reflects 'the spread of transnational capital and imperialist politics associated with globalised neoliberalism' (Green and Gardner 2016: 3).

Another crucial point that might help us gain better insights into the inner mechanisms of documenta and the critique that ensued after the splitting of the 14<sup>th</sup> edition in two halves is that although it was presented to be entirely Szymczyk's decision, this is only half the story. In fact, four years prior to every iteration the

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<sup>6</sup> This understanding of art less as comprising a superstructural phenomenon, which is determined and secondary, according to the traditional Marxist view, than as a complex system of circulation, production, and consumption that has fully integrated into capitalism's cultural industries (hence, comprising a part of the economic base of capitalism) owes a lot to the analyses of Fredric Jameson (1991; 2000) and Guy Debord (1977; 1990), among others.

<sup>7</sup> According to Marchart (2014: 264), the phenomenon of 'biennialisation' should not only be understood as solely stemming from economic globalisation, but also from the impetus to foreground certain decolonial struggles, 'which certainly did not end with the era of decolonization (especially in the post-war era), but carried on for a long time afterwards, as many former colonies continued to strive, also symbolically, for emancipation'. For this reason, he attempts to rewrite the history of biennials from the periphery by including exhibitions like the São Paulo Biennale, the Triennale-India, the Havana Biennial, the Asia-Pacific Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, and the Johannesburg Biennale.

supervisory board appoints an eight-member international Finding Committee that is assigned the role of identifying potential candidates for the position of the artistic director of the next documenta. The 2013 Finding Committee, after intense preparatory meetings, contacted possible candidates and invited them to submit their written curatorial proposals. After thorough deliberation, numerous meetings, and personal interviews with the candidates, the members of the Committee recommended Polish curator Adam Szymczyk's proposal to the Supervisory Board, which concurred with the committee's proposal and appointed him as the artistic director of documenta 14 on November 22, 2013. At the press conference announcing the appointment, Bertram Hilgen, the Lord Mayor of Kassel and Chairman of documenta's Supervisory Board, argued that the responsibility for this decision lies entirely on the Finding Commission, with the City and State having no say.

One must start discerning by now that documenta does not constitute a monolithic entity and a homogenous institution, but is rather composed of diverse stakeholders with possible competing or even contrasting interests. For instance, following the unprecedented decision of the Finding Committee to accept Szymczyk's proposal to split the exhibition in half, it soon became evident that the inertia of the institution did not allow it to act in a full-scale manner away from its hometown, and operational difficulties repeatedly compromised the unfolding of the exhibition on an equal footing in both cities.<sup>8</sup> In Szymczyk's words (2017: 21), 'it took two years of effort by all the documenta 14 workers, under enormous internal and external pressure, to secure an acknowledgement of the equal importance of both iterations of documenta 14'. In many ways, not only were there financial and political stakes imbricated in the decision to split the exhibition, but the rigid self-preservation mechanism of the institution was kicking back.

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<sup>8</sup> According to several accounts, although Szymczyk's proposal clearly stated his intention to split the exhibition (and budget) in half, the initial budget allocated to the two legs of the exhibition did not support such an endeavour by favouring considerably the German leg.

These multifaceted dimensions of the institution help to elucidate the battles that took place at the level of discourse with a multiplicity of official stakeholders arguing with each other to hegemonise the narrative of the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration. For instance, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, during his visit to Greece in 2016, stated that documenta could build an ‘artistic bridge’ between Germany and Greece. For his part, Athens Mayor Giorgios Kaminis characterised the hosting of the exhibition as a gift for the city and as an opportunity to stimulate tourism in Athens, as Aegean Airlines, the Greek flag carrier airline that became the main sponsor of the exhibition was announcing direct flights between Kassel and Athens for the duration of the show. Szymczyk did not endorse the implicit instrumentalisation of the exhibition, stating that ‘documenta 14 is not an ambassador of any one nation, or interest group’ (Documenta 14 2015). He argued that ‘documenta must be considered an autonomous, commonly owned, transnational and inclusive, self-organised artistic undertaking—one that is carried out by *a multitude*, and not limited to any location in particular’ (Szymczyk 2017: 41, my emphasis). In this sense, documenta constitutes not only a split institution comprised of competing interests, but also a site of ideological struggle where art, politics, and the economic sphere are intimately intertwined.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, many critics, activists, and theorists did not share Szymczyk’s optimistic perspective and received the arrival of the ‘hegemonic machine’ of documenta in the crisis-stricken city with scepticism and criticism. These concerns were voiced most intensely by the outspoken critic of the EU Yanis Varoufakis, co-founder of DiEM25 and ex-Greek Minister of Finance who resigned after the 2015 referendum. Varoufakis provocatively argued that ‘when Documenta comes here and talks about neoliberalism with no mention of Deutsche Bank, Société Générale, the awful Troika process, the Eurogroup, etc., it is choosing to be irrelevant’ (Varoufakis and Fokianaki 2017). As he observed, the critique of neoliberalism adopted by the organisers of documenta missed the point spectacularly, since what the Troika had been practising

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<sup>9</sup> As it has been argued thus far, major art institutions not only become attractive sites for state, corporate, and private funding since they can confer legitimacy, public acceptability, and even foster branding, but can also be mobilised to fulfil diverse political agendas.

in countries like Greece was ‘punitive illiberalism’. In that sense, this ‘postmodern version of gunboat diplomacy’ that took place in Greece (and in other countries in debt) exceeds the logic of neoliberal structural adjustment and rather resembles an economic war waged by bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup> He even went so far as to argue that the discourse of Documenta ignored the authoritarian German-led policies since ‘such a “discovery” would risk upsetting Documenta’s sponsors, who remain untouched by the (irrelevant) off-the-shelf critique of neoliberalism’ (Varoufakis and Fokianaki 2017).

Varoufakis’s harsh criticism aside, it seems more difficult these days for Documenta to reconcile, at least at first glance, its leftist anti-institutional origins with its current rigid organisational structure and its dependency on an event-culture economy without falling into the pitfall of perpetuating the cultural logic of late capitalism. For instance, one might find it counter-intuitive to hear the organisers’ anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse from within an institution funded by a 37 million euros budget and financed by the City of Kassel, the State of Hessen, the German Federal Cultural Foundation, and the German Foreign Office, with additional sponsorship from the Sparkassen-Finanzgruppe (a Savings Banks Finance Group that is the largest financial group in Europe) and Volkswagen (the largest automobile manufacturer in Europe).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it might seem striking for a mega-institution, on the one hand, to acknowledge that our lives are increasingly subjected to all-pervasive institutional bodies and apparatuses of power that ‘serve nation-states, coloniality, and capital—all political, judicial, disciplinary, educational, medical, military, economic, cultural, and myriad other dispositifs designed to control our bodies’, and on the other, conceive its role as one ‘of exposing these techniques of governance and confronting them with an unlimited array of techniques of the embodied self’ (Szymczyk and Latimer 2017: 675). In addition, many commentators became suspicious when a famous German-based cultural institution, a ‘hegemonic machine’, decided to

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<sup>10</sup> According to Varoufakis, it is a ruthless strategy of subjugating peoples and governments by weaponising the unsustainability of their debt and an extractive process that allows creditors to get their hands on every available resource and asset (airports, ports, real estate, etc.) of the country to pay back the German and French banks.

<sup>11</sup> A budget that was subsequently revised up by almost 20% as we will see in the next sections.

operate in a city without asking the host.<sup>12</sup> These criticisms were further exacerbated since this decentring was performed within the context of a power asymmetry between the two countries that would make it nearly impossible for such a move to be reciprocated or to take place in the opposite direction. Responding to these critiques, Szymczyk, in one of his interviews to the Greek media, argued (in Antwnopoulos 2016, my translation):

The contradictions and the dead ends of our contemporary culture have reached a critical stage. The best we can do now is to use the existing structures to change things from the inside. No one will ever unconditionally offer us a perfectly neutral, politically correct structure with the calibre of documenta, which could allow us to actually do something with it. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be given such an infrastructure, so we can either decide not to get our hands dirty and kindly decline the offer [...] or we can take action.

Indeed, Szymczyk seemed aware of the obvious contradictions of the project. Hence, for documenta's organisers, decentring was conceived as a methodology in itself in order to not only throw light on the institution's rigid organisational constitutions, but also expose 'how near impossible it is to realise a project that aims at making a political statement from within the organisational structure and constrained position of a state-subsidised cultural institution' (Szymczyk 2017: 22). However, while embarking on an imminent critique of the institution by decentring it was admirable, the simple fact of acknowledging its inner contradictions did not make them magically disappear. One has, thus, to further delve into these very contradictions between the 'exhibitionary' discourse production and the institutional apparatuses from which the discourse emanates by turning to the methodologies and tools deployed, the engagement with the host-city, and the voices that surfaced from documenta 14's landing in Athens.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, the first meetings with potential Athenian collaborators took place in December 2013 and March 2014 at Café Avissinia in Athens, i.e., after Szymczyk had already been appointed as artistic director of d14.

### 2.3 Methodologies of (Un)learning and the Politics of Otherness

I think that we were very careful to try to show a lot of works by artists coming from very different paradigms of making on the artists' terms [...] Artists who understood the importance of the colonial organisation of the world, which included Indigenous artists but not because of ethnographic curiosity, but because they experience the persistence or aftermath of colonial policy.<sup>13</sup>

Monika Szewczyk,

Member of the documenta 14 Curatorial Team

One of the exhibition's main topics was to investigate what happens when you take a certainty, a monolithic entity—the same analogy can be used for a state, a party, or a policy—and you deconstruct it, you shake it to its foundations.<sup>14</sup>

Marina Fokidis,

Curatorial Advisor of documenta 14

The axiomatic principles of 'Learning from Athens' were premised upon an overarching tripartite—but intrinsically intertwined—methodological core. Firstly, the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration of documenta decided to diverge from the tacit rule that the exhibition is supposed to last 100 days—this is why documenta is normally referred to as the 'museum of 100 days'—and organised instead a twofold iteration, almost doubling the duration of the event.<sup>15</sup> In this way, documenta 14 attempted to turn itself into a more open-ended process and a continuum of practices of aesthetic, social, and political experimentation, including programmes, events, and pedagogical activities that predated and exceeded the actual exhibition dates. For instance, as demonstrated in the next chapter, the Parliament of Bodies, documenta 14's public

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<sup>13</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 28/2/2018, 00:15:20).

<sup>14</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 12/3/2018, 00:05:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>15</sup> Document 14's first iteration was held in Athens from April 8 to July 16, 2017 and the second iteration was held in Kassel from June 10 to September 17, 2017.

programme, inaugurated its programme six months before the opening of the Athenian leg of the exhibition.

Secondly, decentring the exhibition to Athens was inexorably interlinked with the notion of *unlearning*, one of the key curatorial motifs and core methodologies of the educational programme. Hence, juxtaposing two locations that seemed to represent diverging cultures, political circumstances, and economic conditions served as a means to deconstruct dichotomies, like West/East, North/South, creditor/debtor, and tradition/contemporaneity. This also aligned with the organisers' intention to flatten top-down models and deconstruct hierarchies between visitors and organisers, audiences and artists. It also echoed the Rancièrian (2011: 12) understanding that oppositions like viewing/knowing, speaking/listening, activity/passivity 'are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly defined terms' and are rather 'embodied allegories of inequality'.<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, as documenta 14 set out to unlearn and challenge preconceived taxonomies, schemata, roles, and identities, it also embarked on a venture to excavate the minor and the silenced by retrieving and foregrounding Indigenous practices from around the world as a potential emancipatory terrain for the subversion of the dominant order—and all that without perpetuating the fetishisation or the exoticisation of the Other. In one of the few instances where the artistic director presented documenta 14's methodological impetus, he writes, 'by bringing Indigenous practices and techniques of knowledge from all over the world, via Athens, to Kassel and elsewhere, we aim to question this very supremacist, white and male, nationalist, colonialist way of being and thinking that continues to construct and dominate the world order' (Szymczyk 2017: 30).

This 'call' to unlearn what one assumes as true does not constitute an unprecedented exhibition concept, but rather testifies to the close engagement of d14's curatorial team with current trends in postcolonial theory and a commitment

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<sup>16</sup> For a rare account of Ranciè's pedagogy (and his attack on educational and sociological theories that, according to him, perpetuate inequalities) see Ranciè 1991.

to extend the decolonising lineage that Enwezor's documenta 11 inaugurated.<sup>17</sup> As Head of Education, Sepake Angiama observed, there is a great potentiality that goes hand in hand with great responsibility in reassembling the institution of documenta from scratch and turning it into a 'learning institution that attempts to flatten the hierarchies between the exhibition, publication, public programme, and education' (Sepake et al. 2018: 17).<sup>18</sup> To do so, documenta 14 had to deconstruct the dominant grand narratives and venture into the 'minor' and the seemingly unspectacular, to shift its subject position 'through intimacy, vulnerability, and questioning', and 'to place itself in an awkward position in order to learn, listen to the unheard, think from the periphery, drift in and out of the center, find new alignments, and become a student again' (Sepake et al. 2018: 21). To start unravelling the politics and ethics, as well as the potentialities and stakes embedded in the learning *from* and *against* the Other one has to turn, at least briefly, to some of the artists themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> In this sense, documenta 14's didactic impetus seems to be drawing from a wide variety of references, ranging from innovative pedagogical-artistic methodologies, like Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (see Freire 1993) to the decolonial discourse of theorists like Gayatri Spivak (1988) and to Walter Dignolo's engagement with questions of otherness, indigeneity, and the subaltern (see Dignolo and Tostanova 2012). In addition, one must also draw attention to the explicitly Foucauldian language, especially in relation to alterity and the politics of otherness, employed in the self-presentation of documenta 14 (see also Foucault 1977b; 1980, Rabinow 1991, Dews 1984, Elden 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Documenta 14's educational department was titled 'aneducation' and had as one of its main tasks to develop tour guides or 'chorus walks' (inspired by the chorus of Greek tragic theatre) through which visitors could explore, engage, and interact with artworks.



**Figure 2.3.** Beau Dick, 'Atlakim', 1990-2012, EMST, Athens, Greece. Photographs by the author.

Amongst a number of exhibited Indigenous artists, Beau Dick (Kwakwaka'wakw, 1955–2017) occupied a prominent place, since he had recently fabricated a full set of colourful Atlakim and Undersea World masks that were arranged in circular formations—one facing inwards towards each other, and one facing outwards towards the room, respectively—occupying the ground floor of one of the exhibition's main venues, the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens (EMST). However, the world-renowned carver, activist, and hereditary chief from a small Dzawada'enux village in Canada, only agreed to include the masks in *documenta 14* on the condition that they would be performed serving their secular and spiritual function.<sup>19</sup> As curator Candice Hopkins (citizen of the Carcross/Tagish First Nation) observes, in Dick's hands, masks do not abide by the conventions, commodity status, and surplus value production that are so deeply entrenched in the contemporary art world. Instead, they are believed to be animate beings and spiritual entities, meant to be ceremonially burned at the artist's memorial potlatch after the exhibition's closing to keep them alive and renew the responsibility to carve new sets of masks.

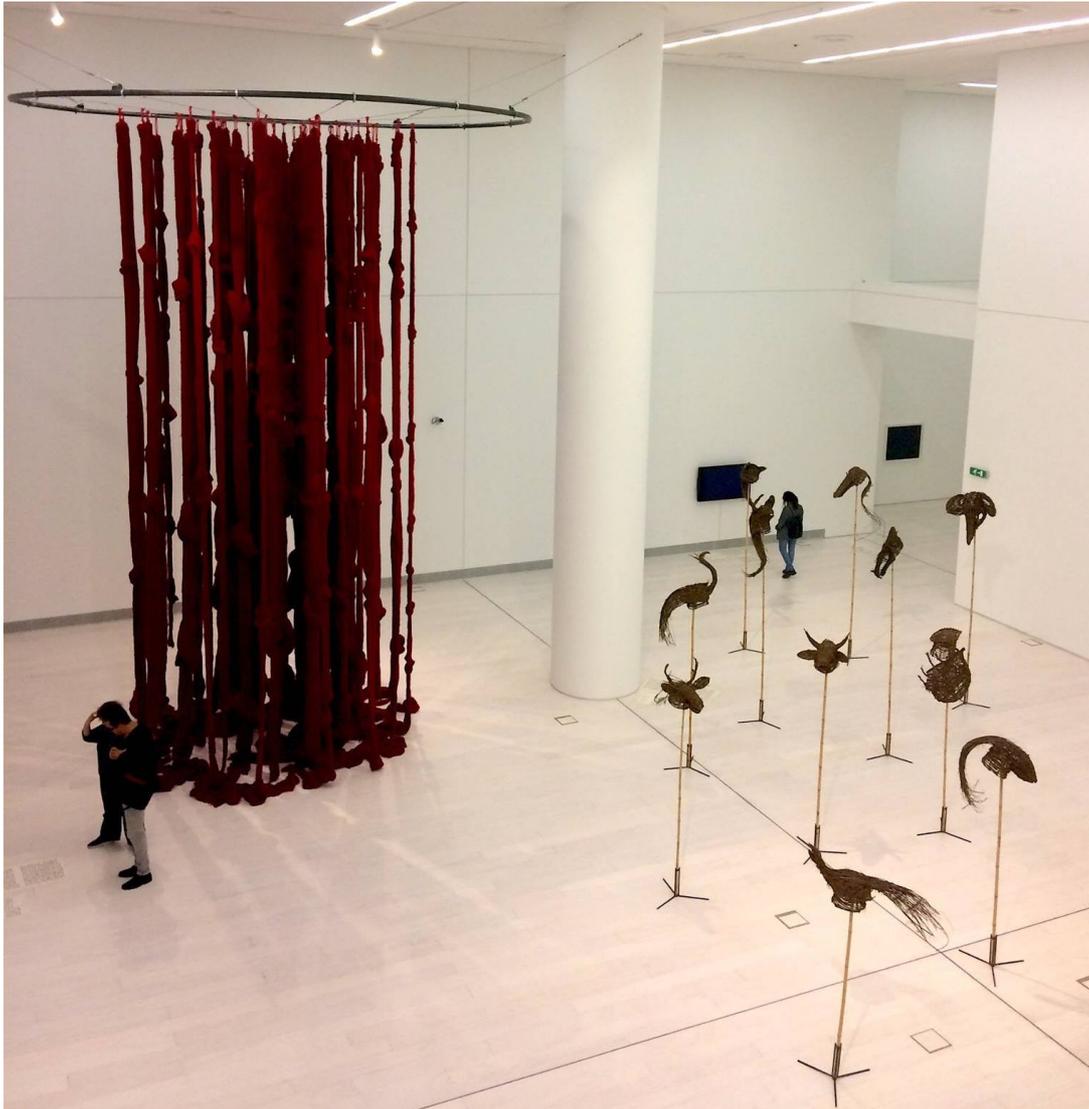
<sup>19</sup> While Beau Dick passed on March 2017 (just before the Athenian opening), his apprentices Alan Hunt (Kwaguł-Tlingit) and Cole Speck (Kwakwaka'wakw) honoured his wish and performed the Undersea ceremony in Athens in front of a small but enchanted audience.

In that sense, Dick's practice can serve as an impetus 'to uncivilise in order to unleash the potential in other economic systems, in Indigenous social contracts, in Native understanding of debt, wealth, reciprocity, and healing', embodying a form of resistance to settler colonialism and extractive capitalism that are based on notions of privately owned property, productivity maximisation, and acquisition of resources (Hopkins 2017: 248-249).<sup>20</sup>

On the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the same building, one would see the impressive 1895 black and white photographs of anthropologist Franz Boas, whose work first introduced the cultures of the Indigenous First Nations of the Western coast of British Columbia (including the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples) to the West. Boas (see 1940) not only introduced the concept of cultural relativism but was also one of the main opponents of the then-popular ideologies of scientific racism and eugenics, arguing that it is the scientist's responsibility to combat myths of racial purity and superiority. In addition, in EMST one would find thirty-two photographs of Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli who tackled issues of occupation, borders, territorial politics, and memory; the flags and maps of the Sámi Artist Group who attempted to reconstruct the history of the Nordic countries from a Sámi perspective; and a film by the Congolese artist Sammi Baloji who connected the process by which copper is drawn into wire from semi-liquid ingots with the role of the church in the colonial enterprise in Africa.

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<sup>20</sup> For more about Beau Dick's practice see Hopkins in Szymczyk and Latimer 2017. For potlatch as a means for postcolonial survival see Hopkins 2016.



**Figure 2.4.** Indigenous artists' works: *Quipu Mapocho* (2016) by Chilean Cecilia Vicuña and *Preah Kunlong* by Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang, EMST. Photograph by the author.

This list of Indigenous artists who were included in the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration of documenta is by no means exhaustive and rather testifies to the organisers' conviction that there is great political potential in releasing other knowledges that are 'specific, minor, repressed, Indigenous' since they can provide 'means of resistance, antidotes, cures' (Szymczyk in DMello 2018). According to the artistic director, 'artists may show us a way toward "learning to learn from below"', invoking Gayatri Spivak (Szymczyk 2017: 33). This also reflected the curators' attempt to foreground 'entire modes of living and cosmologies that are being suppressed by colonial hegemony' and Indigenous objects that are imbued with spiritual and animistic attributes and hence oppose the

commodity form.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, documenta 14's ambition to revisit the notion of alterity and redefine Otherness seemed to be bringing back in full force debates that were prevalent in art and cultural studies of the 1990s, revolving around such questions as anthropology's complicity in the colonial enterprise, multiculturalism and rhetorics of 'authenticity', the deconstruction of Western epistemologies and the persistence of tradition.<sup>22</sup> However, it also revived the same critiques that have been raised since then, namely, 'the indignity of speaking for others' (Deleuze and Foucault 1977: 209), the fear of tokenisation, commodification, and exoticism of the Other, as well as 'the danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of "ideological patronage"' (Foster 1995: 303).

In this respect, Foster's 1995 seminal essay, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', remains pertinent today since he traces the rise of ethnography in Western art. In broad strokes, Foster (1995: 302, original emphasis) challenged the prevalent assumption in the advanced leftist art of the time 'that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, that this site is always located *elsewhere*, in the field of the other', meaning the oppressed postcolonial and the subaltern. He also repudiated the claim 'this other is always *outside*, and more, that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture' (Foster 1995: 302, original emphasis). It is only a primitivist fantasy and a projection on behalf of the artist to assume that the subaltern and cultural other retains a transgressive potentiality and access to a primal, archaic, unruly, and 'other than reason' force that modernity has forsaken and needs to be now unleashed. It can also have grave implications for politics, since in a moment when the expansion of multinational capitalism has made almost redundant the geopolitical demarcations between centre and periphery, a notion of pure outsidership can no longer be valid and 'a projection of politics as other and outside may detract from a politics of here and now' (Foster 1995: 304).

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<sup>21</sup> Monika Szewczyk, interview quote (interview date: 28/2/2018, 00:35:20).

<sup>22</sup> See for example *Magiciens de la terre*, one of the first truly international art exhibitions, which took place in 1989 in Centre George Pompidou and la Villette in Paris, addressing questions like the perpetuation of a colonialist and ethnocentric mentality in Western exhibitions. *Magiciens de la terre* can be juxtaposed with 'Primitivism' in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York that according to many critics ended aesthetising the work of native cultures.

One must assume that documenta 14's organisers were fully aware of how pertinent and persistent these questions remain when they attempted a dual paradigm shift: on the one hand, to declare Athens—which served as an open signifier and a metaphor for the Global South—as a potential point of subversion of the Western dominant culture, and on the other, to reconfigure Otherness in a more expanded formulation that included Indigenous peoples, the stateless and refugees, queer and transgender identities, and contemporary radical left movements. This more capacious conceptualisation of political Otherness was predominantly elaborated by Preciado, who represented the theoretical arsenal of the exhibition, and who, drawing from Butler, set out to establish a chain of equivalence on the basis of precarity (see Butler 2012, Butler and Athanasiou 2013).<sup>23</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, for Preciado, both the exhibition and the Parliament of Bodies, attempted to 'claim to animality, queerness, crippledness, monstrosity, southernness, blackness as modes of resistance during the era of techno-patriarchal-military capitalism' (documenta 14 2016).

In sharp contrast to a substantialisation of otherness, to a normalisation of otherness that is being carefully curated, tamed, and exhibited, as well as to a stereotypical otherness which 'is not relational otherness but otherness captured in the taxonomies of dominant roles', for Rancière, otherness does not refer to the excluded, or unrepresented, but to anybody whoever (Stavrides 2016: 75). In other words, the democratic method, according to Rancière (2010: 59), entails 'the political invention of the Other or the heteron; that is the political process of subjectivation, which continually creates "newcomers"', allowing a multiplicity of voices to surface and asserting the equal power of anyone and everyone. This is why, despite the cultural and political potentialities that were unarguably opened up from this dual paradigm shift, the framing of the exhibition as a wish 'to (un)learn from', denoting a relation predicated upon a distance, a gap, and an asymmetry between

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<sup>23</sup> This is Laclau and Mouffe's concept of *chain of equivalence*, the expansive power of the equations of identity that gives rise to unified hegemonic blocks and concretises the collective counter-hegemonic struggle towards democratic politics and agonistic pluralism.

the observant and the observer, the apprentice and the teacher, hastened many to make some poignant critiques. Some critics argued that Preciado's chain of equivalence, coupled with the privileged position that this constructed Other is assigned, only perpetuated the reproduction of a series of moral dipoles. According to these critics, 'the risk described by Foster came true once again: victimisation of the Other, anthropological exoticism, ethnographic conceit, claims of expertise on matters of gender, and a kind of cultural arrogance, not to mention the notion of "ideological patronage" or narcissistic self-fashioning' (Tramboulis and Tzirtzilakis 2018: 5). Fokianaki, for her part, raised the fear that nominating the Global South as a privileged point of subversion conveys a didactic tone and 'can become a grouping of the Other, thus generating a continuation of "othering"' (Varoufakis and Fokianaki 2017). Indeed, as Dimitrakaki (2012: 313) argues, even when an exhibition attempts to render visible artistic gestures as acts of resistance, 'the exhibition form is inherently predisposed to undermine and tame—or else "manage"—radical forms of art under capital's global rule'.

Whereas d14 was bound to face these criticisms since whenever international mega-exhibitions endeavour to tackle such general problematics they risk 'exoticising' and 'grouping' otherness or 'essentialising' and 'objectifying' Indigenous artists, it made a convincing case that addressing decolonisation is both urgent and necessary. Indeed, unrestrained global capital expansion is most evidently manifested today in the violence against Indigenous peoples and in the ecological violence and environmental destruction of native lands. At the same time, battles for reparations for colonialism, the restitution of Indigenous lands, and the repatriations of cultural property and stolen artefacts still remain unresolved. Indeed, highlighting the nexus between settler-colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, critics have argued that 'invasion is a structure and not an event' (Wolfe 2006: 388) and that 'settler colonial formations are *territorially acquisitive in perpetuity*' (Coulthard 2014: 125, original emphasis). In this respect, documenta 14 curator Candice Hopkins was right to claim that we still have a long road 'for the West to want to be healed from the crimes of imperialism, colonial expansion, resource extraction and cultural genocide' (Hopkins 2017: 239). As we will see in Chapter 4, these critical conversations are taking place

in major cultural institutions around the world and reflect the necessity of pursuing decolonisation processes in exhibitions, collections, and educational models revolving around the transmission of art.

In this sense, one should see 'Learning from Athens' as an additional step in the process of dismantling Eurocentrism and a testament to the commitment to further pursue the decolonisation of the institution of documenta itself. One can only pay homage to an exhibition that was organised by a diverse and decentralised team that instead of solely focusing on already well-established artists from the commercial galleries' circuits, provided a prominent platform for a number of Indigenous, non-white, and dissident artists from regions that are still underrepresented in major art events, without making them, at least to a significant extent, picturesque or exotic.<sup>24</sup> One should also acknowledge that d14 succeeded, at least to a larger extent than its recent predecessors, in resisting the art market's thirst for newly commissioned, easy-to-consume, entertaining, and spectacular artworks. It focused instead on intangible and ephemeral practices (such as performances, testimonies, documentations, and archival works) and on artists who are inexorably interconnected with textiles and the land (like Cecilia Vicuña), and whose work revolves around social practices (e.g., Rick Lowe). However, d14, despite its best intentions, did not manage to avoid certain pitfalls.

One of the main curatorial decisions was to avoid extended commentary and explanatory texts, which can be characterised as both an 'ethical imperative' to allow artists to represent themselves on their own terms and a tactic to prevent narratives from being turned into symbolic capital and being sucked up by the market. This was encapsulated in the conspicuous absence of contextualisation for the artworks that was limited to papyrus-like floor texts (instead of the traditional

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<sup>24</sup> Indigenous artists who participated in documenta 14 include: Britta Marakatt-Labba, Hans Ragnar Mathisen, Synnøve Persen, and Maret Anne Sara (Sàmi), Gordon Hookey (Waanyi), Māori artist Nathan Pohio, Abel Rodríguez (Nonuya), Marilou Schultz (Diné), Ojibwe artist Rebecca Belmore, Beau Dick (Kwakwaka'wakw), and Postcommodity (Raven Chacon [Navajo], Cristobal Martinez [Chicano], and Kade L. Twist [Cherokee Nation]), Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang, and Antonio Vega Macotela (Mexican), among many others. For the importance of indigeneity at documenta 14 and its role in decolonising the Western art canon see Ferber 2017.

wall texts and the customary exhibition guide or catalogue), to marble labels on top of them with the artists' names, and to a one-page dedication in the exhibition's daybook. This was coupled with the overarching curatorial strategy of refraining from providing a straightforward and coherent curatorial narration as 'a way of modelling complexity and tensions'.<sup>25</sup> Whereas a clear curatorial concept would necessitate bringing a plurality of artists from different backgrounds under a common denominator and suppressing the singular, the personal, and whatever does not fit under rigid categorisations, the exhibition followed a different path. 'Rather than one narration', according to Szymczyk 'the exhibition materialised as a dispersed multitude of rituals of the oppressed', it multiplied the exhibition's main narrative lines, it fostered polyphony, and created a 'fragile complexity of voices' (in DMello 2018).

Although refraining from accessorising artworks by explanatory material can foster the impetus of 'unlearning' and can 'urge the visitor to actively put effort to decipher them', such a strategy, at least in my eyes, only ended up weakening the political potentialities of the exhibition.<sup>26</sup> When objects, practices, or even subjectivities are abstracted from their original code and displayed in sterilised white cube environments, they enter the realm of semiotic production and become vulnerable to being imbued and recuperated by the exhibition's broader discourse. If the necessary contextualisation is not provided by the exhibition's primary technologies of display (display texts, labels, catalogues, etc.), then they are inevitably reinscribed in the secondary discourse of the exhibition (curatorial statements, journalists' reviews, etc.).<sup>27</sup> In the case of documenta 14, the articulation of a multiplicity of voices risked being read as footnotes to the exhibitions' larger and overly ambitious political claims, as fragments in a collection of postcolonial narratives, and as an assemblage of testimonies that consolidated the exhibition's intention to foster an unbridled and unrestrained pluralism.

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<sup>25</sup> Monika Szweczyk, interview quote (interview date: 28/2/2018, 00:54:10).

<sup>26</sup> Marina Fokidis, interview quote (interview date: 12/3/2018, 00:45:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>27</sup> For a good overview of the implementation of discourse analysis in visual culture see Rose 2001.

Instead of the construction of a pluralistic otherness, what was missing from the exhibition were the more refined methodological tools and the concrete critical practices of listening that would allow a multiplicity of disparate artistic traditions, minor struggles, and dissident voices to be accessible to the general and uninitiated audience. Not only should it have provided more exhibition information and discursive material to illuminate these voices' distinct particularities, but it should have also facilitated the transition from an aesthetic capturing of context-dependent instances of domination to their inscription into recent social movements and into the broader political sphere. In the same vein, what also remained underdeveloped in the exhibition were the necessary transmission tools and translation mechanisms that would allow a multiplicity of practices to establish a common ground with one another and forge possible interconnections, intersections, and even alliances.<sup>28</sup> After all, as Rancière (2011: 22) reminds us, 'an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators'. Such connections, for instance between an Indigenous First Nation artist and a Sámi artistic collective, cannot be taken for granted, since they are dependent upon a translative project and the establishment of the necessary equivalential links. More importantly, what was conspicuously absent from the exhibition was any explicit reference to the environmental catastrophe, climate destruction, and mass extinction that we are facing today. Disparate decolonial narratives and Indigenous aesthetic investigations addressing (at least implicitly) climate change and the interconnections between imperialism, nature, and capitalism could have been interlinked with one another or even anchored in a common thread that reflects the politics of the here and now.

In this sense, if documenta were to play its radical part as a *counter-hegemonic machine*, it should have linked 'the local to the global within the field of symbolic struggles for legitimisation' (Marchart 2014: 263). Perhaps this could have been achieved by departing from the impulse to represent (since representation often degenerates to spectacle and the commodity form) and by clearly articulating a

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<sup>28</sup> Such an endeavour of movement building and of formulating concrete strategies of action was the formation of 'societies' as part of the Public Programme. As we shall see in the next chapter, the attempt was only short-lived.

decolonial anti-capitalist political ecology. This becomes even more imperative, especially since some of the exhibited Indigenous artists (like Beau Dick) had been actively involved in activist environmental movements and since many Indigenous peoples around the world are leading the struggle to protect their lands against colonialist expansion, resource extraction, and oil infrastructural projects (e.g., the Standing Rock encampment in opposition to the Dakota Access pipeline).<sup>29</sup> Hence, such a thread could have served a double role, not only identifying and connecting local struggles for legitimisation, but also functioning as a demarcation line between potential allies and enemies, expressing a commitment to the inherent divisions and antagonisms that permeate any social order, totality, and identity position. In this respect, it could have accentuated the fact that there is no inherent radicality in ‘indigeneity’, exposing in this way essentialising and reductive accounts that equate the ‘authentically indigenous’ with the ‘innovatively political’. Indeed, since such ongoing divisions run deep even in Beau Dick’s homeland (between anti-pipeline and pro-pipeline Indigenous-led coalitions), documenta missed the chance to refute once and for all the quest for an ‘impossible place’, for a ‘transformative alterity’, and for ‘a subject of history’ that has automatic access to some kind of privileged truth and inherent subversive radicality.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, such an attempt to establish a common thread could have illuminated certain contradictions between the exhibition’s assemblage of decolonial narratives and its diverse political impetuses, providing an opportunity to refine and even bridge its theoretical presuppositions and analytical tools. For instance, it remains unclear how the Indigenous decolonial aesthetics predicated on concepts of rootedness, belonging, tradition, and land ethics can be reconciled with a diverse,

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, Beau Dick had been involved in two major activist interventions. In February 2013, inspired by the activist movement Idle No More, Dick walked to British Columbia and broke a copper named Nunmgala in front of the BC Legislative Assembly and in the presence of three thousand people. In similar action in 2014, Dick broke copper in front of the Parliament Hill in Ottawa, as a call against colonialism and capitalism.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the recent controversy amongst Indigenous peoples that ensued the announcement of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to approve the expansion of the Trans Mountain oil pipeline. On the one hand, there were several pro-pipeline Indigenous-led coalitions that were competing for a stake in the project (like the Whispering Pines/Clinton Indian Band) and on the other, there were anti-pipeline groups (like the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation) that were arguing that the project would endanger the ecosystems of the inlet at the foot of the reserve.

anti-identitarian, nomadic, and ever-changing parliament of bodies advocated by Preciado's programme. Such an equivalential link can be tested only in practice, as one cannot predefine and predetermine that all egalitarian and progressive struggles can align with one another. And while Szymczyk (2017: 32) made a clear-cut distinction between 'the old world' which 'is based on concepts of belonging, identity, and rootedness' and 'our world, ever new' which 'will be one of radical subjectivities', other curators, like Hopkins (2017: 244), went to great lengths to unravel the multifaceted connotations that land has for Indigenous people, since it provides the basis for language, ceremony, and their very being. In her own words, 'this sensibility is shared across Indigenous territories. To the extent that land becomes the basis for subjectivity, and in turn, for resistance' (Hopkins 2017: 244). Such a critical investigation was only undertaken by Gene Ray in his *South* essay, which discerned the limits of critical theory to open up to Indigenous knowledges because of its reflexes to attack any notion of belonging or special bond to a land as a racialised or fascist spectre.<sup>31</sup> He argued instead for the need to develop analytical tools and find a way to integrate 'some version of land ethic' and 'an ethic and politics of reciprocity' that would include more-than-human communities to any contemporary emancipatory movement (Ray 2016: 128).

Lastly, since a methodology of (un)learning seems to be inevitably bound to an ethos of self-reflection, it would be useful to return to Spivak, who advocated for a persistent and repeated process of 'undoing', a critical pedagogy that would deconstruct binary schemata by teasing out their complicity. In her own words, 'such a strategy of strategies must speak "from within" the emancipatory master narratives even while taking a distance from them. It must resolutely hold back from offering phantasmatic hegemonic nativist counternarratives that implicitly honor the historical withholding of the "permission to narrate"' (Spivak 1987). Admittedly, d14 took an important step in redistributing this 'permission to narrate' and in

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<sup>31</sup> He highlights four shortcomings of critical theory that need to be addressed: 'first, the taboo on the expression of emotion; second, a secret, persistent progressivism; third, an emphatic suspicion of place-based bonding; and fourth, the remnant anthropocentrism of a humanism that is still insufficiently self-critical. Together, these biases make it hard for critical theory to approach Indigenous knowledge with openness' (Ray 2016: 122).

decentring cultural authority with generous gestures of inclusion and pluralism, however, one should also acknowledge the fact that it still rested on the hegemonic institution to make the separation between what was made visible and what stayed invisible, between those who were granted the permission to talk and those who remained silenced or were spoken about. And since no act of inclusion, a priori, can ever be enough (as if inclusiveness were an end in itself), I would emphasise the necessity of teasing out the institution's complicity in both historical and present exclusions, and practising the act of listening to the voices that still cannot be heard but are nonetheless screaming for attention. As we shall see in the following sections, it was this sensibility and self-reflexive ethos that was lacking from documenta 14's presence in Athens.

#### **2.4 Public Institutions and Politics of Hospitality**

What happened under Szymczyk was more extended, since documenta did not operate through the usual gallery circuits but decided to work with institutions for the first time in its history and this is a great achievement [...] We never had in the history of documenta such an opening to institutions and this is why this is an unprecedented moment that creates new potentialities for documenta.<sup>32</sup>

Panos Charalambous  
Rector of ASFA

But EMST, thanks to its collaboration with documenta—and I am very glad that this collaboration developed and unfolded in this way and not as a 'gift'—accomplished a great deal both on the local context of Greece and at an international level [...] Through this partnership, the museum had the opportunity for a public exhibition and for the publicising of its collection.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 16/3/2018, 00:09:20, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>33</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 15/3/2018, 1:39:00, translated from Greek by the author).

Katerina Koskina,  
Former Director of EMST

While documenta's landing in Athens took place during an unprecedented time, when the implications of the austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions, the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, and worldwide upheavals most patently manifested in the 2015 refugee crisis were all reaching their peak, it also coincided with the rebirth of the local contemporary art scene. Being at the epicentre of this crisis and coupled with the institutional paralysis of the cultural sector had fuelled artistic sensitivity and stimulated numerous local initiatives that were experimenting with community-based projects, alternative forms of living, and efforts to recommon urban spaces. Against this backdrop, 'where "crisis" has rendered anything "made in Greece" more attractive to an international audience and where collaborative initiatives still flourish and the cost of living is low', the thriving Athenian art scene was attracting theorists, artists, independent curators, and cultural workers (Rikou and Yalouri 2017: 132).

It comes as no surprise that Athens had come under the spotlight of documenta 14's organisers, and of Szymczyk in particular, who had intimate knowledge both of the sociopolitical situation in Greece and of the local art scene. The autonomous spaces, the occupation of vacant buildings, and the solidarity networks between artists, activists, and refugees that had sprung up, like artists-run squats (see Tan 2019), prefigured different social bonds that were based on self-organisation and solidarity. These artistic and social experiments had had lasting effects on Szymczyk (2017: 32) who acknowledged that 'the move of documenta to Athens, in order to unlearn what we know, and not to give its people lessons, is meant to open up a space of possibility'. In fact, his successful curatorial proposal for d14, by his own admission, had been heavily influenced by *AGORA*, the 2013 iteration of the Athens Biennale, a private self-organised art exhibition that took place in the city's former Stock

Exchange building, which had been deserted for some time.<sup>34</sup> Szymczyk was inspired to such an extent by the horizontal, bottom-up, and DIY spirit of *AGORA*, involving over 30 curators, showcasing grassroots arts projects, and eschewing the mainstream commercial format of exhibition making, that he announced in a 2014 public conference the partnering of documenta 14 with the upcoming edition of the Athens Biennale.

Although d14's and the Athens Biennale's teams shared offices in Exarcheia, a neighbourhood infamous for its anarcho-leftist tradition, this collaboration did not come to fruition due to irreconcilable differences. In addition, as the situation on the ground and the living conditions were changing rapidly, it soon became manifest that the majority of the aforementioned grassroots and independent art initiatives were either in a state of precarity or had reached a point of exhaustion after attempting to sustain themselves for such an extended period. Against this backdrop, the organisers of documenta made a crucial strategic decision, namely, to collaborate only with Greek public institutions. This decision encapsulates the overall political impetus of the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration to deconstruct the institution of documenta while reinforcing publicly funded arts and cultural institutions in Greece. In this sense, while the public sector had been systematically underfunded and underappreciated during the previous decade (as a result of austerity measures and budget cuts), d14 brought back in full swing the debate over private versus public provision for the arts and cultural sector. This was also perceived as a statement that attempted to challenge the hegemony of the private sector, individual entrepreneurs, and corporate donors in the production, dissemination, consumption, and management of culture, jeopardising in that way its inexorably public or 'common' dimension.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Athens Biennale, from its first edition in 2007, entitled *DESTROY ATHENS*, had utilised a number of unoccupied and evacuated spaces, like deserted buildings from the 2004 Summer Olympics Games and the decaying Bageion Hotel in Omonoia Square (used in its 2017 iteration, entitled *OMONOIA*).

<sup>35</sup> For instance, one can indicatively note the role of private institutions like the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, the Onassis-Stegi Foundation, The Neon, and the DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art in the production and management of contemporary art, with the Greek state's cultural policies predominantly concentrated on the preservation of ancient Greek heritage.

And whereas Szymczyk shared his hope that documenta would raise awareness of ‘the importance not only of contemporary art but of cultural production in general, in the social and political sphere, and will make these issues the subject of public debate’, becoming ‘one model for resistance to the predictable neoliberal pattern—to which, at the moment, Greece is subject’, this strategic decision did not go uncontested (Szymczyk and Kuo 2017). Varoufakis lamented documenta, which according to him took advantage of Greek hospitality since it ‘did bring some resources from Germany but, overall, it has been an extractive process’ that sucked up every resource available for the local art scene (Varoufakis and Fokianaki 2017). Others alluded to the fact that Greek society has a complicated relationship with such state-funded institutions since they are perceived to be part of the ‘establishment’, representing corruption, moral and political austerity, and perpetuating the fetish of a national identity based on a glorified image of Ancient Greece. These remarks seem, at least from my perspective, to be missing the mark, especially in a city that was at the time the only European capital without a national museum of contemporary art and with so few resources dedicated to the arts that the only thing that could be offered to documenta was the use of empty buildings, as Mayor Kaminis made abundantly clear.<sup>36</sup>

Addressing the more political stakes of this decision, the strategic move to redirect the funds and resources of a mega-institution like documenta towards the underfunded and fragile Greek cultural institutions shows less an intention to play the benefactor who is offering ‘gifts’, but rather a threefold axiom that this thesis attempts to illustrate. Firstly, that anti-institutionality is a phantasmatic construct, holding ‘an outside position’ is an illusion, or, to invoke the institutional critique tradition, ‘[e]very time we speak of the “institution” as other than “us”, we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions’ (Fraser 2009: 416).

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<sup>36</sup> Except from the Aegean Airlines sponsorship, Mayor Kaminis, in a 2016 press conference, made it clear that the municipality had no resources to offer to d14 but buildings. Many buildings like the Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), the ERT headquarters, the Athens Municipality Arts Centre and Museum of Anti-dictatorial and Democratic Resistance, and the Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation, amongst others, were offered to documenta for free for the duration of the exhibition under the premise that documenta would deliver them back partly or fully renovated after the end of the exhibition.

Secondly, that institutions are not static and monolithic entities representing solely hegemonic interests, but dynamic arrangements that can be seized like any other social space, reformed, and even pushed towards radical ends. Thirdly, that any emancipatory struggle necessitates a critical engagement with institutional structures to build its own counter-power infrastructure. To invoke Dimitrakaki's essay once again, the possibility of changing the world without taking power, as per Holloway's vision (2003) who envisaged a revolution in the form of grassroots democracy, anti-politics of events, and oppositional self-organisation, seems much less convincing today, when 'the concept and role of the state [...] have been central to developments' (Dimitrakaki 2015: 181).

Thus, the institutional interlocutors of d14 in Athens consisted of neither private foundations nor the art market (e.g., galleries), but of no less than 45 cultural and educational institutions, archaeological sites, and public spaces instead, which are predominantly publicly funded.<sup>37</sup> As Preciado (2017a) put it, 'in conditions of war [...] the exhibition is understood as a public service, as an antidote against economic, political, and moral austerity.' In this respect, the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) encapsulated the largest stake of documenta 14 in Athens because of its troubled history. Although the museum was established in 2000, a small part of its collection was temporarily hosted in the Athens Concert Hall (Megaron) from 2003 to 2008 and then in the Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), until 2015 when EMST—its staff but not the actual collection—moved to its permanent home in the former Fix Brewery on Syngrou Avenue. The transformation of the old brewery into a new state-of-the-art museum had been underway since 2000, with multiple delays because of what had been characterised as 'a complex renovation process' that resulted in a total expenditure of 40 million euros, with its official inauguration repeatedly postponed, and with the final acceptance ceremony of the

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<sup>37</sup> Such cultural and educational institutions included: Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA), Benaki Museum (Pireos Street Annexe), the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Megaron (The Athens Concert Hall), Agricultural University of Athens, Archaeological Museum of Piraeus, Byzantine and Christian Museum (Gardens), Epigraphic Museum, Gennadius Library, Municipal Theatre of Piraeus, Museum of Islamic Art (Benaki Museum), National Archaeological Museum, Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika Gallery (Benaki Museum), Numismatic Museum, Polytechnion-Prevelakis Hall (National Technical University of Athens NTUA), Yannis Tsarouchis Foundation, and the Greek Film Archive (Tainiothiki).

building in 2016.<sup>38</sup> Most of its collection, comprised of Greek and international art from the post-war period to the present, had been in storage, marking a painful absence in the fabric of the city and perhaps partly explaining the problematic relationship of Greek society with contemporary art.

Since EMST could only make use of the building's temporary exhibition spaces and educational facilities, documenta organisers, upon their arrival in the city in 2014, came to an agreement with director Anna Kafetsi, appointed Director of EMST at the time, to host primarily educational activities along with a limited number of artworks for the upcoming exhibition. Her successor, director Katerina Koskina, renewed this agreement, although both parties were increasingly worried that the museum would not be fully operational to welcome guests. However, documenta was seeking additional climate/temperature/humidity-controlled galleries to accommodate its 160 artists, and the 6-story and 18,142 square meter building of EMST was one of the few spaces that could fulfil such requirements. At the same, EMST had already inaugurated its 'Prolegomena' ('Prologues') and 'EMST in the World' programmes, periodical exhibitions and small events to develop synergies with international institutions and to acquaint the public with sections of its new building. Hence, the two partners came, after intense and lengthy negotiations, to a second agreement. Documenta would take on the responsibility to open, use, and run the whole building of EMST as its main venue, whereas EMST would get the chance to exhibit its permanent, and up to that moment still unseen full collection, in the main documenta venue in Kassel, the Fridericianum.

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<sup>38</sup> The brewery constitutes one of the best examples of modernist architecture in the city, designed by the visionary Greek architect Takis Zenetos. As the brewery was abandoned in 1984, half of the building was demolished to allow a metro stop to open in 2000. Subsequently, EMST leased the building and organised an architectural competition to turn the factory into a museum, which was won by Stylianidis Architects. The renovation was officially completed in 2016.



Figure 2.5. documenta 14 opening day, EMST. Photograph by the author.

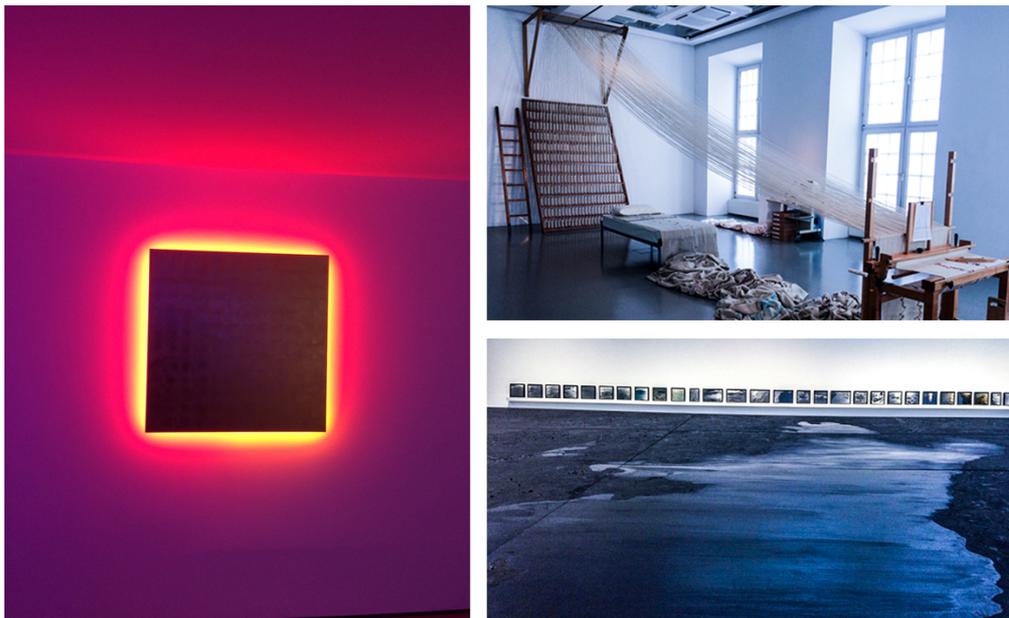


Figure 2.6 (i-iii). Clockwise from left to right: Stephen Antonakos (*Remembrance*, 1987-89), Janine Antoni (*Slumber*, 1994), George Hadjimichalis (*Crossroad*, 1990-1995/97): 'ANTIDORON', the EMST collection, Fridericianum, Kassel. Photographs by the author.

This mutually beneficial collaboration with EMST seems to attest to documenta 14's intention to establish relations with the co-host institutions on grounds of active exchange, reciprocity, mutual partnership, and negotiation on equal terms. The documenta team (curators, technical team, maintenance team, invigilators, art

handlers) entered an almost empty building and had to reinvent the operation of the museum ex nihilo and to introduce the audience to the whole building for the first time.<sup>39</sup> For its part, the EMST personnel were preoccupied with adjusting the newly approved Museological and Museographical study (2016) of its permanent collection to the Fridericianum venue, which was offered almost exclusively to EMST. By Koskina's own admission, the EMST's exhibition in Kassel, entitled 'Antidoron', constituted not only an unprecedented opportunity to make Greek contemporary art visible in 'such a scale and magnitude' to an international audience, but also a crash test and a 'rehearsal' that prefigured how the collection would look once the museum inaugurated its operation.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, EMST was the only venue in Athens to charge admission in order to cover its high operational expenses during the hosting of the d14 exhibition, while documenta covered the transportation/shipping costs, installation/de-installation, and maintenance expenses for both exhibitions in Athens and Kassel.

In a similar vein, documenta 14 reached out to the Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA), primarily to consolidate the exhibition's pedagogical impetus, but also to utilise the School's facilities at the Polytechnic School, a location with a highly charged history and heavy symbolic capital since it epitomises the epicentre of the anti-dictatorial student struggle against the 1967-1974 military junta.<sup>41</sup> At the Polytechnion's Prevelakis Hall, documenta initiated *Continuum* (a term inspired by the Greek composer Jani Christou) that was comprised of semi-public working sessions that aimed at bringing together artists, curators, and the d14 team. Similarly, *Effective Affinities*, led by Arnisa Zeqo, constituted a series of seminars that took place since the fall of 2016 in the ASFA campus, putting students in dialogue with d14 artists.

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<sup>39</sup> This involved the reconfiguration of the bookstore's layout and the audience pathways in the building, setting up lighting and P.A. systems, determining security and public safety provisions, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 15/3/2018, 0:29:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>41</sup> It also represents one of the bleakest moments of recent Greek history. After six years of strict military rule, during which many political opponents of the dictatorship were either tortured or exiled, student demonstrations against the regime began to appear in March 1973. On November 14, 1973, students barricaded themselves inside the Polytechnion and set up a pirate-radio broadcast, calling the people of Athens to rise up against the dictatorship. The occupation of the Polytechnion culminated in November 17, when a military tank took down the main gate, resulting in the death of dozens of students and civilians in the ensuing events. The crumbled gate can still be seen today at the entrance of the Polytechnion.

As ASFA also served as an exhibition space for documenta, the benefits for the art school were twofold. According to Panos Charalambous, Rector of ASFA, not only were the art school's students exposed to an exhibition of international calibre and to the influx of a culturally diverse audience (most of whom had close affinities with contemporary art), but documenta's presence also functioned as an ad hoc educational programme. For instance, the Old Library of the main ASFA campus was renovated by documenta according to the redesign of architect Aristides Antonas, serving as a pedagogical platform to host 'gatherings, seminars, and public conversations, proposed and led by students and ASFA faculty' (Zeqo in Sepake et al. 2018: 135). In addition, it brought to the fore the need for the enrichment of the curriculum with dance, music, and cinema studies, and hence, as Charalambous explained, 'we, the art school, under the influence of documenta [...] institute a new postgraduate programme that is comprised of visualisation, sound art, performance, and politics of the body in the newly renovated facilities'.<sup>42</sup>

In this respect, one cannot but acknowledge documenta's endeavour to strengthen publicly funded cultural institutions, to consolidate strategic partnerships and bilateral ties between domestic (and international) institutions, and to disperse contemporary art into the city by reacquainting the audience with certain cultural sites that had been neglected due to the absence of state support. This institutional 'boosting' was not only limited to EMST, which had the chance to test its galleries and operational systems, to make accurate cost estimates for its building in full operational mode, while seeing its total visitor numbers reaching almost 90,000 during the course of the exhibition. D14 also contributed to repurposing certain cultural sites (like the Athens Conservatoire that was turned into an exhibition space and a landmark for contemporary culture) and integrating some depreciated places of historical value into the cultural network of the city (like the Tsarouchis Foundation that reopened its doors to the public after a renovation funded by

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<sup>42</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 16/3/2018, 00:33:00, translated from Greek by the author). The MA programme was conceived in 2018 and is entitled 'Visualisation, sound, performance: art practices and anthropological perspectives'.

documenta).<sup>43</sup> Most importantly, it provided an opportunity for local stakeholders, especially for a young generation of artists, curators, and cultural workers, to sit together at the same table, reflect on the current precarious state of Athenian cultural organisations and on the need to protect the public dimension of culture, and even coalesce powers, share resources, and develop international synergies and partnerships.<sup>44</sup>

If the accounts of documenta as a ‘purely extractive neocolonial project’ have proven to be unsubstantiated, some other voices addressing the politics of hospitality seem to have more resonance. To begin with, whereas documenta went to great lengths to embed itself in the physical, architectural, and institutional fabric of the city, there appeared to be a detachment and even estrangement from the host city, its local art scene, its current political realities, and its daily-lived experience. In other words, one could discern a continuous oscillation on behalf of documenta’s organisers between Athens as a paradigm, abstracted symbol, and locus of inspiration (and symbolic capital was abundant to be extracted from its radical social context at the time), and Athens as a concrete location with specific sociopolitical particularities. Its artistic director seemed to be inclining towards the former, stating that ‘Athens is one of the most interesting cities in Europe’ since ‘it is one of the very few places currently reinventing itself. The city is fertile ground for people and ideas’ (in Smith 2017). Admittedly, an international exhibition of the calibre of documenta cannot be limited by having the local art scene as its focal point, however, still ‘simply walking around the graffiti-filled Exarcheia neighbourhood of Athens, with its many self-organised community spaces and political meetings grounds [...] felt closer to the Greek state of emergency than nearly anything in the exhibition’ (Demos 2017a).<sup>45</sup> In other words, if we take the

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<sup>43</sup> The building was designed by Yannis Tsarouchis, one of the most prominent Greek contemporary artists who popularised traditional and Byzantine art. It was declared a protected monument by the Hellenic Ministry of Town and Country Planning in 1985.

<sup>44</sup> It is no accident, that the Athens Cultural Net, the city’s first collaborative network of cultural organisations, providing a forum for building relationships, sharing resources, and developing joint programming across Athens, was founded by the Municipality of Athens with support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in 2016, on the eve of documenta 14’s opening in Athens.

<sup>45</sup> Except from the EMST collection that was exhibited in the Fridericianum in Kassel, only a limited number of Greek (or Greek-born) artists were included in the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of documenta.

artistic director at his word, who argued that ‘art is a physical as much as it is a mental experience—it is not an abstract demonstration of conditions that can be deployed in any context [...] the place and the time matter’, the exhibition itself did not succeed in offering such a concise account of the Athenian politico-economic circumstances with any specificity and theoretical depth (Szymczyk 2017: 29).

This feeling of estrangement was further exacerbated by an additional paradox. As documenta was dispersing in the city and activating overlooked cultural sites, it risked reaching a point of gigantism and oversaturation of the social space. As a radical left journal, disseminated in Exarcheia on a monthly basis, pointedly noted, documenta must have had a different conception of hospitality ‘when for the time you proclaim to be a guest, you impose your presence on all the local institutions that have something to do with your field [...] and when there had been no other previous occasion with the City Hall’s having its façade covered with a promotional banner’ (Anon 2018). And yet, this oversaturation of the city’s cultural fabric had the opposite effects in relation with the city’s demos, rendering documenta “‘a total social event” without a society’ (Tramboulis and Tzirtzilakis 2018: 3). In other words, documenta’s asphyxiating communication strategy, that included the circulation of promotional material, the hanging of banners (even at the City Hall’s façade), a regular slot on Greek national television focusing on rare experimental documentary and fiction (*Keimena*), a journal (*South*), a radio broadcast (*Every Time A Ear di Soun*), and the scattering of the exhibition across 45 locations, managed, oddly enough, to render the exhibition alienating and incomprehensible to the general audience.

In the aftermath of the show, when organisers, curators, artists, and the international audience had left the city, many critics, with the memories of the deserted, underutilised, and mismanaged buildings, facilities, and infrastructure of the 2004 Olympic Games still fresh, contemplated the potential long-term outcomes of the exhibition for the host city. The feeling of unease was exacerbated by witnessing EMST operating in a limited capacity, once again, because of further financial and administration issues, some other venues being left unutilised or partly vacant, and the Athens Biennale—the institution that served as a source of

inspiration for documenta 14's arrival—struggling to remain afloat.<sup>46</sup> Whereas this is more revealing of the inability of the state to sustain its cultural institutions and symbolic structures, it also alludes to a twofold alienation: on the one hand, the alienation of the state institutions from the flourishing contemporary artistic landscape, and the alienation of the Greek society with regard to its own cultural institutions on the other, marking a gap between these institutions and the communities which they ought to serve. At the same time, it is also indicative of the fact that the short-lived interval of documenta in the local scene did not suffice to allow Greek society to 'develop its own habitus, its own way of inhabiting the institutional structures' that had remained in lethargy for such an extended period of time (Holmes 2004: 552).

This poses the question whether the specific methodologies, practical strategies, and guiding principles deployed by d14 in Athens were in fact consistent with the aspiration to deconstruct documenta and to conceive it anew. One seems to be reaching certain aporias and paradoxes at the core of the d14 project. Documenta organisers castigated the inertia, rigidity, and 'the institutional self-preservation mechanism of the institution that 'does not easily allow for "experiments"', or having become 'instituted' to use Castoriadis's terminology (Szymczyk 2017: 22). However, they ended up replacing it with an even grander institution that entailed 45 locations in Athens (not to mention the additional 35 locations in Kassel), while maintaining Kassel as the decision-making centre of the exhibition. In other words, whereas certain operations of the institution of documenta were indeed decentralised (for example, the Athenian leg of the exhibition was gravitating towards a horizontal organisational model by conferring relative autonomy on every

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<sup>46</sup> EMST's financial and administrative difficulties continued. Since it could not financially sustain itself after the departure of documenta, it continued using only the ground floor and basement for temporary exhibitions, until a €3,000,000 grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) was approved in July 2018, which enabled the museum to prepare, transport, and install its permanent collection. In the meanwhile, the newly appointed culture minister Myrsini Zorba, initiated an open call for the new director of EMST (the first public competition for the director of EMST since its foundation), thus replacing the previous political appointments for the position with a more transparent process. However, the selection committee deemed the competition unfruitful, announcing that 'none of the proposed candidates fulfilled the selection criteria'. EMST inaugurated its full operations to the public in February 2020, with free admission and under a temporary directing board.

department and exhibiting venue and by introducing open and participatory cross-departmental weekly meetings), the majority of the decision-making processes in relation to finances, communication, and coordination was still dependent upon documenta's departments in Kassel.<sup>47</sup>

As a curator commented, 'what sometimes I wondered during the course of documenta was whether this thing was too big. Is it too big to fail and too big to succeed at the same time?'.<sup>48</sup> Setting aside the immensity of the exhibition's scale, one should still question whether the local context managed to offer fresh insights to 'shake up' the 'instituted imaginary' of documenta by reconfiguring the symbolic, technological, and even hierarchical organisational assemblages that comprise it, and hence do justice to the decision to decentre the institution from its traditional base. However, there seemed to be a lack of a systematic approach on behalf of d14 organisers in seeking to involve the local scene, independent initiatives, and partnered institutions in the decision-making processes, to develop common strategies with the local communities, or to learn from the mechanisms and processes that correspond to local dynamics and needs. While documenta 14 inaugurated or consolidated certain infrastructures during the exhibition period, not enough attention was paid to their sustainability, continuity, and support in the post-documenta epoch. In addition, it remains unclear whether documenta managed to eventually strengthen public institutions in the abstract or to consolidate specific agencies within them and whether the deployed decision-making processes were premised on broader synergies with local stakeholders and communities or on ad hoc decisions on behalf of the organisers.

If there was one project that sprung out of d14 and exemplified a sustainable institutional model that captured the needs of the locality and strived for a longer-term impact on the community it was Victoria Square Project (VSP), a community-

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<sup>47</sup> This could perhaps explain for instance, why one of the main communication strategies of d14 in Athens that entailed a teaser campaign with bus station posters often reading only a vague '14' (implying the upcoming exhibition) completely backfired, since the Athenian audience, being unfamiliar with the event, had no way to relate to it.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymised participant, interview quote (interview date: 28/2/2018, 00:55:20).

based project conceived by American artist and community organiser Rick Lowe and co-founded with Greek artist Maria Papadimitriou. When Lowe, whose previous work had been preoccupied with social-practice art, arrived in Athens on documenta's invitation, he walked in different neighbourhoods and inquired for local artists to introduce him to the local scene.<sup>49</sup> He quickly came across Papadimitriou's name, not only because of her remarkable collaborative projects with Roma communities in the suburbs of Athens, but also because her art-based space Souzy Tros Art Canteen in Elaionas, Athens, seemed to be echoing Lowe's vision for his documenta contribution.<sup>50</sup> Their encounter in November 2016 quickly turned into an unexpected collaboration.<sup>51</sup>

In his quest for a neighbourhood that could host such a project, Victoria Square drew Lowe's attention, not only because it was once one of the most prestigious districts of central Athens and one of the residential centres of the bourgeoisie since the 1940s that had steadily degraded due to the relocation of most of its residents, but also because it encapsulated the locus of the ongoing tensions and polarisations that pervade Greek society. Indeed, the square had become an urban symbol of the 2016 humanitarian crisis, making news as a makeshift refugee campground for those fleeing the violence in Afghanistan and Syria. Although tents were soon removed, Victoria Square remained a melting pot of communities, languages, and cultures; a gathering point for refugees living in different camps in the periphery of Athens; a market centre with the majority of local business stores and retail shops owned by migrants; and a residential area with a few Greek natives still inhabiting some of the

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<sup>49</sup> His Project Row Houses in Houston has been characterised as one of the best examples of long-term community-based projects and has been catalysing the local community through engagement, art, and direct action.

<sup>50</sup> Souzy Tros is a low-cost, organic, art-based project in the industrial urban site of Elaionas. By developing events, workshops, communal cooking sessions, and even skateboard lessons, the project endeavours to bring together diverse groups of people and weave them into a multicultural community. For Papadimitriou's projects with Roma communities in Greece see Papadimitriou 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Interestingly enough, Papadimitriou's name is nowhere to be found in documenta's publications, since according to the curators, the exhibition's list could not accommodate the inclusion of an additional artist.

numerous—now decaying—buildings of classical modernist architecture.<sup>52</sup> The project's aim was to start unearthing some of the unresolved tensions, competing interests, and intertwined subject positions between Greek natives, migrants, and refugees by creating 'a platform where those tensions can get worked out in a less intensified way' and by getting these heterogeneous communities 'involved in a way that they can start to see the value in each of those from a cultural perspective'.<sup>53</sup>

A small corner store, in Elpidos 13, a pedestrian street that feeds directly to the square, was selected as the focal point and was soon to become an intimate space for encounters, exchanges, solidarity, sharing, and community building. Although VSP initially served as an informal gathering point for both old residents and newcomers offering workshops, events, seminars, book presentations, and parties, it started to disperse throughout the neighbourhood. The artists, along with an extended team of friends and collaborators, initiated a lengthy mapping process to document the neighbourhood's distinct characteristics (its possible strengths and weaknesses, the backgrounds and concerns of the people comprising it, etc.) and started to develop intimate relations with the surrounding businesses, restaurants, bookstores, retail shops, schools, and other cultural entities. VSP soon introduced a newspaper that was circulated to the neighbourhood on a weekly basis featuring interviews with some of the 'local heroes' (mainly local store owners).

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<sup>52</sup> It is important to note here, that Victoria Square lies in close proximity to two major streets (Aristotelous and 3<sup>rd</sup> September), whereas on the square there is a railway station that leads directly to the port, the arrival point for many refugees.

<sup>53</sup> Rick Lowe, interview quote (interview date: 2/3/2018, 00:06:30).



**Figure 2.7.** *Victoria Post* is VSP’s quarterly publication, in collaboration with the local high school ‘Theodoros Angelopoulos’. Photograph by the author.

VSP is premised upon axioms of reciprocity, mutual support, and community outreach, as well as upon core principles of broader collaborations, synergies, and a strong pedagogical impetus. As Papadimitriou observes, ‘VSP has become an institution in the neighbourhood since many organisations have started to gather around us’, but also since it serves ‘as a vessel that can accommodate different activities and that is attentive to the neighbourhood itself’.<sup>54</sup> A network of strategic ongoing partnerships have been forged between VSP and other surrounding organisations, schools, and entities including the Senegalese Community, Solidarity Now, Melissa Network, and the Afghan Migrants and Refugees Community in Greece. Artist Eleonora Meoni has initiated a series of museum visits, small-scale exhibitions, cooking lessons, skating activities, and communal dinners with children from Eleonas Refugee Camp and Project Elea, and many of these activities are hosted at the pedestrian street in front of VSP. In addition, in the context of the Athens 2018 World Book Capital, VSP in collaboration with the local high school

<sup>54</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 2/3/2018, 01:02:30, translated from Greek by the author).

‘Theodoros Angelopoulos’ launched a quarterly newspaper, entitled *Victoria Post*, which still remains in circulation. In this respect, it is no coincidence that one of the Athenian mayoral candidates’ debates in 2019 took place at the pedestrian street in front of VSP, indicating that it has become one of the city’s ‘informal institutions’.

Although VSP sprung out of documenta, both artists remain sceptical of the exhibition’s engagement with the local context, noting that if this project is still running today this is predominantly due to its broader synergies, partnerships, and the neighbourhood’s support, rather than documenta having anything to do with it.<sup>55</sup> In sharp contrast to the weighty and rigid institutional model of documenta that was premised upon high-visibility gestures, most of which remained short-lived, VSP offers insights into a potentially novel mode of a radically democratic institutionality, predicated on flexibility, experimentation, hospitality, openness, sustainability, and commitment. Such an institutionality needs to be ‘flexible’, to allow ‘translatability’, and to offer the ground for negotiations between differences and various particular struggles. For Butler, ‘for the translation to be in the service of the struggle for hegemony, the dominant discourse will have to alter by virtue of admitting the “foreign” vocabulary into its lexicon’ (in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 169). In this sense, I would argue that VSP managed to prefigure such a flexible institutional arrangement by deconstructing the preassigned roles of immigrants and refugees and demonstrating what they give back to the community, while providing tools for translating differences between assorted cultural perspectives and diverse subject positions. In other words, it is the long-term engagement with the neighbourhood, its new ecologies of care, and its attentiveness to the voices of ‘newcomers’ that allows VSP *to transform and be transformed by the locality in which it is situated*. As we shall see in the following section, it was the gigantism and rigidity of documenta 14 that impeded any possibility for self-reflection and self-critique, precluding the institution from capturing the multiplicity of voices that emerged inadvertently and in situ.

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<sup>55</sup> Whereas Lowe received only a one-time commission by documenta 14, the precarious institution of VSP is mainly sustained today by the artists themselves with additional grants from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and from A Blade of Grass (a national art organisation supporting socially engaged artists through fellowships).

## 2.5 We (All) Are the People!

We should have been able to start a conversation in relation to its political vision, and to aesthetically engage with the content, the subject positions, and the representations that were born out of such a large exhibition, such an extended discourse production, and such a prolific presence [...] we felt the urge to be, in some way, ideologically and aesthetically present in this thing, despite the fact that no one invited us.<sup>56</sup>

Kostis Stafylakis,  
Co-curator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Despite no one having invited us and no one having reached out to us, we thought that [documenta] was addressing us in some way since we are part of Athens's fabric, we are involved in the artistic scene, and we are active in very related fields [...] so we addressed back with a semi-critical and semi-inquiring stance, predisposed to converse and to further interrogate.<sup>57</sup>

Elpida Rikou,  
Co-coordinator of *Learning from documenta*

Whereas the 6-story building of EMST was dedicated to the narration of numerous minor, silenced, and unspectacular stories of postcolonial racism, repressive state, and nationalism, one could encounter a much larger gesture at the exterior of the building. An 11.5x15.5-meter banner was covering one of EMST's facades, reading *We (All) Are the People* (2017), repeated in 12 different languages (from German and French to Kurdish and Greek) and bordered by a rainbow-coloured roll. Conceived by Hans Haacke, a multiple documenta participant and an artist whose works of institutional critique always elicit layered readings, the banner's slogan constituted an amended version of the rallying cry 'Wir sind das Volk' ('We are the people') that

<sup>56</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 16/7/2019, 00:59:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>57</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 18/7/2018, 00:04:00, translated from Greek by the author).

was enunciated not only by the demonstrators in Germany 1989 in protest against the East German State, but also more recently by the far-right and anti-immigrant Pegida political movement in Germany in 2015.<sup>58</sup> In this respect, the banner's slogan could provoke a double interpretation: on the one hand, it heralds a utopian togetherness, expressing diversity, unity, multiculturalism, and all-inclusiveness (as implied by its rainbow aesthetics), and on the other, it establishes uncomfortable associations with ethnic superiority by invoking historically charged terminology (the devotion to 'Volk' or 'the people's community') that was popular in Nazi propaganda.<sup>59</sup>

If Haacke's banner was unarguably the most noticeable public work of documenta 14 in Athens (since it was also printed in 10,000 poster-sized editions and disseminated everywhere in the city), Olu Oguibe's *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* (2017) was its equivalent for the exhibition's iteration in Kassel. Oguibe created a massive concrete sixteen-meter-high obelisk, installed in Königsplatz Kassel, that read, 'I was a stranger and you took me in', a verse from the New Testament (Matthew 25:35), inscribed in gold letters in each of its four sides in German, English, Arabic, and Turkish. There seems to be a common thread between these two public artworks, since they both tackle issues of statelessness, displacement, and rising nationalism, especially in a time when refugees were fleeing conflicts and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq and seeking refuge in Europe, and whose resettlement divided voters through Europe, triggering xenophobic and far-right reflexes. In this sense, it should come as no surprise that members of the German right-wing AfD party (Alternativ für Deutschland) characterised Oguibe's refugee-friendly obelisk as 'ideologically polarizing, disfigured art', evoking the term 'degenerate art' that was used by the Nazi Party to condemn modern art, to prosecute artists, and to misappropriate countless artworks from their rightful owners. It is no accident either that both Haacke and Oguibe received documenta's Arnold Bode Prize (in

<sup>58</sup> Pegida (European Patriots Against the Islamicisation of the Occident) is a German nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, far-right political movement, founded in Dresden in 2014.

<sup>59</sup> It is not the first time that Haacke engages with these questions. In his 2000 work, he set up a 21-by-7-meter garden at the Berlin Reichstag's courtyard with the phrase 'Der Bevölkerung' ('to the population') inscribed in the middle, which refers to the phrase 'Dem Deutschen Volke' ('to the German people') that stands over the western entrance of the German Parliament.

2019 and 2017 respectively), which is awarded every two years by the city of Kassel, in acknowledgment of their exceptional achievements in contemporary art.<sup>60</sup>

In *We (All) Are the People*, by hiding ‘all’ inside a parenthesis and by implicitly challenging whether ‘we’ can function as a truly open signifier, Haacke reinvents questions that have long preoccupied radical democratic politics and theorists like Balibar, Laclau, Rancière, and Butler, namely, who has the right to proclaim themselves as ‘the people’, who counts as ‘the people’ and who does not, and how this demarcation is enacted. According to these theorists, every discursive effort that brings to the fore and defines ‘the people’ constitutes nothing less than a bid for hegemony, since the very naming of ‘the people’ rests upon a discursive delimitation on the basis of racial, national, political, or even linguistic affiliations. In other words, any assumption about or naming of ‘the people’ is inherently partial, since it is premised upon naturalised exclusions and since it can never overcome what Laclau and Mouffe have called the ‘constitutive exclusion’ or ‘constitutive outside’, that is the political ontological principle and source of antagonism that marks the condition of possibility for a radical democracy. As Mouffe has convincingly argued, any form of consensus is always based on exclusions and any creation of a ‘we’ rests upon a delimitation of a ‘they’.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> While receiving the award, Haacke was photographed holding the ‘We (All) Are the People’ poster-sized edition, whereas Oguibe’s work, which was conceived as a ‘call to action’, was characterised in the award press release as ‘an affirmation of the timeless, universal principles of attention and care towards all those affected by flight and persecution’ (in Freeman 2017).

<sup>61</sup> According to Mouffe (1993: 2-3), ‘When we accept that every identity is relational and that the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an “other” that is going to play the role of a “constitutive outside”, it is possible to understand how antagonisms arise’ (see also Mouffe 1989).



**Figure 2.8.** Hans Haacke's *We (All) Are the People* (2017), EMST. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 2.9.** Olu Oguibe's *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* (2017). Photograph by Rabax63 under CC BY 4.0 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obelisk\\_Olu\\_Oguibe.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obelisk_Olu_Oguibe.jpg)).

To return to the aesthetic realm, Haacke has often used the visibility of art platforms to direct his fierce criticism on art's economic underpinnings, its corporate-institutional partnerships, and its complicity in ongoing social and political injustices.

Haacke has long been adamant that art institutions and museums are not ideological neutral since their cultural production is embedded in a web of encoded interests, beliefs, and social relations, but also the cultural sphere constitutes a terrain where these relations clash and are pitted against each other. In his words, 'artists and arts institutions—like the media and schools—are part of what has been called the consciousness industry. They participate to varying degrees in a symbolic struggle over the perception of the social world, and thereby shape society' (Haacke 2009: 357). In this respect, one can go against the grain and read *We (All) Are the People* as a symbolic provocation that split the institution of documenta from within, brought to the fore its inherent contradictions, and even fuelled the articulation of counter-voices.

Indeed Haacke's posters, which were plastered all around the city, were quickly—and perhaps as intended—covered by a series of anonymous interventions (posters, graffiti, and stencils) that read 'make yourself at home', 'documenta 14: can you kill the hierarchy within you?', 'the usual way to preserve conformism is through pseudo-criticism against it', as well as 'earning from Athens' and 'learning from capitalism' (instead of 'Learning from Athens'). These interventions, often signed by 'oi i&ageneis', meaning 'the Indigenous', foregrounded the disconnect between the curatorial team, the exhibition, and perhaps the art world as a whole, from the lived circumstances of the host city and the locality in which they were temporarily situated. However, counter-voices had begun to surface long before the exhibition opened, exemplifying the inherent antagonisms that permeate the social and the fact that 'society is incomplete, ruptured, and contested' (Dean 2012: 82). From anti-institutional voices that appeared sporadically via essays and media interventions condemning documenta as an instrument of the art market that appropriates radical thought and turns it into cultural capital to para-institutional publics that articulated a more nuanced critique of the exhibition, and from critical institutional interlocutors that attempted to establish dialogues with the d14 organisers to the imminent critique that transpired within documenta itself, documenta's presence provoked manifold reactions and released a multiplicity of voices.

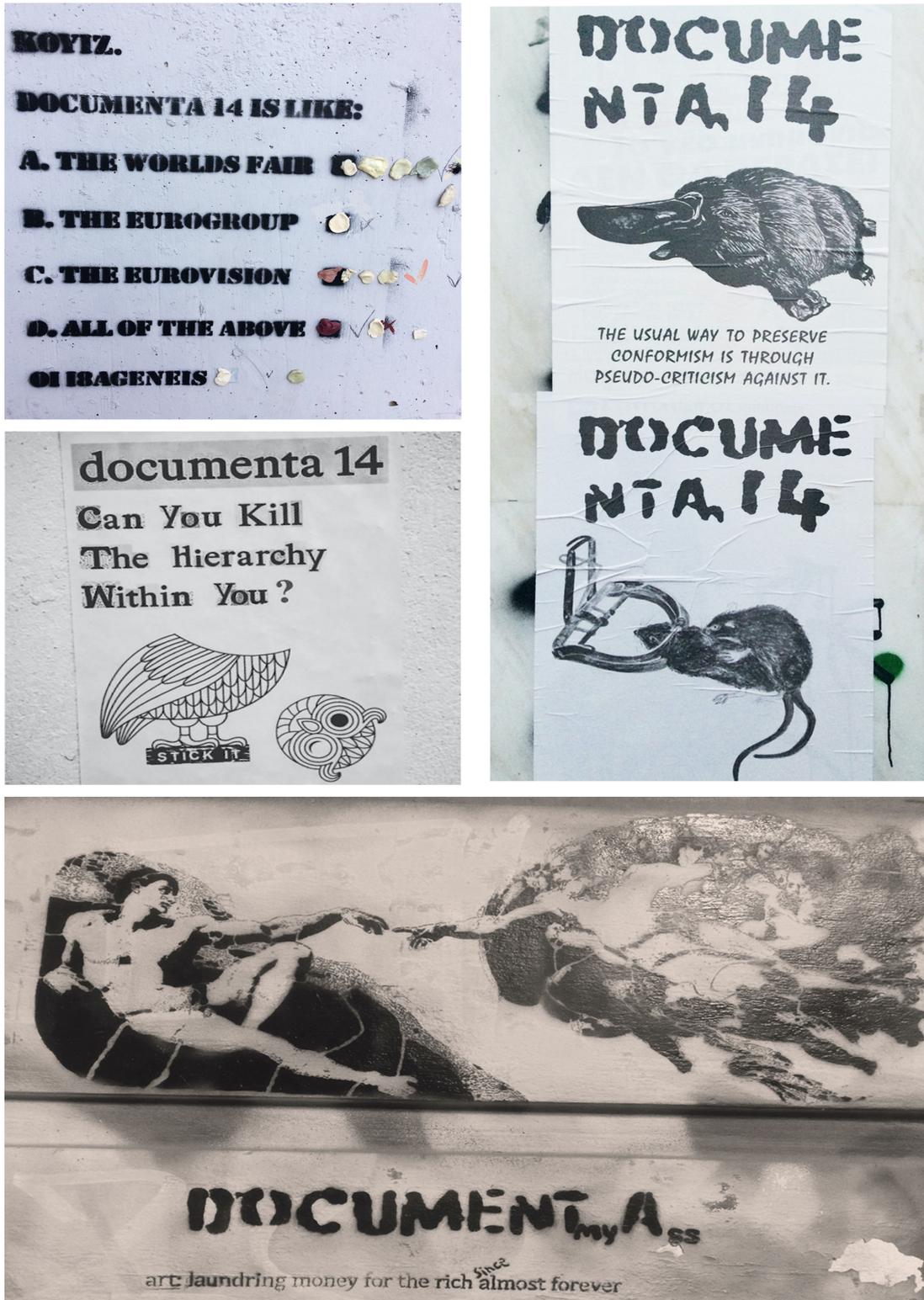


Figure 2.10 (i-iv). Series of anonymous street interventions, critiquing the presence of documenta 14 in Athens. Photographs by the author.

For instance, one grassroots group self-identified as ‘artists against evictions’ published an open letter via *e-flux* addressed ‘to all Documenta 14 Viewers,

Participants and Cultural Workers'. In their letter, they argued that documenta's objective, as declared from the outset, to learn from the streets of Athens, to register the voices of the minority, and to listen to the discourse of illegitimate bodies was never to be fulfilled since 'we are those voices, we are genderless, we are migrants, we are modern pariahs, we are the dissidents of the regime and we are here. We walk with you, we tread the parallel streets, but you don't see us—you have your eyes trained on the blue dotted lines of your Google map' (Artists Against Evictions 2017). They urged visitors to turn their eyes away from the 'feast the Mayor of Athens has staged for you'—the Mayor who provided documenta with free exhibition spaces—since the Municipality and the State posed a threat to grassroots solidarity and self-organised living, where thousands of refugees had shared shelter with artists, activists, and other communities (Artists Against Evictions 2017).<sup>62</sup> Instead of 'culturally archiving the crisis', they invited participants and organisers to support and show solidarity to all autonomous squats and grassroots initiatives.

Along the same lines, an LGBTQI refugee group stole an artwork from documenta as an act of defiance to the art quinquennial and to the fetishisation of refugees seeking asylum in Greece. The d14 artist Roger Bernat created a two-meter replica of the ancient Greek monolith known as the 'Oath Stone' and commissioned (offering a €500 fee) different groups to interact with the artwork and tour with it around the city in a theatrical performative way before its transportation to Kassel. The grassroots collective, upon its invitation and in a symbolic gesture, decided to steal the replica in order to condemn what they perceived as the instrumentalisation of refugees and asylum seekers by NGOs, governments, and even the art world that squandered their vast resources without effectuating any actual change. Afterwards, and under the counter-title '#rockumenta 14', they released an online video statement, mentioning:

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<sup>62</sup> During recent years, evictions, 'mandatory relocations', and police raids have taken place on a regular basis. See, for instance, Villa Zografou eviction in 2017, 5<sup>th</sup> School Likio eviction in 2019, and City Plaza squat relocation in 2019.

You have come to Greece to make art visible, graciously offering to purchase the participation of invisible exoticised 'Others'. Your stone is supposed to give us a voice, to speak to our stories. But rocks can't talk! We can! So, we have stolen your stone and we will not give it back. And like the millions of others who are seeking better lives in Europe, your stone has disappeared.

Artists Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini issued a press release, in which they countered, in a condescending tone, the assumption that an artwork had been stolen since according to them it was nothing more than a cheap fake object devoid of any value. They argued instead that 'thanks to the LGBTQI refugees the project has gained more visibility than it ever had [...] it's our strong political belief that, as an artist and as a refugee, you are doomed to be a victim if victimism is your only political weapon' (Fratini and Bernat 2017).

Along with the activist counter-publics that emerged, a number of artistic and even research-based projects surfaced revealing the deployment of a wide spectrum of diverse and ingenious tactics. Numerous critical artistic interventions attempted to seize and confiscate documenta's institutional discourse. The most notable case entailed an anonymous group that produced t-shirts reading 'Welcome and enjoy the Ruins', labelling them as official documenta merchandise and stashing them in the exhibition's stores for visitors to purchase, before eventually getting detected and removed. The same slogan appeared exactly opposite EMST, on the top floor of an abandoned building.<sup>63</sup> In addition, individual visitors brought their own utterances and knowledge inside the exhibiting venues with impromptu distributions of flyers and with the staging of pranks and hoaxes that attempted to deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of documenta.

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<sup>63</sup> The slogan referred to the modern-day urban ruins from the devastated Greek economy that has become the focal point for theorists, artists, and activists who come to Athens in order to 'learn' from the city, but at the same time it connotes the Grand Tour that was taking place in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century with intellectuals and artists visiting the ruins of classical antiquity in order to approach an idealised Greek past.



**Figure 2.11 (i-ii).** Anonymous interventions both inside and outside the exhibitions' venues, reading 'Welcome and enjoy the Ruins'. Photographs by the author.

At a more institutional level, *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be perceived as the response of the Athens Biennale to its failed partnership with documenta. Although the Athens Biennale and d14 started by working under the same roof, the former ended by condemning documenta for lacking a collaborative spirit and for poaching its staff, and the latter by criticising the curators of the Athens Biennale for seeking more visibility and credit for the overall curation of the show. Hence, *Waiting for the Barbarians* constituted a nearly zero-budget and makeshift interim iteration of the Biennale (serving as a prelude to *ANTI*, the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Biennale) that coincided with the international exhibition's opening, mainly intending to hijack its visibility. Curated by the Heart & Sword Division—a transitional curatorial team comprised of Poka-Yio, Kostis Staphylakis, Nayia Yiakoumaki, and FYTA—*Waiting for the Barbarians* 'erupted into a large-scale role-playing employing overidentification, mimetic critique, sarcastic trolling, and public self-ridicule' with the explicit aim of deconstructing documenta's narratives and main political presuppositions (Stafylakis 2018: 47).

*Waiting for the Barbarians* was comprised of three main performative actions, the Heart & Sword Division's press conference, the Resurrection with Documena, and the Klassenfahrt project.<sup>64</sup> The Biennale's press conference, echoing the Laibach tradition, was a fictitious, performative, and collective role-play in front of a bewildered international audience during which the curatorial team, impersonating heroes from the Greek War of Independence, delivered a series of pretentious and self-contradictory statements about anti-capitalism, authenticity, indigeneity, and resistance. In this sense, *Waiting for the Barbarians* invites a twofold reading about who is the subject of waiting and who are actually the barbarians: the German mega-exhibition that landed in the city, or the natives, 'the noble savages', who presumably instantiate a concrete alternative and an antidote to Western neoliberalism? Such performances must be inscribed into a broader concern by a part of the local artistic community that, according to Stafylakis, attempted to deconstruct a fetishising and totalising account of Greek resistance and the Global South and to critique 'this new radicality in the international artistic scene that locates Greece as one of its epicentres' thus 'risking to remythologise the locality as a radically rebellious, continuously insurgent, and essentially and inherently subversive terrain of action'.<sup>65</sup>

If irony, overidentification, mimicry, and a humorous stance were the tactics deployed by the Athens Biennale, on the other end of the spectrum one can find *Learning from documenta*, a research project coordinated by two Athens-based academics, Elpida Rikou and Eleana Yalouri, that combined art and visual tools with anthropological methods in order to engage with 'Learning from Athens'. Initiated as a small artistic project, it rapidly gained the support of local academic institutions and turned into a long-term undertaking at the intersection of theory and practice.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The Klassenfahrt project was a performance during which a small number of international visitors were 'kidnapped', after having registered for an 'educational trip', and were driven to a semi-deserted location at the outskirts of Athens where they were greeted by artists dressed up as exotic tribal leaders, Indigenous peoples, and magicians.

<sup>65</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 16/7/2019, 00:56:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>66</sup> *Learning from documenta* was an initiative of TWIXTlab (an Athens-based interdisciplinary laboratory situated between contemporary art and anthropology) and was supported by the Athens School of Fine Arts and the Department of Social Anthropology of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences.

To refine its methodological tools and theoretical underpinnings, the project was inaugurated with extended workshops where diverse research methods were introduced, cross-fertilised, and tested (drawing from performance studies to ethnographic methods), while its opening event featured prominent anthropologists George Marcus, Arnd Schneider, and Christopher Wright.<sup>67</sup> Some of the questions that *Learning from documenta* posed were ‘what are the means employed to “learn from Athens”? What reactions and refusals have been provoked in response to a contemporary art institution’s desire to “learn from” a city “in crisis”? How is the significance of what is happening “in situ” to be evaluated?’ (Rikou and Yalouri 2017: 133).

To delve into them, the research team not only conducted extensive participant observation and interviews with the public by systematically attending documenta 14’s events (with some team members also working for documenta), but also created an archive with audio-visual material, publications, and street-level responses. In tandem with the research project, a number of roundtable discussions were organised by the Athens Arts Observatory, providing a public forum for debates and documenting the research outcomes.<sup>68</sup> However, one of the roundtables, titled ‘Politics of Curating’, led to a heated debate between invited speakers from documenta and other art critics and audience members, resulting in documenta cutting ties with *Learning from documenta* since it was deemed responsible for provoking the controversy. However, as Rikou explains, documenta’s arrival in Athens served as an unprecedented opportunity to shed light on the intellectual, political, and even aesthetic debates that had already been in full swing. Hence, *Learning from documenta*’s objective was from the outset ‘to listen to and

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<sup>67</sup> These theorists have had a major contribution to the conceptualisation of the relation between art with ethnography and in the use of artistic methods in anthropological research (see Schneider and Wright 2010, Marcus 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Four roundtable discussions took place: ‘Politics of Culture: Greece-Germany’ (December 22, 2016), ‘Politics of Curating’ (January 12, 2017), ‘The Politics of Learning’ (February 16, 2017), and ‘The Politics of Art Making’ (March 9, 2017). The opening event took place on June 2, 2016 featuring George Marcus, Arnd Schneider, Christopher Wright, and Adam Szymczyk. The closing event was comprised of a five-day programme (October 4-8, 2017) that served as an overall evaluation of the research project and invited anthropologists, art critics, and representatives from the exhibition’s institutional partners.

register all these diverse reactions' and latent controversies, as well as to investigate how a mega-institution would face up to the specific challenges posed by the locality.<sup>69</sup>

In the same vein, this section's objective is less to do justice to any of these particular claims, but to evince the plurality of voices that were revealed during documenta's presence in Athens and to juxtapose them with the main narrative of the exhibition. Indeed, documenta's artistic director seems to have conceived documenta 14 as an essentially collective, participatory, inherently democratic, and all-inviting endeavour 'that can be carried out by anyone and everyone', hoping 'instead of infantilizing and quantifying the audience' to 'empower the visitors as the true owners of documenta, each holding a part in a common undertaking, together with its makers, the organizers of documenta 14, alongside the artists and other participants' (Szymczyk 2017: 36). And whereas Szymczyk (2017: 41) acknowledged, albeit in passing, that this collective enterprise is 'hindered by the cultural and economic factors that limit access to the exhibition to a predominantly privileged, Western European audience', he did not accentuate enough the political, economic, social, and class divisions that the exhibition format, perhaps inadvertently, reproduced.

For instance, the recurring evaluation research conducted by the University of Kassel depicting, among other things, the socio-demographic characteristics of visitors, sketched d14's visitors as highly educated (70% holding a university degree), with predominantly European origins, and most of them with professional art-related occupations (20% artists or journalists and 19% academic professionals).<sup>70</sup> In this sense, the impetus to become 'owners rather than consumers, renters, or producers of documenta 14—and of our entire lives' and to 'institute, realise and employ the possibility of claiming our place in the commons through an act of radical subjectification' remained far from being realised in any concrete manner (Szymczyk

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<sup>69</sup> Elpida Rikou, interview quote (interview date: 18/7/2018, 00:54:00, translated from Greek by the author).

<sup>70</sup> The research is conducted by Prof. Dr. Gerd-Michael Hellstern and Prof. Dr. Joanna Ozga every five years and takes place during the run of the exhibition, involving a survey research.

2017: 42). However, where documenta did succeed was in crystallising some painful contradictions that lie at the heart of contemporary art, namely the sharp contrast between its institutional discourse production on the one hand, and the intertwined material conditions, economic relations, and actual practices in which it is embedded on the other. Whereas documenta's exhibition catalogue observed that a disproportionate number of people from the Global South are facing limited mobility, lack of individual freedoms, and restrictions on movement, it failed to underline how this very fact encumbers their chances to visit any of the two legs of the exhibition. However, this did not prevent documenta organisers and artists from foregrounding the Global South while enjoying unrestricted movement with 500 Aegean Airlines sponsored round-trip air tickets.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, whereas documenta's catalogue went to great lengths to condemn the apparatuses of sovereign power, featuring for instance Tony Bennett's essays that painted an insightful account of the entanglement of exhibitionary institutions in techniques of governance, documenta seems not to have taken the analysis a step further in exposing the inextricable intertwinement of the German-based multimillion institutional apparatus with relations of truth production, power, and ideology. The lack of self-reflection and openness to critique perhaps elucidates the lack of attentiveness to the plurality of counter-voices, counter-publics, and counter-knowledges that surfaced 'screaming for attention' in response to documenta's presence in the city. In other words, although the mega-institution claimed to be shedding light *via the exhibition content* on the dissensual voices that have been silenced by dominant discourses, it did not refine the tools, mechanisms, and methods to engage with and register the voices, controversies, and dissensual spatialities that emerged inadvertently and in situ. Although documenta, perhaps even intentionally, produced disharmony, released ruptures and contestations, and fuelled a myriad of reactions and debates, they predominantly took place outside the confines of the institution, without ever managing to inscribe into its surface. Put

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<sup>71</sup> According to an Aegean Airlines public relations representative, 'all employees of documenta and Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, documenta 14 artists, and other participants of documenta 14 will be entitled to use said airline tickets for their unrestricted use, where Aegean operates' (email interview, date: 11/3/2018).

differently, documenta failed to be attentive to the dissensual voices that erupted because of its presence in Athens.

As we have seen, dissensus and antagonism cannot be produced intentionally or predefined, but can be inscribed and channelled in different ways. One of the few cases where a scene of dissensus did manage, at least, to inscribe into the material manifestation of the institution, surfaced from within the institution and entailed the collective demand of the invigilators for better wages (see Kriki 2017). When nearly 200 hired invigilators were announced that their promised wage of €9/hour was in fact €5.62/hour and that Manpower, the intermediary human resource service provider and recruitment agency, would manage their contracts, they issued an open letter accusing the institution of exploiting the crisis to underpay the staff. The controversy was averted after weeks of open discussions, negotiations, and collective pressures, as well as after the personal involvement of the artistic director, with new contracts provided to invigilators with the terms that they had originally agreed upon. Although the documenta administration claimed it was a 'misunderstanding', the invigilators' second letter highlighted that along with the anti-fascist tradition of documenta and this iteration's radical narrative, there is another covert side of the institution with its corporate structure, vertical hierarchy, and with the corresponding work culture that was responsible for the 'misunderstanding' in the first place.

This provides further testament to the fact that the exhibition did not manage to register and express its inherent contradictions and the deep divisions that run between visitors and organisers, hosts and guests, and the voices articulated *via* the institution and the counter-voices articulated *around* or *against* the institution. One can perhaps start explicating such a paradox by noticing terms like 'constituent' and 'destituent power', 'neoliberal war machine', 'empire', and 'multitudes' that can be found in abundance in the exhibition's texts. This illustrates that documenta's political vocabulary had been heavily imbued with Hardt and Negri's theoretical arsenal, and it is no accident that Negri was the opening speaker in documenta's public programme (as we shall see in the next chapter). In this respect, Haacke's *We*

*(All) Are the People* can invoke a different reading, connoting the *multitude*, a set of horizontally organised singularities that could coalesce into a multiple political subjectivity and potentially exceed capitalism. In fact, according to Hardt and Negri (2009: 177), 'by working on the common and producing the common, the multitude constantly transforms itself'. However, it is my contention that to equate 'the people' with the 'multitude', meaning to relegate all ongoing political struggles to the generative and self-transformative force of an all-inclusive and unified political subject, risks disavowing the tensions and the antagonisms that permeate the social. In other words, the multitude remains a too capacious term and hence cannot express and account for division. As Rancière (2010: 188-189) underlines:

A political community is in effect community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political 'people' is never the same thing as the sum of a population. It is always a form of supplementary symbolisation in relation to any counting of the population and its parts. And this form of symbolisation is always a litigious one.

In this respect, it is Rancière's notion of the 'part-of-no-part' that allows *We (All) Are the People* to become a truly open signifier by inscribing the people as a dividing and divisive force. The 'people' marks not only the surplus of the community, *but the gap itself*, the assertion that the political community remains inherently divided and subject to disruption by the silenced, the invisible, the repressed, and the excluded parts in any given social configuration. As Dean (2012: 80) suggests, 'when the people are conceived as the part of those who have no part, we are prevented from reducing the people to an empirical given or treating the people as the totality of the community. Instead, the people mark and are marked by a gap'. In this sense, the interruption of any given order (or distribution of the sensible) by those who have no part is predicated upon a fourfold axiom: a performative staging of equality by 'anybody whomever' (we all can become 'the people'), an inscription of 'the people' as a split and divisive force (since it is premised upon a claim to universality that is inherently partial), a critical alliance between the unaccounted (how different

struggles might translate to one another), and a critique of the power imbalances that constitute the very stage of appearance and dictate the terms of eligibility for entering it. As Butler (2015: 4) explains, echoing Rancière, ‘the point of a democratic politics is not simply to extend recognition equally to all of the people, but rather to grasp that only by changing the relation between the recognisable and the unrecognisable can (a) equality be understood and pursued and (b) “the people” become open to a further elaboration’. This, I argue, has fundamental repercussions for the way we conceptualise democratic politics, since to underscore the contingent, temporary, and open-ended processes through which ‘the people’ and ‘political community’ are designated allows us to envisage the institutions that can incorporate a ‘democratic check’ for the exclusionary logic that permeates any such delimitation.

## **2.6 Conclusions: ‘It’s the Economy, Stupid!’ or What (Else) Is to Be Learnt?<sup>72</sup>**

In the aftermath of the exhibition, numerous publications and critics raised the question of whether there was anything to be learnt from Athens after all. Although its repercussions, especially at the level of discourse, are still ongoing, one can still discern some notable events that have transpired in the meantime. The decolonising discourse of documenta has entered contemporary art history, contributing to the enrichment of the art canon with non-European art practices, fresh perspectives on postcolonial analysis, new curatorial gestures, and the larger presence of Indigenous, non-white, and dissident voices from regions that remain underrepresented in mainstream art events. In addition, documenta contributed to further decentering not only its own institution, but also the Western art-historical canon as a whole, consolidating a global paradigm shift that has been taking place in universities, museums, and art exhibitions over the last decade. It is no coincidence that the 2018 documenta Finding Committee appointed the Jakarta-based Ruangrupa collective as

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<sup>72</sup> Phrase coined by James Carville (strategist in Bill Clinton’s successful presidential campaign in 1992) that was repopularised during the European sovereign debt crisis.

the artistic director of documenta 15, marking the first time that a group will curate the quinquennial and the first time that the curatorial leadership is of Asian provenance. In this respect, d14 can take credit for paving the way towards the Global South.

Importantly, documenta 14 managed to build on Arnold Bode's anti-fascist legacy, not only within the strict confines of the exhibition composition, but also by adopting an outspoken public stance against the rise of neo-fascism and institutional racism. For instance, as part of d14's public programme, Forensic Architecture (FA), a research agency that uses spatial tools and architectural evidence to expose human rights violations, presented their investigation into the murder of Halit Yozgat that took place in his family-run internet café in Kassel, Germany and was committed by the neo-Nazi group National Socialist Underground (NSU).<sup>73</sup> FA's nine-minute video, presented both in Athens and Kassel, deconstructed the testimony of Andreas Temme, an intelligence agent who was present during the incident but denied witnessing anything and was cleared of all charges. FA, through the public forum of documenta, raised pertinent questions about the role of the German security services in the country's resurgence of neo-Nazism (we will return to FA in Chapter 4).

In this sense, d14 used its visibility to consolidate a chain of equivalence, not an abstract one between Indigenous peoples and leftist movements around the world, as perhaps the original intention might have been, but a rather concrete one instead, serving as an alliance and a political link between anti-fascist groups and movements in Athens and Kassel. To this end, documenta 14 established a communication channel (including d14 participants, artists, curators, and institutional partners), through which it coordinated a number of open letters and critical interventions in the public sphere. One letter was in defence of Yannis Boutaris, Mayor of Thessaloniki, Greece, and an outspoken advocate for

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<sup>73</sup> Forensic Architecture is a research agency based at Goldsmiths University of London that investigates human rights violations using spatial and media tools. In 2018, Forensic Architecture was shortlisted for the Turner Prize.

multiculturalism who was brutally assaulted by a far-right mob on May 19, 2018. In another open letter, d14 organisers and artists condemned the brutal killing of Zak Kostopoulos, a 33-year-old LGBTQI activist and drag performer. Documenta 14's letter castigated the 'increasing number of cases of violence targeting minorities and underprivileged people in Greece' and the 'larger fascist mindset that propels such incidents' (Fofana et al. 2018).

However, if there is an enduring legacy that documenta 14 cemented it must certainly entail the debates and the controversies that transpired near the exhibition's end when Kassel's regional newspaper HNA (Hessische Niedersächsische Allgemeine) announced that 'documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH' faced a reported seven-million-euro deficit. According to HNA, the budget overreach was due to unexpected high electricity bills, security costs, and air-conditioning costs in the Athenian venues, as well as transportation costs between the two locations. The state of Hesse and the city of Kassel had to step in to bailout documenta's parent company, taking over loan guarantees of 3.5 million euros each. The far-right AfD, filed a lawsuit against documenta CEO Annette Kulenkampff and Adam Szymczyk, accusing them of embezzlement and the mismanagement of public funds. An audit from the independent auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and an expanded criminal investigation into documenta's officials (including the ex-mayor of Kassel and former documenta supervisory board chairman, Bertram Hilgen, and his successor Christian Geselle) followed suit, confirming the deficit. Although the public prosecutor cleared all accused parties of criminal wrongdoing and pointed towards the political motivations of AfD's lawsuit, CEO Annette Kulenkampff agreed to step down one year before the end of her contract amidst a global media frenzy and numerous leaks to the press revolving around the financial scandal. The final report bluntly concluded that without Athens as the second leg of the exhibition, documenta would have ended with a profit.

In this sense, whereas d14 decided to 'Learn from Athens' to address the recent debt crisis, the post-political condition in Europe, and the economic war waged by European institutions against Greece, it managed somehow to place itself on the

receiving end of what the organisers called 'shaming through debt' (Fofana et al. 2017). In other words, documenta 14 succeeded in instantiating its exhibition's core themes: it learnt how to live in debt, it established that it is too big to fail since it had its debt pardoned (unlike Greece's debt), and was bailed out by the German State. In addition, not only were the documenta organisers confronted by press manipulations and the underlying interests that propelled them, but they also gained insights into the entanglement between politics and the economy as a morality play of indebtedness. Despite being castigated for their 'hubris' to venture to Athens and with numerous local officials asserting that displacing documenta posed a threat to Kassel's identity as documenta's home and that it should stay put from now on (with an increased budget), documenta organisers remained adamant in defending the 'radical vision' and the 'emancipatory possibility of decentered exhibitions'. In the several letters that they issued in the aftermath of the exhibition, they repudiated the neoliberal logic that has permeated every aspect of social life putting 'ticket sales above art' and the implementation of 'a rigid German identification of documenta, against its cultural mission that has evolved to become a globally relevant exhibition' (Akinbiyi et al. 2017).

What is striking and problematic, at least in my eyes, is the part where the organisers 'defend the artistic autonomy of documenta 14 against the current focus in media on financial profit and political gain' as if the wealthy institution of documenta could exist beyond power games, political interests, and capitalism (Akinbiyi et al. 2017). To originally conceptualise the 14<sup>th</sup> iteration as 'a project that aims at making a political statement' by 'realising and multiplying radical subjectivities in full' and when things went wrong to emphasise the need 'to stay free from political interference' in order to 'fulfil its mission of materialising artistic freedom' is to have it both ways (Akinbiyi et al. 2017). As Žižek (in Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 98) argues, 'if we are to play the postmodern game of plurality of political subjectivizations, it is formally necessary that we do not ask certain questions (about how to subvert capitalism as such, about the constitutive limits of political democracy and/or the democratic state as such . . .)'. If, however, documenta wishes to remain politically and aesthetically relevant, instead of proclaiming its

independence from political and economic interests and advocating a critical autonomy from the corporate hijacking of culture, it should assert its role as a 'hegemonic machine', embrace division, and take sides by turning into a 'counter-hegemonic machine'. Perhaps this is the real political task of mega-institutions today, namely, to expose their inner workings and unmask the violence that is exercised in and through them, especially those institutions that proclaim to be neutral and autonomous. To return to Dimitrakaki's (2015: 188) *South* essay, instead of maintaining illusions about the art field's autonomy from the sphere of economy, contemporary artistic practices and discourses should renounce 'the perpetuation of the crisis discourse, thereby leading the return to the analysis of capitalism's normality, and especially the terms of its reproduction'.

In this respect, what was emphatically proven at documenta 14 was that to decentre a hegemonic art institution spatially is not a sufficient condition for exposing its own limitations, challenging its inner configurations and Western foundations, and reinventing its structures from scratch. Although admittedly a nearly impossible task, especially from within the corporate confines and the rigid organisational structures of a mega-institution, it would have been better if documenta had managed to further elucidate its own multifaceted contradictions, its own instrumentalisation in games of soft power and cultural diplomacy, and its own business growth model. In that way, it could have perhaps delved into its own intertwinement with the European debt regime, the reproduction of inequalities, and its own role in determining which voices are heard and which remain silenced. One only wishes that documenta could have started to learn that in order to 'decentre' its institution, one does not necessarily need to expand to more sites around the world, partner with more venues, include more artists, and gain more cultural authority. It suffices to become even more attentive to the dissensual voices that are already close by and to *develop more refined mechanisms for their appearance, translation, and inscription*. It even suffices to start becoming more self-reflective and more critical of its own inner mechanisms, antagonisms, and power configurations to re-hegemonise and reconquer the very centres that have succumbed to a post-democratic neoliberal ideology. Documenta still remains a powerful institution with

considerable resources, material infrastructure, cultural capital, and an admirable anti-fascist legacy: if it is to play a role in the radical democratisation of society it should take sides and put them into good use.

### 3 Performing the Institution

#### 3.1 Introduction: Alter-Institutions, Performativity, and the Public Sphere

This chapter continues the investigation of a ‘dissensual institutionally’, meaning the critical practices that attempt to challenge the dominant configurations of sense and enact new radical political imaginaries. Following the examination of mega-exhibitions as counter-hegemonic machines, I now move to strategies of performing novel institutional forms that either operate within existing institutions and push their models further, or invent new institutional formats that open up the horizon of political possibilities. Indeed, alluding to what has been termed the ‘infrastructural turn’ or the ‘alter-institutional turn’, a series of alter-institutional formats, para-institutional arrangements, and ‘institutions of the common’ have emerged that attempt a ‘deterritorialisation within existing art institutions’ (Baravalle 2018). Instead of being defined by predictable protocols and social norms or remaining attached to the consolidation of power, these practices deploy artistic skills and activist tools to reimagine the institutions that shape our world.

Encapsulating what Berlant (2016: 414) has termed ‘affective infrastructures’, alter-institutions are characterised by both a ‘relative autonomy to structural political imaginaries’ and by a space of ambivalence, adaptation, and movement. These infrastructures are not identical to traditional structures or institutions; they are ‘defined by the movement or patterning of social form’ and the collective affects and dynamic networks that determine their usage (Berlant 2016: 393). In this sense, they allude to ‘instituting practices’, as evinced by the self-organised practices of collaboration, the autonomous organisations, assemblies, and parliaments, as well as the decentred networks, alternative campaigns, and novel pedagogical methodologies that they introduce, distancing themselves from the neoliberal and post-democratic policies advocated by existing mainstream institutions. According to Baravalle (2018) alter-institutions share a ‘pedagogical intent’, the impetus to disseminate knowledge through new communication technologies, and the

prioritisation of those 'who have been rendered socially invisible'. Not only do they reveal policy failures and potential pathways for reform, but most importantly they take issue with the very question of social visibility and exclusion from the public sphere.

The alter-institutions discussed here, namely, Preciado's Parliament of Bodies, Wielander and Lucchetti's Visible Project, and Staal's various organisations and assemblies, all treat public space as a theatrical stage where power configurations are performed, not only through their spatial articulations, but also through the overall choreography of bodies and decision-making rituals. In this sense, they attempt to reconfigure public sphere as a 'space of appearance' that, according to Arendt (1998: 199), 'comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government'. In addition, they all share the same understanding that spatial settings (the assemblies' morphology, the seating arrangements, the allocation of bodies) play a crucial role in determining the social dynamics that are being developed. Through the deployment of architectural tools, performative methodologies, and continuous self-theorisation, they attempt to reinvent democratic concepts while enacting them. In this sense, they set out to respond to the urgent need to establish common grounds and open institutional architectures that allow the 'body politic' to assemble, debate, and engage with new forms of political becoming, in the attempt to radically democratise the basic structures of social life.

In fact, these case studies attempt to foreground social demands, envisaging both intersubjectivity and the public sphere as a terrain of conflict, a 'battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation' (Mouffe 2007: 3). This view runs counter to the Habermasian consensus-based account of the public sphere. Habermas (1989: 160) describes the depoliticisation of the public sphere, its decline into a 'pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption', and the impoverishment of cultural institutions due to the corrosive impact of the culture industry that manipulates

rational discourse.<sup>1</sup> Habermas's vision of a resurrected and reclaimed public sphere, as the grounding of ideal democracy, entails spaces for rational debate, reasoned deliberation, and consensus.<sup>2</sup> It also entails institutions that can accommodate forums of discussion, criticism of public authority, and collective modes of aesthetic reception.<sup>3</sup>

In sharp contrast to Habermas's version of a consensual public sphere, theorists like Mouffe, Deutsche, and Marchart, among others, have espoused an agonistic, conflictual, and dissensual account of the public sphere. Acknowledging the constitutive dimension of social division, Mouffe's neo-Gramscian approach envisions the public sphere as a democratic outlet for passions, a site of hegemonic contestation and agonistic pluralism.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, for Deutsche (1996: xxiv), 'social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins', advocating for public art forms that disrupt and 'appropriate' space from capitalist and state power domination.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Marchart (2019: 87) asserts that 'a public sphere opens whenever the routines, institutions, and

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas's conceptualisations are built on first generation theorists of the Frankfurt School, especially on Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the 'culture industry'. Indeed, following the later Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002: 104, 125) shifted their emphasis from the notion of reified consciousness to the material structures of commodity exchange, accentuating how the superficial democratisation of culture creates a sense of 'pseudoindividuality' since people have been assigned distinct cultural or artistic tastes, whereas, in fact, it functions as a homogenising force that degrades everyone to the level of consumer: 'something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated' (see also Adorno 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For Habermas (1984: 17), the 'ideal speech situation' serves as a model of communicative practices and 'is oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus [...] that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims'.

<sup>3</sup> However, as many critics have noted there is an impasse in Habermas's theory of communicative action and in its 'reliance on a transhistorical capacity of human communication' due to the 'inability to find in advanced capitalist societies an institutional basis for an effective political public sphere' that does not correspond to the 'realities of later capitalism and states' (Calhoun 1992: 30-31). For additional critiques see Goode 2005, Holub 1991, Warner 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Mouffe repudiates Habermas's deliberative model as a 'conceptual impossibility' and Arendt's notion of pluralism based on intersubjective agreement as 'agonism without antagonism' (Mouffe 2007: 4). For Mouffe's analysis of hegemony and ideology in Gramsci see Mouffe 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Lefevre (1991), Deutsche opposes an essentialist understanding of space, meaning that spatiality is an objective condition and that spatial forms are dictated by functional, mechanical, and organic laws that are politically neutral. She rather perceives spatial forms as social structures, arguing that 'the organization and shaping of the city as well as the attribution of meaning to spaces are social processes' (Deutsche 1996: 52).

identities of our social world are touched by antagonism'.<sup>6</sup> Where all these approaches coincide is in viewing the public sphere (and the space of politics) not as a preexisting space, but one that comes into being through conflict.

Accepting that antagonism is the constitutive moment of the social and that contingency grounds every system, the case studies discussed here attempt to devise flexible institutional arrangements and open-ended infrastructures that both activate the underlying antagonisms that structure the public sphere and unearth the exclusions that have been gradually naturalised. They are also characterised by the utilisation of artistic tools and curatorial strategies that include performance, dramaturgy, choreography, and embodiment. Drawing on theories of performativity, these practices assume that social reality can be constructed and transformed by repetition and reiteration.<sup>7</sup> They also follow strands of theatre, performance, and curatorial studies that foreground not only choreographic elements in curation (Lind 2012), 'the performative potential of curating' (Malzacher 2017), and the 'reality-making capacity' of performativity (Shannon 2017), but also the critical role of staging and dramaturgically reclaiming the public space in movement building and communicating power (Benford and Hunt 1992, Castells 1983; 2012).

In this respect, one can draw parallels between on the one hand, participatory performance, theatre, and the performing arts, and on the other, the practice of democratic politics and the contentious construction of the public sphere. The strong affinity of performing arts with politics goes beyond the self-evident togetherness in public space, which they both have in common, and extends to the direct nature of political action. Arendt (1998: 188) asserts that action constitutes the privileged realm of political activity and 'theater is the political art par excellence: only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art'. 'Politics is a techne, [it] belongs among the arts', she notes, and as such it can be

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<sup>6</sup> For Marchart, the main conditions for the emergence of every public sphere are strategy, collectivity, conflictuality, the blockade of circulation, and, most importantly, the human body.

<sup>7</sup> Butler's (1988; 2011) conception of gender as performative (meaning as enacted by both bodily and linguistic actions) constitutes an important conceptual basis for the theories of performativity that have flourished in art, theatre, and curatorial studies.

likened to activities such as ‘the performance of the dancer or play-actor’, where ‘the “product” is identical with the performing act itself’ (Arendt 1998: 207). In the same vein, a number of scholars has explored the politics of performance, the role of dramaturgy in the revitalisation of the public sphere, and the deployment of public art, curatorial tactics, and architectural concepts to reimagine public space as the terrain for negotiation, exchange, and confrontation.<sup>8</sup> It comes as no surprise that activists and artists have been deploying theatrical and performative methodologies as a politicised practice to foreground the limitations of representative democracy and political institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Following this strand of thought and the long tradition of artistic interventions in the public sphere, this chapter presents a dynamic constellation of long-term structures and artists’ organisations that often exceed the temporality of an exhibition or biennale. They take issue with the various scales of procedural, highly bureaucratised, and professionalised forms of present-day institutionality, while attempting to offer prefigurative models of democracy. Their common denominator is that they attempt to go beyond what Bishop (2012: 2) has described as the ‘social turn’ in contemporary art, meaning the growing attention to collaborative practices and ‘participatory engagement’. Indeed, recent trends have been privileging participatory, relational, and audience-based artistic practices, ranging from Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics whose aspirations for participation fade beyond the walls of his ‘laboratory’ or ‘art factory’ to public art and community-based projects often premised on ephemeral and commodified experiences.<sup>10</sup> Bishop (2004: 67) repudiates them, arguing ‘the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic’ and ‘they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity

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<sup>8</sup> See Cvejic and Vujanovic 2015, Shannon 2011, Phelan 1993, Bogad 2016, Evans 2019, Kelleher 2009, Morgan 2013, Serafini 2018, Malzacher and Warsza 2017, Fisher and Katsouraki 2017, Baz 1992, Shirin and Reinelt 2015, Eckersall and Ferdman 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Indicatively, the artistic tradition that foregrounds the political dimension of theatre ranges from Brecht’s epic theatre, where the audience is deliberately estranged through a variety of techniques (interruptions, contradictions, fragmentations, etc.) and urged to decipher reality, to Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* that, inspired by theorist Paulo Freire, strives to foster critical thinking and promote social change.

<sup>10</sup> For this discussion see Finkelppearl 2000, Kester 2004, Kwon 2002, Billing, Lind and Nilsson 2007, Helguera 2011, and Bauer 2007.

as whole and of community as immanent togetherness'. In this respect, Bishop's critique alludes both to Lacan's understanding of subjectivity as constitutively split and to Laclau and Mouffe's assertion that the creation of a fully inclusive political community is unfeasible since it will always be based on acts of exclusion and a 'constitutive outside'. In Mouffe's own words (2005b: 69), '[p]olitical life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a "we" in a context of diversity and conflict'.

Delving into three hitherto underexamined case studies also allows me to set them in a constructive dialogue to map out not only their divergences, but also their respective potentialities and limitations. For Preciado, Europe is faced with 'the failure of participatory and representative democracy', so the aim of the Parliament of Bodies was to 'find new ways of doing politics together' (in Svarrer 2016). Inspired by the Greek anti-austerity movement, documenta 14's public programme set out to serve as a counter-parliament to reinvent the assembly form by introducing novel spatial elements and working both on the level of the discursive and the embodied. For its part, the Visible project serves as a decentred research platform that showcases socially engaged practices, seeking to instantiate a deterritorialised 'space of appearance' and to connect artistic practices that promote social change not only with one another, but also with theorists and policymakers. Through its Temporary Parliament, Visible also interrogates the parliamentary format by experimenting with novel decision-making processes. Lastly, according to Staal (2010: 14), political discourses seem devoid of creativity and imagination, whereas artists who show a 'real commitment', a 'fidelity', and an 'urgency' for action can not only produce alternative visions of the world, but also produce the organisational and infrastructural basis to bring them to life. His nomadic parliaments, assemblies, and trainings serve as such spatial articulations and performative acts of enacting 'stateless democracy', namely a vision of democracy that is divorced from the state apparatus. These alter-institutions are examined along the lines of three structural and intimately interconnected dimensions. Firstly, their ability to transcend the artistic realm and connect with other spheres of social life, ongoing struggles, and social movements. Secondly, their potential to provide stages for the appearance of

'the people' and architectural settings for the spatialisation of dissensus. Finally, the degree to which they remain not only flexible in creating porous spaces for the negotiation and translation of differences, but also self-critical and self-reflective in relation to their own practices, possibilities, and limits.

## 3.2 The Parliament of Bodies

### 3.2.1 '34 Exercises of Freedom'

Since the Parliament of Bodies was an extension of the square movements, there was a fetishisation of direct democracy [...] so you had many speakers addressing the issue of direct democracy, also using Ancient Greece as a historical framework, without taking into consideration the context of archaeolatry, which is part of the civic education and the nationalist discourse in Greece, and which has, of course, a series of issues.<sup>11</sup>

Stathis Gourgouris,  
Participant in '34 Exercises of Freedom'

The Parliament of Bodies, curated by Paul B. Preciado, transgender activist and Professor of Political History of the Body, Gender Theory, and History of Performance at Université Paris VIII, comprised the public programme of documenta 14. The Parliament of Bodies, encapsulating d14's overall leftist rhetoric and curatorial discourses, explored a multiplicity of topics, like the periphery's dependence on the centres of economic power, radical movements across the globe, the history of the Greek Left (especially in the aftermath of the Greek military dictatorship), LGBTQI+ rights, and the discursive construction of gender identities. In addition, the main anchor point of the Parliament of Bodies was the concept of the assembly, inspired by the Greek Indignant movement, the anti-austerity movement that begun in 2010 and resulted in the Syriza party winning elections in 2015.

The Parliament of Bodies, acting as an alter-institution that took shape within the mega-institution of documenta 14, was inaugurated with '34 Exercises of Freedom' in September 2016, as a precursor to the main exhibition, seven months prior to its

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<sup>11</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 06/03/2019, 00:15:00). Stathis Gourgouris's contribution to the '34 Exercises of Freedom' of the Parliament of Bodies comprised a poetry reading, entitled *Transgressive Listening*, which entailed the reciting of the story of Prometheus accompanied by an audio of monotonous loud noises.

official opening. '34 Exercises of Freedom' comprised a ten-day intensive marathon programme that entailed lectures, ceremonies, performances, rituals, and screenings, involving prominent thinkers, academics, artists, curators, and activists. The forty-five speakers were invited to 'exercise freedom within the building', since according to Preciado (2017b), the programme was inspired by 'Michel Foucault's idea that freedom is not a natural right or a quality that you can possess, but something that has to be exercised'.<sup>12</sup> Following documenta's long history of artistic experimentation, innovative curatorial approaches, and radical pedagogies, '34 Exercises of Freedom' invited artists to offer their own redefinitions of freedom. The invited speakers were granted complete freedom to utilise the space, explore a diversity of mediums and means, and take as much time as they needed for unscripted and uncensored interventions.

By the organisers' own admission, an important focal point of '34 Exercises of Freedom' was the investigation of the 'failed' transition from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy in countries like Greece, Spain, and Argentina. Asserting that in neoliberal regimes, freedom is often misunderstood as consensus capitalism, they posed the central question of the programme: 'Might it be possible to think the Greek notion of *eleftheria* (freedom) against the capitalist notion of freedom?' (documenta 14 2017). Indeed, neoliberalism can be seen as attacking the very principles, practices, and institutions of democracy, understood as 'people rule' or 'rule by the people'.<sup>13</sup> According to the organisers, such aggressive neoliberal tactics are most evident in austerity programmes and in the privatisation of state infrastructures. In the same vein, predatory neoliberal reforms can be evinced by the

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<sup>12</sup> Although Foucault's genealogical writings map the intimate intertwinement of practices of social relations and the spatial distributions in which agents are situated, he remains adamant that freedom remains a practice. 'I do not think that it is possible to say that one thing is of the order of 'liberation' and another is of the order of 'oppression'... I do not think that there is anything that is functionally—by its very nature—absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice' (Foucault 1984: 245).

<sup>13</sup> As Brown (2015: 31) has convincingly argued, neoliberal rationality 'disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*'. Analysing the Greek etymology of democracy (or *Demos/kratia*, which translates as 'rule by the people'), Brown argues that its meaning has been always contested, since *demos* refers, on the one hand, to the entire population, and on the other, to the rule by the poor (as per Aristotle). For this discussion see also Harvey 2005.

neocolonial means of conceding sovereign power to creditor international institutions (like the IMF and the World Bank) through conditional loans. By remaining unaccountable, such supra-national institutions, according to Rancière (2006: 82), 'depoliticize political matters, reserve them for places that are non-places, places that do not leave any space for the democratic invention of the polemic'.<sup>14</sup>

The Athens Municipality Arts Centre, right across the Museum of Anti-dictatorial and Democratic Resistance at Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park) was selected as the location to host '34 Exercises of Freedom'. The decision to situate the Parliament of Bodies in the context of the Freedom Park, a site that encapsulates the recent political history of the country, was not accidental. Both buildings are politically charged and have been associated with the repression of rights, censorship, imprisonment, and the prosecution of dissidents, especially during the Regime of the Colonels (the Greek military junta of 1967-1974). The site comprised a detention and torture facility, as well as the headquarters of ETA/ESA, the military police of the junta. Although both buildings still belong to the Greek Ministry of Defence, the Museum of Anti-dictatorial and Democratic Resistance' interior spaces, enclosures, and interrogation rooms have been partially preserved, with a minimum public funding. Members of the Association of Imprisoned and Exiled Resistance Fighters have been granted permission to perform guided tours, showcasing a collection of documents, journals, and archives, while photographs of places of exile and personal belongings of political prisoners and deportees are also on display. The Athens Municipality Arts Centre, on the other hand, operates as a contemporary art exhibition venue, with its interior panelled so as to resemble a 'white cube'. According to the documenta 14 (2017) organisers, this transformation of the building 'effected a "de-historization" of the site, creating the conditions for institutional amnesia'.

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<sup>14</sup> According to Rancière (2014: 81), it is through the invention of such supra-national institutions that the oligarchic government's compulsion is best exemplified, namely, 'the compulsion to get rid of the people and of politics'.

'34 Exercises of Freedom' was neither 'an exhibition, nor a conference', but an attempt to render visible 'dissident, heterogeneous, and minor narratives' by bringing together a multiplicity of contemporary cases of resistance, ranging from the Kurdish revolution in Rojava to queer and feminist struggles against patriarchy (documenta 14 2017). For instance, in one of the opening events, Antonio Negri was brought together with political-rights activist Niillas Somby, whose struggle revolves around Sámi sovereignty in the north of Norway. Delivering their speeches from the opposite sides of a full house, they shared their experiences of activism, struggle, and imprisonment. On the one hand, Negri, drawing from his days in the Potere Operaio group (Worker Power), gave his account of liberation as an active struggle, the realisation of possibilities, and an exercise in building the constituent power that can structure liberated ways of living (see Negri 2017). Reiterating his confidence in the creative capacity of the multitude, he delved into the movement of the squares (in Madrid, Tunis, Cairo, New York) as a new 'Athenian' experience of freedom, the spatialisation of a new democracy, and the *topos* of revolution. On the other, Somby underlined some of the obstacles that Indigenous movements of the Scandinavian Peninsula face, such as discrimination by the dominant Norwegian culture and dispossession of their traditional territories.



**Figure 3.1.** Andreas Angelidakis, Antonio Negri, and Paul B. Preciado, opening of the Public Programme of d14 at Parko Eleftherias, Athens, Greece. Photograph by Stathis Mamalakis.

One of the most participatory events of ‘34 Exercises of Freedom’ was a peripatetic exercise, co-organised by the Contemporary Social History Archives of Greece (ASKI), that involved a cross-city historical tour to sites that had been associated with oppression and violence during the military dictatorship of 1967-74. The organisers introduced the audience to histories of political persecution and acts of resistance against the 1967 dictatorship.<sup>15</sup> The dictatorship in Greece was put into dialogue with other cases of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes from around the world. For instance, Diana Taylor (New York University) and Ana Longoni’s (University of Buenos Aires) lectures focused on collective strategies of resistance and creative actions of human rights movements during dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. The testimonies and personal accounts of torture, violence, and acts of resistance were complemented by attempts to address the recent history and even exorcise some of the traumatic memories of the space itself.

<sup>15</sup> ASKI was indeed the most appropriate host for this collective walk, since it holds the most comprehensive collection of archives relating to the history of the Greek Left and it has dedicated its activities for more than 40 years to enriching the public’s historical awareness.

'34 Exercises of Freedom' seemed willing to actively investigate some of the current political debates and the history of the Greek Left by imbuing them with artistic sensitivity and reproducing them on a cultural level. The exercises ventured into the minor and the ruptured, focusing on dissident areas of knowledge, while tackling some of the hegemonic narratives and mainstream accounts of Greek resistance. This was the case with the lecture of Kostis Kornetis (Carlos III University, Madrid) that attempted a respectful demythologisation of the private histories of torture and suffering during the Colonels' Regime, through the lenses of public history, public memory, and contemporary artistic representation. In the same vein, Neni Panourgia (Columbia University) delivered an emotionally charged talk, while situated in the torture chambers of EAT/ESA with some of the survivors present in the room.<sup>16</sup> In her critique of documenta 14's public programme, she argued that 'what I think happened in the Parliament of Bodies was that a stage was given to the speakers and the audience to think about the current problems of the country and to engage in historical and retrospective reflection. If this did not materialise, it was due to the lack of clear directives and parameters of inquiry'.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of shedding light on the politically charged history of the post-1974 era and activating the already present antagonisms within the hegemonic narratives, the programme often tended towards reproducing superficial accounts of local history. According to Zefkili (2017), the Parliament of Bodies' involvement with the topic of the Greek junta 'was in many cases overly nostalgic, sentimental and confident, offering easy meanings instead of activating regions where history is fragile and fluid', overlooking, for instance, the role of American foreign policy in the establishment of the junta.<sup>18</sup> Especially when international artists with little or no familiarity with the specificities of the local socioeconomic context offered their own accounts, the programme degenerated into a nostalgic theatricality and an over-romanticised performativity. This was the case with Daniel García Andújar's *A Lexicon of Dictatorship*, a random patchwork of archive images of the military

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<sup>16</sup> Her performative lecture was entitled 'Chronotopes/Dystopic Geometries/Terrifying Geographies'.

<sup>17</sup> Neni Panourgia, interview quote (interview date: 11/03/2019, 00:28:00).

<sup>18</sup> For this debate see Coulombis 1983, Woodhouse 1985.

junta, accompanied by imagery of ancient statues and Ancient Greek-themed tattoos (symbols predominantly used today by members of the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party).

Invoking ‘the Greek notion of *eleftheria*’, the ‘Athenian experience of freedom’, and ‘direct democracy’ risked fueling national pride and solidifying existing ideological constructs that are being capitalised upon to reinforce tourist-driven consumption. In sharp contrast to a cohesive Greek identity that is well-situated within the dominant narratives of the West, a more in-depth analysis would suggest that this identity is a rather precarious construction, the result of cultural cross-fertilisations, successive layers of inhabiting practices, and externally imposed narratives.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the transition from the fall of the dictatorship to today’s neoliberal democracy (called ‘*Metapolitefsi*’), a turbulent period of restoring democracy ‘from above’ and of rapid transformations in political and social institutions, was underexamined and treated uncritically. This was because the Parliament of Bodies engaged in these interrogations with insufficient knowledge of the local historical context, the antinomies that comprise Greek identity, and the internally split and often opposing political imaginaries (even within the Left) that have emerged from the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), through ‘*Metapolitefsi*,’ all the way to the anti-austerity movements of 2010-2012.

### **3.2.2 Towards an Anarchitecture**

The Parliament of Bodies was conceived by Preciado not only as a platform where the notion of the assembly could be redefined, but also as a subversive and politicised architectural practice that could disrupt preassigned gender and sexual identities. Delving into Preciado’s theoretical edifice is crucial since this provided the cornerstone of the Parliament of Bodies. Preciado’s work has explored how

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<sup>19</sup> This was the case, for instance, with the attempt to revitalise Greece’s ‘ancient glory’ through archaeological infrastructural development and neoclassical architecture projects during Otto Friedrich Ludwig’s reign in Greece from 1832 to 1862. In addition, as Stavrides (2017: 66) convincingly argues, the internal immigration after the Second World War explains, to a large extent, why Athenians ‘don’t exactly identify with the city’ they live in and why ‘autochthony as a mythology rests on very precarious foundations’.

architectural practice is both reflective of broader societal transformations and instrumental in the normalisation, gendering, and racialisation of subjects. Returning to Foucault's (1977a: 208) work on biopolitics, Preciado tracks how 19<sup>th</sup>-century Panopticism, along with other technologies of the body, provided 'the general principle of a new political anatomy' that morphed into disciplinary institutions and architectures. According to Preciado (2012: 123), 'the devices of sexual-political subjectivation were inevitably interlinked with the netlike expansion of gender and race-segregated institutions, as well as the development of the heterosexual domestic architectural regime during the 19th century'.

Indeed, for Foucault, architectural forms, like the allocation of bodies in space, the canalisation of their movement, and the meticulously organised gaze, can be understood as biopolitical techniques that construct and produce the subjects that inhabit them (see Foucault 1984, Elden and Crampton 2007). Based on Foucault's analysis of institutions of confinement (like prisons, asylums, clinics), theorists like Bennett (1995) and Crimp (1980; 1985) investigated the history of the public museum and the international exhibition as institutional articulations of relations of power, knowledge, and regimes of truth.<sup>20</sup> Bennett documents how a diversity of technologies (museum dioramas, display cases, reconstructions) were deployed to create an organised order of things that articulates 'truth' statements (underpinned by notions of historical progress and scientific rationality). At the same time, spatial articulations and technologies played an instrumental role in transforming the visiting crowd into 'a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating, and, as the historical record suggests, consistently orderly public—a society watching over itself' (Bennett 2017b: 370).

In this respect, Preciado took Foucault's analysis a step further to map more recent societal transformations, coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism, that have informed the production of subjectivity. By coining the term '*pharmacopornographic*' he describes the power nexus of global communication

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<sup>20</sup> As Crimp (1980: 45) notes, 'there is another such institution of confinement ripe for analysis in Foucault's terms—the museum—and another discipline—art history'.

media (and its semiotic techniques) and biotechnologies (and its biomolecular techniques) in the government of sexual subjectivity. In this pharmacopornographic regime, there are no more objects and things to be produced, only signs, desires, and states of the psyche. Hence, the Foucauldian architectural apparatuses that controlled the body externally in disciplinary societies have mutated into immaterial networks and soft biopolitical technologies that have become inseparable from the body. In Preciado's view (2012: 130, original emphasis), 'In the pharmacopornographic regime, the body no longer inhabits disciplinary places, but is now inhabited by them. Architecture exists *in us*'.<sup>21</sup> Hence, Preciado highlights the interplay of architecture, media culture, and biopolitics to argue that hegemonic patriarchal/heterosexual systems not only have an architectural articulation but can also be conveyed through spatial metaphors, representations, and signs.



**Figure 3.2.** Paul Preciado's three-day seminar on the history of sexuality, Parko Eleftherias. Photograph by the author.

<sup>21</sup> In his study on Hugh Hefner's pornographic topography, Preciado (2019: 23) describes the production of pornotopic spaces within the domestic realm during the '50s and '60s, analysing the consumption of intimacy and the operation of architecture 'as powerful gender signifier that emphasizes the representation of masculinity'.

The Parliament of Bodies, an exhibition apparatus in its own right, presented the ideal opportunity for Preciado, not only to incorporate his theoretical vision, but also to investigate architecture as a critical practice that can provide micropolitical actions of defiance to the biopolitical technologies of gender and sexual reproduction. Influenced by architectural theorists, like Beatriz Colomina, Preciado seems to have conceptualised the Parliament of Bodies as a 'common space' in which the spatial conventions and the architectural representations of the body could be reconfigured and even reinvented.<sup>22</sup> Instead of accepting the dominant paradigm of visibility and the hegemonic representation of the body, the Parliament of Bodies attempted to venture into the bodies of sexual minorities, stateless people, and refugees, whose status of visibility has been questioned by the current regime of 'necropolitics' (Mbembe 2019b). As Preciado (2012: 134) argued, 'The aim of a transfeminist and queer theory for architecture is to undo the spatialization of knowledge and power techniques that have contributed to the performative construction of political subjectivities'.<sup>23</sup>

Preciado's (2012: 134) assertion that 'it is time for architecture to become activism' and his insistence on redefining the spatial configuration of the assembly format were crystallised in the interior redesign of the Athens Municipality Arts Centre at Freedom Park. Andreas Angelidakis was invited by the organisers of d14 in a double capacity, both as exhibiting artist and the architect of the Parliament of Bodies. Angelidakis, whose work has dealt with topics like site specificity, memory, and the legislation status of unauthorised constructions, proposed an 'investigative renovation' of the Arts Centre.<sup>24</sup> By assuming an archaeological methodology, uncovering layers of the walls, and foregrounding evidence of past usage, he attempted to reconstruct the material history of the space. A series of minor interventions, mainly consisting of cuts and incisions through the plasterboard walls and panelled ceilings, revealed spatial elements, like barred windows and stone

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<sup>22</sup> See Colomina 1992; Spade 2006; Crawford 2010; Gorny and Heuvel 2017; and Spencer 2016.

<sup>23</sup> After all, Preciado traces a lineage of feminist, homosexual, and trans movements of the '60s, leading up to today's gender, transgender and queer-crip movements aiming to deconstruct gender and critique the technologies of normalising (hetero)sexuality (see also Butler 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Andreas Angelidakis, interview quote (interview date: 22/07/2019, 00:05:00).

walls.<sup>25</sup> According to the d14 organisers, this process of excavation that uncovered some of the building's memories would allow its users to negotiate with the spectres of its history.

Since for Preciado using individual chairs would evoke a neoliberal workplace environment or an aesthetic event to be consumed, Angelidakis's proposal (*Demos*, 2016) comprised sixty-nine foam and vinyl seating modules of variable dimensions, which resembled blocks of concrete ruins. This soft, adaptable, and 'open form' architecture, allowing the public to alter the organisation of the space by assembling, disassembling, and rearranging the blocks, became the focal point of the Parliament of Bodies. By the artist's own admission, his inspiration for *Demos* was twofold: on the one hand, the ancient steps on the hill of Pnyka, which provided the space of deliberation of the demos (alternatively, 'ekklesia' or the people's assembly), the sovereign body of government in Athens in the 5th century BC; on the other, the modernist concrete frame that was used as the main construction module for the urban development of Athens during the 1960s and '70s. In this sense, *Demos* invokes both a typology of spaces and architectural settings that comprise the archetypal unit of democratic decision-making processes and the 'anarchist' and unauthorised constructions that have characterised the modern urban scenery of Athens.

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<sup>25</sup> The interventions echoed the projects of Gordon Matta-Clark, for example *Splitting* (1974). Interestingly enough, Matta-Clark was a member of the Anarchitecture Group, which was comprised of artists like Laurie Anderson, Tina Girouard, Carol Goodden, Suzanne Harris, Jene Highstein, Bernard Kirschenbaun, Richard Landry, and Richard Nonas, and whose aim was to tackle architecture's complicity in capitalist modes of production (see Wigley 2018).



**Figure 3.3 (i-iii).** Different configurations of Angelidakis's *Demos* (2016), Parko Eleftherias. Photographs by Andreas Angelidakis and by the author.

According to Angelidakis, 'one of the main goals of the organisers of documenta was to redefine the relationship between transmitter and receiver of knowledge, between those who speak and those who listen. This was the foundational principle of the architecture of the Parliament of Bodies'.<sup>26</sup> Although he had designed more than a series of 40 typologies for *Demos*, in reality, participants utilised the blocks spontaneously and arbitrarily to construct different arrangements for every event. In sharp contrast to the ruins of ancient temples that must be preserved as touristic attractions and trademarks of the country, Angelidakis's modern 'pseudo-ruins' invited users to dismantle and reshape them. The assembly was transformed into a multiplicity of architectural configurations, ranging from more unconventional sitting arrangements (like two opposite sitting rows with the 'stage' in between them) to more traditional formats like semi-circular platforms or exedras (where the stage is in front of the audience). In this way, every iteration of the parliament was instantiating different and transient compositions of the demos, which had to be demolished again to leave room for its next articulation.

<sup>26</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 22/07/2019, 00:44:00).

As Preciado (2012: 129) noted, 'the pharmacopornographic agora is a postdemocratic space; light, open, and public space no longer holds the possibility of democratic and rational communication'. This echoes Mbembe's own account (2019a: 7) which traces the emergence of a new form of corporate sovereignty, namely the 'bifurcation between liberal democracy and finance capitalism' where 'the demos properly understood might no longer be the sovereign'. Deconstructing the Athens Municipality Arts Centre and introducing the malleable architecture of *Demos* could be interpreted only as a first step; a symbolic gesture that signified that biopolitical systems of domination must be unbuilt and new subject positions must be spatialised. Shattered surfaces, the interplay between building and ruin, and the gathering of bodies without established architectural hierarchies would allow them to shift beyond binary inscriptions and preassigned roles towards a performative production of public space. For the duration of the exhibition, artists, performers, activists, dancers, writers, and critical thinkers were invited to the Freedom Park to imagine the reconstruction of a democratic public sphere by reorganising the blocks and by creating different platforms for appearance and enunciation.

Indeed, the Parliament of Bodies was characterised by a strong emphasis on corporality, affect, embodiment, and performativity. In a series of performances, Dionysian parties, and rituals, the body was centred as an archive of cultural significations, political practices, and personal narratives. For instance, in one of the events, visitors were invited to bring sleeping bags and food supplies to attend the twenty-four-hour performance of Greek artist Georgia Sagri, who danced to the beats of a drummer, until exhausted. Similarly, choreographed pieces like *Civic Education* by Peruvian artist Sergio Zevallos, where a group of men, some dressed as civilians and others in military uniforms, danced, fought, and undressed one another, invoked the history of the place as well as instances of police brutality and violence during more recent demonstrations. These performances inside the politically charged Freedom Park alluded to the possibility of re-witnessing memories, reconfiguring subject positions, and staging the political through the

medium of dance, rhythm, and bodily motion.<sup>27</sup> As Ndikung (2018: 114), one of d14's curators, argued, 'dance is a sociopolitical method and practice, a means of writing, narrating, and disseminating histories. It is a corporeal phenomenon that can be a catalyst for building communities and challenge and transcend the boundaries of societies and languages'. The body can be perceived as a container of knowledge, a site of learning and disseminating testimonies, and a stage for the communication of societal sentiments and collective fictions.

Disciplinary powers might deploy space in the form of 'normalized enclosures', biopolitical architectures, and urban enclaves in order not only to classify and situate subjects, but also to guarantee their reproduction through everyday activities and social articulations (Soja 2000: 299). However, spatial organisation does not preexist human relations; it is created through the arrangement of bodies; bodies that by exercising their performative right to appear and by acting in concert, mould and shape the space they inhabit.<sup>28</sup> The Parliament of Bodies invited participants to reexamine the intimately intertwined construction of sex, gender, and space by foregrounding the in-betweenness of bodies, deploying tactics of 'undoing disciplinary architectures', and actively reconfiguring the performative production of space and its representations.

### 3.2.3 Reinventing the Parliament

The failure of the Oxi (No) referendum in July 2015 revealed the failure of representative politics [...] the parliament showed itself to be as an institution in ruins, empty. But for many days, Syntagma Square and the streets of Athens were filled with voices and bodies. The parliament was on the street.

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<sup>27</sup> To remember Emma Goldman's often-quoted dictum: 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution' (for dance and politics see Mills 2016, for play, creativity, and social movements see Shepard 2011).

<sup>28</sup> To be more precise, departing from earlier accounts that viewed space as entirely passive (i.e., socially constructed), it is now claimed that as much as space is socially constructed, society is also transformed through continuous processes of spatialisation. Put differently, as Elden (2007: 112) argues, 'Just as the social is historically shaped, so too is it spatially shaped. Equally the spatial is historically and socially configured' (see also Marchart 2018, Massey 2005).

These events greatly influenced the formation of the documenta 14 exhibition.

Paul Preciado (2017a)

Curator of Parliament of Bodies

In concert with Szymczyk, Preciado diagnosed the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis as a post-democratic order, since not only were severe austerity measures imposed on countries, but also the democratic rights of different groups (undocumented immigrants, refugees, racial minorities) had been increasingly restricted.<sup>29</sup> The implementation of successive waves of austerity, especially in the Greek context, was coupled with the resurgence of nationalist movements and fascist reflexes, which were exacerbated by the 2015 unprecedented refugee flows to Europe and the humanitarian crisis that transpired in Greece. With the modern institutions of representative democracy in ruins, at least in Preciado's eyes, the real parliament was transported to the streets and squares. For Preciado, this new parliament was constituted by protesting bodies (including unrepresented and undocumented bodies) that collectively resisted neoliberal policies and xenophobic impulses.

Inspired by the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados, the Indignants' protests at Syntagma Square encapsulated the spatialised staging of dissent. For Swyngedouw (2011: 376), the insurrectionary events and the performative staging of equality, witnessed in the squares of Athens, Tunis, Cairo, etc., provided testament to 'how egalitarian political spaces can be claimed, staged, choreographed and "materialized"'. However, the Greek Indignant movement did not form a uniform entity; it was rather a 'rhizomatic revolution', detached from political parties, labour unions or other civil society organisations, expressing opposing political imaginaries (Castells 2012: 115). As Kaika and Karaliotas (2014: 245) argued, on the one hand, the 'upper Syntagma square' was a protest against political corruption, but

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<sup>29</sup> This became especially clear after the 2015 Greek referendum, where a new package of austerity measures was introduced, in spite of the citizens' overwhelming rejection of the proposed EU bailout.

‘concluded in xenophobic and racist discourses’, and on the other, a ‘politics of solidarity’ was staged in the ‘lower Syntagma square’, defined by the demand for direct democracy and alluding to more universalising democratic politics.<sup>30</sup> For his part, Negri (2017: 559-560), asserted that these new ‘parliaments of freedom’ in the squares of Athens, Madrid, and elsewhere, defined by their horizontal organisation and by a radical critique of political representation, were spatialised attempts to build the commons and give ‘life to new political democratic experiences’.

Hence, one can safely assume that the public programme of documenta 14 took its name from the political imaginaries and the feeling of urgency that manifested itself during these moments. Szymczyk (2017: 29) had envisioned d14 as a ‘diverse, ever-changing, transnational and anti-identitarian parliament of bodies—of all bodies coming together in documenta 14, to then disperse and form other parliaments, other instances of destituent power, elsewhere and in another time’. Preciado castigated ‘necropolitical institutions’ premised on a sex-gender-race epistemology and the biopolitical technologies of a nation-state government, arguing that ‘the museum, the school, the hospital need to transition’ (Preciado 2017b). Displacing the institution of documenta to Athens in order to deconstruct it, as well as reinventing the parliament as a critical, embodied, and decolonial public sphere, exemplified such a radical transition, at least in the eyes of Preciado (2017c: 120), who, invoking Deleuze and Guattari, asserted that ‘transitioning is a line of flight’.

The Parliament of Bodies, invoking Latour’s ‘Parliament of Things’ (see Latour 1993), was conceived as an alter-institution that challenged the very principles that allow certain bodies to be rendered visible and audible, inventing ‘new forms of democratic action and cooperation’ (Preciado 2007a). In this sense, it served as a *counter-parliament*, dedicated to those who are normally excluded from the public

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<sup>30</sup> According to Kaika and Karaliotas, the ‘upper Syntagma square’ was fuelled by anger and indignation directed to the parliament (since for protestors, the financial crisis was the result solely of corrupted politicians) and was often the locus for reactionary politics and nationalistic discourses, exemplified by numerous groups, like ‘300 Greeks’ and ‘the Greek Mothers’, that were attempting to appropriate the square. In contrast, the ‘lower Syntagma square’ was defined by the demand for unmediated and direct democracy, and was sustained by collective practices of self-organisation, like solidarity kitchens, informal hospitals, and an Open Popular Assembly Forum.

sphere, echoing Rancière's own account of the demos as the unaccounted, the part of those who have no part.<sup>31</sup> The highly ambitious aim of the Parliament of Bodies was to create an alternate platform of visibility and enunciation that challenges ethnocentric accounts of belonging, colonial genealogies, and fixed categorisations of gender. This was based on the premise that categories of citizenship and nationality, sex/gender designations, and identity politics can no longer provide the analytical tools to examine the present-day processes of political subjectivation, in a time of forced displacement and dispossession, homelessness and exile. This is why the Parliament of Bodies attempted to incorporate feminist and queer anarchist methodologies, diverse histories of radical democratic activism, and an anti-colonial critique. By utilising the Freedom Park, a space marked by histories of oppression and dictatorship, the newly founded Parliament became the focal point to reexamine democracy and the possibility of an emancipatory agent, premised on difference, heterogeneity, the proliferation of languages, and fluid identities.

To map some of these connections, Preciado drew parallels between asylum seekers who have abandoned their country and seek refuge as potential citizens of other nation-states, and trans people who have departed from the gender assigned at birth and seek to integrate into (and be recognised as) another gender. It is no accident that Preciado (2017a) referred to d14 as 'the Apatride Exhibition', encapsulating also the main problematisations at the core of the Parliament of Bodies: 'But who is entitled to a name today? Who can claim to be a citizen of a nation?'. In this sense, for Preciado, trans people and refugees can fall interchangeably under the rubric of 'apatride', since both categories are not only faced with exile and with conditions of high social vulnerability, but they are also denied their legal/political rights and sovereignty over their bodies.<sup>32</sup> According to Preciado, trans people and migrants strive neither for normalisation, nor for integration, but for the necessary 'semitechnical prostheses' (administrative and

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<sup>31</sup> In Rancière's (2010: 53) words: 'The demos is not the population, the majority, the political body or the lower classes. It is the surplus community made up of those who have no qualification to rule, which means at once everybody and anyone at all'.

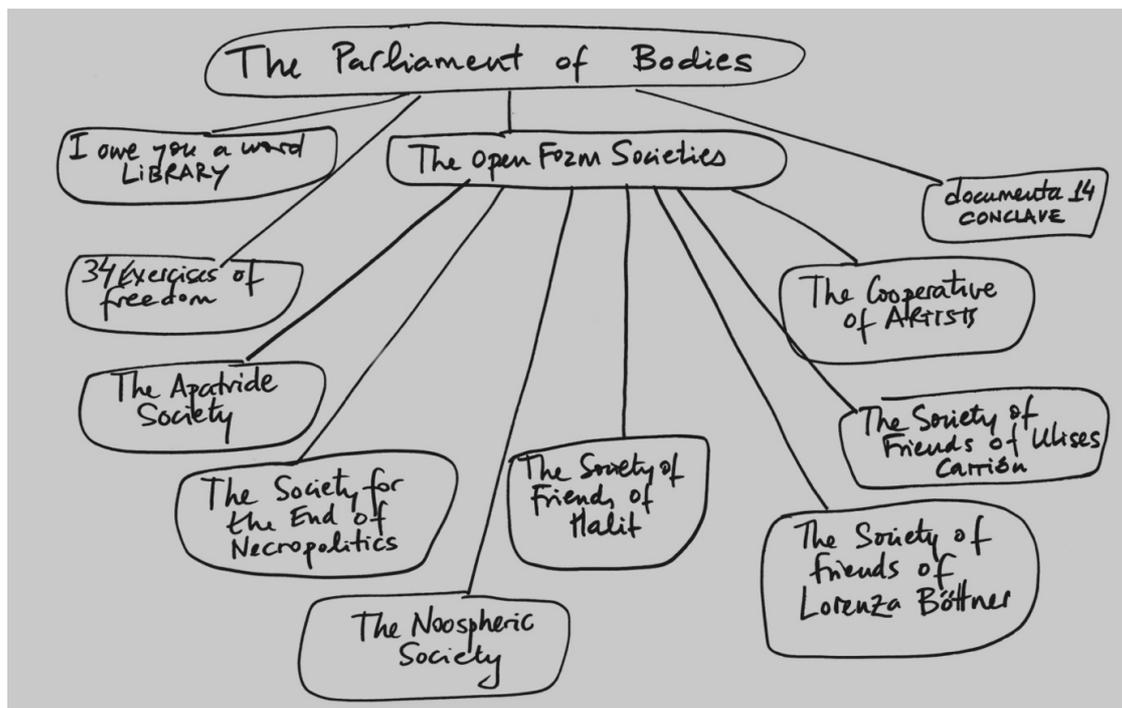
<sup>32</sup> As Preciado argued (2017c: 125), 'in Althusserian terms, we could say that trans people and migrants find themselves in the paradoxical situation of asking to be interpellated as subjects by the ideological apparatus of the very state that excluded them'.

legal recognition) that will allow them to gain agency over their body and its semiotic construction.

Preciado attempted to revisit the definition of political Otherness, expanding the category of the subaltern to include the stateless, the refugee, the marginalised Indigenous, the sex worker, the queer and trans subject, the disabled, and the repressed sexual identity. By taking this analysis a step further, Preciado argued that a chain of equivalence could be established, not between those who share similar identities or subject positions (along national, racial, ethnic, or sexual lines), but between those who are connected by different forms of dispossession, oppression, and displacement. In this sense, the Parliament of Bodies attempted to materialise the 'plural performativity' that Butler (2015: 51) has convincingly advocated, 'a critical alliance formed among the discounted, the ineligible—the precarious—to establish new forms of appearance that seek to overcome that differential form of power'. It constituted the melting pot where diverse counter-hegemonic struggles for 'sovereignty, recognition, and survival' could coalesce, in order to forge 'synthetic alliances' and 'new affects' (documenta 14 2017). Participants were invited to engage in critical processes of dis-identification, and subsequently, invent novel modes of political subjectivation, actively constructing a 'political theatre' every day. The establishment of new critical alliances and the performative in-betweenness of bodies crystallised a form of struggle that 'intervenes in the spatial organization of power, which includes the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear' (Butler 2015: 86).

The inauguration of a variety of societies to populate and utilise the newly constituted parliament was conceived as a means to solidify such networks, cultural translations, and alliances. In fact, these societies were conceived as 'the public infrastructure' of the exhibition which could continue the parliament's mission after documenta's departure by aligning with other local activist initiatives or by merging into another hybrid institution. Six Open Form Societies were introduced as participant-run groups, dedicated to exploring different topics, propositions or problematisations. Acknowledging the financial and cultural barriers that

traditionally structured cultural events and exhibitions normally entail, Societies were conceived as a more open-ended format based on self-allocation of tasks and activities.<sup>33</sup> Imagined as mutating and performative entities of micropolitical self-organisation and self-learning, their aim was to convene on a monthly basis, share knowledges, forge bonds, develop methodologies, and then present their findings in public.<sup>34</sup> Exceeding the scope of a mere working group, Societies would serve as a collective exercise aimed at creating platforms of debate and concrete tools for activist action.<sup>35</sup> Although Societies attempted to bring together participants, artists, and activists in order to forge an anti-fascist, feminist, and anti-racist front, in reality they never materialised into anything that could amount to an alliance or concrete action.



**Figure 3.4.** The conceptual configuration of the Parliament of Bodies. Photograph by the author.

<sup>33</sup> This was after all, at least on a discursive level, one of the fundamental axioms of the exhibition, namely, to lift some of the exclusions that 'limit access to the exhibition to a predominantly privileged, Western European audience' (Szymczyk 2017: 41).

<sup>34</sup> Open Form Societies were modelled on the late-eighteenth-century anti-colonial and abolitionist societies in England and France and were inspired by Oskar Hansen's 'Open Form' methodology.

<sup>35</sup> According to Szymczyk (2017: 35), these societies constituted 'calls resulting from bringing people together and formulating concrete strategies to counter the divisive, damaging effects of the neoliberal mindset and its fascist shadow'.

Societies resembled academic lectures or performances that reproduced the power dynamics between speaker and audience, since instead of being structured on principles of self-organisation and horizontality, certain artists or academics were assigned the role of coordinators and 'often took them over'.<sup>36</sup> In addition, as one of the coordinators of the Parliament of Bodies admitted, some of the Societies were unstructured, 'off topic', and 'reflective of an agenda that was set in advance, instead of being attentive to the specific urgencies of the locality'.<sup>37</sup> This was the case, for instance, with the 'Cooperativist Society', that was supposed to delve into circular economy, the distribution of open knowledge, and post-capitalist cooperative ecosystems. However, its coordinators seemed less interested in sharing their research or organising workshops, than in redirecting the institutional funding they received from the Parliament to grassroots organising they were involved in elsewhere. In fact, Societies highlighted some of the organisational limitations of the Parliament of Bodies itself, which, according to numerous accounts, failed to reach a broad audience. Its scheduled events were structured around the invited speakers' presentations and there was insufficient time for debate and audience participation.

On the one hand, putting precarious positionalities, like refugees and LGBTQI+ people, centre stage in the Parliament of Bodies, was both necessary and long overdue, since heteropatriarchal norms, deep prejudices against sexual/racial/ethnic minorities, and a culture of gender-based violence still run deep across conservative parts of Greek society. The brutal beating to death of Zak Kostopoulos, a young LGBTQ activist and popular drag queen not long after documenta 14's departure from Athens, was a case in point.<sup>38</sup> Preciado, along with other members of the Parliament of Bodies, signed documenta 14's open letter castigating the attack and were present in the demonstrations demanding justice for

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymised participant, interview quote (interview date: 05/07/2018, 00:45:00).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> The incident took place on September 21, 2018, when Zak was beaten by two men, after entering a jewellery store in central Athens. Dozens of passers-by observed the scene without interfering, while the police, upon arrival, violently apprehended Zak, who was already injured, and was then taken to the hospital handcuffed. He died from the multiple injuries he sustained.

Zak.<sup>39</sup> On the other, although the Parliament of Bodies did address, at least on a discursive level, themes of displacement, statelessness, and queer politics, the firsthand experiences and the actual bodies of these social agents were missing from the events. For instance, except from the contribution of the Athens Museum of Queer Arts, the queer scene was represented by American artists like Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle. Although they both have had a 3-decade long record in tackling issues like labour rights in the porn industry, queerness, feminism, and environmentalism, their controversial performative lecture *Wet Dreams Water Ritual*, which led to an ‘ecosexual dance party’, did not reference the local context.<sup>40</sup> In addition, one of the characteristics of the local queer community (which is shared with other radical and autonomist movements) is a critique of Greek ideology, and more particularly, the deconstruction of Greekness and its embedded patriarchal and xenophobic elements. In fact, the notion of indigeneity comes with the baggage of neo-patriotic overtones, espoused by several parties in the far right. Hence, the Parliament of Bodies’s over-emphasis on instances of Greek ‘radical resistance’ against neoliberalism and the fetishisation of the Greek anti-austerity movement as a cohesive entity and a potential revolutionary collective subject resulted in alienating the very communities that the programme intended to attract. Failing to accommodate the local LGBTQI+ scene and the academic queer community can be also explained by the fact that these communities, characterised by a grassroots and activist form of organising from below, were estranged from the top-down institutional context of a mega-exhibition like documenta.

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<sup>39</sup> A series of civil society initiatives surfaced that included a twitter campaign, under the hashtag #Justice4ZakZackie, and an investigation launched by Forensic Architecture, one of the exhibiting collectives of documenta 14. Preciado (2018) also condemned Zak’s murder in one of his articles in the *Libération*.

<sup>40</sup> Their water ritual, involving artists, naked dancers, and participants in their bathing suits engaging in water fights, erotic massages, and collective moans, provoked fierce criticisms since it was situated in the politically charged space of the former EAT/ESA headquarters.



**Figure 3.5.** *Wet Dreams Water Ritual*, by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Parko Eleftherias. Photograph by Stathis Mamalakis.

In the same vein, vulnerable social actors have engaged in a number of initiatives to sustain a sense of communal life, building tangible networks of mutual aid, support, and collaboration to counter the lack of a social safety net and effective state welfare provisions. According to Stavrides (2017: 66), '[w]hat is perhaps distinctive about Athenian society's response to crisis is not the proliferation of differences in identity and life values, but the re-emergence of community values and practices beyond state-regulated relationships and institutions'. In sharp contrast to those who deemed the Indignant squares as 'post-political' because of their 'failure to generate more compound, non-localized democratic practices that would endure beyond the square's temporal and spatial practices', one can point to numerous grassroots collaborative projects, social medical centres, and social kitchens that have institutionalised egalitarian imaginaries, new modes of being in common, and novel ways of practicing solidarity in the here and now (Kaika and Karaliotas 2016: 566). In this sense, there seemed to be a 'disconnect between the Parliament of Bodies and the Indignant squares', since the latter might have ended as eventual sites, however their legacy is still ongoing in society.<sup>41</sup> The Parliament of Bodies was unwilling to accommodate either the existing solidarity networks and the multiplicity

<sup>41</sup> Stathis Gourgouris, interview quote (interview date: 06/03/2019, 00:08:00).

of self-organised initiatives that had emerged on a neighbourhood level, or the various grassroots queer and activist collectives, which were not included in the programming.

Extrapolating from that, a more theoretical question seems to be at issue, namely the disparities that arise between the schematic articulation of a chain of equivalence (meaning the expansive power of the equations of identity that can serve as ‘horizontal linking’ forging a multiplicity of minor struggles into Gramscian hegemonic blocs) and the specific context, the historical determinacy, and the lived reality of the local struggles where this theoretical construct is put to the test. Bringing together strands of the Left, the Indigenous, the displaced, and the queer, through an equivalential chain, can prove to be a highly contentious endeavour, especially when it fails to incorporate the local contingencies and sociohistorical peculiarities from which these political processes and collective identifications derive their meanings. Such a chain of equivalence, I argue, cannot be established a priori, it needs to be both theoretically investigated and examined in praxis.<sup>42</sup>

To conclude, the Parliament of Bodies, as both an aesthetic and political alter-institution, operated as a conduit for the designation of open signifiers that defy the patriarchal, hetero-normative, and identity-bound representations of the West. However, this attempt to stage a counter-parliament for the appearance of different narratives of resistance remained highly abstract, spatially unsituated, and unaware of the recent history of social and urban movements, along with their opposing imaginaries. Instead of serving as a practical mechanism of cultural translation between a multiplicity of precarious positionalities and concrete lived experiences, the Parliament resulted in the fetishisation and reification of certain social actors. In addition, as Stavrides (2017: 68) argued, ‘there is a huge difference between struggles for collective freedom and self-determination and individual radical actors’. Indeed, there was a continuous oscillation between the articulation

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<sup>42</sup> As one of the publications of the 2018 Athens Biennale stated, critiquing the Parliament of Bodies, ‘either cherry picking its particularities, mainly its political history or even mythological past, or devaluing its current state of emergency, it all gradually evaporated into the abstraction of a volatile Global South concept’ (Hessler, Poka-Yio, and Stafylakis 2018).

of counter-hegemonic personal identities and contemporary insurrectionary movements premised on collective practices of freedom. The Parliament of Bodies might have created a 'space of appearance', but the human bodies, which are 'the most important medium through which a public space is carved out of the social', were missing (Marchart 2019: 88).

### 3.3 The Visible Temporary Parliament

#### 3.3.1 Deterritorialising Socially Engaged Art

The problem that we face today is not only a political crisis, but it is also related to a crisis of imagination. In that sense, the artist represents this ideal figure who has the capacity to work with imagination and envisage how change could look like, giving an image to a social transformation.<sup>43</sup>

Judith Wielander,  
Co-curator of Visible

Initially conceived as a research project, Visible was founded in 2010 with the support of two private foundations, the Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna. Curated by independent curators Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti, Visible functions as a nomadic and decentred platform that researches and sustains socially engaged art in a global context. Visible has set out to examine artistic practices from a broad range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds that have the capacity to connect different worlds, experiment with new cultural visions, and articulate new social imaginaries to effectuate change.

Visible's subtitle 'where art leaves its own field and becomes visible as part of something else' encapsulates the vision of the project's instigator, artistic director, and one of the main representatives of the Italian Arte Povera, Michelangelo Pistoletto. Drawing on his decades-long artistic engagement with the public sphere through performance art, theatre, and action art, he argues against the art world's tendency to become increasingly self-referential and self-centred (the well-rehearsed argument for art's autonomy or purity). According to him, 'with a lack of institutions on the one hand and an excess of institutionalization on the other, what is emerging is an unprecedented situation, something in between, which is leading art to act in very new and different spheres' (in Wielander 2010: 13). This in-

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<sup>43</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 13/12/2019, 00:19:00).

betweenness can be facilitated by an aesthetic sensitivity that can mediate between different spheres and by artistic practices that can integrate into the social fabric. Hence, Pistoletto (1984) advocates for the creation of new organisations and institutional arrangements capable of advancing not only structural change within the art system, but broader social and political transformation.

Based on this premise, Visible was not envisioned as an institution, since for Lucchetti 'institutions should be recognisable, and sometimes remain stuck in what they are doing and what they need to perform'.<sup>44</sup> Visible attempts to encapsulate an 'instituting connective device', a satellite institution that experiments with its format while performing it; a nomadic organisation whose research feeds into practice. In this sense, flexibility, being in motion, engaging with established institutions to reimagine them, and redirecting their private funds to support minor projects are the imperatives of this endeavour. According to Visible's curators, the gradual understanding of socially engaged practices as fragile processes and politically grounded projects that need to be protected in their contexts has dictated their own self-reflective stance and their ethos of 'working and growing slowly'.<sup>45</sup>

Visible demonstrates a commitment to bring to light artistic practices that challenge the perception of the sensible, echoing in many ways Rancière's theoretical framework. Indeed, for Rancière (2010: 141) artistic strategies are indispensable 'to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated'. Aesthetics, with its innate ability to produce scenes of dissensus by revealing a multiplicity of cracks in the cartography of the thinkable and by questioning the way bodies fit their destinations, functions, and roles, has a political effect and it 'allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation' (Rancière 2011: 73). Although Rancière maintains a dialectical

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<sup>44</sup> Matteo Lucchetti, Zoom conference, *From an Award to a Long-Term Support Structure?*, June 3, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti, joint presentation during 'Commonism' session at the Swamp Pavilion, Venice Biennale.

tension between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art, he seems to be positively inclined towards the purity or autonomy of the aesthetic, while dismissing more ‘committed’, ‘militant’, or overly politicised art forms.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, one can argue that Visible takes the Rancièrian dissensual approach a step further. Indeed, instead of solely focusing on symbolic acts of aesthetic disruption, Visible is committed to showcasing socially engaged practices that are directly involved with some sort of struggle or social movement to bring into discussion ‘the regime of the visible so that it can then work toward the establishment of a new order’ (Burtscher and Wielander 2010: 7).

Most of the artistic processes that Visible foregrounds deal with the consequences of the global financial crises, the effects of neoliberal policies, and the expropriation and dispossession of the commons.<sup>47</sup> Not only are they detached from institutional contexts, galleries, and the art market, but they are also site-specific, relational, and ‘long-term projects that are developed in very specific localities by artists or collectives responding to a very specific urgency’.<sup>48</sup> Although contemporary art is increasingly dominated by socially engaged art, many of the practices that are situated outside the purview of the Western art canon are often deemed as extra-disciplinary and have limited access to resources, funding, and institutional backing.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, according to Visible’s curators, most of the discourses surrounding socially engaged art remain rooted in Eurocentric genealogies. Hence, since its establishment in 2010, the platform’s aim has been not only to legitimise ‘non-extractive’ art practices, but to also engage in a decolonial critique, a plurality of

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<sup>46</sup> In one of the most revealing accounts of Rancièr’s theory (2005: 80) he argues: ‘the aesthetic effect, is not the effect of a work in the sense that a work should produce this energy for action or this particular form of deliberation about the situation. It’s about creating forms of perception, forms of interpretation’.

<sup>47</sup> This echoes Sholette (2016: 191), who argues that such artistic practices have been deployed to restore ‘social forms and collective institutions that neoliberalism has broken down’.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Wielander, interview quote (interview date: 13/12/2019, 00:18:00).

<sup>49</sup> Socially engaged art is an emerging subfield of contemporary art that deals with politicised processes, focusing on intangible processes and human interactions, encouraging collaborations, and raising awareness, instead of producing finalised material art objects (see Sholette 2015; 2016, Bishop 2006a; 2006b, Stimson and Sholette 2007, Thompson 2011). From this perspective, it has been argued that socially engaged art defies the insatiable appetite of the art market for consumable, commodifiable, and marketable products, striking a blow against hyper-production, artist branding, and media-based culture.

genealogies, and a diversity of knowledge systems. On the one hand, this re-orientation is partly owed to the conditions of social emergency that have surfaced in the Global South, zones of conflict, and sites of scarcity and that have urged artists to come up with new experimental processes and research projects that strive for socioeconomic sustainability. On the other, Visible has set out to serve as a support structure for such precarious practices and a way of connecting them with other artists, activists, thinkers, and public or private institutions, resulting in forging broader alliances.

The first tangible outcome of Visible was a publication (Burtscher and Wielander 2010) that collected artistic processes from around the world. Nine curators who worked in different sociocultural localities, ranging from Gabi Ngcobo from Johannesburg to Raimundas Malašauskas from Lithuania, were invited to share their research through the presentation of concrete case studies. Subsequently, instead of turning the publication into an exhibition, Visible's curators decided to reconfigure it into an award, inaugurating the first European award dedicated to socially engaged art practices. According to them, the award structure was a strategy in itself: it served as a means not only to redirect funds of private foundations towards long-term art practices, but also to render them visible by art institutions and recognised as part of the contemporary ecology of art.

In this sense, Visible aspires to become an infrastructure for sustaining socially engaged practices in a global context, by providing both immaterial support through visibility, cultural capital, and networking, and a material contribution of 25,000 euros to the award winner.<sup>50</sup> The financial award is a way to secure the viability and the continuity of artistic projects, which are often related to social movements, while foregrounding the urgencies in which these practices are situated.<sup>51</sup> Apart from the

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<sup>50</sup> The prize is considered a production award and can be used in any way artists see fit, removed from the burden of bureaucracy, red tape, and lengthy procedures that the award system normally entails.

<sup>51</sup> Past recipients of the Visible award include: the *8th Festival de Performance de Cali* by the Colombian collective Helena Producciones (2011); *The Silent University* by the Kurdish artist from Turkey Ahmet Ögüt (2013); *Salt* by the Karrabing Film Collective, an Indigenous media group based in Northern Territories, Australia (2015); *Aqui Vive Gente* by the Puerto Rican grassroots artist collective

award, the effort of supporting socially engaged practices from non-Western contexts is often complemented with collaborative research methodologies. For instance, Visible, in collaboration with Public Art Agency Sweden, compiled an annotated bibliography dedicated to the interdisciplinary field of art that engages critically with the public sphere. According to the curators, ‘the selection of the texts reflects a decolonial perspective that takes into account the bias, privileges and power positions of those who wrote the dominant perspectives on art history so far’ (Wielander and Lucchetti 2020: 8).

Visible’s ongoing research is also enriched by a transnational, gender and racially diverse network of curators and collaborators, which is an additional testament to the commitment of breaking down Eurocentrism. Thirty-six curators, who share an innovative curatorial approach and are active in diverse contexts, are invited by Visible every two years to form the Curatorial Advisory Board. Every curatorial advisor is then asked to nominate between one and three artists from around the world, which are added to the long list of projects presented through the platform. Subsequently, the selection committee joins forces with an institutional partner to mutually assess the collection of projects. When the ten shortlisted projects have been finalised, Visible commissions them to produce a video statement discussing their work and the ways they plan to utilise the prize. As I discuss in the following sections, the last stage of the award process entails a Temporary Parliament in the form of a public jury, hosted in collaboration with the partnered institution.

### 3.3.2 Commoning Practices and Transversality

It is a very useful tool for curators to have access to 400 projects on the website of Visible [...] it is a very good resource to educate yourself and to give these projects visibility [...] it is the little encyclopedia of social practices today.<sup>52</sup>

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Brigada Puerta de Tierra (2017); and *Blank Noise* by Indian artist and human rights activist Jasmeen Patheja (2019).

<sup>52</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 15/11/2019, 00:19:00).

Anna Colin,

Former Associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations

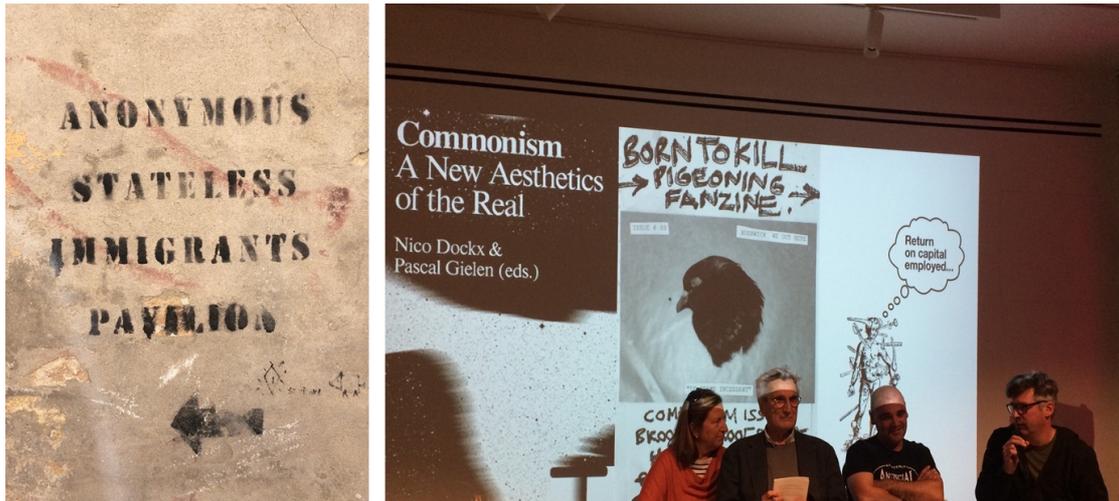
As part of the Swamp Pavilion, Lithuania's contribution to the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, both Visible and the Silent University (recipient of the 2013 Visible award) were invited to share their insights during the 'Commonism' session (see also Dockx and Gielen 2018). This third and last session of the programme invited artists, practitioners, and theorists (including Antonio Negri) to explore the commons as an ideology by posing questions like: 'how is the commons constituted in society, how does it shape our reality of living together, and what strategies and what aesthetics do artistic commoners follow?' The Swamp Pavilion itself, curated by artists Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas, interrogated the traditional structure of national representation based on pavilions in exhibitions and world fairs, in a time of transnational crisis, environmental destruction, and global migration.<sup>53</sup> Building on Negri, who advocated for new durable 'institutions to organise the commons', Visible's curators presented their research platform as an attempt to institute a 'commoning practice'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, by bringing together diverse artistic and social processes, Visible attempts to experiment with pedagogical methodologies premised on non-hierarchical, decentralised, and de-localised formats of sharing knowledge and conceptualising the commons. On the curators' own admission, the 'transversal reading' from art, philosophy, and politics, as well as 'the accessibility to knowledge' constitute their 'main philosophical and political approaches'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This constituted a pertinent and timely issue since the title of the 16th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale was *FREESPACE*. The Swamp Pavilion's curators attempted to challenge the Biennale's traditional format of national pavilions, echoing the anonymous interventions that took place during the Biennale, involving sprayed graffiti in the walls of Venice reading 'Future?' and 'Anonymous, stateless, immigrants pavilion' with arrows pointing to dead ends.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti, joint presentation during 'Commonism' session at the Swamp Pavilion (date: 28/09/2018).

<sup>55</sup> Judith Wielander, interview quote (interview date: 13/12/2019, 00:53:00).



**Figure 3.6 (i-ii).** Left: Anonymous interventions during the 2018 Venice Biennale. Right: theorist Antonio Negi and architect Santiago Cirugeda at the Swamp Pavilion. Photographs by the author.

Visible's toolbox, termed as 'public utilities', includes publications, online archives, video documentations, research programmes, and workshops that serve as valuable resources that remain accessible online. This repository of knowledge is enriched by ongoing collaborations with universities, institutions, and non-profit organisations. In addition, the Temporary Parliament, held in the format of a public jury serves a twofold purpose: as an 'opportunity for collective learning', since the assessment process itself 'produces knowledge and collective scholarship' that reconfigures the discourses that surround socially engaged art, and as an emerging commoning practice that establishes a ground where a different set of social relations and decision-making processes are prefigured.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, developing modes of collective sharing, self-governing, and self-managing becomes a crucial part of the process of commoning and even of reassessing the common good.

In addition, since most of the practices that are showcased are centred around affective experiences and embodiment, one can examine Visible's educational tools through the lens of the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>57</sup> In this context, affect can be considered as a method in itself, the body becomes an inherent part of the learning process, and a transversal methodology can be

<sup>56</sup> Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti, joint presentation during 'Commonism' session.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Clough and Halley 2007, Hickey-Moody 2013.

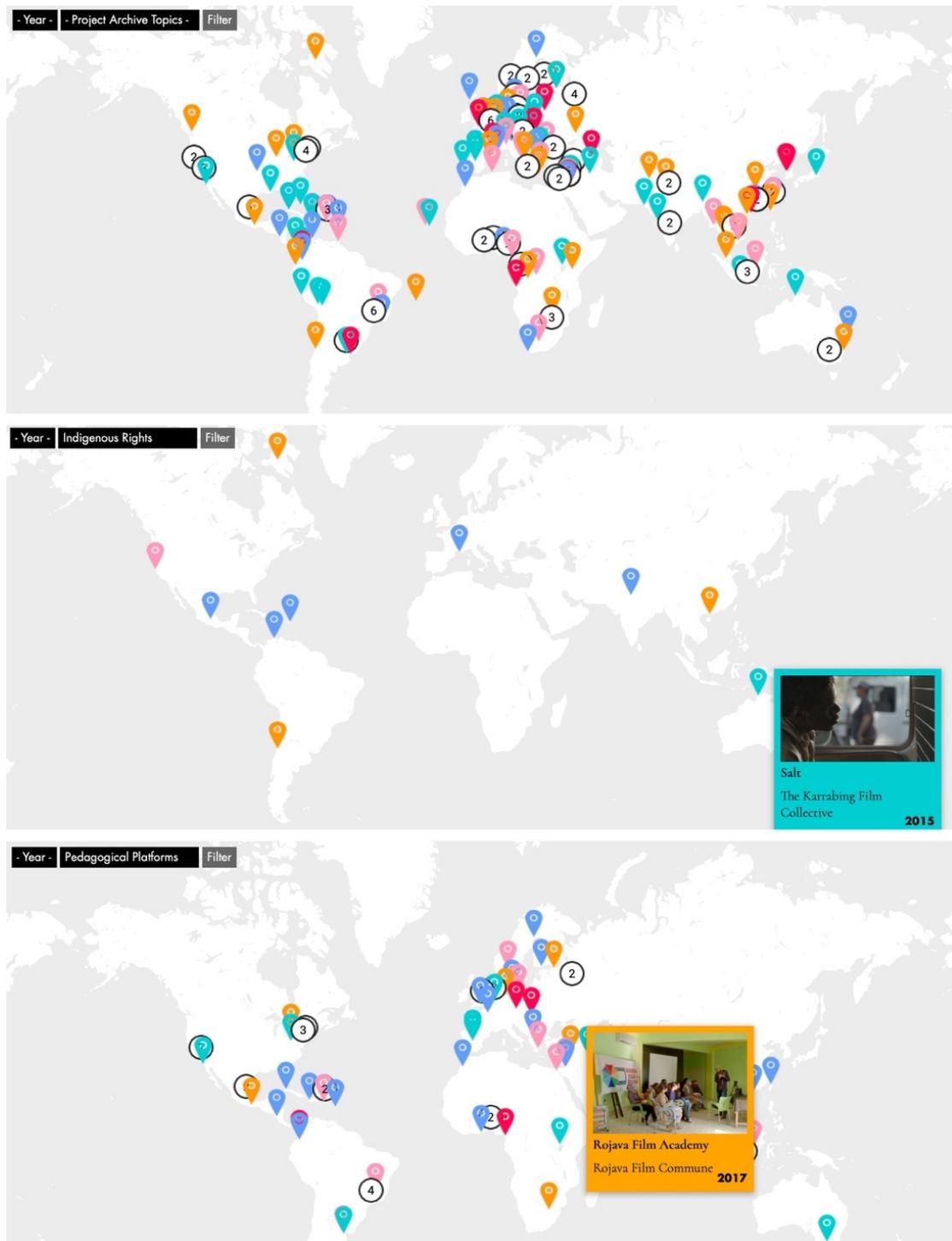
deployed as a collaborative, interdisciplinary, and borderless form of knowledge production. According to Tan (2016: 32), ‘artistic practices in contemporary art and their conceptual frameworks offer possibilities of following such transversality that enacts Othernesses’.<sup>58</sup> This is also consistent with what Law (2004: 144, original emphasis) has termed ‘method assemblage’ to allude to the slow, diverse, and uncertain methods of conducting social science research, and reconfiguring it as a ‘continuing process of *crafting and enacting necessary boundaries between presence, manifest absence and Otherness*’.

This is exemplified by the way the Visible platform is structured. As Wielander and Lucchetti explained, every proposed project that meets the selection criteria is archived in the Visible database, with information and visual material relating to the project, the artist, the location, and the completion year. The more than 400 projects that are featured encompass topics like racial struggles, queer cultures, sustainable urbanisation, migrant movements, pedagogical initiatives, Indigenous rights, ecological/environmental needs, alternative economies, and decolonial narratives. The user can filter the platform through topic: a list of all the relevant projects that fall under the selected category is revealed, showcasing a diversity of methodologies and tactics from a global context.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, one can browse geographically and locate all socially engaged practices from a specific region, country, or continent, generating a map of the specificities and the contingencies of ongoing struggles within a specific socioeconomic and cultural context.

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<sup>58</sup> The notion of ‘transversality’ also alludes to the assemblages between agents and resources from the art circuits to political associations, squats, and autonomous universities, exemplified by projects ‘which can’t be reduced to an all-embracing institution’, but ‘rather, extend elsewhere’ (Holmes 2009a: 58).

<sup>59</sup> For instance, by choosing the topic ‘decolonial narratives’, one is presented with projects ranging from Dread Scott’s *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* in New Orleans, through Helena Producciones’s *8<sup>th</sup> Festival de Performance* in Cali, to Sammy Baloji’s *Kumbuka!* in Congo and Belgium.



**Figure 3.7 (i-iii).** Visible's database with its 400 archived projects. Photographs by the author.

By bringing together a diversity of practices that operate in different contexts but might share methodologies or face similar threats, Visible can serve as a worldwide network, encompassing disparate struggles, positionalities, and urgencies. The understanding of public space as transnational and translocal dictates the need, not

only for new extended networks and movement building tools that establish interrelations between different localities, but also ‘the need for new forms of empathy across borders and geographical limitations’ (Wielander and Lucchetti 2020: 85). Visible’s approach echoes De Angelis’s own argument: ‘commons are a means of establishing a new political discourse that builds on and helps to articulate the many existing, often minor, struggles, and recognizes their power to overcome capitalist society’ (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010).<sup>60</sup> For Stavrides (2016: 42) ‘institutions of commoning need to offer opportunities as well as tools for translating differences between views, between actions and between subjectivities’. In this sense, it could be argued that the Visible platform encapsulates such an ‘institution of commoning’ since it provides a virtual common space, a meeting point, and a porous threshold, encouraging differences to meet and creating the ground for negotiations between minor struggles.

Except from Visible’s own methodologies of reimagining the commons, the platform also foregrounds projects that engage with commoning practices, pedagogies of unlearning, and ‘affective infrastructures’. Perhaps the most characteristic case is the Silent University (SU), an autonomous knowledge exchange platform established in 2012, where migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers serve both as students and teachers. Initially conceived by Ahmet Ögüt as an artistic project, it has now evolved into a semi-structured network operating in several cities, including Athens, London, Stockholm, Hamburg, and Amman.<sup>61</sup> By dealing with the systematic loss of skills and knowledge that takes place during the process of displacement and forced migration, SU attempts to go beyond institutional and governmental policies to deconstruct dominant representations and the notion of silence as a passive state. The aim is the reactivation of knowledge that exists among asylum seekers whose professional skills and academic training have been discarded due to their status. In this respect, SU strives to counterbalance pre-established notions of subjectivity

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<sup>60</sup> This also reflects Klein’s (2001) call for ‘reclaiming the commons’, meaning both repurposing spaces, infrastructures, culture, and even nature for the common good, and revisiting what we define as *sensus communis* in order to accommodate alterity.

<sup>61</sup> For an overview of the Silent University see Tan 2014, Tello 2020, and Malzacher, Ögüt, and Tan 2016.

among refugees and asylum seekers, predicated on a sense of precarity, a 'state of exception', and a position of being on the receiving end of solidarity acts and social services.

Self-organised and participant-run, SU proposes non-hegemonic modes of knowledge production and collective processes of alternative pedagogy. In this respect, its educational and research methodologies are inscribed in a framework of solidarity, reciprocity, and recognition. Using shared digital spaces and online libraries, adopting collective learning and self-teaching, and deconstructing pre-established hierarchies between teachers and students, lay the groundwork for new modalities of social relations and commoning practices. In many ways, the shared resources and archives, the performative learning/teaching, and the horizontal mode of pedagogy, all become part of the SU methodology. This encapsulates a commoning practice, since such relational and sharing processes are produced from below by those who need them, shaping both their subjects and their means. In other words, they have a prefigurative element since they are defined not only by the means they employ, but by the participating subjects, 'literally produc[ing] what is to be named, valued, used and symbolized as common' (Stavrides 2016: 35). In addition, commoning practices are characterised by multiplicity and negotiation between differences, since, according to Stavrides (2016: 42), 'institutions of expanding commoning need to be flexible because "newcomers" need to be included in them without being forced to enter a pre-existing taxonomy of roles'.

One can start conceptualising SU's translocal knowledge exchange system as such an 'institution of commoning' that strives to re-empower participants against pre-established representations of subjectivity, laying claim to a public sphere from which one has been excluded, and reimagining citizenship beyond borders. According to Tan (2016: 25), one of SU's core coordinators, the pedagogical structure of SU serves as a 'mobile academy', a 'transversal machine', and a social

network, moving beyond the narrow confines of socially engaged art.<sup>62</sup> Although often approached for synergies by humanitarian organisations, activists, and NGOs, SU remains firmly rooted in the contemporary art sphere, often hosted in partnered art institutions since it ‘needs their institutional structures, funding, infrastructures, and spaces’.<sup>63</sup> These partnerships trigger a series of questions relating to funding, the politics of hosting, and the ethics of participation. ‘In this process, the host institution needs to reexamine its own institutional nature and to decide whether it wants to be a part of the social affect as a transforming instituting practice or to continue to remain a neoliberal bureaucratic instrument of culture’ (Tan 2016: 26). However, by entering these negotiation processes with institutional hosts, SU is forced not only to question ‘how it situates itself within institutional structures’, but also to continuously scrutinise its own premises, exemplifying ‘an instituting practice’.<sup>64</sup> In other words, SU strives to appear like an institution, even issuing fake university cards for its members, without ever ‘fully becoming an institution’.<sup>65</sup> Although it only simulates being an ‘established’ institution, SU can still effectuate tangible change. For instance, as Tan mentioned, an asylum seeker who had been expecting a residence permit for seven years, managed to acquire a residence permit by proving an affiliation with SU.

Therefore, SU has set certain minimum principles that need to be upheld: every SU platform requires a space, both coordinators and lectures need to have a salary, the host institution/organisation must show a long-term commitment of at least three years, and institutional funding must be transparent. Although SU constitutes a transversal and borderless academy, it is also firmly grounded in the locality where it is situated, remaining attentive to the specificities of the sociopolitical context and the terms of engagement that are dictated by the setting. For instance, for the SU branch in Athens, organisers had to take into account that Greece functions as a transit country, where a synergy of anarchist networks, social workers, and artists

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<sup>62</sup> The notion of transversality was developed by Felix Guattari (originally conceptualised by Sartre) as a concept and clinical tool designed to transform institutions (and the psychiatric hospital in particular).

<sup>63</sup> Pelin Tan, presentation during ‘Commonism’ session at the Swamp Pavilion, date: 28/09/2018.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

have been involved in creating temporary spatialities to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>66</sup> The branch, coordinated by architect Maria Peteinaki, was named Silent University Assembly, to denote the collaborative effort that would be required to bring together people from different refugee networks, squats, and activist-run spaces that did not necessarily share the same politics.<sup>67</sup> As Tan argued, although Athens has strong informal ‘threshold institutions’, the SU Assembly faced numerous problems due to bureaucracy, institutional rigidity, and limited opportunities for funding.<sup>68</sup> What both SU and Visible demonstrated is that commoning practices strive to implement self-reflective modalities of sharing, while envisioning translocal solidarities that transcend the dictates of the state and the market.

### 3.3.3 The Dramaturgy of Democracy: Enacting the Parliament

We curate this day for over two years because we believe that the act of occupying for one day an existing parliament with such transformative processes is a way of reimagining democracy from the perspective of artists.<sup>69</sup>

Mateo Lucchetti,  
Co-curator of Visible

One of the reoccurring topics that emerged through Visible’s research was the experimentation with assemblies and participatory curatorial formats in response to the growing need for spaces for deliberation and new democratic models. According to Visible’s curators, a prize for social engagement in art could not but mirror some

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<sup>66</sup> A case in point is Victoria Square Project and hotel City Plaza in the centre of Athens that was occupied by refugees and activists.

<sup>67</sup> For instance, many activist and anarchist groups refuse to collaborate with NGOs that accept funding from the EU.

<sup>68</sup> A core obstacle was that the potential lectures of the SU Assembly could not have been remunerated for their services, since this would have required a social security number, which is only awarded when one obtains asylum seeker status (a process that is very lengthy in Greece). In fact, the SU Assembly proved, in many respects, unsustainable, with only a limited number of sessions actualised.

<sup>69</sup> Public statement, Temporary Parliament, Hôtel de Ville de Paris, date: 16/11/2019.

of the tools and structures that have been employed by the very artistic practices that are under scrutiny. For this reason, Visible introduced the format of the Temporary Parliament, a biennial event where a day is devoted to the assessment of shortlisted projects. Instead of conceiving the award as a process that takes place behind closed doors, organisers rather envisioned the enactment of the Parliament as a public event and as part of its public programming. For instance, for its 2015 edition, where Visible partnered with Tate Liverpool, the debate of the jury phase was transported from a museum space to a real parliament, the Liverpool Town Hall. In this way, the councillors' seats, situated in a layered and tiered concentric semi-circle, were filled by the audience, which included both experts (curators, theoreticians, artists) and non-experts (like members from Liverpool's civic organisations). According to Francesco Manacorda, then Artistic Director of Tate Liverpool, using the city's Grand Council Chamber was 'a stroke of genius' since people were already familiar with the architecture of the parliament and this could provide a format for other public programmes.

In the same vein, the 2017 Temporary Parliament was hosted in the Queens Museum, in New York, a public museum characterised by its multifaceted communities, its diverse programming, and its long-standing commitment to socially engaged art.<sup>70</sup> London-based design studio The Decorators, conceived the parliament as an assembly, creating an inventory of all the furniture that existed within the museum and then inviting Visible's public jury to utilise these objects to create a new spatial configuration. According to the design studio, 'the worldwide social movements that have emerged in the last decade remind us that it is in the public assembly that space for direct democracy can be created, by making use of what is already in place and most accessible' (The Decorators 2017). In this staged parliament, assembled experts, along with guests and members of the public, deliberated to determine the recipient of the 2017 Visible Award through an open vote.

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<sup>70</sup> From 1946 to 1950 the Queens Museum housed the General Assembly of the newly formed United Nations, where a number of important decisions were made (including the partition of Palestine), hence providing the ideal space to host Visible's Temporary Parliament.



**Figure 3.8 (i-ii).** Top: 2015 Visible Temporary Parliament at the City Council Liverpool. Photograph by Visible. Bottom: 2017 Visible Temporary Parliament at the Queens Museum. Photograph by Stephanie Berger.

By introducing the public jury, the Temporary Parliament serves not only as a tool for assessing the winner, but a purposefully instituted common ground and a performative event, where urgencies can be heard and different constituencies can meet. Its format, according to the organisers, proves useful, since it provides the means to reimagine the ‘space of appearance’ as a translocal scene, rendering the debate public and accessible. One can argue that the Temporary Parliament takes issue with the Western notion of a singular, homogeneous, universally accepted, and

consensually constructed public sphere, echoing Mouffe's agonistic model that defines the public space as plural and hegemonically constructed. The tactical move to partner with different art institutions for every edition of the award signifies the attempt to bring projects that have emerged outside the purview of the art system back to an institutional context, in order to not only inspire institutions to support these practices, but also to alter the institutions' dynamics from the inside. According to Wielander, this is a 'political gesture' that aims to steer museums away from neoliberal policies.<sup>71</sup> According to her, every museum has the potential to stage a parliament, so the wager is to reclaim them as integral parts of a redefined public sphere and as spaces that can facilitate novel democratic decision-making processes and more politicised discussions about the current sociopolitical crises.



**Figure 3.9.** 2019 Visible Temporary Parliament at the Hôtel de Ville de Paris Council room. Photograph by the author.

These ambitious aims were put once again to the test in the fifth and most recent iteration of the Temporary Parliament, hosted in Paris, on November 16, 2019, in collaboration with a private art institution, Lafayette Anticipations. The Temporary

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<sup>71</sup> Judith Wielander, interview quote (interview date: 13/12/2019, 00:50:00).

Parliament was envisioned as only one component of a broader partnership, which also included exhibitions, workshops, and residencies that eventually did not work out.<sup>72</sup> The Parliament was held inside the Council room of the Hôtel de Ville de Paris, a highly symbolic space with authoritative 16<sup>th</sup> century architecture, grandiose reception halls, and ceremonial rooms lavishly decorated, where the Mayor and her cabinet meet monthly. The nearly 200 participants who had filled the Council room's auditorium were invited 'to let political imagination be nourished by artists' initiatives that propose alternative, transformative, and viable solutions to the overwhelming urgencies of our times, through the format of the assembly, which facilitates an experience of collective learning on how art can impact our future lives'.<sup>73</sup>

The role of presenting and advocating for the shortlisted projects was performed by students attending CuratorLab, the master's curatorial programme at Konstfack University of Arts, Stockholm. After spending several months in preparation, research, and communication with the nominated artists, students were called to the parliament's podium to convincingly defend the artistic projects they had been assigned. The common denominator of all ten shortlisted projects was the fact that they all operate as catalysts for mobilisation and social transformation in relation to their specific context, while addressing more global pressing political issues. In addition, the importance of all ten projects, according to Lucchetti, resided 'not only in imagining another world, but also in making it concrete'.<sup>74</sup>

Although participants were invited to occupy any seat in the semicircle, even those designated as 'reserved' ones, the architectural setting seemed to reproduce hierarchies: the Speaker of the Parliament, performed by scholar Andrea Phillips,

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<sup>72</sup> As Anna Colin admits, although the hosting institution wanted not only to host the prize but organise two residencies for artists Nida Sinnokrot as well as Pedro Neves Marques and Mariana Silva, providing them with a flat, a production budget, and a list of contacts to allow them to disseminate their practice in Paris, in reality the initiative 'cancelled itself', the artists were not that responsive to the invitations, and the residencies never came to fruition (Interview quote, interview date: 15/11/2019).

<sup>73</sup> Excerpt from the pamphlet distributed during the 2019 Temporary Parliament in Hôtel de Ville, p. 3-4.

<sup>74</sup> Public statement, Temporary Parliament, Hôtel de Ville de Paris, date: 16/11/2019.

chaired the debate from the central podium, while the two seats on each side of the Speaker were held by Visible's curators, who acted as informal commentators. Prior to the enactment of the Parliament, organisers presented the rules of engagement, the format of the discussion, and the basic premises for the decision-making process. Indeed, the parliamentary deliberation was only inaugurated after the presentation of the selection criteria for assessing the projects, namely, urgency (can it serve as a tool for visibility and building alliances?), scalability (can the practice scale up within its context or provide a model that can be adopted elsewhere?), sustainability (can the practice be viable?), social impact (who is the audience and who is affected by the practice?) and aesthetic value/social innovation (does the practice stem from the aesthetic realm while being socially transformative?).

Participants had to raise their hands to make a contribution and had to speak using individual microphones, while headphones and translation devices were provided, since it was crucial not to have 'a hierarchy in languages'.<sup>75</sup> The racially and ethnically diverse audience, comprised mainly of artists, curators, and art students from across Europe, seemed to be already familiar with the Visible award and the current artistic discourses. Indeed, members from the general public were limited, since physical attendance to the event—although public and free—was either by invitation or by registering via Visible's website. However, the parliamentary discussion was shared with broader audiences virtually, since it was livestreamed through Visible's website, while all ten short-listed projects were presented through the parliamentary television channel LCP in the form of short broadcasts during the last ten days before the Parliament.<sup>76</sup>

A plethora of voices were heard and the discussions that transpired pertained less to assessing the winner than to delving into the methodologies employed by different projects and raising more general concerns about the selection criteria and processes. For instance, a member of the audience highlighted the irony of sitting in

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<sup>75</sup> Anna Colin, public statement, Temporary Parliament, Hôtel de Ville de Paris, date: 16/11/2019.

<sup>76</sup> In addition, a number of satellite sites (for instance, the Assembly BA Curating at Goldsmiths, London) were participating remotely.

a luxurious parliament at the centre of Europe to evaluate the urgency of projects that are situated in different continents, with insufficient information about their local conditions. An additional provocation came from a young male who underlined the strong authorship that some of the projects conveyed, arguing ‘Does the artist talk on the behalf of a community? Does he or she stand in front of them, next to them, or behind them?’<sup>77</sup> Another attendee, emphasised the fact that some of the nominated projects have already amassed significant cultural and social capital, as well as secured access to different streams of funding, challenging the asymmetries involved in bestowing visibility and recognition.<sup>78</sup> Others examined ways to envisage the award less as a competitive process, than a coalition building tool, suggesting to split the awards in order to support more projects.

In fact, the audience seemed to be increasingly engaging in the parliamentary debate, with several members of the audience insisting on challenging the award’s voting premises. One attendee, An Vandermeulen, argued that ‘if we all agree to multiply the money, we can start thinking about creating new values on a fair governance model’ and new ways of collectively organising the decision.<sup>79</sup> Building on a long parliamentary history of dissent, she suggested that participants required more time to recalibrate the voting process itself, since it had been forced upon them. The time was ripe, since her proposal was gaining traction and the parliament’s collective mobilisation could have been used as leverage to force the representatives of the institutions that were present to either increase the award’s budget or come up with another solution.<sup>80</sup> The Chairman called for a quick vote by a show of hands to assess whether the majority agreed to allow this expression of dissent by signalling their dissatisfaction with the democratic process that was being enacted. After a hasty counting of the raised hands performed by the Chairman and without a vote against the proposition, she announced that it was overruled since there were only 54 votes for it, compared to the event’s 126 official registrants.

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<sup>77</sup> Public statement, anonymised participant, Temporary Parliament, date: 16/11/2019.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Public statement, An Vandermeulen, Temporary Parliament, date: 16/11/2019.

<sup>80</sup> Representatives of Hôtel de Ville, Lafayette Anticipations, Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, and Fondazione Zegna (not to mention directors and senior staff from other museums and private institutions) were present in the room.

For the last phase of the Temporary Parliament, voting cards were distributed to the attendees, who were asked to tick the box that corresponded to their preferred option and cast their votes in ballots. Votes were counted immediately, and *Blank Noise* was announced as the winner of the 2019 Visible Award. Artist-facilitator Jasmeen Patheja expressed her gratitude in a brief Skype call and the 2019 Temporary Parliament was adjourned after a duration of eight hours. Indeed, the project seemed to meet all the criteria set by the selection committee. Firstly, the art project is locally situated—dedicated to the eradication of gender-based and sexual violence in India—but has global resonance; it is empathy based and is transferable culturally and socially. At the same time, while all the presented artistic practices pointed to policy failures, this grassroots project seemed to take an extra step in opening a pathway towards both legal system reform and a shift in public consciousness pertaining to the culture of victim blaming.<sup>81</sup> Lastly, the project works at the intersection of aesthetics, social engagement, and structural reform by combining choreographies of bodies, testimonies, and performativity with the reclaiming of urban public space.<sup>82</sup>

To conclude, the staged Temporary Parliament seems to function on many levels. Content-wise, it foregrounded artistic practices that invent ‘new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation’ that ‘crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible in order to sketch a new topography of the possible’ (Rancière 2011: 49, 73). According to the Visible’s curators, bringing artistic gestures to the symbolic site where political decisions are made allows them to transcend the strict confines of the cultural

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<sup>81</sup> In Indian law, it was only in 2013 that the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was passed by the Indian parliament and it has been under debate since there have been no steps, thus far, by the government to enforce the law and no data on the effectiveness of the Local Committees that are responsible for reporting and dealing with sexual harassment complaints in the informal sector.

<sup>82</sup> For instance, the recent iteration of the project, entitled ‘I Never Ask for It’, comprises a social media campaign, exhibitions, and performances, where garments of street harassment’s survivors are collected and treated as witnesses of their assaults. With the Visible award, Patheja plans to gather 10,000 garment-testimonies and to use them for a monumental installation around the India Gate in Delhi.

sphere and be transposed into the realm of politics, inspiring models for policy reform and operational strategies. Hence, the significance of the Parliament lies in ‘occupying the conceptual and physic, space of an actual parliament, allowing the contents and methodologies addressed in the projects to breathe new life into the democratic format of the parliament while highlighting the social transformation potential of these projects’.<sup>83</sup>

On the one hand, echoing Phillips who argued that ‘Democracy is a mise en scène’, the Parliament pushes participants to mimic the Western mode of democratic-making processes, namely, to assume the responsibility and gravitas of reaching consensus on the award recipient, despite conflicting interests and opposing views.<sup>84</sup> On the other, while it institutes transparent, democratic, and open decision-making processes by breaking down, at least discursively, the distinction between experts and non-experts and by putting the public at the centre of the decision-making process, it reproduces power imbalances through the performance of predefined roles and organised divisions, like advocates, speakers, jurors, and ‘the people’, which are structurally ascribed to a hierarchy of judgement scale, status, and expertise. In this sense, it foregrounds not only the colonial histories, patriarchal settings, and architectural hierarchies that are embedded in the parliamentary form, but also the contingency of decision-making, since the collectivity that embodies the role of ‘spokespersons’ is neither nominated nor elected, but arbitrary.

Being invited though in a public room of a democratically elected authority to reinvent institutions of the common, in the midst of severe budget cuts in the arts public funding and while the entity hosting the event (Visible), the institutions sponsoring the award (Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna), and the partnered institution (Lafayette Anticipations) are all privately funded,

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<sup>83</sup> Excerpt from the pamphlet distributed during the 2019 Temporary Parliament in Hôtel de Ville, p. 6-7.

<sup>84</sup> Andrea Phillips, *Democracy and Dramaturgy: Modern Justice and Socially Engaged Artistic Practices*, June 4, 2020, online event.

accentuated certain contradictions.<sup>85</sup> Enacting the Parliament while oscillating between the aestheticisation of the parliamentary format and the utilisation of a democratic forum to shed light on minor struggles can serve as a rehearsal of democratic possibilities, however, I argue that this is achieved perhaps unintentionally, due to the very contradictions that lie at the heart of the dramaturgy of Visible's staged parliament that alludes to the very fictitious, imaginary, and fabricated nature of present-day democracy. In this respect, Rancière (2014: 52) provocatively argues that 'there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government. Government is always exercised by the minority over the majority'. He draws a distinction between two types of democracy: one premised on a representation of minorities who are in charge of public affairs and that corresponds to the individual liberties and human rights discourses of a postmodern consumerist individuality, and another collectivist, egalitarian, protracted form of democracy, where the power of people 'is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of governors and of the governed' (Rancière 2014: 49). Staging the Temporary Parliament both accentuates the very problematics of decision-making procedures and puts in question the very premises, roles, and formats that ground representative democracy. In this sense, the participation and active experimentation with the parliamentary form within the art field, despite the shortcomings of the Paris iteration of the Visible Parliament, can serve as a means to articulate an immanent critique of 'actually existing democracy' and even push forward more radical possibilities for democratic politics through pre-enactment, alluding to the political events that are yet to come.

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<sup>85</sup> For instance, Lafayette Anticipations is not an institution with social engagement attached to its core mission, but rather a private institution, funded by a family-run department store, Galerie Lafayette. Its new building is located in the centre of Paris, which is highly gentrified, and its opening has been characterised as a marketing PR tool to refresh and rebrand the image of the company.

### 3.4 Jonas Staal's Assemblies

#### 3.4.1 Assemblism, Propaganda, Ideology

[W]e will need infrastructures and narratives that mobilize the imagination to construct a different world. To achieve this, we will need an emancipatory propaganda and an emancipatory propaganda art.

Jonas Staal (2018),

Founder of the 'New World Summit' and 'Training for the Future'

Jonas Staal's PhD thesis, recently published by MIT Press, opens with a laconic statement: 'My name is Jonas Staal, and I am a propaganda artist' (Staal 2019: 1). Indeed, Staal is a visual artist and a prolific writer, whose work investigates the relation between aesthetics, architecture, propaganda, and democracy. Building from Herman and Chomsky's (1988) analysis of propaganda during the 1980s, Staal (2018a) argues that every form of propaganda entails the performance of power, 'meaning that propaganda aims to enact infrastructures—political, economic, mass-media, and military—that shape reality according to a specific set of interests'. In this sense, visual morphologies can be understood as a form of propaganda since they deal with the staging of power configurations and they are imbricated in the shaping of realities, framing of cultural narratives, and consolidation of norms. Artistic and cultural practices play a crucial role in the dissemination of truth statements, which according to Staal, can be best understood as a propaganda struggle, a battle of infrastructures, narratives, and imaginations that shape not only the present, but also the future.

If the current post-political order reflects the specific interests of a managerial elite, the most effective tool of propagating emancipatory propagandas and new forms of self-governance is, according to Staal, the performative assembly. In this sense, enacting counterpropaganda through the performative assembly allows the articulation of collective demands, radical imaginaries, and a different configuration

of power that challenge both authoritarian forms of government and global capitalism's tendency for individuation and atomisation. A discussion of Staal's theoretical work is necessary to decipher his artistic and architectural practice. Staal's (2017a) theoretical and practical work has set out to reinvent 'the practice of performative assembly', which he terms 'assemblism', referring to the nexus of art, performance, activism, and politics that allows the construction and the embodiment of a 'we' versus a 'they'. Invoking the social movements that have emerged around the world during the last two decades, and specifically, the 'Arab Spring', the Indignados movement in Spain, the Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter in the US, the Indignant movement in Greece, and Nuit debout in France, among others, Staal attempts to theorise models of public assembly.

In this respect, Butler's work constitutes a central reference point for Staal's theoretical trajectory. Indeed, these insurgent forms of collectivity witnessed in squares, streets, and other forms of public space, according to Butler (2015: 59), are 'enacted by the assembly of bodies, plural, persisting, acting, and laying claim to a public sphere by which one has been abandoned'. They have also involved processes of self-determination, a discursive invocation of a 'we', and an enactment of 'the people', which is 'performative inasmuch as it brings into being the people whom it names' (Butler 2015: 169). In other words, any emerging collectivity is instantiated by its performative right to appear and its vocalised actions that predate a clearly demarcated collective subject. These collectivities-in-the-making involve not only a heterogenous, diverse, and potentially internally split assemblage of bodies brought together by necessity rather than choice, but also a partial and non-all-inclusive totality defined by a discursive demarcation, often along the lines of race, nationality, religious beliefs, or political affiliation.

Staal follows Butler (2015: 58) in asserting that precarity is the rubric that can bring together 'women, queers, trans-gender people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities'. This is because precarity is 'a social and economic condition, but not an identity', hence it can cut across different identity positions and categories of social exclusions, allowing the formation of

broader alliances. Precarity, for both Staal and Butler, constitutes the foundation for the new proletariat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that can coalesce struggles against the privatisation of common resources, the erosion of the collective infrastructures necessary to sustain life, displacement and forced migration, the predatory mortgage system, debt, etc. Hence, for Staal (2017a) the practice of assemblism is 'simultaneously a direct expression of the condition of precarity and a protest against it'; both a form of critique against the normalised social exclusions of the public sphere and a social form in the making, which is what confers to it a prefigurative and performative dimension.

For the artist, the self-evident political nature of the assembly is complemented by its aesthetic, architectural, and symbolic dimension. The aesthetic dimension is crystallised in the choreographies and the theatricality of bodies, as well as the morphologies of the newly constituted social forms. In this sense, political acting does not differ from dancing, performing, or theatrical acting that takes place on a public stage. In addition, this performative action of bodies does not occur either in a vacuum or in a pre-established architectural location; it is rather the in-betweenness of bodies that brings the space of appearance into being. The body might be the cornerstone of the assembly's social architecture, but if we are to believe Butler (2015: 76), the appearance of the body must be 'supported by a material organization of space'. This brings us to the last dimension, the symbolic, to which Staal often returns in his own writings. According to him, the assembly invokes an imaginary collectivity that is premised on a false nomination, like the slogan 'we are the 99 percent' that spread during Occupy. 'Assemblism lays the foundation for a collectivity yet to emerge. A new Us is performed as if it is already a majority, before it manifests materially' (Staal 2017a).

However, Staal distances himself from the over-romanticisation of the assembly format as it has been exemplified during the highly condensed, intensified, and localised 'eventual' sites, which, as Badiou (2012: 57, original emphasis) argues, '*makes possible the restitution of the inexistent*'. Instead Staal seeks to channel the concentrated energy, the temporary organisational structures, and the

emancipatory political imaginary that are born out of assemblies into a new type of long-term institutionality and more sustained infrastructures. In Staal's own words (2017a): 'once the squares are empty again, this new institutionality needs to be formalized, organized, and enacted under administrative structures of checks and balances that guarantee durable physical and economic security and fidelity to the collectivity that brought it into being in the first place'.

In this respect, Staal's work seeks to give shape to these emerging emancipatory collectivities by consolidating their imaginary, aesthetic, and spatial manifestations and by converting them to long-term 'common' infrastructures. For this purpose, Staal has dedicated his event-based work in reconfiguring the notion of the performative assembly by extending its categories to ongoing projects, like summits, unions, parliaments, academies, embassies, and most recently trainings (examined in more detail in the next section). By constructing parallel political structures where novel self-governing formats can be enacted, he investigates the many forms that the practice of democracy can take, outside the purview of the national-bounded parliamentarism, taking issue with what Badiou (2012: 40) has termed 'capitalo-parliamentarianism' or what Rancière has called 'consensus democracy'. His theatrical 'stagings' serve both as symbolic gestures and as physical and architectural arrangements that can allow the performance of gatherings, intimate politics, self-representation, and moments of 'radical egalitarianism' where people can meet on equal terms.

A case in point is the 'New World Summit', 'an artistic and political organization' developed by the artist's production studio since 2012, that provides 'alternative parliaments' with and for 'stateless states, autonomist groups, and blacklisted political organizations' (Staal 2018b). Through the different iterations of the 'New World Summit', Staal experiments with notions like 'stateless democracy', 'fundamental democracy', and 'limitless democracy' to establish alternative political spheres worldwide.<sup>86</sup> Partnering with both parliamentary and non-parliamentary

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<sup>86</sup> Staal is also a prolific writer, attempting a continuous self-theorisation to complement his artistic practice. For the 'New World Summit', see, for instance, Staal 2014a; 2014c; 2014d; 2015; 2016a.

movements, these political forums aim to become the meeting grounds for representatives from stateless or unrecognised states, as well as for political organisations deemed as 'terrorists', whose members have been banned from traveling or have had their passports revoked.<sup>87</sup> Without fixed geographical locations related to nation-states and by taking advantage of the juridically exceptional position of visual art, the summits serve as nomadic parliaments, with every iteration taking place in a different locality. The first edition took place in Sophiensaele Theatre, in the context of the 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, featuring political and juridical representatives from organisations like the Kurdish Women's Movement, the National Liberation Movement of Azawad, and the Basque Independence Movement, among others.<sup>88</sup> The parliament's circular architecture allowed speakers from 'blacklisted' groups and members of the audience to sit side by side, experimenting with new democratic instruments.

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<sup>87</sup> New World Summits use a number of legal exceptions and loopholes to allow representatives from organisations characterised as 'terrorists' to attend (for instance, taking advantage of ongoing peace negotiations to exceptionally be allowed to travel).

<sup>88</sup> The second edition of the New World Summit took place in Leiden on December 29, 2012, in collaboration with Museum De Lakenhal and the music theatre ensemble De Veenfabriek in Leiden. It gathered representatives from organisations like the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA), both of which have been included in 'terrorist' lists because of their involvement in ongoing armed struggles against what they describe as a 'semi-colonial and semi-feudal ruling system' under 'US imperialist control' (from pamphlet distributed during the parliament, edited by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei). The third edition took place in Kochi (India), featuring a number of representatives of political organisations deemed as 'terrorists' by the Indian government.



**Figure 3.10 (i-ii).** ‘New World Summit-Rojava’ (2015-2018), Dêrik, Cêzire Canton, Rojava. Artist: Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava. Photographs by Ruben Hamelink.

As part of the ‘New World Summit’, and specifically between 2015 and 2018, Staal co-designed and built the People’s Parliament of Rojava, a region in northern Syria that has been self-declared autonomous since 2012, amidst the Syrian Civil War. The Democratic Self-Administration of North and East Syria (NES), or Rojava, comprised of Assyrian, Arab, Kurdish, and other peoples of the region, has emerged as an autonomous, decentralised, and pluralistic ‘democratic confederalism’, but has not yet been officially recognised by the Assad regime, or by any other state or

organisation.<sup>89</sup> For Staal (2016b), the Rojava experiment is notable because it defies the ‘scripts’ that are dictated by the nation-state and it challenges the ‘performative acts’ that are demanded by citizens (e.g., paying taxes), the repetition of which strengthens and legitimises the state’s ‘form’. The Rojava revolution rather invented new ‘forms’ of communalist self-governance, founded on principles of social and gender equality, self-representation, and communal economy, as exemplified in its newly instituted peoples’ councils, cooperatives, and self-organised academies.<sup>90</sup>

Since the declaration of Rojava as an autonomous region, the material remnants of Assad’s regime (infrastructures, government buildings, public monuments) were deemed unfit to inscribe the revolutionary political narratives that were in the making. For this purpose, Staal (2016b) was invited to construct the new public parliament for the ‘stateless’ government of Rojava, ‘a parliament that both expresses a political vision, but at the same time serves as a tool to bring this vision into practice’.<sup>91</sup> Informed by the ideological premises of a stateless democracy, the newly constructed parliament entailed an open-air public space with an elliptical architectural form and with circular arches that depict some of the key axioms of the autonomous government’s collectively written social contract, reading, for instance, ‘Confederalism’, ‘Self-Defence’, and ‘Communalism’. Staal also reconstructed the parliament (in a smaller scale) in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (Netherlands), in collaboration with the Democratic Federation of North-Syria and the Kurdish Cultural Foundation Eindhoven. Turning a museum hall into a parliament constituted for Staal a strategic decision and a counter-propaganda technique since it served multiple purposes. On the one hand, it brought together activist groups, cultural workers, and wider publics from Kurdistan, the Netherlands, and beyond. On the other, the setting of a major European art institution not only conferred visibility and

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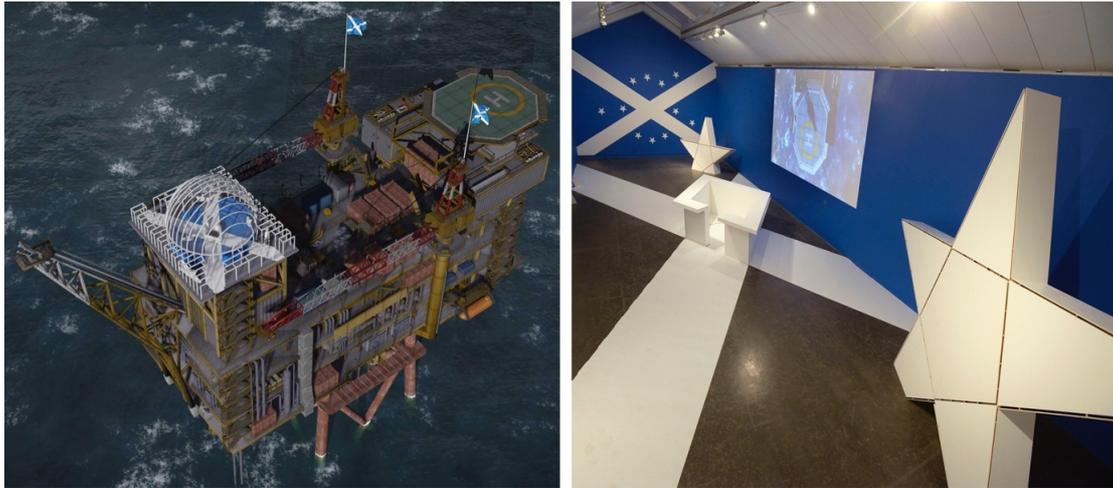
<sup>89</sup> The Kurdish Women’s Movement has been playing an instrumental role within the Rojava Revolution by bringing together a series of political nonparliamentary organisations, armed wings, and action groups, and by exercising a practice of democracy that remains outside the confines of the state (see Dirik, Maur, and Staal 2015).

<sup>90</sup> Many of these initiatives have been allied with the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), a left-wing umbrella organisation that has set out to organise Syrian society under a confederalist system and with a number of democratic political organisations and parties like the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK).

<sup>91</sup> An international summit was also organised in the region, on October 15-16, 2015.

legitimacy on the Rojava revolution, but also reiterated the argument that cultural institutions can become potential allies for movement building that exceeds the confines of the art world.

The rise of new multi-ethnic experiments in radical democracy, borderless political parties, and decentralised networks against all forms of authoritarianism and ultranationalist rule, has inspired the artist to advocate for political struggles that go beyond territorial and ethnic demarcations. These forms of practising 'democracy without the construct of the nation-state' encapsulate the artist's vision of 'transdemocratic alliances' and 'stateless internationalism' (Staal 2014b). In his own words, 'democratic autonomy aims at a new ideal of democratic self-governance that takes multiethnic and multireligious municipal constituencies as its political foundation' (Staal 2016a). In this respect, Studio Jonas Staal's campaign 'New Unions' has set out to consolidate the pan-European and transdemocratic movements that have been proliferating over the last decade with the aim to propose 'alternative scenarios for transnational unionization' to the 'current political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental crisis of Europe' (Staal 2017b). For instance, Staal's ongoing collaboration with Varoufakis's *Democracy in Europe Movement 2025* (DiEM25) has entailed the production of a new popular visual language to reflect the party's commitment to 'Democratise Europe!'. Through the construction of seating arrangements, logo design, and assembly formats for the party's meetings in Athens and Amsterdam, the artist strives to translate the notion of a new union in-the-making and the party's emancipatory politics into spatial, aesthetic, and symbolic forms.



**Figure 3.11 (i-ii).** *The Scottish-European Parliament* (2018). Produced by Center for Contemporary Art, Glasgow. Left: initial conception. Right: final installation at the Glasgow School of Art. Photographs by Allan Dimmick.

One of the most recent parliaments that Staal conceived was *The Scottish-European Parliament*, a pan-European parliament with the ambitious plan to bring together social movements, civil organisations, and political parties to envisage the future of the European Union from a Scottish point of view. According to Staal, the independence referendums in Scotland, Catalonia, and elsewhere, or the 2015 Greek bailout referendum, can provide the fertile ground for the emergence of a transdemocratic movement for the revitalisation of the EU against the threat of rising ultranationalism and austerity policies. Commissioned by the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Glasgow and in collaboration with Viviana Checchia, Johnny Rodger, Anika Marschall and Alex Misick, the project, initially, would have entailed the repurposing of an abandoned offshore oil rig, a ‘non-place, where the political imagination of attendees could roam free’.<sup>92</sup> Setting the parliament on a decommissioned oil rig was not accidental, since the oil industry remains a contested and recurring discussion in relation to the case for Scottish independence and financial viability, while also alluding to the environmental devastation that it generates.

<sup>92</sup> Anonymised participant, (interview date: 16/11/2019, 00:45:00).

This idea did not materialise due to its high production costs, so both the Parliament and an exhibition by Staal Studio (including imaginative political symbols and murals of novel scenarios for the relation between Europe and Scotland) ended up being hosted in CCA's exhibition galleries, next door to the Glasgow School of Art's Mackintosh building. However, the celebration of the opening of *The Scottish-European Parliament*, on June 15, 2018, coincided with a fire that devastated 'the Mack' and resulted in shutting down the parliament for almost four months (see Checchia and Marschall 2018). Eventually, *The Scottish-European Parliament* opened for only four weeks hosting gatherings, political discussions, and workshops. It brought together representatives of political parties or campaigns (like the Scottish Green Party and the Radical Independence Campaign), Scottish civic platforms (like Common Weal), grassroots groups (like 'WTF is Neoliberalism' and Solidarity Against Neoliberal Extremism), and students and artists from the GSA community. Although the parliament did reinvigorate discussions about Scottish independence 'by providing a platform for the articulation of different voices', this short-lived public engagement programme 'did not come close to produc[ing] a shared alternate political vision for Scotland'.<sup>93</sup> In this sense, a cultural intervention aimed at giving birth to new symbolic sociopolitical institutions and shared imaginaries, was defined by the very physical collapse and infrastructural failure of the Glasgow School of Art.

Staal's parliaments, assemblies, and visual languages reflect the artist's general position pertaining to the political potential of art, which he envisages as actively engaged in the ideological struggles against the conception of nation-state parliamentary democracy. Assuming an agonistic neo-Gramscian 'war of position', Staal situates art within an arena of ideological struggle, acknowledging the necessity of deploying propagandist techniques in the service of counter-hegemonic emancipatory political movements. For the artist, it is through varied cultural means and in and through space that radical political imaginaries can be articulated. Echoing Mouffe and Marchart, Staal (2011: 276) argues that 'public space is the democratic arena par excellence, the place in which public conflict and confrontation

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

have to take place, the place in which political existence takes shape'. Since the idea of the nation-state has already a material form and a performative dimension, a vision of a 'stateless internationalism' or a 'stateless democracy' requires too a spatial configuration. The performative texture and the visual languages he attempts to construct provide this form of counter-infrastructure that can open up the horizon of possibility for a post-national future.

### 3.4.2 Training for the Future

Instituting structures and infrastructures is essential to give legitimacy to common desires.<sup>94</sup>

Jonas Staal,  
Founder of the 'New World Summit' and 'Training for the Future'

How can we train for the future when we do not live in the same present?<sup>95</sup>

Seelan Palay,  
Invited participant in 'Training for the Future'

'Training for the Future' was one of the most recent iterations of Staal's work. It constituted a utopian and performative training camp that set out 'to pre-enact alternative scenarios and reclaim the means of production of the future', proposing a reformulation of the traditional revolutionary Marxist mantra (Staal and Malzacher 2019). The three-day event was conceived by Staal and Florian Malzacher and was led by creative activists, progressive hackers, theatre makers, and artists who offered trainings and workshops. It was organised in September 2019, in Bochum, Germany, as part of the Ruhr Triennial Arts Festival with additional institutional support from the Goethe Institute, the Mondriaan Fund, and the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. The diverse crowd was composed not only of fellow

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<sup>94</sup> Public statement, 'Training for the Future', Bochum, Germany, date: 20/09/2019.

<sup>95</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 23/09/2019, 00:05:00).

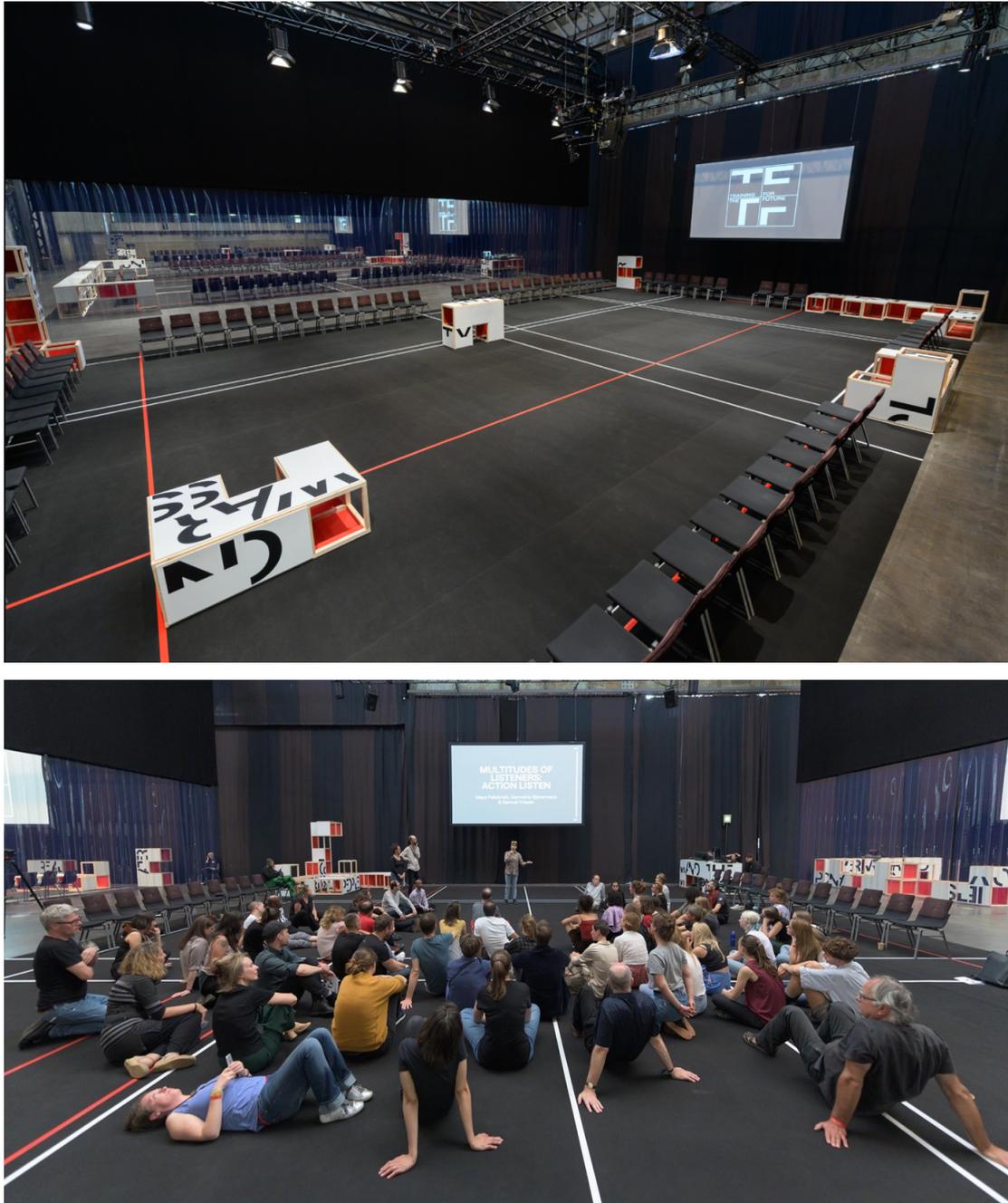
artists, art critics, and activists with intimate knowledge of Staal and Malzacher's practice, but also of a group of 'avant-garde' young artists and activists from Southeast Asia, hand-picked by the Goethe Institute. Deviating from other participatory assemblies where the decision of engagement rests with the audience, 'Training for the Future' aspired to turn everyone into active participants. Dissolving the distinction between trainers and trainees was perceived as vital not only to perform modes of being together in the present, but also to experiment with the collective construction of the emancipatory infrastructures of the future. The aim of the training, according to Staal, was to share tactics and knowledges, as well as to 'provoke the collective imagination', while 'providing the tools to enact it'.<sup>96</sup>

The training was hosted in Jahrhunderthalle Bochum, an immense industrial building (built in 1902) with flexible and versatile interior spaces. Initially used as a power station for the Bochumer Verein, the building was later repurposed into a massive arts venue, hosting events like the Triennale, festivals, trade fairs, and concerts. An intense programme of twelve training sessions was divided into two separate blocks, with groups of approximately sixty people attending every session.<sup>97</sup> The Triennial's black box theatre was split in three large square areas, divided only by plastic transparent curtains, in order for trainees to maintain a visual connection with adjacent sections. Whereas the two outer areas were dedicated to concurrent three-hour long training sessions, the central space was reserved for collective exercises, whole group briefing and debriefing events, and participatory performances every morning and evening of the workshop. Black floor carpets were used to cover the training ground that was demarcated by white and red constructivist line patterns, while chairs and white and red modular wooden furniture arrangements, designed specifically for the occasion, were used to organise the space.

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<sup>96</sup> Public statement, 'Training for the Future', Bochum, Germany, date: 20/09/2019.

<sup>97</sup> According to the organisers' estimations, more than 600 people attended the three-day training. This format of the training was initially introduced in 2018, in a much more condensed iteration, containing four trainings of 30 minutes each.



**Figure 3.12 (i-ii).** ‘Training for the Future’ (2019), Bochum, Germany. Top. The training’s layout, artist: Jonas Staal. Bottom: *Multitudes of Listeners* by Maya Felixbrodt, Germaine Sijstermans, and Samuel Vriezen. Photographs by Ruben Hamelink.

The format of the three-day workshop allowed experimentation with an impressive range of discursive, physical, creative, and practical sessions. For instance, ‘Killing the Dominant Male’ by the Center for Jineology Studies introduced tactics developed by the Kurdish Women’s Movement to undo patriarchal behaviours and exercise in cooperative democracy; ‘Decolonising Society’ by the Initiative Schwarzer Menschen

in Deutschland provided an introductory seminar that addressed the implications of colonial histories and racism on the present, while focussing on tactics of self-empowerment and resistance; and ‘Intimacy Encryption’ by Heath Bunting taught trainees to create coded languages and to build intimate knowledges about one another to encrypt information and develop counter-interrogation skills.

One session, entitled ‘Communalizing Data’ by the Institute of Human Obsolescence sought to develop ‘tools to communalize the means of production and governance emerging from the control over digital data’.<sup>98</sup> Coordinated by Manuel Beltrán and Wael Eskandar, it comprised three parts. Echoing Castells (2012: 7), who argued that ‘communication networks are decisive sources of power-making’, the first part examined the role of social media in the square movements and the ways in which new autonomous networks of horizontal communication have played a crucial role in the enactment of participatory democratic models. The next part addressed the limitations of ‘social media revolutions’, using examples from the Arab spring where the ‘organic reach’ of certain counter-power platforms was hindered, internet access and mobile phone networks were switched off, and the data hosted on public platforms was censored by private corporations, like Twitter and Facebook.<sup>99</sup> The last part involved a collective exercise that invited participants to discuss in groups and come up with new ideas for data commoning and open-source tools that go beyond the reliance on individual solutions,<sup>100</sup> echoing Staal’s own campaign ‘Collectivize Facebook’.<sup>101</sup>

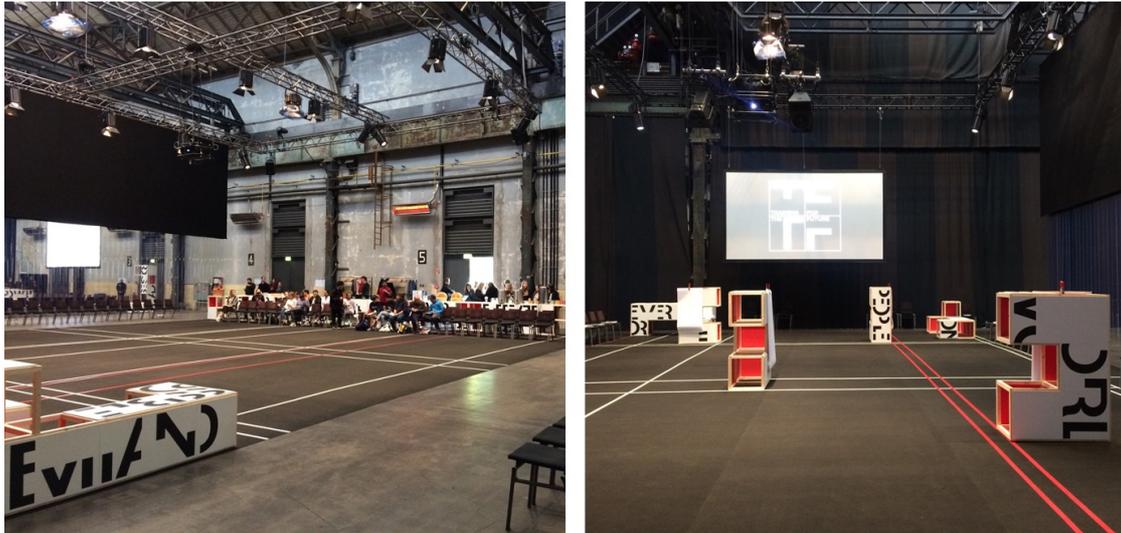
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<sup>98</sup> Manuel Beltrán and Wael Eskandar, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 20/09/2019.

<sup>99</sup> As Castells (2012: 63) asserts, during the first days of the protests, in the attempt to violently suppress the usage of the Internet, ‘the Egyptian government censored the media inside Egypt and took measures to block social media websites, which had helped to call for the protest and spread news about the events on the ground’.

<sup>100</sup> A diversity of voices was heard, proposing modes to establish new sociopolitical solutions of data collection, data workers unions, data banks, and data cooperatives in order to oppose ‘digital colonialism’, meaning data monopoly, data harvest, and data commodification.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Collectivize Facebook’ is a collective action lawsuit, organised by Jonas Staal and Jan Fermon, which aims to force legal recognition of Facebook as a public domain and to transfer its ownership to its users. Staal and Fermon’s basic premise is that ‘corporate’ social media platforms, like Facebook or Twitter, not only monopolise the tools of communication, but also instrumentalise and commercialise their users’ affective labour and personal data, hence it is time to reclaim these digital tools and transform them into collectively shared and owned infrastructures.



**Figure 3.13 (i-ii).** 'Training for the Future', Bochum, Germany. Photographs by the author.

Although Castells (2012: 10) highlights the crucial role of mass self-communication and multimodal digital social networks in movement building and coordination of action, he is also attentive to the urban networks that are formulated in the squares, arguing that networked social movements 'need to carve out a new public space that is not limited to the Internet, but makes itself visible in the places of social life'. In this respect, most of the other training modules centred performativity, choreography, and embodiment as alternative methodologies for the reappropriation of public space, beyond the ritualised forms of protest. For instance, every morning started with 'Choreographies of Togetherness' by Public Movement. By introducing a series of touching techniques and collective movement exercises (touching hands, standing in circles, carrying one another), they invited trainees to deploy them according to different speculative scenarios, for example, when in conflict, when on the run, for protection, etc. Through questions like 'What kind of distances do we maintain between our bodies? When do we chose to be touched? How do we develop evacuation techniques and escape a non-intimate touch?' they attempted to reveal not only the knowledges, but also the politics that remain dormant in bodies.<sup>102</sup> As the trainers argued, through exercising embodied actions, dance routines, and choreographies used by military, police, and activist groups, a

<sup>102</sup> Performance lecture by Ma'ayan Choresch and Hagar Ophir during the session 'Choreographies of Togetherness', 'Training for the Future', date: 20/09/2019.

dispersed public can turn into a united force and a collective entity. In this case, performativity can exemplify not only a more collectivised format of protest that can 'pre-enact' larger antagonisms in society by allowing 'conflict to pass from the latent to the manifest' (Marchart 2019: 96), but also a more sustained and embodied 'support system' (Jackson 2011).

For their part, Isabelle Fremeaux and John Jordan from the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination shared with trainees their firsthand experience from the rural commoning experiments and the occupation of lands in Notre-Dame-des-Landes (also known as ZAD NDDL). 'Zones to Defend' (or zone à defender) are contested areas in western France, which activist collectives, farmers, and ecological movements have occupied to put a halt to the government's development projects (like clearing its residents in order to build an airport).<sup>103</sup> Affirming that the aim is 'to live a post-capital life and not just do interventions', Fremeaux and Jordan argued that 'to defend a territory you have to inhabit it'.<sup>104</sup> Their contribution entailed practical trainings about putting the body at risk, where participants were divided into groups and explored a range of direct actions, ways of deploying unsanctioned interventions and human blockades, and possible modes of resisting arrest.

However, the most interesting session was spontaneously organised when a group from the Goethe Institute asked Staal and Malzacher to sit down with them outside the building. During this more intimate and 'informal training', it was the voices of the 'trainees' that were centred and it was their concerns that were heard. Several critiques were articulated, arguing that the levels of complicity in the different forms of colonialism (military, financial, internal or nation-state, and cultural colonialism) were insufficiently unpacked and concrete anti-colonial methodologies were not presented. A number of participants argued that the 'trainings were not accessible

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<sup>103</sup> In 2018, a large-scale eviction operation was inaugurated that resulted in fierce clashes between activists and local farmers who were defending the autonomous zones, and police forces. After 10 days of battles and with many squatters and police officers injured, the plans were dropped and a truce was agreed upon. Representatives of the ZAD are now in the process of negotiating for legal recognition for some of the commoning projects that have been initiated in the squatted lands.

<sup>104</sup> Presentation by Isabelle Fremeaux and John Jordan, during the session 'We are Nature Defending Itself', 'Training for the Future', date: 22/09/2019.

enough’ since their format was still deeply rooted in a Eurocentric perspective that privileges the discursive over other modes of interaction, hence ‘a more thorough interrogation was needed on the cultural background of the people attending the training’.<sup>105</sup> Others admitted that their testimonies from activism and radicalism, as well as their firsthand experiences of police brutality and suppression of rights in counties—and former European colonies—like Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Myanmar ‘could not relate to the tactics, methodologies, and modes of engagement explored during the trainings’.<sup>106</sup> In this way, they questioned not only the very premise of having this conversation in Bochum, one of Germany’s former powerhouses,<sup>107</sup> but also the very role of the Goethe Institute, and specifically the Asian-based branches that had individually selected the attendees and covered their expenses to fly them over specifically for the event.



**Figure 3.14.** ‘Inventing the Radical’ by NAA at ‘Training for the Future’. Photograph by the author.

Lastly, ‘Inventing the Radical’ by Not An Alternative (NAA) was perhaps the only session that not only invoked the constructivist architecture of ‘Training for the

<sup>105</sup> Public statement, anonymised participant, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 22/09/2019.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Bochum, and the Ruhr region in general, was a centre for iron, coal, and steel industries in the mid-19th century and a centre for the manufacture of weapons during the Second World War.

Future’, but also resonated with Staal’s own theory that underlines the necessity of deploying artistic tools to visualise emergent political imaginaries. Steve Lyons and Jason Jones from NAA emphasised the importance of constructing a common language for the communication of power and the ‘dramaturgy’ of social movements. Building on their engagement in Occupy Wall Street, they argued that even the most ‘subtle alterations in the symbolic terrain can affect the physical’, hence destabilising dominant symbols and the power relations that govern them through carefully choreographed interventions can provide a model for the reappropriation of public space.<sup>108</sup> In other words, the struggle over the physical and symbolic terrain must be considered intimately intertwined; staging, performing, repeating rituals, and reclaiming signs all become indispensable in expressing and building collective power.<sup>109</sup> In this way, Not An Alternative’s (2020) assertion that ‘language becomes a material force as it voices an alternative imagination of the world’<sup>110</sup> resonated with Staal’s (2016b) own argument that ideology has ‘a material reality, which one can understand through morphology: through art’.<sup>111</sup>

The session managed to move beyond the outlining of a conceptual framework and to be translated into concrete action through an exercise. Trainees were instructed to use the provided construction materials, red tape, and other visual markers to activate elements of the surrounding space in order to extend the visual code of the training space into public space. By decoding the visual language that held the training space together and by recognising the existing power of symbols within the room, trainees spread through the vast industrial site and started repeating signs, red graffiti, and other ephemeral installations. Through this ‘productive confusion’

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<sup>108</sup> Presentation by Steve Lyons and Jason Jones during the session ‘Inventing the Radical’, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 22/09/2019.

<sup>109</sup> In this respect, for NAA, establishing a sharp distinction between two modes of practicing politics, namely, one that prioritises the direct transformation of material conditions as the basis for revolutionary change, and another that foregrounds the political efficacy of symbols, slogans, and mediated images in the construction of collective desires, is no longer pertinent.

<sup>110</sup> For NAA, the focus is less on inventing new symbols ‘but about pouring gas on existing fires’: the acknowledgment and reiteration of specific signifying practices as a gesture of solidarity (for example, burning cars, wearing a specific mask, using tents for occupations, etc.) testifies to a commitment to a common vision and symbolic language despite disagreement, hence building collective power (Jason Jones, interview quote, interview date: 3/12/2018, 00:10:30).

<sup>111</sup> Staal’s conceptualisations of ideology owes a lot to Althusser’s own analysis on ideology as having a distinctive material manifestation (see Althusser 2014).

between what already existed in public space and what was added, the aim was less to create interventions as subversive marks of individual expression, than to reiterate a common language that could be recognisable 'as assertions on public space that bind us as a collective'.<sup>112</sup>

The afternoon of the last day, the temporary community that was formed during the three-day marathon, along with Staal and Malzacher who had attended all sessions, assembled for a final evaluation. During the brief discussion, it became evident that without reflecting on the divergences and distances between different individual subject positions, countries of origin, cultural contexts, local urgencies, and even the relations with time and the land one assumes, the possibility of envisaging a collective future seems out of reach. Notions like intimacy, trust, temporality, or struggle do not have universal resonance; the language barriers often constitute an insurmountable obstacle for the translatability of particular struggles; and the practical stakes and the real costs of political radicalism remain asymmetric depending on the context. In this sense, by bringing together firsthand experiences from real world struggles (like the ZAD) and aesthetic tools (like touching and intimacy trainings) inside the formal art setting of the Ruhr Triennial, the training seemed to continuously oscillate between a speculative exercise in imagining the future and a practical workshop that investigated the tools to enact it. As a trainee mentioned, 'if this is an artwork, then it is fine, but if this is an actual training for political change then it is too abstract', underlying the problematics of extrapolating from heterogenous and site-specific struggles.<sup>113</sup>

Instead of outlining a singular and clearly defined version of a collective future, and the required methodologies to enact it, the training rather provided an unexpected opportunity to map out the differentiations that ground the present conditions and the disparities between the different material circumstances of the participants. It can also be argued that it foregrounded that the crystallisation of translation mechanisms between particular struggles is an essential prerequisite for the

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<sup>112</sup> Excerpt from handout during the session 'Inventing the Radical' by Not An Alternative.

<sup>113</sup> Public statement, anonymised participant, 'Training for the Future', date: 22/09/2019.

formation of any ‘transdemocratic alliance’ or ‘internationalist movement’. To recall Butler, the universal claims that are intrinsic to particular struggles ‘need to be articulated in the context of a translative project’, one that is ‘in the service of the struggle for hegemony’ (in Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000: 168). As one participant highlighted, ‘the future is now, so now is the opportunity to find our meeting points, to listen to each other, and to learn from each other’.<sup>114</sup>

It is also crucial to draw some broader conclusions about Staal’s transition from the assembly to the training format. In sharp contrast to the assembly configuration that serves as a formal stage where the diverse groups that have been excluded from democratic discourse can engage in unscripted interactions and experiment with governing forms, trainings provide a more disciplined, committed, and audience-specific composition that bridges theory and action. In this sense, the training format departs from both the overarching themes of ‘participation’, ‘diversity’, and ‘social engagement’ that have saturated the politicised art world and from the polemical atmospheres that have characterised Staal’s assemblies and which, according to Malzacher (2019: 183), often ‘produce moments of a strong sense of unease, disagreement or even anger since these organisations are obviously not chosen on criteria of political correctness’.

In this sense, the composition of the training constitutes a paradigm shift since it already presupposes a common horizon. Whereas Staal’s performative assemblies provide the discursive terrain that allows the redefinition of collectivity, echoing Mouffe (2005b: 2) who argues that ‘the creation of a “we” by the delimitation of a “them”’ is a precondition in every process of collective identification, the training configuration already presupposes ‘a strong commitment to egalitarian politics’ from all attendees.<sup>115</sup> According to Staal, this novel endeavour establishes an intimate, albeit often critical and uncomfortable, space that allows the sharing of experiences, the strengthening of group bonds, and the additional time, not only for open-ended discussions but also for the application of practical methodologies, surpassing the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Jonas Staal, public statement, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 22/09/2019.

impasses that have occurred during assemblies. The training takes the assembly format a step further, not only allowing the articulation of new radical imaginaries, but also providing a toolbox for direct action and a base camp where the idioms of specific tactics and the intricacies of site-specific struggles can be translated into one another and tested out in practice. It can go beyond the sole mobilisation of imagination and start giving material form to the symbolic infrastructures that have been desired but have not yet been instituted. This new typology of gatherings, I argue, provides the opportunity to leave the realm of representational politics and experiment with Left institutionality beyond the constraints of realpolitik. Under the protective veil of the cultural realm and the premise of 'artistic freedom', it can work towards enacting and sustaining a radical imagination over time, by devising its organisational, infrastructural, and institutional grounding.

### 3.5 Conclusions: The Potentialities and Limitations of Alter-Institutions

After having examined the aforementioned cases, it is now useful to put them into a constructive dialogue to draw some useful conclusions. To begin with, it seems that all three cases constitute small-scale but long-term institutional arrangements that set out to provide practical alternatives to the impasses of parliamentary democracy. Through the deployment of performativity and pre-enactment as tools to materialise intense social experiences and relational temporary communities, they attempt to construct multiple and pluralistic public spheres to oppose the homogeneous pseudo-public sphere and its normalised exclusions. They are invested in creating not only discursive terrains where disparate, underrepresented, and marginalised voices can be foregrounded, but also spatial settings where a diverse collectivity can coalesce, while both verbal and non-verbal encounters can take place. In this sense, the political dimension of performativity is accentuated, as means to both facilitate the physical assembly of bodies and to symbolically reexamine the very notion of 'demos', reconfiguring the 'space of appearance' as a translocal and deterritorialised stage. Showcasing tactics and methodologies that work at the intersection of art and politics, they attempt to open up spaces for the articulation of more egalitarian imaginaries, while providing the concrete tools to enact them.

The alter-institutions discussed above attempt to replicate in the cultural sphere parliamentary formats, different modes of decision-making processes that abolish top-down hierarchies, and common spaces of negotiation that welcome otherness in order to galvanise interdependencies between diverse social actors. However, the use of curatorial techniques and theatrical stages to facilitate social encounters remain artistically framed, artificially constructed, and partly predetermined, and hence differ significantly from the spontaneous assemblies witnessed during insurgent movements, moments of protest, or square encampments. Blurring the lines between what is real and what is scripted, these alter-institutions distance themselves from immersive experiences and the 'fake participation' that remain bound on the level of representation, while striving to strengthen political awareness and turn participants into active actors. As I have argued, these

‘instituting’ practices should be best assessed through a three-layered analytical framework: their ability to exceed the artistic realm and be connected to broader movement politics and activist organising; their potential to rehearse the moment of the political, meaning ‘the *anticipation* of the political, rather than its direct enactment’, as Marchart (2019: 178, original emphasis) would put it; and finally, the degree to which they remain flexible and interrogate their own means, procedures, and limits.

Starting with the first criterion, the Parliament of Bodies constituted ‘an institution-in-becoming’ that operated within the confines of a mega-institution, i.e., documenta 14. The political question posed, framed under the banner of ‘Learning from Athens’, was how parliaments of bodies, similar to the rhizomatic assemblies that emerged during the Indignant squares movements, can be sustained artificially in the context of performance art, and how these can be translated back and feed into society. However, if we are to believe Ribalta (2010: 228), instead of being stable, ‘the local is a process of reinvention’, alluding to ‘a specific way of being open to others and transformed by them’. In this sense, the Parliament of Bodies seemed to be assuming an outdated, and perhaps even idealised view of the Greek Indignant movement, detached from what was happening in the local scene, like the social solidarity networks and the self-organised initiatives that have flourished on a neighbourhood level. In other words, the Parliament of Bodies failed to put its political agenda into a meaningful dialogue with the audience that it was targeting in the first place, since its abstract and schematic theoretical framework could not resonate with the concrete practices of the locality. To summarise its critique of the Parliament of Bodies, one of the grassroots journals of Exarcheia, put it eloquently (Anon 2018):

The real issue is that in a city where for many months more than 40 neighbourhood assemblies were active and a central assembly in Syntagma, where some thousands of people discussed their problems and dreams in an unmediated and self-organised way, the only thing that the Parliament of Bodies has to offer is the assimilation of a radical

discourse and practice, and their 're-serving' through the vertical processes of a mega-institution.

For its part, the nomadic platform of Visible serves as a discursive platform to innovative artistic approaches that can transcend the artistic world to imagine alternative models of public action. Although it is conceived as a bridge between socially engaged practices and other social actors, it remains firmly rooted in the artistic sphere, detached from social movements and political struggles. Interestingly enough, the Visible 2019 Temporary Parliament was held on the first-year anniversary of the Yellow Vest movement that began in France on November 17, 2018. During Visible's parliamentary procedures, one could hear the fierce clashes between protestors and the police that were taking place outside the building and around Paris. Heavily armed policemen were guarding the Hôtel de Ville, and attendees of the parliament could access the building only through ID verification and bag check. In this sense, one could perceive 'the parliament as a form of protectionism', as Phillips put it, or feel a sense of detachment from the local urgencies when 'discussing about social engagement in art while Paris is burning'.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, inhabiting a parliament that was burnt by the Paris Commune in May 1871, and reproducing the same decision-making processes and political formats that were challenged by the gilets jaunes just outside of the local administration building's walls, invoked some of the painful contradictions that seem innate in contemporary art discourses.

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<sup>116</sup> Public statement, Visible Temporary Parliament, Hôtel de Ville de Paris, 16/11/2019.



**Figure 3.15.** Participants of ‘Training for the Future’ joining the FridaysForFuture demonstration, Bochum, Germany. Photograph by the author.

As far as ‘Training for the Future’ is concerned, the primary target audience of the workshop was, undoubtedly, an international ensemble of artists and activists, with the residents of Bochum remaining underrepresented. At the same time, the training’s organisers seemed eager, at least, to engage with the urgencies of the local setting. This was exemplified when the first day’s training sessions were cut short and participants were urged to join the FridaysForFuture demonstration, the local instantiation of the global climate strike movement. Although this was not part of the organisers’ initial plan, when the issue was raised by several trainees, it was deemed necessary to shift focus from ‘training for the future’ to direct action and embodied activism in the present. Hence, trainees and trainers formed a unified block and marched around the streets of central Bochum, underscoring ‘the necessity of fighting where one stands’.<sup>117</sup> However, this did not compensate for the general feeling of attending what can be characterised as an ‘activist retreat’, since the various training modules, set in the multifunctional and luxuriously renovated building of the Ruhr Triennial Arts Festival seemed detached from anything that resembles frontline struggle.

<sup>117</sup> Anonymised participant, public statement, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 22/09/2019.

Turning to the next criterion, in sharp contrast to established institutions, a ‘dissensual institutionality’ alludes to the practices that do not avoid conflict, but rather remain open to antagonistic moments, striving to create architectural settings of assembly and stages where exclusions and divisions can be rendered more visible. In other words, a truly public sphere is not a space that guarantees participation or accessibility, but rather one that emerges through conflictual debate.<sup>118</sup> This relates to Latour’s argument (2005: 23) that ‘we don’t assemble because we agree, look alike, feel good, are socially compatible or wish to fuse together but because we are brought by divisive matters of concern into some neutral, isolated place in order to come to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis)agreement’. As far as the potentiality of the ‘instituting’ practices discussed here to allow actual disagreement, conflict, and contention is concerned (instead of solely contributing to the ‘domestication’ of dissent), one should remain sceptical.

Although the Parliament of Bodies did strive to symbolically construct ‘a scene of appearance’ for dissident, heterogeneous, and minor narratives, its intense programming rendered the terms of appearance predetermined, restricted to a small number of preselected speakers, whereas the audience’s participation remained limited only to questions and answers at the end of every session. As Angelidakis admitted, ‘in reality, in a scheduled programme, like the Parliament of Bodies, there is always someone invited to speak, followed by a discussion which is audience-driven’.<sup>119</sup> One can argue that the Parliament of Bodies failed to deliver its ambitious mission since it remained a highly didactic event that felt like preaching to the converted: the production of radical discourses was consumed by a limited audience that was already familiar with them. Since the critical interlocutors of documenta did not participate in the programme, there was neither enough space for opposing views, conflict, and antagonism, nor the institutional terrain that could have allowed ‘antagonism’ (struggle between enemies) to take the form of ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries), which constitutes the basis of a pluralistic

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<sup>118</sup> For Marchart (2019: 145, original emphasis), ‘the essential criterion for a public sphere that can be considered a true *political* sphere—and not just a simulation of a public sphere—is thus conflict, or antagonism’.

<sup>119</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 22/07/2019, 00:45:00).

democracy. In addition, rejecting the fixed architectural formats that have been associated with democratic fictions (like the semi-circular amphitheatre) in favour of the political potentiality of open forms and transient architectures, did not guarantee the construction of an agonistic public space. As Deutsche (1996: 289) notes, 'when the exclusions governing the constitution of political public space are naturalised and contests erased by declaring particular forms of space inherently, eternally, or self-evidently public, public space is appropriated'. Demarcating a place for the spatialisation of dissent and constructing an architectural setting to allow certain bodies to assemble does not guarantee that exclusions are taken into consideration and that the stage of appearance remains open to dispute, conflict, and division, which are the conditions of existence of a democratic public sphere.

For their part, Visible's curators had expressed their willingness to 'give more space to dissent',<sup>120</sup> asserting that 'if a jury decided to take over the process, we are open to that scenario'.<sup>121</sup> However, the 2019 Temporary Parliament's dissensual moments that could have served as opportunities to rethink and 'to reimagine democracy from the side of the artists' were quickly 'tamed' and dismissed. Although multiplying or splitting the prize would not have been unprecedented, organisers seemed reluctant to follow through, using as an excuse the necessity to evacuate the room because of political urgencies outside the building. However, it was these very calls by the audience to take more time on the decision procedures, to rethink the voting system, and to democratise the award structure—which went largely unanswered—that would have allowed the arbitrary collectivity that assembled but was lacking any democratic legitimacy to be transformed into 'a people'. Indeed, for Laclau, to raise a demand, that is to protest, is the minimal unit of politics; 'it is to demonstrate the contingent nature of the given, the fact that things could be different' (Marchart 2018: 33). In this sense, situating the audience in a staged parliament to exercise democracy seemed not to guarantee the reinvention of decision-making processes and the enactment of new models of governance.

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<sup>120</sup> Judith Wielander, interview quote (interview date: 13/12/2019, 00:55:00).

<sup>121</sup> Judith Wielander and Matteo Lucchetti, joint presentation during 'Commonism' session at the Swamp Pavilion, (date: 28/09/2018).



**Figure 3.16.** The moment of dissensus, 2019 Visible Temporary Parliament. Photograph by the author.

Returning to the dissensual moments that transpired during the only ‘informal training’ of ‘Training for the Future’, for Staal, these provided the fertile ground for enriching its very format. Indeed, since many of the trainees had ‘high expectations’, having travelled from across the world to exchange experiences and tactics of direct action, this led to a more engaged critique on their part. They highlighted that the separation of roles between trainers and trainees left some voices underrepresented and it did not allow enough space for reciprocal exchange of methodologies, many of which ‘cannot be translated to a universal language’.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, what was made clear is that everyone can be the source of knowledge, highlighting the need to excavate personal testimonies and minor struggles, and to further interrogate the tactics that activists assume in different localities. In this sense, the unofficial training brought to the fore the necessity of prioritising the art of listening, especially when native English speakers and those already familiar with the artistic realm can disproportionately dominate the discussion.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Public statement, anonymised participant, ‘Training for the Future’, date: 22/09/2019.

<sup>123</sup> As Gourgouris (2016: 16) noted, ‘Listening, more than speaking, is essential to autonomous understanding—autonomous in its literally political sense. Indeed, more than a domain of free speech, democracy is a state of listening’.

The last prerequisite of an 'instituting' practice is its openness to critique, the insistence in revisiting its own founding premises, the self-examination of its *modus operandi*, and the readjustment of its course of action, or even its self-dissolution, when this is required. The Parliament of Bodies ventured into sensitive topics like the 'failed transition' from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy, attempting to formulate concrete spatial knowledge on Greek history and society. However, the parliament entailed neither decision-making processes, nor moments where participants could collectively engage with modes of political becoming. In addition, except from one final debriefing session two months after the end of d14, the Parliament of Bodies never developed the sustained organisational infrastructures, tools, and methodologies that would allow the assessment of its own practices and the registering of the critiques raised from its constituencies. In other words, the experiment of attempting to render certain bodies visible (and the fact that many bodies were absent) could not be evaluated, since the mechanisms of self-assessment and self-reflection were not in place.

For their part, Visible's curators have set out to dismantle the award by broadening its scope and by transforming it into a long-term support infrastructure, acknowledging its problematic and competitive structure, which still abides by the temporalities of an event-based economy. According to them, this will encompass the inauguration of fellowships, exhibitions, and art residency programmes, the invention of new granting schemes and modes of redistributing knowledge and resources, as well as the extension of collaboration opportunities with institutional partners that go beyond the culmination of the Temporary Parliament. The aim is to guarantee the support of all shortlisted projects by disseminating their work and putting them in touch with other activist groups, organisations, universities, and policy makers that address similar issues. However, it seems that Visible, at the moment, still remains firmly attached to a hierarchical organisational network, with its two curators comprising the grid's centralised nodal point. This, I argue, is perhaps where the sociopolitical potential of the platform lies, namely, in operating as a decentred and autonomous platform that enables interactive and horizontal

communication where groups come together to exchange methodologies, share tactics, and build alliances.

To return to 'Training for the Future', Staal seems aware of his privileged status as an artist and academic, the vast cultural capital that he possesses, the high production costs of his infrastructures, and the expanded network of sponsorships and institutional partners that he sustains, all of which he tries to channel towards those who are struggling for recognition. According to him, the artist's role is first and foremost to commit and take a side, serving as an intermediary who repurposes means, resources, and power from the art system to ongoing struggles and social movements. 'At the point where our politics fails, where the democratic deficit shows more explicit, we artists should take over', Staal (2013: 251) argues, and continues: 'as artists, we are not *in power*, but through morphology we *give power*: we give *form to power*' (Staal 2017, original emphasis). In this respect, Staal strives to continuously experiment with different innovative architectural formats, physical settings, and conceptual tools that can allow people to be together otherwise. The training format, still a work-in-progress, continues to investigate ways to best facilitate the transition from a hierarchical pedagogy to a reciprocal and cooperative model of exchanging methodologies and tactics, with the potential to bring together a disparate assembly of people who all share a commitment to emancipatory politics. However, it remains an open question whether his assemblies, parliaments, and trainings work mostly on the symbolic level, namely propagating for a radical collective imaginary, or if they can be actualised in the form of organisational counter-infrastructures that can sustain such an imaginary over time.

To conclude this section, despite the artists and curators' honest commitment to put art in the service of emancipatory politics, the reality of the parliaments, assemblies, and trainings was that they mostly served as gatherings for already politically minded audiences, pre-enactments for another moment elsewhere, and ephemeral performative stagings of the appearance of 'the people'. The space of appearance might be brought into being when the 'body politic' assembles, but its peculiarity is that it can also degenerate when a people disappears or dissolves. As Arendt (1998:

206) asserts, 'Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence'. In this sense, the true potential of these alter-institutions lies in their ability to enact translocal solidarities, be embedded in long-term strategies, and connect already-existing struggles, serving as mechanisms of cultural translation and equivalential linking. Indeed, echoing Laclau and Mouffe's concept of chain of equivalence, a radical democratic politics requires the political articulation of different levels of struggles that allows the formation of broader alliances between social movements, political parties, activist organisations, and critical artistic practices, concretising a counter-hegemonic struggle.

## 4 Reclaiming the Institution

### 4.1 Introduction: Artistic Activism Against Museum Neutrality

In the attempt to theorise a ‘dissensual institutionality’, this thesis has examined strategies of decentring rigid institutional arrangements and performing novel egalitarian institutional forms. The focal point of this chapter constitutes artistic activism, an agitational, tactical, and creative practice that serves not only as a tool to disrupt the smooth operation of elite institutions, but also as a means to address the present inequalities that permeate the museum world. Admittedly, the notion of artistic activism has been explored extensively—albeit through different lenses—by both political theorists and art historians over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> This renewed interest in artistic activism, or what Mouffe has called ‘artivism’, can be justified by the recent wave of boycotts, petitions, callouts, walkouts, sit-down protests, banner drops, strikes, interventions, occupations, and direct actions targeting museums in a global context.

One can only indicatively note here the important work of the Gulf Labour Campaign in highlighting the working conditions in the building of the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi (see Ross 2016), the People’s Cultural Plan with its concise alternate cultural plan for New York City, and Nan Goldin’s P.A.I.N campaign that successfully targeted the Sackler family who profited from the opioid crisis while sponsoring numerous cultural institutions. In addition, it is not that long ago that David H. Koch, oil billionaire and climate change denier, stepped down from the board of the American Museum of Natural History. More recently, Warren Kanders, owner of Safariland, a company that supplies law enforcement agencies, resigned from his position as vice-chairman of the Whitney Museum’s Board of Trustees. Both symbolic victories discussed here were attributed to activist tactics that succeeded in

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of artistic activism see Bradley and Esche 2007, Kester 2011, Thompson 2015, Weibel 2015, DeLaure and Fink 2017, McKee 2016, Estefan, Kuoni, and Raicovich 2017, Janes and Sandell 2019, Marchart 2019, Mouffe 2007, Sholette 2017, Serafini 2015, De Cautier, De Roo, and Vanhaesebrouck 2011.

raising public awareness and putting pressure on the respective institutions. Such interventions set out to hold museums, institutions, biennials, and non-profit organisations accountable not only to their own mission statements, but also to the communities they claim to serve. At the same time, they allude to a broader crisis of legitimacy that major museums are faced with today.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 4.1 (i-iii).** Series of strategic interventions in U.S. museums. Photographs by Occupy Museums.

Although the majority of such actions exceed the curatorial discourses and the contemporary art canon, for McKee (2016: 6, original emphasis), a movement-based cultural production ‘involves the *reinvention* of art as direct action, collective affect, and political subjectivization embedded in radical movements working to reconstruct the commons in the face of both localized injustices and systemic crisis that characterize the contemporary capitalist order’. In this sense, McKee’s concise account of the prehistory of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the movement itself, and what he calls the ‘post-Occupy’ condition, provides the backdrop for this chapter. His unreserved investment in the movement-based cultural production of OWS is owed to its indispensable role in the ‘prefigurative politics’ of the movement. In this

<sup>2</sup> Despite the recent renaissance of artistic activism, one should pay tribute to the long historical genealogy of the practice that can be traced all the way back to the Situationist International (see Knabb 2006). Groups like the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) and the Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) who challenged the New York art world on labour conditions, racism, and sexism in the 1960s and ‘70s; collectives like Critical Art Ensemble, the Guerrilla Girls, and Gran Fury who deployed tactical media interventions, struggled over gender and racial inequality, and raised awareness about AIDS, respectively, during the ‘80 and ‘90s; and the numerous creative direct actions and hacking tactics of the alter-globalisation movement, culminating in the Battle of Seattle in 1999, have all laid the groundwork for the intensive repoliticisation of the art world that we are witnessing in the 21st century, especially in the U.S. context.

respect, Graeber's description of prefigurative politics is an important anchoring point, since for him, less alienated forms of creativity, such as the language of civil disobedience or the networks of direct action, can provide an alternative, non-capitalist imaginary.<sup>3</sup> As he argues 'surely there must be a link between the actual experience of first imagining things and then bringing them into being, individually or collectively, and the ability to envision social alternatives' (Graeber 2002: 73).

The 'prefigurative politics' of creative direct action seems to also resonate with Marchart's 'conflictual aesthetics', namely, an aesthetics that has the ability to 'pre-enact' and anticipate the moment of antagonism that is yet to come. As I have argued, the staging of dissensus does not have a 'proper place'; it cannot be predefined or predetermined, it cannot be simply constructed or brought about by a specific agent. Since it arises inadvertently, it can only be encountered. This, however, should not be perceived as a sign of defeatism. According to Marchart (2019: 55, original emphasis), 'the political as such *cannot be staged* [...] it nevertheless *must be staged* in order to become visible at all'. Forms of artistic activism, like direct actions, encapsulate such attempts of staging the political to bring to the fore its inherent dissensual and antagonistic forces. Hence, he advocates for 'an aesthetics, that is, of *propagating, agitating, and organizing* as three interconnected ways of rehearsing antagonism' (Marchart 2019: 30, original emphasis).

This view runs counter to the Rancièrian understanding of the relation of aesthetics and politics, which does not distinguish adequately political from non-political art, since all art, by virtue of contributing to the 'distribution of the sensible', is, in and of itself, political. Art's inherent and primordial political dimension is challenged by Marchart as unfounded and anti-political since it provides the 'functionaries' of the art field with ideological justifications for refraining from and arguing against any

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<sup>3</sup> For the role of prefiguration in social movements see Maeckelbergh 2011, Yates 2020; for the role of prefiguration during activist performances see Serafini 2015; and for the performative, affective, imaginative, and embodied aspects of institutional transformation see Celermajer et al. 2019.

explicitly politicised art.<sup>4</sup> Instead, what the recent resurgence of more militant artistic practices has made clear is that artists and activists accept that there is no ‘not getting your hands dirty’ as they dive into the murky waters of political struggle and social change. ‘Activist practices within the art field teach us this simple lesson: Art is political when it is political. It is not when it is not’ (Marchart 2019: 14).

In this respect, this section differentiates itself from the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, it sets out to add another chapter in the long lineage of artistic activism, by examining some remarkable but hitherto underexamined cases of activism in cultural contexts as they unfolded in 2019. The tactics discussed were undertaken by the action-oriented movement Decolonize This Place (DTP), which is being facilitated by the MTL+ collective, of which McKee is a member; and by Not An Alternative (NAA), a collective that works at the intersection of art, activism, and critical theory. By setting these case studies side by side, I establish an instructive dialogue between them, investigating both DTP’s actions centred around decolonisation, Black liberation, and Free Palestine, and NAA’s most recent work on climate and environmental justice and Indigenous struggles. I analyse both their overlap (for instance, their focus on movement building) and their points of divergence, in terms of their politics, methodologies of organising, and creative tactics. Hence, I demonstrate the ways in which present-day struggles and their artistically oriented tactics are still informed by OWS, during which members of both groups were active participants. This is discussed alongside other groups, like the MTL collective, that either emerged out of Occupy or whose members were actively taking part in the movement.

Secondly, I explore tactics of artistic activism in juxtaposition with the notion of ‘museum neutrality’. Indeed, the numerous activist initiatives that have set out to scrutinise museums’ ethics, streams of funding, and principles of governance are often confronted with the museums’ adherence to an ‘authoritative neutrality’

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<sup>4</sup> According to Marchart (2019: 12), for art’s ‘functionaries’ the political efficacy of art resides in its ‘complexity, obliqueness, and remoteness from every political practice in the strict sense’, hence they oppose any explicit politicisation of art.

(Janes 2009: 59). As custodians of knowledge and cultural heritage, museums claim to present their information and objects from a 'neutral' ideological position, while priding themselves on offering spaces for unbiased debate. Under the guise of neutrality, museums might deploy progressive exhibitions, diversify their audience, and become more inclusive, however, they often remain resistant to address deeper structural problems.<sup>5</sup> The case becomes more complicated when the ethical underpinning of institutional sponsorship is compromised, namely when the sponsors' means of creating personal wealth contradicts the purported values of the institutions where they serve as board of trustees.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, wealthy donors and corporations strive to associate themselves with arts and cultural institutions since the latter not only can guarantee access to power, political influence, and public relations, but can also secure them a 'social licence to operate', meaning symbolic standing, social acceptability, social prestige, and even brand promotion (Evans 2015: 88).

'Artwashing' allows agents to present themselves, through their institutional sponsorship, as philanthropists, favourable public personas, and benefactors of the arts, while providing cover for profiteers of war, state violence, mass incarceration, and climate catastrophe. Since the connection between cultural philanthropy and plutocracy has been well documented (see Fraser 2018), many scholars now argue that 'philanthropy has always been toxic' (Joselit 2019: 3). They highlight the undemocratic nature of 'philanthrocapitalism' that undermines essential public sector services and consolidates political quietism.<sup>7</sup> Such a model of museum governance alludes to what has been characterised as a 'post-democratic order', a space where antagonism and disagreement has been colonised by a consensual, corporate, and techno-managerial model of governance.<sup>8</sup> This also brings to mind

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<sup>5</sup> This is such that while the public provision of culture is being increasingly privatised, museums embark on extravagant expansion projects, and a seat at the museums boards' table is dependent on the voluntarism and tax-deductible charity of wealthy individuals.

<sup>6</sup> The core problem in U.S. cultural institutions is that museum boards constitute both the primary governing body and one of the main sources of funding.

<sup>7</sup> For this discussion see Giridharadas 2018, Gomberg 2002, Singer 1972; 2009, Bishop and Green 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one can talk about the ways in which the principles of 'participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people are submitted to economization' (Brown 2015: 10).

Rancière's (2006: 80) understanding of the post-political, as exemplified by the 'wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics'.

However, this chapter takes the activists' side when they claim that 'major cultural institutions exert large-scale political, economic, and cultural influence', they establish a specific understanding of our collective being, they define common sense, and they consolidate common beliefs and popular values, 'but they refuse to use this power on behalf of the people' (Not An Alternative 2016). If museums and art institutions are essential for the maintenance of power, they could also contribute to subverting capitalist imaginary and 'they could be transformed into agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested' (Mouffe 2013: 100). Hence, instead of accepting the myth of museum neutrality, I view museums—their perspectives, symbols, and resources—as sites of ideological struggle, permeated by inner divisions that represent broader antagonisms in society. In other words, in a time of climate emergency, mounting inequalities, and racial violence, museums and art institutions cannot afford to cling to the idea of neutrality. They need to take sides, since neutrality only means complicity.

Thirdly, I show that these tactical interventions, although originating from artistic circles, as evident by their aesthetic and semiotic density, often exceed the artistic realm and use institutions as gateways to larger struggles. I demonstrate that using institutions as tactical targets can have a double meaning. On the one hand, institutions are admittedly 'softer targets' (compared to banks for instance) and hence valuable 'for leveraging visibility, publicity, and pressure relative to political aims and movements that straddle the artistic and extra-artistic realms' (MTL Collective 2018b: 193). On the other, the 'institutional liberation' approach puts institutional resources in the service of a broader political movement, treating institutions 'as forms to be seized and connected into a counterpower infrastructure' (Not An Alternative 2016). Delving into the fine nuances of these two groups' theoretical arsenals and creative tactics, I examine their effectiveness not only in terms of forging alliances with broader social movements and building counter-

power in the here and now, but also of laying the groundwork for a moment to come, the moment of antagonism and dissensus.

## 4.2 Decolonising the Whitney Museum

### 4.2.1 Setting the Stage: 'The Democracy of Art'

Walking through the door of Cooper Union's Amphitheatre on January 26, 2019, you would be disappointed if you had expected to attend another lecture on the history of the avant-garde; instead you would be attending 'art history in the making'.<sup>9</sup> A full house of more than 200 artists, curators, art critics, activists, cultural workers, students, and other stakeholders had gathered in a Town Hall Assembly, hosted by DTP, in collaboration with Chinatown Art Brigade and W.A.G.E. to address 'The Crisis of the Whitney'. The theatre walls were filled with banners reading 'we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us', 'Kanders must go', and 'Whitney Museum: No space for profiteers of state violence'. After a brief land acknowledgement by members of the Shuar Nation in solidarity with the Lenape peoples and in support of the return of their lands, the floor was opened to anyone who wished to make a short intervention. This was followed by multiple breakout groups that discussed future plans, specific tactics, and possible direct actions against the Whitney.

The J26 Town Hall Assembly took place just weeks after the courageous decision of more than 100 Whitney staffers to address a letter to the museum leadership concerning the connection of the Whitney to the migrant crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. This was a response to the revelations, published by *Hyperallergic* art magazine, that the tear gas cannisters discharged by U.S. Border agents against hundreds of asylum seekers who were trying to cross the border between Tijuana and San Diego had been manufactured by 'Safariland' and 'Defense Technology'. Both corporations were owned by Warren B. Kanders, who served as vice-chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art.<sup>10</sup> The symbolic

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<sup>9</sup> As artist Alicia Grullon stated in her passionate speech during the J26 Town Hall Assembly, 'Today is art historical. Look around where you are, you feel that energy. You will be reading about this in textbooks to come' (public statement, date: 26/1/2019).

<sup>10</sup> Safariland, purchased by Kanders in 2012 for \$124 million, manufactures law enforcement equipment, including riot gear and tear gas, and offers trainings for the department of Homeland Security and the NYPD. Defense Technology (part of the Safariland Group) produces pepper spray, rubber bullets, chemical agent devices, launchers, and impact munitions, boasting for offering 'less lethal solutions'.

weight of the staff’s letter was tangible, since it stood in sharp contrast to the Whitney’s claims about being ‘a safe space for unsafe ideas’, an equitable and inclusive institution that serves diverse communities. Highlighting the obvious contradictions between the museum’s progressive façade and its actual practices, the letter stated: ‘We cannot claim to serve these communities while accepting funding from individuals whose actions are at odds with [the museum’s] mission’ (in Vartanian, Small, and Weber 2018). The staff’s demands included the *consideration* of Kanders’s resignation, the development of clear ethical guidelines for trustee participation, and a museum-wide forum to address staff concerns and other museum policies.<sup>11</sup>

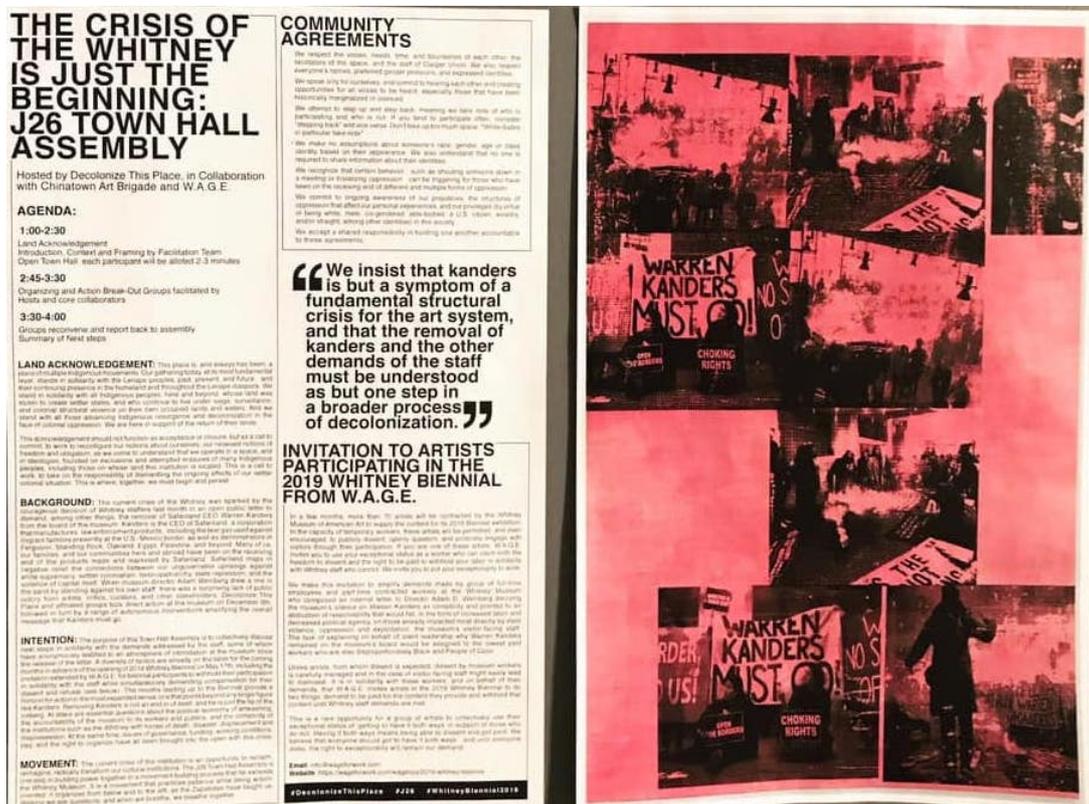


Figure 4.2. Flyer circulating at the J26 Town Hall Assembly. Photograph by the author.

<sup>11</sup> The letter continued: ‘we intend to clarify what qualifies or disqualifies a wealthy philanthropic individual for the Board. Is there a moral line? If so, what is that line? If this was an instance of a #metoo scandal, would we call for resignation? If this was an instance of overt racism, would we call for resignation? We believe the line should be that we not be afflicted with any Board member whose work or actions are at odds with the museum’s mission’ (in Vartanian, Small, and Weber 2018).

The Whitney staff's initiative was met by the leadership's condescending remarks. In his response, Kanders contended that he is not the problem the authors of the letter seek to solve, asserting that 'the politicization of every aspect of public life, including commercial organizations and cultural institutions, is not productive or healthy' (in Greenberger 2018). For his part, Whitney Museum Director Adam Weinberg, in a statement that echoed all the Rancièrian buzzwords, took pride in fashioning a museum as a space where unheard and unwanted voices are recognised, thus encapsulating 'the democracy of art', asserting that 'we respect the right to dissent', but the 'staff does not appoint or remove board members' (in Weber 2018). Both Kanders and Weinberg's responses echoed, in many ways, what has been described by Rancière as the police order. Indeed, the police order pertains to a distribution of the sensible where everyone is assigned a social position and where community is divided into groups with specific roles and functions. According to Rancière (2010: 36), in the police order, community is 'made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places'. The Whitney staff's exercise of their democratic right to have their voice recognised as a legitimate partner in the debate in order to address a wrong they suffered, was negated by a simple statement: 'this is not your place', hence disqualifying the political quality of their role, position, and space.

It was this profound contradiction between the leadership's pronounced commitment to the liberal illusions of mutual respect, fairness, tolerance, and freedom of expression and the outright dismissal of the staffers' right to be heard that led activists to organise the J26 Town Hall Assembly in solidarity with the staff and in order to amplify their demands. The assembly itself served a dual purpose. On the one hand, its format put forward and prefigured an alternative model of decision-making, premised on community agreements, horizontal conversations, a plurality of voices, as well as on direct, participatory, and democratic processes. Echoing the prefigurative politics of the alter-globalisation movement, the insistence on 'inclusive political practices of governing' and the sensitivity in all aspects of the organising processes were a focal point for DTP, the assembly's main

host (Maeckelbergh 2011: 3).<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the formations, analysis, actions, and organising principles adopted by the group were informed by a self-reflexive ethos and a continuous effort to decentre whiteness, while not reproducing structures of oppression or narratives of victimisation unwittingly.

On the other hand, by the group's own admission, the J26 Town Hall Assembly was not only 'an opportunity to reclaim, reimagine, and radically transform our cultural institutions', but was also 'one step in building power together in a movement-building process that far exceeds the Whitney Museum'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, amplifying the staff's specific demands through the organisation of actions that target a large institution like the Whitney—with its high visibility, symbolic capital, and cultural legitimacy—was not an end in itself. It rather presented itself as an opportunity for a multitude of different groups and communities—that were not strictly limited to the art world—to coalesce into one movement, hence building collective power. According to the MTL collective (2018a), 'it is a matter of facilitating formations and decolonial solidarities over time that extend beyond any particular institution or demand, while remaining deeply attentive to the specificities of struggle'.

Evidently, DTP's analytical framework has been heavily influenced by black and decolonial pedagogies, methodologies, and epistemologies.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Tuck and Yang, a constant reference point for DTP, have illustrated the intimate intertwinement of internal and external colonialism in the operation of settler colonialism. They have also denoted the pitfalls of metaphor invading decolonisation and the 'settler moves to innocence', namely the strategies and empty gestures that aim at relieving the settlers' feeling of guilt without 'giving up land or power or privilege' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 10). They write: 'When metaphor invades

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<sup>12</sup> It is crucial to make some clarifications about the composition of the groups that will be mentioned since the same agents might comprise different formations. To my understanding, Amin Husain and Nitasha Dhillon constitute the MTL collective. The MTL+ Collective consists of Nitasha Dhillon, Amin Husain, Yates McKee, and Andrew Ross. The MTL collective is a founding member of Tidal: Occupy Theory, Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), and Decolonial Cultural Front, among others. The MTL+ Collective *facilitates* Decolonize This Place, which includes Lorena Ambrosio, Kyle Goen, Crystal Hans, Yates McKee, Vaimoana Niumeitolu, Aiko Roudette, Andrew Ross, Marz Saffore, and Amy Weng.

<sup>13</sup> Extract from the flyer that was distributed during the Town Hall Assembly.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Sium, Desai, and Ritskes 2012, Fanon 2004.

decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recentres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). In other words, decolonisation does not have a synonym; it pertains strictly to the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.

In this sense, the group seems to be shifting away from both a social justice perspective and a strictly anti-capitalist stance (where colonialism is perceived as a by-product of capitalism) to an all-encompassing decolonial framework, while also being attentive to issues like race, class, and gender.<sup>15</sup> The impetus of building solidarities through a decolonial lens that guides DTP is informed by the understanding that all struggles against different forms of colonisation, dispossession, and displacement are intimately intertwined. Such struggles include but are not limited to movements like the Idle No More in Canada, Black Lives Matter in the US, and No Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. They also find affinities with activist and direct action groups from the 1960s whose struggles against predominantly white institutions revolved around race, power, representation, and redistribution, as well as with grassroots groups that have set out, more recently, to decolonise museums and universities.<sup>16</sup> The triangulation of Indigenous Struggle, Black Liberation, and Free Palestine, in particular, constitutes the focal point of DTP, and according to the group, 'decolonization as an analytic enables us to highlight intersections between such struggles without collapsing them' (MTL Collective 2018b: 197). As DTP argues, 'there is no blueprint for what decolonization looks like; it is always context-specific' (MTL Collective 2018a). 'Decolonization is not an appeal to liberal tolerance or feel-good diversity', but rather a combative and creative process of self-liberation through struggle and an immanent process of questioning, unlearning, and building broader solidarities (MTL Collective 2018b: 194).

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<sup>15</sup> This is embedded in their understanding that colonialism is not just a by-product of capitalism that will just fade away with a socialist or communist revolution (see also Tuck and Yang 2012: 4). In other words, one can be an anti-capitalist without necessarily being an anti-colonialist.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, one can look at the protests of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition against the Whitney Museum in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Wallace 2015, D'Souza 2018).

Returning to the J26 Town Hall Assembly, as the activists made clear from the outset, Kanders is not an exception; he is nothing but a symptom of the general crisis of the art system. U.S. cultural institutions and their boards often consolidate deep-rooted systemic injustices and are implicated in structures of oppression, white supremacy, and settler colonialism.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, even the land where such museums are often situated, as well as their collections, objects, and broader discourses are intimately imbricated in imperialist and colonial projects.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, some of these connections were made evident, especially when it was made public that the same tear gas by Safariland that was used against migrant families at the Tijuana border had been also used against Native water protectors at Standing Rock Reservation, Black Lives Matter protesters in Ferguson, and Palestinian refugees in Gaza.<sup>19</sup> According to activists, this provided a further testament to the involvement of Kanders's company in the consolidation of the military-industrial complex and the industry of repression, both domestically and internationally. At the same time, this has also allowed him to profit directly from white supremacy and the subjugation of Black, Brown, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples in particular, who, in their involvement with a vast spectrum of struggles and uprisings, have ended up being on the receiving end of his products.

The activists sought to inscribe the current controversy surrounding Kanders into larger histories of oppression, colonialism, and hyper-gentrification. As the Whitney itself now openly acknowledges, its new building is built on unceded Indigenous lands, and specifically the territory of the Lenape, signalling an attempt to dismantle the ongoing effects of its colonial legacy. However, as some activists pointedly

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<sup>17</sup> Instead of using the term 'institutional racism', if we are to follow Frances Lee Ansley, the term 'white supremacy' is more accurate, denoting the fact that the racism of our time has been predominantly of white over black. By 'white supremacy', argues Ansley (1988: 1024), 'I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings'.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Whitney is the first major New York museum that has not only openly addressed settler colonial guilt and the erasure of Native Americans in Western-centric culture, but that also issued an online statement of Indigenous land acknowledgement.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, the involvement of the Whitney's vice-chairman in Safariland and Defense Technologies, one of the main police suppliers of the Baltimore Police Department and the NYPD, had been well documented from 2015 (see Feigenbaum 2015, Steinhauer 2015).

illustrated, the construction of its new \$422 million building, designed by the star-architect Renzo Piano, played a part in the ‘revitalisation’ of the meatpacking district in lower Manhattan, dramatically altering the composition of the historically working class, queer, and LGBTQ youth neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> The deployment of art as a ‘weapon of mass displacement’ is palpable, especially when aesthetic strategies are being deployed as a driving force to repackage areas targeted for redevelopment and financial speculation (Rodriguez 2018).<sup>21</sup> In this respect, one can situate the ongoing contestations over the land, in the form of gentrification, within successive waves and broader histories of displacement that can be traced all the way back to the original dispossession of native lands.

The Whitney controversy posed as an ideal case study for DTP. On the one hand, the case of Kanders foregrounded questions of artwashing, toxic philanthropy, labour rights, and the complicity of the institution in ongoing processes of displacement and dispossession. On the other, he provided the perfect target to organise around by rendering apparent the connections between seemingly disparate struggles. Hence, the Whitney crisis served as an unprecedented opportunity for DTP to mobilise, organise, and propose their own decolonial agenda, insisting ‘that the removal of Kanders and the other demands of the staff must be understood as but one step in a broader process of decolonization’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the 2005 rezoning of the Chelsea area allowed the acceleration of real estate investments and luxury residential developments—for example, Hudson Yards—as well as the landing of brand-new ultra-luxe cultural centres—for example, the Shed—thus inescapably resulting in rent increases and the displacement of its residents.

<sup>21</sup> For the role of art in processes of artwashing and gentrification see Magally and Lane-McKinley 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Extract from the flyer that was distributed during the Town Hall Assembly.



**Figure 4.3 (i-iii).** Posters created by DTP depicting Warren Kanders, activists at Standing Rock, and Safariland riot control canisters. Photographs by the author.

#### 4.2.2 A Diversity of Strategies and Tactics

We are holding this meeting because we intend to act [...] We can have a diversity of tactics. We can agree on basic principles. We can think of actions in an expanded sense. And we do have leverage on these institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Amin Husain,  
Core organiser of DTP

If gaining visibility in the art system today requires artists to differentiate themselves from other artists by authoring their own political dissent as an extension of their aesthetic practices, then there is no basis on which we can come together around a shared politics.<sup>24</sup>

Lise Soskolne,  
Core organiser of W.A.G.E.

<sup>23</sup> Opening statement at the Town Hall Assembly (date: 26/1/2019). It is important to note here that 'leverage' is not used lightly. The Whitney's Independent Study Programme (ISP), a semi-autonomous—but affiliated with the Whitney Museum—educational platform for curatorial, studio, and critical studies has been serving as an incubator of radical thought since the '60s. It has also provided harbour, through residencies, to numerous artists, including Jason Jones of Not An Alternative and Amin Husain and Nitasha Dhillon of DTP, many of whom went on and continued their practice in the milieu of Occupy.

<sup>24</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 26/6/2019, 02:25:00).

The opening of the 79<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Whitney Biennial, one of the leading exhibitions in American contemporary art that had been scheduled for May 17, 2019, provided the activists with a horizon for action. It is crucial to note here that the months leading up to the Biennial opening allowed different activist groups and other stakeholders to test manifold pressure points. A constellation of strategies and modes of resistance were conceived to be deployed in solidarity with the staff, dependent on and reflective of each stakeholder's material interests, capacities, privilege, and leverage. DTP, which assumed the role of leading the campaign, established an escalation calendar to increase the pressure on the Whitney 'to do the right thing'. This comprised '9 Weeks of Art and Action', namely the launching of a series of weekly direct actions at the Whitney, beginning on Friday, March 22, and concluding on Friday, May 17, coinciding in that way with the 2019 Biennial Opening (as Friday nights are pay-what-you-wish at the Whitney). The intention was that activist interventions would not overlap with the Biennial itself, leaving enough space for artists to play their part, in whatever way they deemed appropriate under the circumstances.

The activists' explicit aim was to break through the confines of the art world to connect the Whitney controversy with broader social movements. To this purpose, DTP inscribed every week's action to a specific topic and assigned to its core collaborators some of the anchoring dates. In this way, DTP's escalation calendar created a multiplicity of entry points, where different communities and grassroots groups plugged in with independent actions. The group's adherence to the principle of solidarity and firm belief that 'autonomy creates a lot of space' meant that DTP would only serve as a container and a platform.<sup>25</sup> Constituting a centralised communication infrastructure, it facilitated direct actions, amplified marginalised voices, and provided support for other groups, while safeguarding the autonomy of every participating group.

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<sup>25</sup> Amin Husain, public statement during DTP research meeting (date: 10/3/2019).

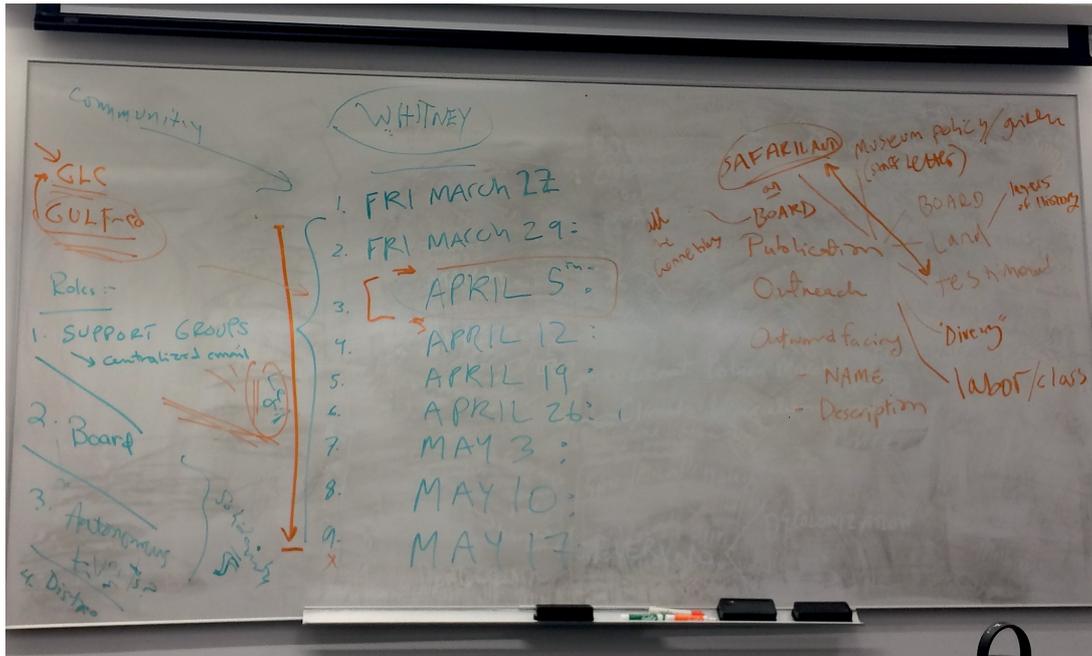


Figure 4.4. DTP's research and production meeting. Photograph by the author.

DTP's investment in establishing points of intersection between different communities and struggles is informed by a conceptual framework grounded in decolonial thinking, 'epistemic disobedience', as well as different principles of knowledge production that have been disempowered by European Modernity (see Mignolo 2009). According to Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006: 207), 'knowledge and subjectivities have been and continue to be shaped by the colonial and imperial differences that structured the modern/colonial world'. It is from this perspective that activists attempted to foreground subaltern experiences and decolonial knowledges that have been deemed 'inferior' by hegemonic discourses structured by the colonial or imperial differences. This is encapsulated in what DTP calls 'movement-generated theory', an attentiveness to the silenced knowledges that already exist within communities and a way of questioning and answering that is experience-based, stemming from engagement and from the ground up.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, theory and practice are perceived as intimately intertwined; knowing, being, and doing become inseparable; and in accordance with other prefigurative models,

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *Anemones*, DTP's movement-generated theory magazine on Palestine, anti-colonial struggle, and liberation.

any theorisation takes place through praxis and in action. In the words of the Zapatistas, another of DTP's reference points, 'preguntando caminamos'.

This meant that the group served both as an analytical tool to establish intersections between disparate struggles and as an infrastructure for logistics, research, and tactical 'know how', organising numerous research and production meetings prior to the launching of the 9 weeks of action. Out of these meetings and under DTP's facilitation an autonomous research collective was established, the (De)Institutional Research Team or (D)IRT, with the aim of conducting research on other board members of the Whitney. The commitment to the organisation of well-rehearsed actions in consultation with all the participating groups, the refinement of a language that is accessible and sensitive to different audiences, and the democratic self-allocation of tasks and responsibilities according to availability and skillset, constituted core principles of the campaign.

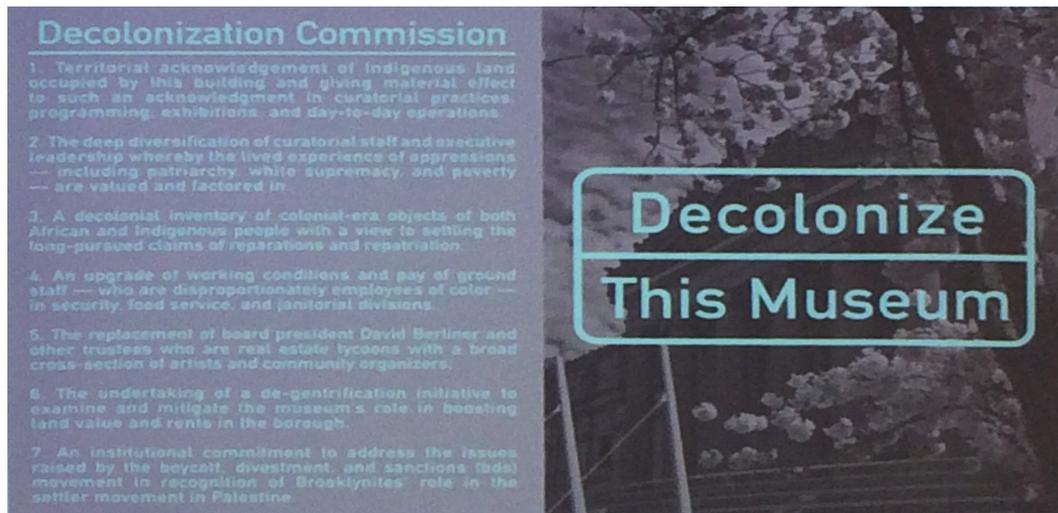
A social media hashtag campaign was developed to hack the branding of the institution, while DTP created the framing and the visuals for the campaign targeting Kanders in particular. Two all-day sessions were held, involving Know Your Rights training and the presentation of past campaigns' direct actions, in order to familiarise everyone with the intricacies that both protesting art and the art of protest entail. The majority of these organisational meetings and the printing of flyers took place within university settings, since DTP and many of its collaborators are affiliated with New York universities. This echoes Harney and Moten's notion of the 'undercommons', a relation to the university premised on bad faith, where one subversively sneaks into it to take advantage of its resources. According to them, '[t]o abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university' (Harney and Moten 2013: 26).

This was not DTP's first campaign against a New York museum, nor were its members inexperienced in repurposing art for disruptive direct actions in order to

hold an institution accountable.<sup>27</sup> According to DTP's organisers, not only do these campaigns build power and community bonds between different stakeholders, but they are also 'designed to create crises of governance for institutions, putting them in "decision dilemmas"' (MTL Collective 2018a). This is premised on the understanding that institutions are not monolithic entities and that by putting enough pressure, activating broader alliances, and amplifying existing crises, the situation can be pushed to a tipping point where the leadership is forced to change course. The 'decision dilemma', however, exceeds the specific demands, since once the power balance has tipped, it can trigger broader structural changes, thus unsettling the normalised institutional nexus of art, settler colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. What the MTL collective calls 'decision dilemmas' for institutional governance, I would translate in Marchart's terminology as 'precisely attempts to test out the antagonistic quality of a given situation' (Marchart 2019: 40). The escalation of direct actions and tactics of disruption, agitation, and sabotage constitute only a starting point of a broader strategy. In this regard, activists were interested not only in issuing specific demands that could be satisfied by the present order ('Kanders must go'), but also in setting a broader horizon. This entailed the dismantling of all oppressive structures and the consolidation of a decolonial movement across the city and beyond.

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<sup>27</sup> DTP emerged in 2016 during the staging of an unsanctioned intervention at the Brooklyn Museum, building on the escalation of tensions surrounding the *Agitprop!* exhibition and connecting what artists perceived as the museum's complicity in the gentrification of poor communities of colour with the instrumentalisation of art for the normalisation of displacement and settler-colonialism in *This Place* exhibition. In subsequent years, similar campaigns included a three-year protest against the American Museum of Natural History, demanding the removal of the Roosevelt statue from the museum's front door and the establishment of a decolonisation committee; and a highly controversial campaign against the Brooklyn Museum's appointment of a white woman, Kristen Windmuller-Luna, as its new curator of African Art. DTP's campaigns have not always gone uncontested. For example, as Okeke-Agulu (2018) highlighted, 'to argue, as many have, that a person of colour, by dint of her ancestry, would naturally grasp the intricate histories, and complex aesthetics of historical African art is to misunderstand the work of the curator or scholar'.



**Figure 4.5.** DTP's campaign demanded museums to implement a seven-point Decolonisation Commission. Photograph by the author.

In the meantime, the tactic of W.A.G.E., one of the co-hosts of the Town Hall Assembly and a core collaborator of DTP from 2016, was from the outset to shift away from an exclusive focus on Kanders's removal to the amplification of the staff's specific demands. W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) is an activist non-profit organisation founded in 2008 and based in New York, whose mission has been strategically centred around a single achievable goal, namely artist fees.<sup>28</sup> By introducing programmes like W.A.G.E. certification for institutions that have committed to paying artists' fees that meet minimum remuneration standards and by supplying artists with digital tools like Wagency that allows them to negotiate fair compensation, the group's methodologies resemble a labour union.<sup>29</sup> Hence, it serves both as a mechanism that supplies the artists' workforce with collective bargaining power and a means to pressure institutions to pay artists liveable wages,

<sup>28</sup> Initially W.A.G.E. was comprised of a group of visual and performing artists and independent curators, including the core members A.K. Burns, K8 Hardy, Lise Soskolne, and A.L. Steiner.

<sup>29</sup> The W.A.G.E. Certification national programme has been running from 2010 and has already certified 81 non-profit arts organisations, museums, and institutions that have demonstrated a commitment to paying artist fees that meet the W.A.G.E. minimum payment standards. Wagency was introduced in 2018 and constitutes an artists' solidarity union that facilitates fair remuneration in the arts and non-profit sector. Wagency calculates the appropriate fee based on the institutions' projected annual operating expenses, as well as the nature of the work they provide (solo exhibition, single artwork, participation in a Biennial, etc.). Artists can use the online platform to reach out to institutions and either secure a W.A.G.E.-approved fee or refuse to provide content.

especially during a time when the majority of them are struggling to make ends meet.<sup>30</sup>

W.A.G.E.'s wager is that striving for transparency and accountability can potentially create substantive impact, especially in a field as financially oblique and unregulated as the art world. It is this role of 'working with and against the institution at the same time', as well as the legitimacy that stems from being a third-party verifier of 81 institutions that W.A.G.E. leveraged at the Whitney.<sup>31</sup> Providing an opportunity to support the struggle both of artists and workers, the demands of the letter's signatories became the epicentre of W.A.G.E.'s approach, acknowledging that 'what makes the Whitney crisis unique is that it came about not because of the public dissent of artists, but through the private dissent of a group of full-time employees and part-time contracted workers' (W.A.G.E. 2019a).

In solidarity with these workers and through an open letter, W.A.G.E. (2019a) invited the still unannounced artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial to do two things, 'demand to be paid for the content they provide and withhold that content until the demands of Whitney staff are met'. In this sense, W.A.G.E redirected its infrastructure, already geared to putting pressure 'from within', to allow artists to take a collective stand. Using the Wagency platform, artists could utilise their collective leverage and their exceptional status to 'have it both ways'. In order not to single out this Biennial's artists, a second letter was soon to follow, extending the invitation to any artists participating in future Whitney Biennials. The letter urged them to collectively dissent and 'to resist being divided by coming together around a political demand' to effectuate structural change within the museum (W.A.G.E. 2019b).

No Biennial artist responded directly to W.A.G.E.'s call, perhaps due to the fact that the invitation came after they had signed a mandatory Non-Disclosure Agreement,

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<sup>30</sup> The visibility, cultural capital, and fame gained during prestigious biennials, like the Whitney's, does not reflect the material conditions of the vast majority of art workers, who are normally precarious freelancers in a gig economy, overburdened with fine art school loans and forced to pay escalating rents in metropolitan centres (where access to the visual arts world lies).

<sup>31</sup> Lise Soskolne, interview quote (interview date: 26/6/2019, 00:27:00).

prohibiting them from revealing their participation, hence making any collective form of organising practically impossible. It could also be because some artists objected to the unfair burden placed on their shoulders, whereas others argued that the call amounted to the silencing of artists of colour, who finally had an unprecedented opportunity to participate in what had been considered the most diverse Whitney Biennial to date. However, W.A.G.E.'s letter did play a crucial role in the conversations and collective actions that followed.<sup>32</sup> For instance, artist Michael Rakowitz, in tandem with W.A.G.E.'s invitation, declared his withdrawal from the exhibition before the list of participants was even released.<sup>33</sup> Collective organising 'from within' became more feasible after the public announcement of the participating artists at the Biennial. Indeed, as we shall see, some artists decided to incorporate their political commentary in their work, more than half of the Biennial's artists and collectives signed an open letter demanding Kanders's resignation, and another eight artists announced their intention to withdraw from the exhibition until the demands of the staff were met. As will become evident in the following sections, it was the variety of tactics developed by assorted stakeholders (not limited to activists), the opening of multiple fronts and points of sustained collective pressure, and the deployment of strategies from both inside and outside the institution that contributed to the eventual resignation of Kanders.

#### **4.2.3 Protest, Performance & Prefiguration: 9 Weeks of Art and Action**

Black liberation matters. Queer liberation matters. Trans liberation matters. Palestine's liberation matters [...] We know our lives matter. We are here to talk about accountability. To get Warren Kanders off the board. We are here to

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<sup>32</sup> In fact, as the Whitney later confirmed, all participant artists in the 79<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Biennial received an honorarium of \$1,500, meeting in this way the suggested W.A.G.E. fee.

<sup>33</sup> In a letter addressed to the curators of the 2019 Whitney Biennial Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, he stated: 'I felt like the only way to truly leverage any kind of voice was to say that often times what an artist doesn't do is more important than what they said they will do' (in Steinhauer 2019).

talk solidarity amongst each other because our struggles are intertwined, our liberations are intertwined. This is not charity. This is liberation.<sup>34</sup>

Representative of Crystal House

The 9 Weeks of Art and Action constituted a testament to how an institution like the Whitney can be used as a tactical target and how direct action can inscribe acts of solidarity by multiple stakeholders into broader movement building. This was demonstrated by the more than 30 grassroots groups and collectives that mobilised at the Whitney every week. These actions also contained a prefigurative and performative dimension, unleashing the power of collective imagination. Whereas ‘reactionary organising’ would aim for the satisfaction of a specific demand, ‘visionary organising’ addresses structural issues while deploying actions that ‘are implanted within a radical imagination of what it would mean to totally overhaul the institution and the principles by which it is governed’ (MTL Collective 2018a). Although delving equally into all nine weeks exceeds the scope of this chapter, I will discuss a range of actions that manifested tactical originality, semiotic density, artistic ingenuity, or political efficacy.

For the 1<sup>st</sup> week of Art and Action, nearly 200 protestors organised an unannounced ‘assembly’ at the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the Whitney in front of Andy Warhol’s *Camouflage Last Supper* (1986), with banners reading ‘brought to you by Safariland’, ‘artwashing blood money’, and ‘Warren Kanders must go’.<sup>35</sup> The symbolism was pervasive, not only due to the green military patterns that covered the 25-foot-long painting, but also since Kanders was listed as a ‘significant contributor’ to the museum’s Warhol retrospective *From A to B and Back Again*. Protestors and onlookers formed a half-circle around the painting and unfurled banners on the floor reading ‘Puerto Rico’, ‘Palestine’, ‘Egypt’, ‘Tijuana’, ‘Ferguson’, ‘Standing Rock’, ‘Kashmir’, ‘Bahrain’,

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<sup>34</sup> Public statement, delivered during the 9<sup>th</sup> week of direct actions at the Whitney Museum (date: 17/5/2019).

<sup>35</sup> Although an unsanctioned intervention, activists went to great lengths to liaise with the museum security staff, as the presence of heavily armed law enforcement across the street did not allow for much spontaneity.

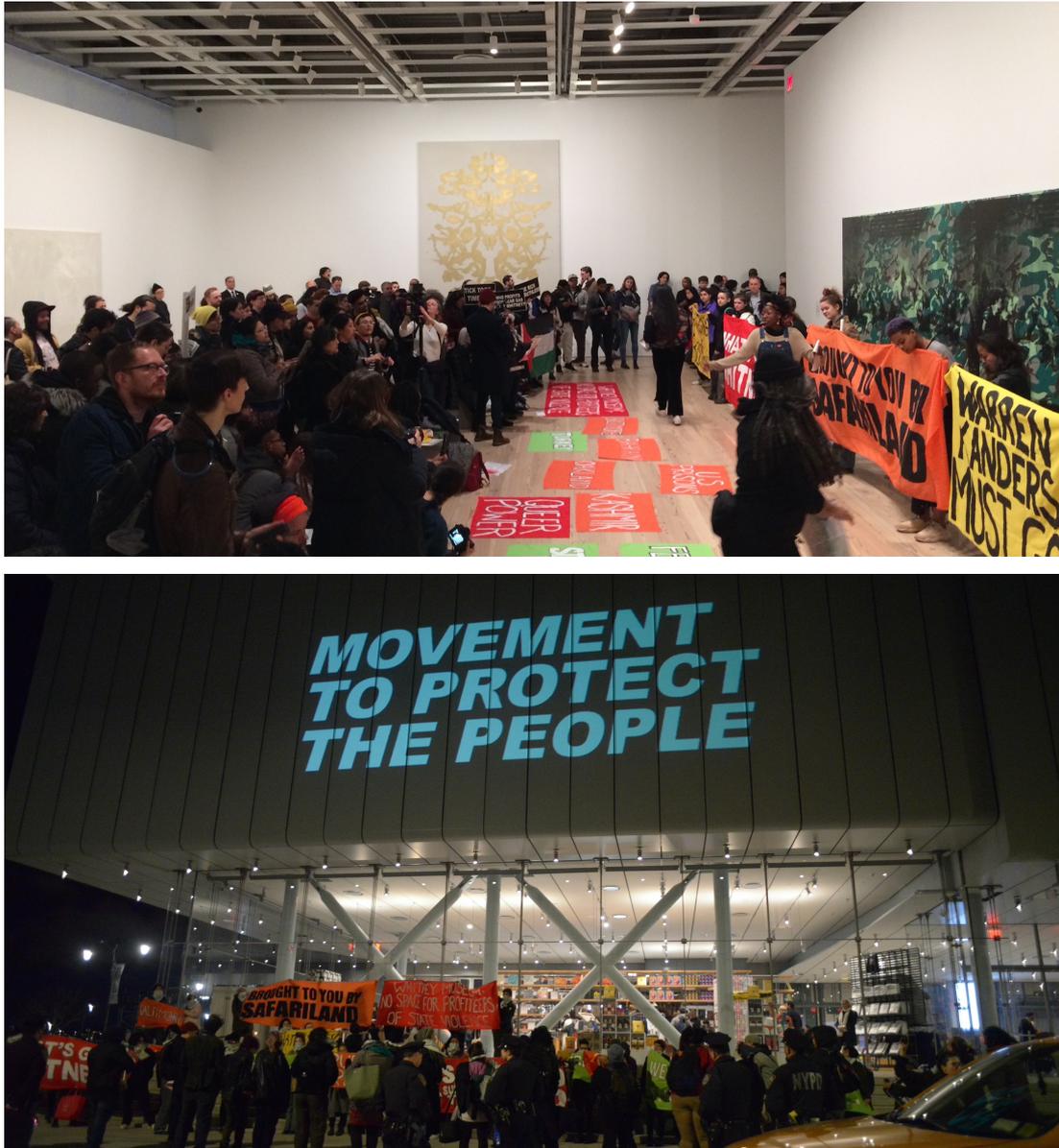
‘Baltimore’, ‘Turkey’, and ‘Oakland’. The banners’ assemblage of all the sites of protest where Safariland’s tear gas has been deployed against civilians served as a visual testimony of the interconnectedness of the different struggles. In the form of a ‘mic check’, representatives of more than fifteen groups delivered short speeches, providing the underscoring for the same argument: ‘our liberation is either collective, or non-existent’,<sup>36</sup> evoking in that way Castoriadis’s (1987: 92) argument: ‘I want the other to be free, for my freedom begins where the other’s freedom begins’.

## 9 Weeks of Art+ Action COLLABORATORS

Art Space Sanctuary	South Asia Solidarity Initiative	Within Our Lifetime
Chinatown Art Brigade	Take Back The Bronx	Movement to Protect the People
Crystal House	The Illuminator	Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network
Critical Resistance	The People’s Cultural Plan	Black Youth Project 100
Queer Youth Power	The Whitest Cube	No New Jails NYC
Hydro Punk	We Will Not Be Silent	Mi Casa No Es Su Casa
Mahina Movement	Equality 4 Flatbush	New Sanctuary Coalition
NYC Shut It Down	Mobile Print Power	P.A.I.N. Sackler
NYC Solidarity with Palestine	Global Ultra Luxury Faction	About Face; Veterans Against the War
War Resisters League	Insurgent Poets Society	Queens Anti-Gentrification Project
Brooklyn Defense Committee	Semillas Collective	Cosecha NYC
Comité boricua En La Diáspora	Copwatch Patrol Unit	(De)Institutional Research Team (D.I.R.T.)
Sunset Park For A Liberated Future	Nodutdol For Korean Community Development	Why Accountability

**Figure 4.6.** The more than 30 grassroots groups participating in the 9 Weeks of Art and Action. Photograph by the author.

<sup>36</sup> Quote from flyer circulated during actions.



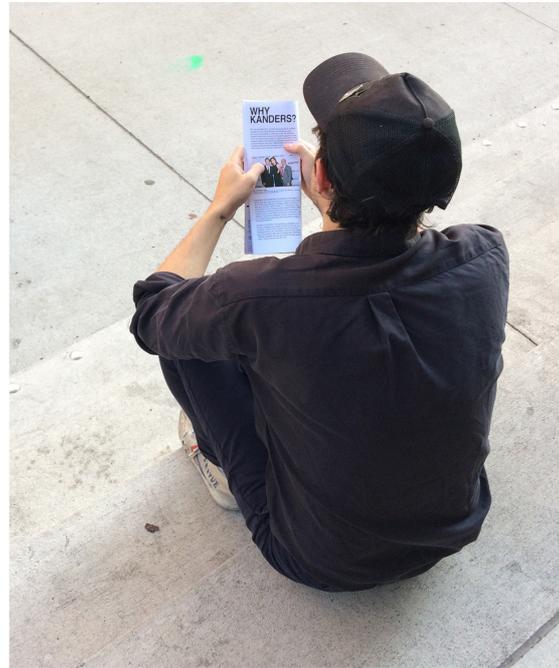
**Figure 4.7 (i-ii).** Top: 1<sup>st</sup> week of Art and Action, unannounced ‘assembly’ in front of Warhol’s *Camouflage Last Supper*. Bottom: unauthorised projections on the façade of the Whitney Museum by the artist-activist collective The Illuminator. Photographs by the author.

The role of private funding and toxic philanthropy in the cultural field was tackled during the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, where the focus shifted from direct action to analysis. In what was considered an autonomous action in solidarity with the museum staffers, 120 prominent theorists, critics, and scholars, including Claire Bishop, Hal Foster, and Rosalyn Deutsche, signed an open letter demanding the resignation of Kanders.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The letter was published on April 5, 2019, the same day as the 3<sup>rd</sup> intervention at the Whitney.

The letter was later updated with another 100 signatures by artists and curators, including 50 participating artists of the upcoming Biennial. Although the letter was clearly infused with DTP's language, terminology, and decolonisation agenda, it was not officially authored by DTP, thus creating an additional point of collective pressure. Released by *Verso*, the letter argued that 'the stakes of the demand to remove Kanders are high and extend far beyond the art world' since it points to 'broader patterns of toxic philanthropy' on museum boards and other public and private institutions (Arroyo et al. 2019). Protestors read the letter in the museum lobby, put copies in envelopes, and handed them over, in a theatrical manner, to the Head of Security to deliver them personally to every single member of the Whitney board.

In tandem with DTP's 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive week of actions, the (D)IRT collective devised an alternate version of the Whitney visitor guide. The (D)IRT collective had been conducting independent research, meeting on a weekly basis, and developing a publication by refining its language in consultation with the campaign's main stakeholders. In an act of *détournement*, the fake guide imitated the aesthetics and layout of the official museum document, even using images from the museum collection, allowing it to be dispersed undetected throughout the museum and planted at the admission desks. Hundreds of copies were also disseminated to museum visitors, inviting the public to explore issues like museum ethics and museum governance, gentrification and labour rights, diversity and art washing. (D)IRT's (2019) response to the board members who complained in a December 2018 internal board email that 'we feel it is unfortunate that Warren Kanders was singled out' entailed an analytical list identifying 16 additional trustees (and/or their families) 'who profit from the military industrial complex that enables state violence through various financial institutions'. In fact, according to (D)IRT, Whitney had only one artist (Fred Wilson), one academic (Henry Louis Gates Jr.), and four people of colour serving on its fifty-two-member board. In this manner, (D)IRT crystallised a mode of conducting research as direct action, a type of research that, instead of being extractive and commodifiable, integrates theory and practice while building solidarities.



# PLAN

Welcome to The Crisis at The Whitney: A Guide  
(D)IRT - (De)Institutional Research Team  
c-art.com

Please return to the museum guide kiosks after reading.

- 8** **Why Land?**  
Breaking false borders and combating displacement.
- 7** **Why Diversity?**  
Questions of representation, inclusivity, and equity.
- 6** **Why Art Washing?**  
Using toxic philanthropy to legitimize culture.
- 5** **Why Museums?**  
Museum policy, ethics, participation, and accountability.
- 3** **Why The Board?**  
Levels of complicity in climate change, gentrification, economic inequality, and the military industrial complex.
- 1** **Why Labor?**  
Issues of vulnerability, precarity, and solidarity.
- 1** **Why Kanders?**  
No more state violence. No more toxic philanthropy. No more Kanders.

**Whitney Museum of American Art**  
whitney.org  
@whitneymuseum

**Museum Hours**  
Mon 10:30 am-6 pm  
Tues Closed  
Wed 10:30 am-6 pm  
Thurs 10:30 am-6 pm  
Fri 10:30 am-10 pm  
Sat 10:30 am-10 pm  
Sun 10:30 am-6 pm

Free Wi-Fi is available throughout the Museum.  
Ask Whitney staff about accessibility services.  
Admission is Pay-What-You-Wish on Fridays, 7-10 pm.  
Nonflash photography is allowed for personal and noncommercial use, except where noted. The use of tripods and selfie sticks is prohibited.  
Please do not touch the works of art on display. Food and beverages are not allowed in the galleries.



# WHY THE BOARD?

The 52 members of the Whitney Board of Trustees feel, according to a December 2018 internal board email, that "it is unfortunate that Warren B. Kanders was singled out." We agree: he is not alone, and below we list trustees (names underlined> and/or their families who profit from the military industrial complex that enables state violence through various financial institutions. This chart contains just some of the information we have been able to access.

This is what toxic philanthropy rooted in military investments looks like and it must be stopped. In addition to state violence, many Whitney Trustees are also complicit in climate change, gentrification, opioid addiction, and socioeconomic inequality. The Board of the Whitney may hope to be seen doing good, but it is time they started doing less harm. In truth, the Whitney, via its board, is complicit in many of the issues that they claim to be trying to solve.

Board Member	Connection	Military Investments	Impact
Whitney Co-Chairman <u>Thomas E. Turf</u>	Chairman at Lazard, an international financial firm, and Firm Advisor at Arsenal Capital	Armedex Corporation, BWX Technologies, Boeing, CPI Aerostructures, AeroVironment, Aermec Robotics, Cytosure Technologies, and Sparhawk	Makers of military equipment, missiles, drones, fighter jet materials, and nuclear reactor parts.
Museum President <u>Scott B. D'Amico</u> and Executive Board Chairman <u>Robert J. Hunt</u>	Board members of Victory Capital (a company owned by their company CEO/vice Partners)	Kaiser Industries, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and Fermion	Makers of military communications systems, deadly bombs, fighter jets, and more.
Vice Chairman <u>Henry Crown</u>	Crown family (spouse Anne "Bebe" Crown is a General Partner at Henry Crown & Co)	Also, via Blackrock, General Dynamics, Science Applications International, Honeywell, Huntington Ingalls Industries, and L3 Technologies	Holder a 10% stake in Global Dynamics, the world's 5th largest defense contractor
Vice Chairman <u>Patrick G. Dalton</u>	Sister-in-law of Erik Prince, founder of the private security firm Blackwater	Spartan Corporation and Navstar Defense	Blackwater's mercenaries massacred fourteen innocent Iraqis in 2007 when they fired machine guns and launched grenades into Baghdad's Nisour Square.
Vice Chairman <u>Fern Vige Lester</u>	Husband is vice chairman of Centene Capital Management	Spartan Corporation and Navstar Defense	Spartan makes anti-submarine warfare devices for the U.S. Navy. In 2018 Navstar Defense won a \$475 million contract to manufacture armored vehicles for Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Board Member	Connection	Military Investments	Impact
<u>James A. Gordon</u>	Founder and Managing Partner of Edgewater Growth Capital Partners	United Aerospace, Citron, Welbar, and NeoCentrics	Welbar is now part of General Dynamics, which provides defense R&D services to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, and Qatar.
<u>Kenneth C. Griffin</u>	Founder of Clader	Astronics	Recently increased its stake. Astronics impacts the military's airplanes, vehicles, and weapons systems.
<u>Brenell Goodman Paul E. Schott</u>	Blackstone Executives including the spouses of John Ostrom and Michael LeB	Among other defense investments, owns MB Aerospace	Builds engines for Boeing, United Technologies Aerospace Systems, Pratt & Whitney AeroPower, OHL, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and the U.S. Department of Defense.
<u>John C. Pfaber</u>	Co-Managing partner of MSD Capital which is invested in Oak Tree (co-founded by Paul C. Schott)	ACSA Enterprises Holdings and Perspecta	Manufactures military equipment and U.S. Armed Forces technological support.
<u>Paul S. Lery</u>	Founder, J.L. Partners	Aviation Technical Services and Point Blank Enterprises, Inc	Technical support for bombers and fighters, as well as body armor, backpacks, and covert vehicular intelligence systems.
<u>Jonathan D. Lee</u>	Founder, Lee Capital	Raytheon and Boeing	Two of the largest defense contractors in the world.

\*some research by Whitney Curly Winbain, The Daffin.

Figure 4.8 (i-iv). (D)IRT's alternate version of the Whitney visitor guide. Photographs by the author.

Some of the other weeks' actions, hosting groups like Decolonial Time Zone and the Movement to Protect the People, had less of a confrontational tactical approach,

focusing instead on pedagogical activities, well-orchestrated performances, and mutual aid. The 2<sup>nd</sup> week of actions involved the chanting of and dancing to Indigenous and black freedom songs in the museum's lobby, the 4<sup>th</sup> week consisted of a potluck party with posters, flyers, and other literature offered to onlookers, while during the 7<sup>th</sup> week protestors and students held 'teach-in' sessions. Similarly, for the 5<sup>th</sup> week of action, centred around Palestine, protestors, with their faces veiled in Palestinian keffiyehs chanted rhythmically 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free', while members of the Palestinian collective Within Our Lifetime performed a carefully choreographed traditional folk dance, resembling a flash mob. As Dhillon from DTP stated, 'this is why this work is really important: to keep connecting, keep unsettling, keep unlearning'.<sup>38</sup>

During these actions, spaces, like the lobby of the Whitney, were appropriated and transformed into 'common spaces' that prefigured a different set of social relations, while means and ends were folded into each other. Not only were different experiences shared and marginal roles centred, but also antagonisms were enacted and dissident voices were amplified. Whereas the police order demarcates a street, a lobby, or a museum as nothing but a space of circulation and movement, 'politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving along" and circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens' (Rancière 2010: 37). This is where the performative element of these actions resides, in the magical acts of interrupting, even momentarily, the museum's daily function and repurposing it from a semi-private space into a space of confrontation, a site of organising and community building.

At the same time, the activists attempted to articulate a radical imagination that goes far beyond the articulation of strict moral lines and policies pertaining to trustee participation. They aimed to challenge the shape of institutional governance and the principles of cultural production as a whole, while prefiguring another vision of how it could look: a museum that adheres to the principles of transparency and

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<sup>38</sup> Public statement, delivered during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of direct actions at the Whitney Museum (date: 12/4/2019).

accountability, an institution whose primary governing body is not composed of affluent philanthropists but local community members, a museum governance model where 'the people' are part of the decision-making processes, and a vision of cultural production that is not solely sustained by and dependent on capitalist means and colonial traditions. Indeed, if for movements striving for structural change prefiguration is 'the most strategic means for bringing about the social change they desire', activists managed to articulate new ways of being in common, practicing horizontality, and embodying a politics of solidarity in the here and now (Maeckelbergh 2011: 2).

The diversity of these actions invoked the prefigurative politics of OWS, strands of anarchist thought, and the autonomist-Marxist tradition. Participation in such actions was less about seizing institutions and state power, and more about 'delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it', while experiencing, albeit momentarily, 'another world' (Graeber 2002: 68). Activists rather opted to breathe life into novel organisational instruments, new modes of collective enunciation, and new forms of grassroots democratic processes. According to Graeber (2002: 71), it is only the invention of new democratic processes that can 'allow initiatives to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity, without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling anyone to do anything which they have not freely agreed to do' (Graeber 2002: 71). This form of 'visionary' or 'transformative' organising, according to Grace Lee Boggs, aims at tearing down the structures that impede the ability of self-organising, while rehearsing a different future by developing alternative institutions and by nourishing and empowering the creative capacity of people.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, these prefigurative, albeit ephemeral, actions also encapsulated new forms of civil disobedience and non-violent warfare that unleash the cultural commons

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<sup>39</sup> According to Grace Lee Boggs, the notion of 'visionary organising' alludes to the developing of alternative institutions and communities that facilitate 'the work of re-imagining our selves' and help us to 'think beyond capitalist categories' (in Birkhold 2012).

from below. As Nitasha Dhillon argues, ‘we strike art to liberate art from itself. Not to end art, but to unleash its powers of direct action and radical imagination’ (MTL Collective 2017). These gestures of resistance served as disruptive moments to the exclusions of luxury consumption, the tendencies of cultural commodification and capitalist valorisation. In sharp contrast to the spectacular culture’s imperatives, it was the well-coordinated deployment of banners, the imaginative détournement of Warhol’s paintings to decorate activist flyers, posters, and fake guides, the establishment of a series of blockades and human barricades, the choreographed performances of flash mobs or folk dances, and the projection of slogans on the Whitney’s façade that instantiated art forms in themselves.<sup>40</sup> This movement-based form of cultural production attempted to break with the all-pervasive notion of authorship and instead exemplified art as collective action, based on empowerment and community building.<sup>41</sup> In the words of the activists, ‘when communities make artwork, and artists become organizers the normal hierarchy of artistic production falls apart’,<sup>42</sup> invoking Benjamin (1978: 237) for whom the revolutionary artist had to transform himself from a ‘supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution’.

For the culmination of the 9 weeks of Art and Action, which coincided with the Whitney Biennial’s public opening, DTP extended a citywide mobilisation call to all the groups who had participated in the campaign. The long queue outside the Whitney waiting to enter the exhibition was complemented by a turnout of more than 300 protestors who brought fake tear gas canisters, bullhorns, banners, and a tall cylindrical prop on wheels that emitted smoke. In a coordinated unsanctioned intervention, a group of activists unfurled banners from the 6<sup>th</sup> floor terrace, reading ‘when we breathe, we breathe together’, and the assembled crowd beneath chanted the words rhythmically while entering the Whitney. However, the final act

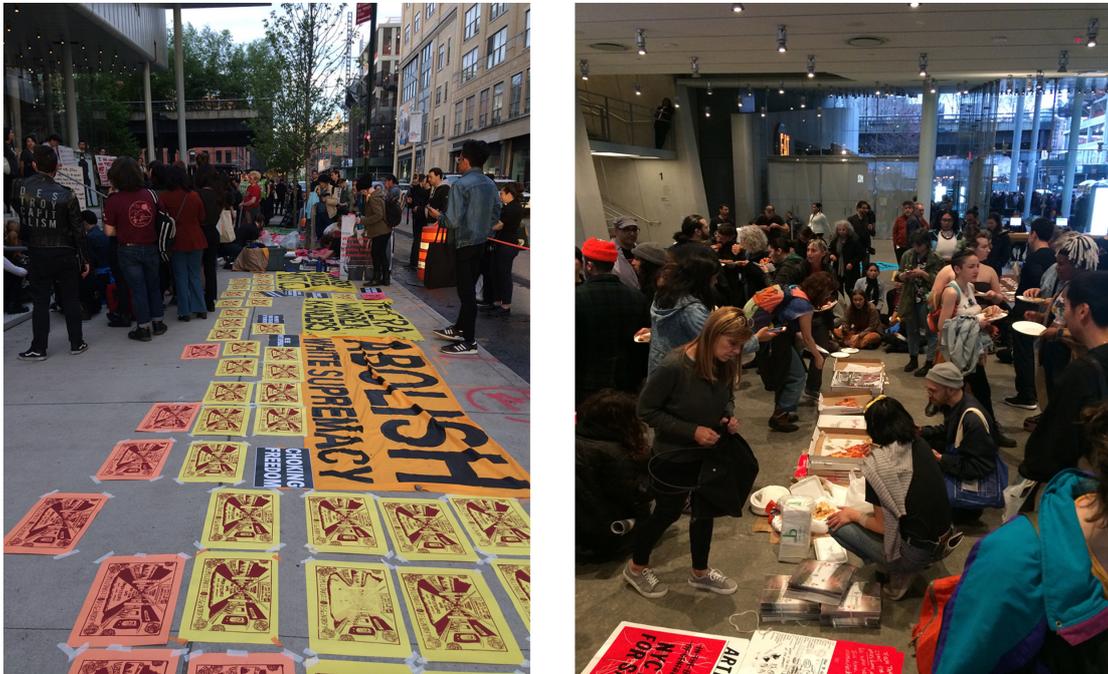
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<sup>40</sup> The projection of the names of the campaign’s allied groups and other slogans on the Whitney museum’s façade took place during the 1<sup>st</sup> week of Art and Action by the artist-activist collective The Illuminator.

<sup>41</sup> For this debate see Bourdieu 1984; 1993, Becker 2008.

<sup>42</sup> From the press release of MTL+, announcing the inauguration of Decolonize This Place, September 17, 2016.

was not performed inside the Whitney Museum. After the delivery of speeches in the museum lobby, the protestors started marching towards Kanders's nearby house in the West Village. Protestors held space in front of Kanders's house for almost an hour, while distributing flyers and relevant literature to the neighbours, informing them about Kanders's involvement in war profiteering and state repression. As the last act was coming to an end, along with almost six months of intense mobilisation and direct actions, activists gave Kanders an ultimatum 'Fall is the deadline. We will be back if necessary. And our tactics will escalate further. In the meantime, we expect, others will act and organize'.<sup>43</sup>



**Figure 4.9 (i-ii).** Unsanctioned interventions at the Whitney Museum during the 9 Weeks of Art and Action. Photographs by the author.

<sup>43</sup> DTP's poster, entitled 'From Crisis to Decolonization', distributed during the 9<sup>th</sup> week of direct actions.

#### 4.2.4 The Tear Gas Biennial: The Pitfalls of Visibility

Museums have learnt a lot and they have better tactics [...] they give you more identities but basically, they have no interest in changing things structurally, and they know that as long as the sphere of the battle is about visibility, they are going to do just fine.<sup>44</sup>

Noah Fisher,  
Core organiser of Occupy Museums

The activists' call did not go unanswered. Although the 79<sup>th</sup> iteration of the Whitney Biennial opened its doors as one of the most diverse, inclusive, and progressive exhibitions to date, with the majority of the 75 participants being emerging artists of colour, the fact that the museum was taking steps to decentre whiteness on a representational level seemed not to achieve the desired result.<sup>45</sup> The roster of artists and the radical content of the exhibition, according to both activists and critics, stood in sharp contrast to an institutional framework that was complicit in artwashing, state violence, toxic sponsorship, and white supremacy. As (D)IRT (2019) put it: 'artists do the work of addressing issues around economic disparity, race, gender, and sexuality, advocating for change. Meanwhile, Whitney trustees continue to function in, profit from, and perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality'. In this sense, for activists, the Biennial provided an additional testament to the painful contradictions between the representation of Indigenous, Black, Brown, and Queer artists in contemporary shows and an art system that, at least in principle, remains structurally embedded in capitalism, toxic philanthropy, and settler-colonialism.

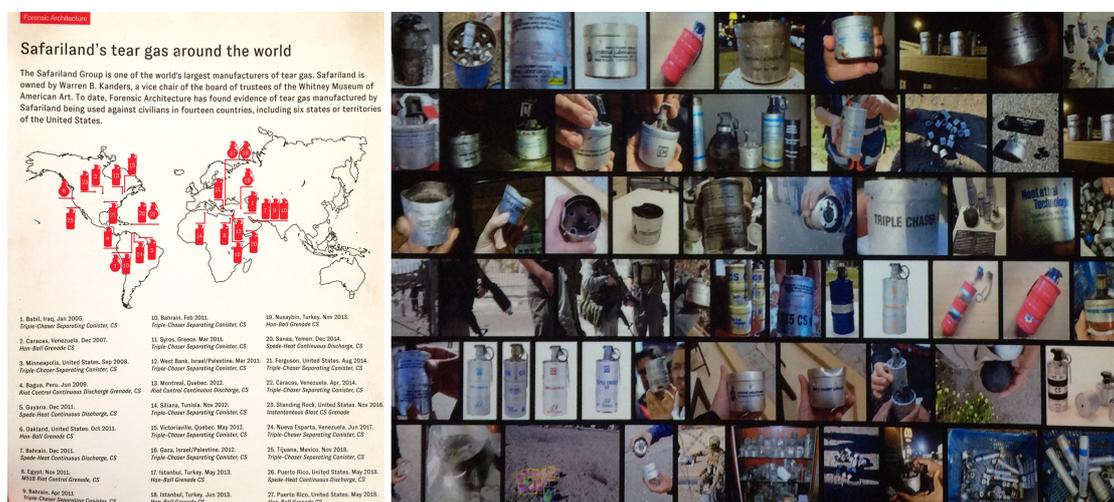
Responding to the activists' call, some of the Biennial's participants took action against Kanders, demonstrating that artists can come together around a specific demand, while assuming a diversity of approaches. For instance, Forensic

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<sup>44</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 12/6/2019, 00:50:00).

<sup>45</sup> In addition, three-quarters of the participant artists were under the age of 40 and the majority of them were first-time biennial participants.

Architecture (FA) decided to take on the Whitney's vice-chairman directly by incorporating political commentary in its work. The collective's submission for the Whitney Biennial constituted a 10-minute video ('Triple-Chaser', 2019) that mapped not only the prevalence of Safariland's munitions around the world, but also the usage of Sierra Bullets (another Kanders-owned company) in Gaza, suggesting that the export of small arms ammunition to the Israeli army may be aiding and abetting war crimes.<sup>46</sup> According to FA, the sale and export of tear gas is not a matter of public record, and the only way to track the territories where they are used is through online photographs of canisters. FA's contribution to the Biennial was to automate this laborious process by using machine learning technology to search for open-source images of the Triple-Chaser, a tear gas canister manufactured by Defense Technology. Before entering the 'Triple-Chaser' projection room, the visitor was welcomed by a printed map containing Safariland's presence around the globe. The wall text read: 'to date, Forensic Architecture has found evidence of tear gas manufactured by Safariland being used against civilians in fourteen countries, including six states or territories of the United States'.<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 4.10 (i-ii).** 'Triple-Chaser' (2019), Forensic Architecture's submission to the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Photographs by the author.

<sup>46</sup> The U.S. munitions manufacturer Sierra Bullets was acquired by the Clarus Corporation in 2017, of which Warren B. Kanders is the Director, Executive Chairman, and part-owner. According to Forensic Architecture (2019), their findings, which were shared with the European Center of Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), 'suggest that sniper bullets manufactured by Sierra were used by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against civilian protesters in Gaza in 2018'.

<sup>47</sup> These locations include Bahrain, Canada, Egypt, Guyana, Greece, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Tunisia, Turkey, United States, Venezuela, and Yemen.

Subsequently, in what looked like a coordinated action, eight artists and art collectives, including FA, announced their intention to withdraw from the exhibition, following the publication of an essay from artists and writers Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett. In their letter, entitled ‘The Tear Gas Biennial’, the authors made a powerful plea to the exhibiting artists to remove their artworks from the Biennial before its closing date in September. Where the letter differentiated itself from previous calls to boycott the Biennial—calls that had gone unanswered and had been dropped by some activist groups including DTP—was in two crucial and interrelated points.<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, it took artists to task, taking issue with what Marchart (2019: 13, original emphasis) calls ‘*the spontaneous ideology of the art field*’. In other words, it challenged the very ideological argument that permeates the art field against any explicit politicisation of art. It is this very ideological presupposition that allows artists and curators to proclaim their work as ‘political’ in a vacuum, cut off from any concrete political situation. According to the authors ‘there are moments when the disembodied, declarative politics of art are forced into an encounter with real politics, i.e. with violence’ (Black, Finlayson, and Haslett 2019).<sup>49</sup> Recognising ‘the implementation of boycott as a distinctly political tactic’, there could be no better setting for its deployment than a biennial, one of the nodal points in the production, circulation, and consumption of art (Estefan, Kuoni, and Raicovich 2017: 7). By disrupting the circuits of valorisation that sustain art’s economy, the repercussions of a boycott can exceed the mere symbolic level and have tangible, material, and political effects.

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<sup>48</sup> DTP, which in the beginning was fully supportive of W.A.G.E.’s call to artists boycotting the Biennial, disassociated itself from W.A.G.E. in the process and supported the artists in whichever strategy they decided to assume.

<sup>49</sup> The letter continued: ‘Two of the authors of this statement have recently rejected offers from the Whitney in explicit protest against Kanders. But these were private negotiations, private gestures—which we are now making public as a way, we hope, of joining our efforts to those of colleagues and friends who also wish to contribute to putting collective pressure on the institution’ (Black, Finlayson, and Haslett 2019).

On the other hand, the authors of the letter, deconstructed the main argument against boycott, namely that the burden of protest and refusal should not fall on artists of colour, who have been historically excluded from the art canon. In sharp contrast to those who claimed that the presence of artists of colour in the Biennial was enough, the authors countered that this 'view promotes the reactionary fiction that marginalized or working-class people are the passive recipients of political activity as opposed to its main driver' (Black, Finlayson, and Haslett 2019). Although acknowledging the fact that whoever—and historically sidelined artists in particular—assumes the 'wrong politics' risks being alienated by the art system, this is exactly what gives these acts of refusal their potency, namely that they have stakes. Strikes, boycotts, and other forms of resistance have never been marks of luxury, but rather sites of urgency and ongoing struggle. To recall Dean and Žižek, antagonism is a constitutive feature of human experience, and while a dissensual or antagonistic site might rise inadvertently, one is nonetheless confronted with the inevitability of taking sides. In other words, to abdicate the necessity of taking sides when a political situation occurs, means 'avoiding the division and antagonism that comes with taking a political position' (Dean 2012: 57).

Indeed, the letter's symbolic weight, owed to its collective, persuasive, and authoritative rhetoric urging artists to take an explicit political stance that goes against the grain of the supposed 'neutrality' of art museums proved decisive and led to the tipping point. Warren Kanders, presumably unaware of Forensic Architecture's video investigation, pressured by the artists' withdrawal from the Biennial, and 'concerned for his family's safety', decided to resign from the Whitney's Board of Trustees. Both he and his wife, co-chairwoman of the museum's painting and sculpture committee, stepped down having donated more than \$10 million to the Whitney. Eventually, none of the artists withdrew their work from the Biennial, which has come to be called the 'Tear Gas Biennial'.

Valuable conclusions can be drawn from the Whitney controversy. What the plurality of activist tactics demonstrated, illuminating in that way some of the limitations of Rancièrian theory, is that for any disruption of the existing regime of

visibility there are three requirements that are inexorably intertwined: a performative staging of equality, a critical alliance between the unaccounted, and ‘a critique of the differential forms of power by which that sphere is constituted’ (Butler 2015: 51). Firstly, in order for the staging of equality to have any chance of entering into the sphere of appearance it must necessarily involve the crossing of a discursive performativity and a performativity that is embodied, affective, and prefigurative. When activists assembled in the Whitney’s lobby or in the street, they exercised ‘a plural and performative right to appear’ and their claim of equality was constituted both through language and action (Butler 2015: 11). In this way, the space of appearance was brought into being by both their vocalised sounds and by the tactical use of their bodies acting in concert. This understanding of the embodied and libidinal investment in politics proper, namely in acts of dissensus and the correlative processes of subjectivation, remains largely untheorised by thinkers like Rancière and Laclau.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 4.11 (i-ii).** 9<sup>th</sup> week of Art and Action, Whitney Museum. Photographs by the author.

Secondly, when activists claimed ‘when we breathe, we breathe together’, they demonstrated that the practice of freedom must be understood as a collective

<sup>50</sup> This is not the case for Mouffe’s democratic theory that seems to be taking into account the role of passions (see Mouffe’s most recent work, especially 2005a; 2015c).

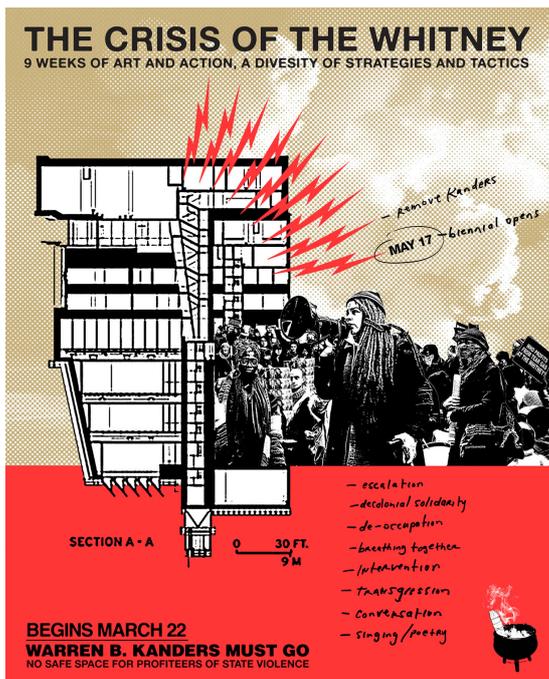
endeavour since ‘freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us’ (Butler 2015: 89). By enacting a spatiality of dissensus at the threshold of the institution, the activists’ struggle for liberation was informed by a critical intersectional analysis that recognises the multiple categories of oppression and suffering as intrinsically intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Such analytical lenses enabled them to unveil ‘the multifarious ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the totalizing character of state power interact with one another’, forming a constellation of dominating and exploitative power relations that function in concert with one another (Coulthard 2014: 14). Emphasising systems of oppression as ‘interlocking’ means that struggles for decolonisation, Black liberation, especially in the context of the BLM movement, and feminism can overlap and align with one another.<sup>51</sup> Through these analytical lenses, the movement against Kanders and his technologies of violence foregrounded the impetus of building a ‘we’ together, based not only on the negation of the intimately intertwined oppressive structures, but also on the understanding that a translative project between a diversity of seemingly uncorrelated struggles must be undertaken. The envisioned ‘we’ was less premised on a homogenising unity or on a clearly defined but restrictive coalition, than on the axioms of difference, multiplicity, and solidarity. Forging a critical alliance between the ‘unaccounted’ or the actively precarious, as well as centring the body ‘as the site of a common human vulnerability’ constituted such an attempt to solidify interdependences and to galvanise community bonds that far exceed the art world (Butler 2012: 44).

The third requirement constitutes the critique of the present regime of visibility, along with its differential forms of power and exclusions. In sharp contrast to the museum leadership’s claims that this is ‘our museum’, representing ‘our community’ and ‘a shared commitment’, activists responded by challenging the very principle of counting who belongs to the community and who is excluded. As

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<sup>51</sup> According to Taylor (2017: 23), ‘if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression’. For an overview of intersectionality and black feminism see Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000; Combahee River Collective 2017; hooks 1999.

Nancy (1991: xxxviii) points out, ‘thinking of community as essence—is in fact the closure of the political’ since ‘the political is the place where community as such is brought into play’. The activists repudiated the façade of inclusion via diversity (through exhibitions) that often serves as a shield to protect cultural institutions from criticism, hiding the real discrepancies in representation between artists, staff, and museum boards. In this sense, the claim of the museum to include the silenced voices of Indigenous or other marginalised peoples via visibility in representation stood in direct conflict not only with the failure to address the history of their exclusions, but also with the present-day perpetuation of an unequal distribution of power and resources. Whereas the initial attempt of the Whitney staff who first spoke out against Kanders was silenced by a police order that allocated them a subordinate place within the regime of visibility, the political dimension of the activists’ disruptive actions ‘consisted in re-qualifying these spaces, in getting them to be seen as the places of a community’ (Rancière 2010: 38). The symbolic win of removing Kanders from the board reenacted ‘the power of the people’ to hold their institutions accountable; it transformed not only the aesthetic coordinates of community, but also the actual delimitation of what is in common.



**FROM CRISIS TO DECOLONIZATION**

**To Adam Weinberg and the Board of Trustees**

It has been six months since the crisis began. The Whitney Museum has a long problem.

The staff have spoken. Community groups have spoken. Scholars have spoken. Journalists have spoken. Artists have spoken, including 52 participants in the Biennial. Everyone agrees that Warren Kanders must go. Yet the museum remains silent. What will it take to finally remove Kanders from the board?

We know this goes beyond Kanders. He is a stand-in for an entire system. Toxic philanthropy can no longer be normalized. The landscape is changing, as we can see with the repudiation of the Sacklers by the Met, Guggenheim, and Tate.

Had you asked, we would have told you: the removal of Kanders is a gesture of good faith by the museum, a signal that you grasp the historical moment, and that you recognize business cannot go on as usual. It would open a pathway for a collective process to address deeper structural questions about the distribution of power and the shape of institutional governance.

The crisis started with teargas, and it now points to decolonization. In the open letter signed by more than 400 writers, curators, and artists calling for the removal of Kanders, they invoke the prospect of a Decolonization Commission that would “include community stakeholders and guided by a variety of urgent principles: Indigenous land rights and restitution, reparations for enslavement and its legacies, the dismantling of patriarchy, workplace democracy, de-gentrification, climate justice, and sanctuary from border regimes and state violence more generally.”

The letter reminds us that “There is no blueprint for decolonization.” We agree. The process is the plan, and we are here for it.

**A Notice to the Whitney Museum**

We could have shut the museum down today. But after nine weeks of action, we offer the museum leadership a final window to do the right thing: remove Kanders and participate in the formation of a process with stakeholders: staff, community groups, scholars, artists, and more.

Fail is the deadline. We will be back if necessary, and our tactics will escalate further. In the meantime, we expect others will act and organize.

**When We Breathe, We Breathe Together**

One of our banners today reads “When We Breathe, We Breathe Together.” This is the same banner that was used in shutting down Brooklyn Bridge in 2014, after a Grand Jury failed to indict the cop who choked Eric Garner to death. As we speak, Officer Anthony Pantano is now undergoing a departmental “disciplinary trial,” one that by design cannot result in criminal charges. Our allies, including Why Accountability, NYC Shut It Down and Copwatch Patrol Unit, have been at the forefront of the struggle to hold this killer cop and the NYPD accountable for their violence.

We know that the same forces that stole the life of Eric Garner are those represented by Warren Kanders, who counts the NYPD among his clients. The banner also has the design of the keffiyeh, which signals solidarity with the Palestinian freedom struggle. From States Island to Gaza, chokeholds, teargas, handcuffs, batons, bullets, body armor, occupation, displacement, land theft, incarceration... These are the sources of Kanders’ wealth and profit, which he launders into his profile as a board member at this Whitney Museum.

**A Note on White Supremacy and the Reviews of the 2019 Whitney Biennial**

We want to congratulate the 75 artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial artists, over half of whom are artists of color. This is the most diverse Whitney Biennial to date. Shout out to you for making history with your work, and also for the public stand that 52 of you have taken against Kanders. Your presence is monumental, and you are sculpting the future of the arts landscape.

The Whitney Biennial has taken an important step in decentering whiteness as an exhibition. But it remains embedded in a museum and a broader artworld that has white supremacy at its core. It cannot be separated from the settler-colonial condition, and the interlocking systems of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism that affect how contemporary art is produced, circulated, and critiqued. We see this play out in the reviews of the biennial so far. We note the condescension of those white art critics who are now lamenting that the artists in the Biennial are not properly political, that they “play it safe.”

White supremacy doesn’t get to decide whether or not our work or actions are “radical” enough to liberate our peoples from white supremacy. White supremacy doesn’t have the tools to examine white supremacy. White supremacy doesn’t get to dictate whether or not our frustration with white supremacy is expressed most effectively via “melancholy,” “outrage,” or anything in between. White supremacy doesn’t get to measure the level of risk (or the level of “safety”) we take in resisting white supremacy. In fact, white supremacy gets no say in the ways in which we choose to survive, live, and fight as people of color in this world. White supremacy doesn’t get to separate us from each other in the name of art and protest, while upholding its own dubious agenda. We won’t let it. So, make no mistake, when we resist Warren Kanders on the board, we are pushing back and resisting against Whiteness dictating what constitutes contemporary art and aesthetics.

**Nine Weeks of Art and Action: Participating Groups**

About Face, Veterans Against the War, Art Space Sanctuary, Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network, Brooklyn Defense Committee, Christian Art Brigade, Comité Boricua En La Diáspora, Copwatch Patrol Unit, Critical Resistance, Crystal House, Decolonial Time Zone, Deinstitutional Research Team (DRT), Direct Action Front for Palestine, Equality 4 Fatimah, Hydro Punk, The Illuminator, Insurgent Poets Society, Global Ultra Luxury Faction, Mahina Movement, Mi Casa No Es Su Casa, People’s Power, Movement to Protect the People, New Sanctuary Coalition, NodtoDol for Korean Community Development, No New Jails NYC, NYC Shut It Down, NYC Solidarity with Palestine, Queens Anti-Gentrification Project, Queen Youth Power, P.A.I.N., Sackler, People’s Cultural Plan, Semillas Collective, South Asia Solidarity Initiative, Susan Park for a Liberated Future, Take Back the Bronx, The Whitest Cube, War Resisters League, We Will Not Be Silent, Why Accountability, Within Our Lifetime, and more.

#decolonizehisplace

Figure 4.12 (i-ii). Posters and flyers developed by DTP. Photographs by the author.

Having examined the threefold requirement of disrupting an existing configuration of visibility, a final point needs to be made here. To return to my own argument, although dissensus constitutes an indispensable step in the radical democratisation of society, it should be considered neither an isolated incidence nor the result of a spectacular gesture of artistic or activist radicalism. Dissensus is not a singular, ruptural, and extraordinary event. In order to unfold, dissensus must be built upon and it necessarily involves a collectivity of agents. Dissensual events might attract visibility, but they are just condensations of much more protracted struggles making activist organisation only one, albeit indispensable, part of the process. For Marchart (2019: 17), '[t]he continuity of activist practices is punctuated by broadly visible events, but it is this continuity of practices that allows for the organization of these events'. In sharp contrast to the unnecessary competition that transpired when critics appeared eager to give credit either to the tactics of activist groups or to the dissent of individual artists for forcing the resignation of Kanders, I offer a different reading.<sup>52</sup> I would argue instead that what allowed the original act of protest by the Whitney staff to break through the police order and to be registered as a scene of dissensus, was that the original gap was cracked wide open by various stakeholders and was amplified by a multiplicity of fronts of sustained pressure from both inside and outside the institution. While the activists' decolonisation efforts were essential to organise and test out, as per Marchart, the 'antagonistic quality' of the situation, a multiplicity of agents needed to step in along the process and take sides in the division, while broader alliances had to be forged.

After this significant victory, various stakeholders assembled for a second Town Hall Assembly to build on the momentum and reimagine the future of institutions in the city and beyond. Admittedly, by bridging creative activism and grassroots organising, and by merging analysis, aesthetics, and direct action, activists forged a concrete

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<sup>52</sup> Art critic Ben Davis (2019) notes in relation to the importance of the 'The Tear Gas Biennial' essay: 'looking at the campaign, what still strikes me is how momentous its effects are versus how fragmented its actual contours were. Decolonize waged a dogged series of protests, but the effective blow came out of the blue from another source, from three intellectuals articulating matters in their own terms, triggering artists to act very abruptly in small groups, detonating the final crisis'.

passage towards politics and ongoing struggles. The Whitney's crisis did manage to open a whole new can of worms relating to questions about organisational structures, museum governance, and democracy, however, it remains to be seen whether these demands can be 'inscribed' into a new reconfigured and decolonised order. After all, as activists clarified from the outset, the issue goes far beyond removing a few toxic trustees from museum boards.

### 4.3 Towards a Museum Insurgency

#### 4.3.1 From Institutional Splitting to Institutional Liberation

To play a role in our movement, to become allies, to back us up with all your legitimising and authoritative aesthetics: this is a much more challenging task because it is not as negative a poster towards the institution, it suggests that there is redemption for the institution and that it can be part of this constellation of sites and organisations that comprise our movements.<sup>53</sup>

Beka Economopoulos,  
Co-founder of NAA

DTP's campaign echoed in many ways Not An Alternative's (NAA) own campaign against climate denier David Koch, who, after serving for 23 years and donating more than \$20 million, stepped down from the board of the American Museum of Natural History in 2016. Before turning to the latter campaign, it is worth discussing the theoretical and tactical arsenal of NAA. Working at the intersection of art, activism, and pedagogy, NAA was founded by Beka Economopoulos and Jason Jones in the aftermath of the alter-globalisation movement and consolidated itself as a central figure in the political-cultural milieu of Occupy. The collective's work ranges from critical research and exhibition design to activist interventions and political organising, evincing an effort to impact both the material and immaterial world to affect social change. As well as designing the colour-coded symbolic and tactical infrastructure during the Occupy Wall Street movement, NAA has been involved in numerous long-term campaigns including Occupy Homes, Picture the Homeless, and Strike Debt. During the 2000s their work extended from campaigns against foreclosures and evictions, through tactical reoccupations of empty lots for common use, to activist publicity stunts against the Iraq war.

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<sup>53</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 9/12/2018, 00:42:40).

NAA's mission and theoretical standpoint derives from the conception that every symbol, institution, and subject is fundamentally and inherently split since it is defined as much by its positive attributes as by what is constitutively excluded. The collective's practice is oriented towards the occupation and hijacking of existing visual languages, popular vernaculars, and semiotics (symbols, stories, events, etc.) to affect what they mean. In this sense, by destabilising the symbolic terrain and by activating the split within any given situation, they strive to foreground what remains excluded, hence transforming its very definition and its popular understanding.

The very name of the collective instantiates such an inversion and split. Taking its cue from Margaret Thatcher's notorious remark that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism (TINA), what Not An Alternative represents is the 'not alternative', namely the alternative which has been excluded from the horizon of possibility.<sup>54</sup> As Fisher (2009: 9), underlines, "'Alternative" and "independent" don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact the dominant styles, within the mainstream'. Instead of alluding to an existing predetermined and prepackaged alternative, NAA 'names the option that is not an option', it points at what is constitutively excluded and exceeds any given regime of visibility.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, by looking to occupy an impossible place beyond the inherent limits of any given system—even though the system might appear total—it poses a threat by putting pressure on it and by activating the antagonisms and the more egalitarian formations that lie hidden within that order.

This approach is consistent both with the Rancièrian understanding of the disruption of the distribution of the sensible and Lacanian theory and its reconceptualisation by the Lacanian Left, the latter constituting a recurrent theoretical reference point for NAA. For instance, Rancièrè argues that dissensus, or the disruption of the *partage du sensible*, 'means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside,

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<sup>54</sup> The ideological triumph of neoliberal capitalism (and the imaginary inability to conceive alternatives to it), as trumpeted by politicians like Margaret Thatcher, has been called 'Capitalist Realism' by Fisher (2009).

<sup>55</sup> Jason Jones, interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 00:10:30).

reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification' (Rancière 2011: 49). Dean (2012: 190) compares Rancière's the-part-with-no-part that signifies the surplus of any given distribution of the sensible and the supplement that unsettles that order with Lacan's *objet petit a*, 'an impossible, formal object produced as the excess of a process or relation, a kind of gap that incites or annoys'. Laclau and Mouffe, for their part, reformulate the Lacanian problematic of negativity, lack, and the limits of the symbolic, by arguing that society is inherently divided and that 'antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125).<sup>56</sup>

Despite their diverse conceptual underpinnings, all these theories converge in identifying antagonism and division as constitutive elements of any given order. However, Dean, a collaborator of NAA, takes it a step further, arguing that what is constitutively excluded by capitalism—hence constitutes a threat to it—is communism, since there can be no communist relations within a capitalist order. According to Dean (2016a: 83), what NAA attempts to achieve is not only the excavation and exposure of existing symbols, stories, and institutions as sites of struggle, but the foregrounding of the gaps and divisions of that order, 'forcing others to take a side'. Indeed, once these fundamental splits are revealed and once the dominant configuration is challenged, the real work begins, namely in sustaining the divisions and organising the side one is fighting for.

NAA applied these analytical lenses to develop their own theory of institutionality, achieving an extraordinary degree of self-conscious theorisation. According to the group, 'institutions are not monolithic unities. They are complex multiplicities, split within themselves and between themselves and their settings' (Not An Alternative

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<sup>56</sup> Following this theorisation, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 125) argue that the subject is constitutively split: 'insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself'. To remind the reader, 'antagonism', meaning the impossibility to represent adequately the fullness of society, goes by the name 'the political', alluding to the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political', as examined in Chapter 1. Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014: 10, original emphasis), for instance, define '*politics* as the contingent and incomplete attempt to ground a particular set of power relations on an ultimately absent foundation, and *the political* as the ineradicable presence of this absence itself, which continually undermines the social orders constructed upon it, and which holds open the possibility of radical change'.

2016). From this perspective, institutions are perceived less as ideologically homogeneous and consistent sites than as complex organisational forms that can contain multiple positions at any given time, positions that might be contradictory with one another. Institutions comprise a multiplicity of agents, ranging from front-desk personnel and administrative staff to curators, educators, and managers, and from returning visitors, artists, and passers-by to directors, sponsors, and trustees. Inevitably then, institutions are already permeated by inner divisions, fractures, and disagreements.

According to theorists like Mouffe, neoliberal ideology's rise to hegemony has relied on seizing a multiplicity of institutional terrains, with the cultural domain occupying a strategic place within the battlefield. This is where the construction of 'common sense' takes place since public institutions have the power to legitimise and normalise social values and perspectives, while providing the infrastructural base for supporting certain regimes of visibility. Institutions might 'have been starved into submission by private interests', however, according to Not An Alternative (2016), 'the practice deployed by neoliberals to seize institutions is now being deployed against neoliberal purposes. Co-optation goes both ways'. Instead of relinquishing and surrendering institutions to the hands of oligarchs, toxic philanthropists, and climate deniers—as if capitalist co-optation and take-over has been total—this approach foregrounds institutions as sites still worth fighting for. It acknowledges the valuable social resources, wide acceptance, and collective power that has been concentrated in these institutions and sets out to commandeer them. This is premised upon the understanding that, especially in the U.S. context, museums are popular and beloved sites, they are the only informal educational site and one of the few spaces left to be held 'in common' against the spectre of increased privatisation, commercialisation, and mass surveillance.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> According to the American Alliance of Museums (2019), museums attract more than 850 million visits each year—more than the attendance for all major league sporting events and theme parks combined—and are considered the most reliable source of information in the country, ranking higher than local newspapers, the U.S. government, and even academic research.

For NAA (2016), 'this is the wager of the insurgent movement to liberate institutions from the grip of capitalism'. According to Swyngedouw (2014: 178), 'insurgency is, therefore, an integral part of the aesthetic register through which the re-framing of what is sensible is articulated and becomes symbolisable'. In this sense, one can situate NAA's theory and practice of 'institutional liberation' amongst a series of activist art collectives that have set out to 'commandeer museums'. Although these groups might not share the same tactics, rhetorics, objectives, or politics (ranging from decolonisation to a climate justice agenda), they all treat museums as a terrain of insurgency in order to reclaim the cultural commons.

Hence, 'institutional liberation', at least from a tactical standpoint, coincides with Mouffe's notion of a counter-hegemonic struggle, in which she highlights 'the necessity of artistic interventions to challenge the post-political view that there is no alternative to the present order' (Mouffe 2013: xvii). 'Institutional liberation', however, sets itself against two converging strands of thought, one deriving from the political sphere and one from the institutional critique tradition. The first approach, which has been advanced overwhelmingly by the Left since the '60s is grounded in anarchist thought, the operaist-autonomist tradition, and the Zapatista political imaginary. Taking an anti-institutional and anti-bureaucratic stance, it stresses the all-pervasive threat of assimilation and neutralisation of radical potential. It advocates for the necessity of building new autonomous infrastructures, constructing viable alternative governing structures that are external to the state, enacting horizontal networks of resistance, and creating non-hierarchical models of consensus democracy. Since the state constitutes a form of social organisation that impedes self-determination and autonomy, this approach advocates for the evacuation of places of power and the necessity of 'insurrection' and 'destitution'.<sup>58</sup> Such an approach is best encapsulated in the words of Hardt and Negri (2009: 355)

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance Holloway 2003, The Invisible Committee 2009; 2017, Bey 1991. For The Invisible Committee, the notion of destitution allows to distinguish between two distinct forms of revolutionary logic, namely between 'constituent insurrections' and 'destituent insurrections'. The former indicates the revolutions that have been recuperated and turned into their opposite, whereas the later indicates the spontaneous and unexpected appearance of a people in the public space. Under the banner of 'destituent insurrections' one can bring together a manifold of disparate movements like the May '68, the Spanish Indignados, Nuit Debout, Occupy Wall Street, the Zapatista uprising, and many other insurrections.

who argue that the multitude ‘has no interest in taking control of the state apparatuses, not even in order to direct them to other ends—or, better, it wants to lay its hands on state apparatuses only to dismantle them. It regards the state as not the realm of freedom but the seat of domination’.

The other strand of thought stems from the institutional critique tradition, which critics have broken down to four successive waves. The first wave developed as an immanent critique of the institution, scrutinising and unearthing the networks of political, class, and social relations that sustained the production, circulation, and framing of art within the institution.<sup>59</sup> According to Haacke (2009: 357-359), one of its key figures, arts and culture ‘are not ideologically neutral’, consequently ‘whether intended or not, as managers of consciousness, museums are agents in the political arena’. The following wave shifted its critique to the broader systems of oppression, as well as to the racial and colonial histories that underpinned not only the narrow confines of the museum, but the art system as a whole and other institutions structuring the corporate and legal system.<sup>60</sup> The third wave took issue with what Andrea Fraser (2009: 409) called the ‘institutionalization of institutional critique’. This alluded to the limitations of accomplishing, or even imagining ‘a critique of art institutions when museums and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification’ to such an extent that there might no longer be ‘an outside’ position from where critique can be levelled.<sup>61</sup> More recently, critics like Raunig and Ray, building on the work of Deleuze, Virno, and Negri, have theorised a fourth wave of institutional critique that has started mapping ‘strategies of flight’,

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<sup>59</sup> One can trace the first wave of institutional critique back to the 1960s and 1970s in the politicised art practice of Hans Haacke, Michal Asher, Daniel Buren, and Marcel Broodthaers, among many others (for a more in-depth analysis of institutional critique see Alberro and Stimson 2009).

<sup>60</sup> For the second wave of institutional critique, one can turn to the work of Fred Wilson, John Knight, Louise Lawler, Andrea Fraser, Carey Young, Renée Green, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Barbara Bloom, during the 1980s.

<sup>61</sup> Fraser (2009: 414) continues: ‘it is artists—as much as museums or the market—who, in their very efforts to escape the institution of art, have driven its expansion. With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or reintegrate it into everyday life, to reach “everyday” people and work in the “real” world, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it’.

‘instituent practices’, or ‘institutions of exodus’ that prevent institutions from structuralisation and closure.<sup>62</sup>

To these two approaches, Not An Alternative (2016) responds that ‘rather than overburdening ourselves with the overwhelming task of inventing entirely new political and social forms’, the more crucial task today for contemporary artists and activists consists in ‘reclaiming the cultural commons’. Instead of investing in anti-state politics, repeated calls for innovations, ‘outside tactics’ of playful disruption, and experiments in ‘being ungovernable’, it proposes a different way of reinhabiting institutions through insurgency; a mode of reclaiming institutionality based on Left ideals and counter-power. Instead of adopting a reformist standpoint that values critique for critique’s sake and focuses on ‘rendering injustices visible’, it foregrounds the necessity of militancy, strategising, and constructing tight organisational forms in order to seize power. According to Jones, one can ‘use these museums as a broader model for institutional take-over’, which is not limited, by any means, to the confines of the cultural sphere.<sup>63</sup> It provides a broader model for experimenting with institutional seizure (including how to work in and against the state), extending to the building of a counter-power infrastructure that can feed directly into ongoing social movements. In this respect, I would argue that instead of building on institutional critique, it weaponises it, forging it into a project of political organising within the museum sector. In the words of Not An Alternative (2016): ‘so institutional liberation isn’t about making institutions better, more inclusive, more participatory. It’s about establishing politicized base camps from which ever more coordinated, elaborate, and effective campaigns against the capitalist state in all its racist, exploitative, extractivist, and colonizing dimensions can be carried out’.

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<sup>62</sup> See for instance Raunig and Ray 2009, Baravalle 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 00:58:00).

### 4.3.2 The Invention of the Generic: The Natural History Museum

This is why we called it The Natural History Museum, our intention in the beginning was not to become our institution; it was to become the generic Natural History Museum. So, we were not meant to be an expression of ourselves, we were meant to be an expression of the natural history in common, the generic Natural History Museum. We were intervening on all that is natural history.<sup>64</sup>

Jason Jones,  
Co-founder of NAA

It is through these analytical lenses that NAA embarked on a multi-year project, The Natural History Museum (NHM), in an attempt to work inside and against the sector of natural history museums. The project endeavours to infiltrate the museums that communicate the truth about science and climate change in order to organise the staff to confront their institutions' alignment with the interests of the fossil fuel industry. The NHM adopts the language of ecology and nature, as well as the authoritative vocabulary of the generic natural history museum—its aesthetics, its pedagogical impetus, its communicative models—to get inside the museum sector and transform it from within. However, unlike a traditional museum, it highlights the sociopolitical forces that shape nature and sheds light on the infrastructures that support the 'way we see', treating museums, the science field, and nature as inherently split, hence as sites of struggle.

Although it is an artistic project and a travelling activist organisation without a base, it constitutes nothing less than a proper museum. It is an officially accredited institution within the American Alliance of Museums, it offers exhibitions, expeditions, educational workshops, and public programming often hosted in established mainstream museums, and it has an advisory board that includes

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<sup>64</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 01:16:00).

prominent scientists, artists, and environmental activists (for example, Naomi Klein).<sup>65</sup> Its programmes and exhibitions are developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities, environmental justice organisations, scientists, and museum professionals in order to recreate narratives of nature from an environmental and climate justice perspective.

In this sense, the NHM attempts a double gesture. On a symbolic level, by assuming the generic name and logo of the Natural History Museum it takes issue with larger systemic issues, like the involvement of natural history museums in fossil fuel industry greenwashing, the privatisation and corporatisation of these spaces, and the contradictions between those institutions' purported values and the actual practices that they adopt. The generic name renders it an 'empty' or 'floating' signifier, alluding to the incomplete character of the symbolic terrain that has constituted it and allowing antagonisms, contestations, and counter-hegemonic articulatory practices to emerge.<sup>66</sup> On a tactical level, by 'becoming' an alternative museum it prefigures and models the museum of the future, it asserts itself as part of the wider museum sector, hence enabling it to hold the entire sector accountable. At the same time, the deployment of a counter-institution serves as a practical means to gain access to the sector, to infiltrate it like a Trojan horse, apply pressure from within, and 'treat it like a union organising project'.<sup>67</sup> The underlying assumption is that by splitting the very form of institutionality and by morphing into a partisan institution, a close circuit can be forged between frontline Native-led struggles, activist groups, and the narratives that these museums convey.

The NHM came into existence, almost accidentally, when NAA was approached by an environmental advocacy organisation to work on a creative campaign against David Koch, petrochemical billionaire and one of the key figures behind the Tea Party

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<sup>65</sup> The team includes both native and non-natives members, including Beka Economopoulos (Executive Director), Jason Jones (Creative Director), Ruth Miller (Dena'ina Athabaskan, Storytelling Organizer), Julian Brave (Noisecat (Secwepemc/St'at'imc, Narrative Change Director), Karina Yager (Quechua, Director of Education), Steve Lyons (Director of Research), and Mark Auslander (Director of Special Projects).

<sup>66</sup> For the notion of 'empty signifiers' see Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 134-144.

<sup>67</sup> Beka Economopoulos, interview quote (interview date: 9/12/2018, 00:10:00).

movement.<sup>68</sup> At the time, Koch was not only a major sponsor and trustee of Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and the American Museum of Natural History in New York, but also a donor and trustee emeritus at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—it is no coincidence that the new public plaza in front of the Met was named after him. Koch Industries, the largest privately held oil company in the U.S., is one of the main investors in Canada's tar sands and one of the greatest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. The Koch brothers have also been leading funders of the climate-change-denial machine, actively building political influence, extensive networking, and lobbying to undermine the significance of global warming.<sup>69</sup>

Assuming a tactic of 'fake it until you make it', the NHM was first conceived as a *détournement* of the official museum that blurred the lines between performance, creative activism, and political organising. In order to claim the authority of what it was performing, the NHM started functioning as an institutional chameleon, deploying a wide array of tactics according to the circumstances, transforming itself from a political battering ram to break through the institutional barriers to an instrument of soft power and diplomacy. The Koch campaign, for instance, necessitated a wide array of tactics to bring together a multiplicity of agents both inside and outside the museum sector.

The NHM initially produced an open letter asking science and natural history museums to sever their ties to the fossil fuel industry, divest from fossil fuels, and remove climate deniers from their boards. 'We are deeply concerned by the links between museums of science and natural history with those who profit from fossil fuels or fund lobby groups that misrepresent climate science', the letter read (The Natural History Museum 2014). The letter leveraged the authority and legitimacy of more than one hundred leading climate scientists and cultural figures, including

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<sup>68</sup> As it has been well documented, a major force behind the Tea Party movement has been Koch's conservative political advocacy group Americans for Prosperity (AFP).

<sup>69</sup> According to Greenpeace's (2018) most recent data, the Koch Family Foundations have spent more than \$160 millions over the last two decades in order to finance more than 90 climate denial front groups, organisations, and thinktanks that have been consistently attacking climate change, environmental regulations, and policy solutions.

several Nobel laureates, who signed it.<sup>70</sup> Although reproduced by numerous media outlets, including the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*, the letter did not stand alone. It was accompanied by the NHM's 'Kick Koch off the Board' petition asking for David Koch's resignation from the board of the American Museum of Natural History, gathering 550,000 signatures in two weeks, and by numerous articles that debunked the very notion of museum neutrality. Eight months after the campaign was launched, Koch succumbed to the pressure and stepped down from the board without ever attributing his departure either to the growing external activist mobilisation, or to the inner criticism from museum staffers who were putting increasing pressure on the leadership to take a stand.

Indeed, museums' adherence to an 'authoritative neutrality' is one of the main obstacles to overcome, since not only does it obfuscate the political, economic, and corporate fossil-fuel interests that have already infiltrated the institutions, but also 'it prevents institutions from seriously re-evaluating their roles in a time of climate crisis' and thus taking a stand (Lyons and Economopoulos 2015). As it has been widely acknowledged, Big Oil has always sought to gain cultural capital, brand promotion, and social acceptability through sponsoring arts and culture.<sup>71</sup> Associating with prestigious institutions on a national level has been considered a survival strategy for an industry that has been facing international criticism and outrage, not only because of its involvement in repeated incidents of criminal negligence (e.g. BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010), but more importantly because of its continuous profiting from environmental destruction. At the same time, museums can play a crucial role in affecting public opinion, accelerating broader cultural shifts, and advancing policy reform. For instance, as Evans (2015: 23) notes, when the Tate London was pushed by artists to issue a statement, almost

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<sup>70</sup> Explicitly painting David Koch's picture, the letter continued: 'when some of the biggest contributors to climate change and funders of misinformation on climate science sponsor exhibitions in museums of science and natural history, they undermine public confidence in the validity of the institutions responsible for transmitting scientific knowledge. This corporate philanthropy comes at too high a cost' (The Natural History Museum 2014).

<sup>71</sup> For instance, only in London, Shell has had attachments with the National Theatre, the National Gallery, the Royal Opera House, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the Natural History Museum, and others, while BP has sponsored the Tate, the British Museum, the Science Museum, the Royal Opera House, and the National Portrait Gallery, among others.

three decades ago, declaring that it would no longer accept sponsorship from tobacco and arms companies, it had an unprecedented impact on the social stigmatisation of these industries, ‘influencing public policy rather than adhering to laws only once in effect’.

In fact, a growing movement of artistic activism has been spreading recently, following the example of the UK groups Art Not Oil Coalition, BP or Not BP, and Liberate Tate, among others, which have campaigned to end oil-industry sponsorship of the arts, accomplishing remarkable results along the way.<sup>72</sup> The NHM brought together these London-based groups and other creative campaigns from around the globe on the occasion of the 21<sup>st</sup> conference of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris in order to create ‘a museum liberation movement’.<sup>73</sup> During the final days of the convention, hundreds of activists gathered in front of the Louvre, demanding that the museum terminates oil and gas company sponsorship (Total and Eni have been ‘Outstanding Patrons’ of the Louvre). Outside the museum, performers carried black umbrellas reading ‘Fossil Free Culture’ while others launched a performance protest inside the Louvre’s galleries that entailed walking barefoot while spreading footprints of what appeared to be an oil spill.

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, Tate announced in 2017 that it would no longer receive sponsorship from BP, putting a halt to BP’s ability to ‘artwash’ its image and identity. However, the struggle continues, since according to T.J. Demos (2017b: 109), ‘BP recently announced a new £7.5 million, five-year deal with four major arts institutions in the United Kingdom—the British Museum, National Portrait Gallery, Royal Opera House, and Royal Shakespeare Company’.

<sup>73</sup> Numerous artistic and activist groups were involved in this movement, including Art Not Oil, BP or not BP?, G.U.L.F., Liberate Tate, Occupy Museums, Platform London, Science Unstained, Shell Out Sounds, UK Tar Sands Network, Stopp Oljesponssing av Norsk Kulturliv, and The Natural History Museum.



**Figure 4.13 (i-iii).** Top: The NHM's exhibition and mobile museum bus at the AAM Convention 2015, Atlanta, GA. Bottom: The NHM's tent at the 'Grand Opening: Exhibiting the Gaze', 2014, Queens Museum, NY. Photographs by the NHM.

Although such spectacular direct actions and agitational techniques aiming at creating media visibility and raising awareness have long been part of the tactical repertoire of NAA, the NHM marks a paradigm shift to a more expanded array of tactics that could fall under the banner of *tools of moral propaganda*. These range from modeling exhibition content for museums (content that is relevant to the pressing concerns of the communities they serve) through field building (talks, publications, panels) to advocacy (divestment campaigns, open letters, science marches). For instance, for the inaugural exhibition of the NHM at the Queens Museum in 2014, a 64-foot-long tent was installed inside the museum, featuring a

two-month discussion and workshop series between scientists, artists, historians, and climate justice activists. The modular architecture not only evoked a common language and signification with the Zuccotti Park occupation tents, but it also echoed the natural disaster emergency response infrastructure. According to Dean (2016a: 89), 'the NHM's tent turns visitors into occupiers, implicating them in a counterpower infrastructure. It divides the space of its installation within itself, creating a new, divisive collectivity'.<sup>74</sup>

Since the NHM is an officially accredited institution within the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), this means its 'moral propaganda tactics' can also be deployed during museum conventions and directors' retreats, or when invited to host panels and round tables. For instance, such an opportunity presented itself during the AAM 2019 convention in New Orleans, when the NHM was invited to present on one of the panels. Moving beyond critique and treating it like a union organising project, members of the NHM attended meetings with museum professionals, Native Nations, and scientists, all of which served as opportunities to establish frank conversations, identify allies, advocate for an environmental justice agenda, and build counter-power.

At the same time though, the NHM co-organised, as part of the convention's official programming, a mobile 'counter-panel' that addressed more explicitly the legacy of extractive industries in Southern Louisiana, a topic that was conspicuously absent from the convention's panel discussions. While visiting local oil refineries, participants had the opportunity to learn about the silenced colonial histories of *Bulbancha* (the pre-colonial name of New Orleans) and the city's historical transition from plantations and a land extraction-based system to the present-day oil extraction-based system and prison-industrial complex. They also had the chance to hear firsthand experiences of the social, environmental, and health impact of

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<sup>74</sup> Switching tactical approach, in 2017 the NHM, along with Climate Truth.org and other partners, organised a rally outside of the American Association for Advancement of Science (AAAS) conference, assembling thousands of scientists wearing their lab coats and chanting 'Stand up for Science'.

petrochemical plants on the region.<sup>75</sup> During the bus tour, Leon Waters, organiser of Hidden Histories tours, shared his own experience of the ways in which the fossil fuel industry development has destroyed the social fabric of the local communities. After all, oil and gas industries have gone to great lengths to normalise their presence and their contribution to the region's economy by artwashing their image through generous sponsorships of science and natural history museums. This is obvious at the New Orleans Audubon Aquarium of the Americas.<sup>76</sup>



**Figure 4.14.** The sponsorships of the New Orleans Audubon Aquarium of the Americas. Photograph by the author.

Infiltrating the science and natural history sector—from where the discourse of neutrality originated—meant that the NHM had to quickly adapt to a more refined language and to a less loaded terminology, where politics can nevertheless be embedded. For instance, according to Economopoulos, ‘you cannot ask museums to

<sup>75</sup> As Monique Verdin explicated during the bus tour, historically, south Louisiana has either been producing or transporting about 25% of the nation's oil and gas supply.

<sup>76</sup> In one of the most prominent galleries of the aquarium, the Gulf of Mexico exhibit features an underwater oil rig. The wall text depicts the sponsoring energy companies claiming that ‘the story of the Gulf of Mexico is incomplete without them’, without a single mention of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. It argues instead that their 3,700 rigs are left in place to ‘serve as substructure on which reef systems develop’, hence preserving the marine habitats.

be political, you can ask them to be relevant, and that discourse of relevance is where the politics lie. Or you can ask them to be ethical'.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, leveraging the more nuanced language of relevance and the credibility of scientific discourse, when petitions or demands are issued, can prove to be more effective tools of putting pressure on institutions. However, the emphasis on relevance, inclusivity, participation, and diversity, often used by museums to broaden their audiences' bases and to reapproach their underrepresented constituencies, can prove misleading. Indeed, one should not be distracted from the more urgent questions like '*what is the role and responsibility of the museum in a time of climate crisis?*' since 'the problem is not whether or not our institutions are relevant, but for whom and to what end' (Lyons and Bosworth 2019: 174, original emphasis).

In sharp contrast to the recent discourse on the Anthropocene that has attempted to obfuscate the human impact on climate change, the NHM, along with a series of other eco-activist mobilisations, tries to redirect our attention back to the notion of the Capitalocene in order to emphasise the link between climate catastrophe and the dynamics of global capitalism.<sup>78</sup> Such a paradigm shift helps to expose capitalism 'not just as an economic system but as a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of the web of life on earth'; a way that is rooted in violence towards and exploitation of not just human, but also extra-human life (Patel and Moore 2017: 3). This aligns with the NHM's own wager to dispel the myth of neutrality and convince museums that, especially in a time of climate emergency, they are obligated to defend the commons. For museums, this can translate into paving the way for a fossil free world, redirecting their resources to preserve the natural world, and resignifying it as something to be held in common. Most importantly, it means mobilising resistance against the very interests that threaten both human and non-human life.

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<sup>77</sup> Beka Economopoulos, interview quote (interview date: 9/12/2018, 00:12:16).

<sup>78</sup> For this discussion see Moore 2016; 2017, Klein 2014, and Haraway 2015. In addition, a series of creative alternatives in contemporary visual arts and culture has attempted to debunk the notion of the Anthropocene (see Demos 2017b).

### 4.3.3 In and Against the Institution: Infiltration Tactics

The question is, how to, from an organisational and tactical standpoint, work as insurgents inside and against the American Museum sector [...] Because we believed that one of the problems with the Left was that it was trying to distinguish itself from these compromised, impure institutions, and in so doing gave up the possibility to organise inside and against them, to leverage and seize the power that already exists there.<sup>79</sup>

Steve Lyons,  
Director of Research at the NHM

I admire the way the NHM has successfully infiltrated the conferences and the executive committees, so they function as savvy insiders rather than critical outsiders that can be dismissed as disruptive or disrespectful.<sup>80</sup>

Nicole Heller, Curator of the Anthropocene,  
Carnegie Museum of Natural History

Resisting the temptation to treat museums as uniform ideological apparatuses in the service of the hegemonic neoliberal order, the NHM sets out to provide its own answer to the urgent question ‘which form of institutions and instituting do contemporary social movements need?’ (Raunig and Ray 2009: xvii). By taking natural history museums’ purported values of serving the common at its face value, the NHM not only repurposes institutional resources towards more radical ends, but it also takes advantage of their scale and authority to legitimise and consolidate ongoing movements and grassroots activism. To do so, the NHM attempts to formalise an alliance, centring Native Nations leadership and bracketed by scientists and museum professionals in order to compel institutions to rise to the challenge of the climate emergency. This stems from the acknowledgment that, although the environmental movement has achieved significant victories over the last decade, it is

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<sup>79</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 01:03:00).

<sup>80</sup> Interview by email (interview date: 26/08/2019).

still frontline communities that lead the struggle for environmental and climate justice.<sup>81</sup> This became more acute during the 2016 historical civil disobedience uprising at Standing Rock, where an unprecedented alliance was forged between more than 300 Native Nations against the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL).<sup>82</sup> The NHM coordinated an open letter decrying the desecration of ancient burial grounds and other sacred cultural sites by DAPL to secure the construction of the pipeline. The letter was signed by 1,400 museum directors, archaeologists, and historians, providing a powerful testament of collective mobilisation on behalf of the museum community in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

To provide a more sustained infrastructural support for movement building around native resistance to resource extraction, the NHM initiated an ongoing collaboration with the Lummi Nation, an Indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest. Over the last few years, Northwest Tribes have been building alliances with local non-tribal communities of fishermen, farmers, and environmental activists to protect their natural and cultural heritage from proposed fossil fuel infrastructural projects like oil trains, coal trains, and oil pipelines.<sup>83</sup> The House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation has been deploying forms of traditional art, hand-carving totem poles (one of the oldest forms of North American storytelling) and transporting them across North America to educate about environmental threats, raise awareness, and build alliances. Annual ‘totem pole journeys’, which span from ceremonies and collective singing to public media events, have been taking place over the last few years, dealing specifically with the threats that fossil fuels pose to water and wildlife. Thus far, the Native Nations-led coalitions, leveraging their sovereignty and treaty rights,

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<sup>81</sup> In relation to the broader environmental movement one can mention the Fossil Free movement (championed by Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben) that has led faith-based organisations, educational institutions, philanthropic foundations, pension funds, and non-profits to commit to divestment; the global climate strike movement FridaysForFuture (initiated by Greta Thunberg); the grassroots direct action anti-fracking movement; and of course the Green New Deal (backed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders), a package of legislation that emphasises environmental and social justice aiming to bring U.S. greenhouse gas emissions down to net-zero by 2030.

<sup>82</sup> The final section of the Dakota Access Pipeline was set to cut through the Sioux territory, jeopardising the primary water source of the Indian Reservation across the Missouri River. It is crucial to note here that the native water protectors, and other activists who had joined them, were pepper-sprayed and tear-gassed by the police, using the products of Warren Kanderson’s company, Safariland.

<sup>83</sup> As Economopoulos (2018: 33) explains: ‘while Indigenous communities inhabit just 2 percent of the world’s land mass, they steward 80 percent of its biodiversity’.

have proven enormously resilient, defeating numerous proposed fossil fuel infrastructural projects in the area (see De Place and Budech 2017).

Distancing itself from the contemporary art world's infatuation with ephemeral socially engaged practices and the visibility of an event-based economy, the NHM shifts its emphasis towards a 'relational sensibility', 'long-term commitments', and a continuity of organisational practices (Kwon 2002: 166). This can be attested by the decision to engage in a multi-year project related to the Lummi Nation's Totem Pole Journey that entails exhibitions and programming developed in consultation with Indigenous communities, centring Native-led climate justice efforts. For instance, 'Kwel' Hoy: We Draw The Line' has been such a multi-year collaborative exhibition and event series that was inaugurated at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Afterwards, both the totem pole and the traveling exhibition embarked on a cross-country tour, partnering with other host institutions and visiting sites threatened by fossil fuel projects along the way, in order to bring communities together and demonstrate how these struggles are connected.



**Figure 4.15.** 'Kwel' Hoy: We Draw the Line', 2018, Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Photograph by the NHM.

More recently, the Lummi Nation House of Tears Carvers hand-carved a 3,000-pound totem pole depicting a human riding a killer whale, which constitutes part of a

campaign to save the orca, one of the most critically endangered marine mammals in the world. For the Lummi, the orca does not signify an isolated species facing extinction, but rather a broader connection with the ancestors, the interdependency of the ecosystem, as well as the entirety of nature held in common. Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest have been raising the alarm, highlighting the many threats orcas face, including commercial fishing, fossil fuel pollution, industrial development, and the proposed Trans Mountain Pipeline that would substantially increase oil tanker traffic to the Salish Sea.

The exhibition *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea* at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville was the first time that the whale totem entered a museum. It constituted a five-month temporary stop for the totem pole that had travelled across the U.S., inviting thousands of people to touch it along its journey.<sup>84</sup> The NHM contributed to the exhibit design, along with the production of a seven-screen 90-foot-wide immersive floor-to-ceiling video installation, showing underwater footage of the orca in its natural habitats and featuring interviews with Native Nations elders who speak about the human influence on water. In addition, the video's depiction of environmental degradation in the forms of tar sands and fossil fuel refineries was contrasted by scenes of Indigenous canoers and other 'kayaktivists' confronting pipeline projects. In this manner, the exhibition set out to narrate today's environmental emergency through the plight of the orca from an Indigenous perspective. As Kristina Choe, exhibit developer at Florida Museum of Natural History, remarks 'the opening ceremony was extremely powerful. Visitors were extremely engaged, even moved and empowered to be part of something bigger to make a difference in our world'.<sup>85</sup>

In sharp contrast to the traditional museum objects, attendees were invited to touch the totem pole and pray together, in order to recharge its mission and build collective power. Totem poles themselves are not considered sacred; they rather function as batteries that are symbolically charged every time someone touches

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<sup>84</sup> The exhibition opened its doors on December 8, 2018, and closed on May 5, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Email interview (date: 14/12/2018).

them, hence becoming lasting symbols of resistance. However, the newly carved orca totem did not stand alone in the exhibition. It was brought into dialogue with a selection from the museum's own collection of Indigenous artefacts: five historical totem poles from the coastal Northwest, two carved pipes, and five argillite carved platters, adorned with representations of orca whales, bears, eagles, and humans. This points to the NHM's broader tactic of conceptualising and treating objects not as merely passive, dead, and alienated, but as secret agents and as 'disobedient objects'.<sup>86</sup> The NHM's strategy implies the tendency of museums to enclose and recuperate Indigenous objects and narratives is destined to always remain unfinished and unfulfilled. Even objects that have been trapped within the confines of the museum for a long time can be reactivated, resymbolised, and re-politicised.



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<sup>86</sup> This echoes Baudrillard's (2008: 177) argument that 'our world would not be bearable without this innate power of *détournement*, this "strange attraction", this radicality originating elsewhere—originating in the object'.



**Figure 4.16 (i-iii).** Top: The opening of *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea*. Photograph by Kristen Grace/Florida Museum. Bottom: Details of the exhibit, designed by the NHM. Photographs by the author.

This view aligns with a strand in contemporary museology that challenges the very axiom of ‘contemporaneity’, which, especially in the art world has been pervaded by a consumerist mentality that dictates a constant need for innovation and novelty, the always cutting-edge and the spectacular. To oppose this tendency, critics have put forwards an alternate vision of museological practice that attempts instead to activate and unearth the multiple temporalities, counter-narratives, meanings, and configurations that are embedded in their collections. This becomes particularly acute when historical collections are connected to pressing social or environmental threats that their constituencies are facing in the present. Bishop (2013: 6), for instance, advocates for a model of ‘dialectical contemporaneity’: a non-presentist multi-temporal curatorial approach; a ‘dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality’.<sup>87</sup>

By conceiving exhibitions as opportunities to produce collective meanings and shared significations, such an approach resists both the reductive metaphor of ‘museum-as-mausoleum’ where objects go to die and the notion of ‘museum-as-

<sup>87</sup> Bishop, coming from an art history perspective, has in mind museums like the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, and the MG+MSUM in Ljubljana, all partner institutions in the L’Internationale confederation, a platform for research, communication, and best practices around issues like ‘real democracy’, ‘decolonising practices’, and ‘alter-institutionality’ (see Papastergiadis 2020)

supermarket' where objects are captured, repackaged, and remarketed under the regime of semiotic differentiation and profitability (Flood and Grindon 2014: 23). If 'disobedient objects' point at the objects' ability to disobey the very symbolic order of the museum that hosts them, 'the concept of disobedient curating endows the curator with a similar agency to work within the institution but against the protocols that limit its capacity to act in the interests of the common' (Lyons 2018: 24).<sup>88</sup> For the NHM, Indigenous totem poles' power does not solely lie on a symbolic level, but also on a very material one: totem poles have proven instrumental in Native Nations victories against fossil fuel infrastructural projects serving as an alliance building tool. In fact, the natives' relationship to their artefacts embodies a radical negation to the capitalist mode of production and to the Western way of connecting to objects, nature, and the land, premised on processes of extraction, exploitation, and dispossession.<sup>89</sup>

In this sense, totem poles become monuments of the Indigenous anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle since they incarnate practices of symbolic exchange, communal social relations, and a different way of relating to nature and to the land. In sharp contrast to a productivist economy revolving around principles of consumption, commodification, and ownership, Indigenous artefacts embody an alternate mode of cultural production, a decolonial body of thought and practice, and a modality of Indigenous-land connected practices that can 'inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time' (Coulthard 2014: 13). Totem poles can signify a non-dominating and non-exploitative way of relating with the natural world that is

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<sup>88</sup> For instance, such an attempt was undertaken by curators Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon in their exhibition 'Disobedient Objects' at the V&A Museum in London. Taking its cue from other activist art exhibitions (like *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum), it constituted one of the first major exhibitions to assemble the actual instruments of direct action, foregrounding the design of object-making and the material culture of social movements from around the world, and redirecting institutional resources towards ongoing activist struggles.

<sup>89</sup> As many critics have highlighted, 'primitive accumulation', does not only allude to the enclosures and land expropriation from the European peasantry that led to the concomitant process of proletarianisation, but also to a project tied to colonialist expansion and European imperialism. Using these lenses helps us perceive 'primitive accumulation' not only as a foundational process for the initial development of the capitalist mode of production, but also as an ongoing process of 'accumulation by dispossession' and expanded reproduction (Harvey 2003, Boatca 2015).

imbued with an understanding of land and nature as ‘*a system of reciprocal relations and obligations*’ (Coulthard 2014: 13, original emphasis). Especially in the post-Standing Rock era, totem poles are invested with reinvigorated meanings, instantiating not only durable signifiers that have been reiterated for generations within the Indigenous cultural tradition, but also much vaster and capacious temporalities that reach far beyond the institution itself and even capitalism for that matter.



**Figure 4.17.** Collective prayer to charge the mission of the Whale Totem Pole. Photograph by Kristen Grace/Florida Museum.

To return to the *Whale People*, not only did the orca totem serve as a Trojan horse that enabled Indigenous politics to be brought into the museum, but also the exhibition itself functioned as a secret agent within the museum. After having infiltrated the institution, the NHM sided with its better nature, identifying and recruiting potential allies and activating the divisions that already lied hidden within it. It established bonds of solidarity between native communities and the partnered museum, while leveraging this inside position to pressure it to put its physical, organisational, and communications infrastructures into good use. However, such an

approach stands in sharp contrast to the liberal politics of inclusion, diversity, and representation, where institutions are perceived as the sole arbiters for conferring ‘affirmative’ recognition.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the NHM pushes against institutions, which are often rooted in histories of plunder and colonialism, with demands that extend far beyond the repatriation of sacred objects and human remains or granting Indigenous communities more authority over the representation of their cultural traditions and narratives.<sup>91</sup> Instead, museums are used as platforms for amplifying dissensual voices, consolidating native forms of collective self-empowerment and modes of prefiguring alternatives to the existing colonial power structures (what Coulthard calls a ‘resurgent politics of recognition’). By building such models of allyship, institutions can not only render certain struggles visible, but actively join them by taking a side in the division and redirecting their resources towards Native-led activist campaigns.

#### 4.3.4 A Name in Common: Building Collective Power

Rather than starting something new all the time, look for where the splits already exist and amplify them; it is like pouring gas on that fuel by just reiterating. [...] This, we would argue, is the basis of how social movements communicate. To reiterate becomes an act of solidarity.<sup>92</sup>

Jason Jones,  
Co-founder of NAA

The emphasis on the totem poles’ symbolic and material power to bring together disparate native and non-native communities, environmental organisations, activist groups, and natural history museums for a common cause is neither unwarranted

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<sup>90</sup> Fraser (1995: 83), for instance, distinguishes between ‘affirmative’ remedies that aim ‘at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them’ and ‘transformative’ remedies that aim at ‘correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework’.

<sup>91</sup> According to Bennett (2017a: 345), museums provided ‘a template for programs that aimed—unsuccessfully—to manage Indigenous peoples off the face of the earth’.

<sup>92</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 00:11:23).

nor coincidental. In fact, it has been one of the NHM's priorities to coalesce these various groups into strategic alliances in order to build broader solidarities across the environmental justice movement, even if there is not always a complete alignment between their respective interests. After all, divisions run deep even among Indigenous communities, with some leaning in favour of the proposed oil and gas infrastructural projects and others struggling against them. Far from a universally accepted signifier, nature itself has been a contentious symbol and active site of struggle.<sup>93</sup> Although the focus is on engaging with the Indigenous site-specific struggles and on organising the side that holds nature as the site of non-capitalist desire, there is also a continuous effort to establish points of intersection between a wide range of struggles by inscribing them into a broader horizon. The aim is to extrapolate from the local to the universal and to render the site-specific injustice into a symbol that embodies a collective struggle.

One of the main preoccupations of NAA's work over the last two decades has been to identify and propagate symbols for contemporary leftist struggles to prevent these movements from dissipating. This became more evident in their work during Occupy, which consisted in media strategies of reappropriating, hijacking, and rebranding visual signifiers (normally used by the authorities) to thread together various manifestations of the same popular movement around the world. In using the black-and-yellow Occupy tape, the 'mili-tent' form, and other visual markers deployed during the Zuccotti occupation, the aim was to create a visual language in common. A language that by being standardised could not only be reproduced and reiterated, but could also resonate with other occupations taking place in the squares of Spain (M15 movement), Greece (Indignants), Egypt (Arab Spring), and elsewhere. This militant practice indicates both an aesthetic and political response to a three-faceted diagnosis of the present condition: the fragmentation of the Left, the fragmentation of meaning, and the limits of participation, or what NAA calls 'participationism'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Notions like nature, belonging, and bonds to the land have always problematised critical theory since they are often used to invoke racialised fantasies of blood and soil.

<sup>94</sup> See Not An Alternative's series of lectures, entitled 'Participationism and the Limits of

In this respect, Dean has coined the term 'communicative capitalism' to describe the amplified role of global telecommunications, the immense bodies of assembled data, and the surplus of affective networks that characterise our social media era.

'Communicative capitalism' designates the injunction to make everyone speak, a kind of exploitation of communication that rests upon the rhetorics of technological access and individual participation.<sup>95</sup> According to Dean (2012: 125), 'communicative capitalism' provides the technological infrastructure for neoliberal capitalism, while 'communication technologies contribute to the displacement and dispersion of critical thought'. If the impetus to 'be connected' has entrapped us in the very communicative circuits that had promised liberation, then participation now affirms the system rather than challenging it. After all, 'capitalism is a system that exploits people, not one that constitutively excludes them' (Dean 2012: 105). For Dean (2012: 156), 'participation is personalization; the more we communicate, the less is communicated; expansions in expression and creativity produce the one rather than a collective of the many'. This is a concomitant of what Žižek (1999: 322-334) has described as 'the decline of symbolic efficiency', meaning the fragmentation of meaning that results from the intertwinement of capitalism and communication. In other words, the vast circulation of utterances, the proliferation of digital data, and the increasing accumulation of free-floating signifiers have resulted in the eclipse of meaning since it no longer has any stable anchoring point. Hence, for Dean, 'the decline of symbolic efficiency' not only designates that the same signifiers can be imbued with divergent meanings depending on context, but also that previously shared meanings, narratives, or conventions have been now rendered illegible, oblique, and open to multiple interpretations.<sup>96</sup>

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Collaboration'. Taylor (2010) argued that in our current ideological formation that fetishises interactivity and engagement, 'participation is perceived as politics, and vice versa'.

<sup>95</sup> Dean (2005; 2019) has developed the concept of 'communicative capitalism' to describe the contemporary forms of individuation that stem from mass media and communications technology. Her analysis often invokes Baudrillard (1983: 20), for whom the capitalist system is based upon the premise of the masses' participation: 'Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation'.

<sup>96</sup> Even the sign has been penetrated by capital, since according to Baudrillard (1993; 1998) it is manipulated as coded difference, comprising the final object of consumption.

According to NAA, this predicament has been further exacerbated by strands of the contemporary Left milieu that have elevated individual acts of resistance, personal lifestyle changes, DIY and small-scale experiments, momentary acts of defiance, and playful aesthetic disruptions that attract media attention, albeit just temporarily. According to Dean (2019: 34), hints of this ‘fetishisation of resistance as correlative to contemporary individualism’ can be found, for instance, in the work of Hardt and Negri, who seem to be opting for an entrepreneurial form of revolution involving the affective, generative, creative, and cooperative power of the multitude. Indeed, Hardt and Negri seem to reject notions like ‘alliance or coalitions’, advocating instead for the convergence of a multiplicity of singularities, for horizontal network forms and new modes of decision-making. In fact, according to them, it is ‘the experiences of networkers and net users’ that ‘have configured an institutional decision-making composed of a myriad of micropolitical paths’, as well as ‘the collective control of expression in networks’ that can become ‘a political weapon’ (Hardt and Negri 2009: 358).



**Figure 4.18.** NAA’s slogan ‘Goldman Sacks does not care if you raise chickens’. Photograph by NAA.

To return to NAA’s work, in order to distance itself from the infatuation with individual ethical decision-making, micropolitical activities, and practices of self-cultivation, as evidenced by some grassroots horizontal networks that emerged out of Occupy, the group came up with the slogan ‘Goldman Sacks does not care if you

raise chickens—unless they are raised in Zuccotti park’.<sup>97</sup> In other words, ‘subversive acts’, like raising chickens or other modes of ‘dissensual disruptions’ represent nothing more than individualistic alternatives already offered by the system; they can represent an actual threat to the system only when inscribed into a commitment to a collective cause.<sup>98</sup> This alluded to a shift from a ‘folk-political’ localism (co-ops, for instance), excessive individuation (e.g. self-sustainable communes), and constant preoccupation with the means (participation, horizontality, engagement) to a politics focused on the ends, as the only way to break through the impasse of communicative capitalism. Indeed, during Occupy, NAA remained sceptical of the ‘fetishisation of processes’ arguing that in themselves they ‘say nothing of the form of social relationships within which they exist’ (Not An Alternative 2013). The impetus to participate in horizontal forms of organisation, the prioritisation of process over product, and democratic consensus decision-making as evinced, for instance, in the General Assembly, were read as ‘symptoms of the dominant ideology of communicate capitalism’ (Not An Alternative 2013). The General Assembly itself, purported as an instance of all-inclusive and direct (non-representative) democracy, was nothing less than an exclusionary mechanism, especially for non-native speakers or working people who could not attend and hence could not be represented in the decision-making processes. The strenuous efforts to reach consensus often resulted in stalemate, inaction, and stagnation.

Instead, NAA (2013) counters that ‘Occupy was powerful not where consensus worked but in instances where groups and individuals showed a commitment to a collective idea even when they disagreed’. This allows us to read Occupy not as an isolated and site-specific instance of societal discontent, but as part of a global movement that built on preexisting mobilisations across the world. The people who

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<sup>97</sup> The original slogan is ‘Goldman Sacks does not care if you raise chickens’ and is attributed to Jodi Dean. NAA reformulated the slogan to ‘Goldman Sacks does not care if you raise chickens—unless they are communist chickens’ and ‘Goldman Sachs does not care if you raise chickens—unless they are raised in Zuccotti park’.

<sup>98</sup> Such individualistic acts of resistance, according to NAA, can be easily recuperated by the system. This process of appropriation entails the dismantling of ‘specific signs of contradictory social discourses’, their transformation into neutral narratives, and their retransmission as ‘popular’ signifiers, resulting in the distortion of mediated images and to the blurring of the lines between advertising and aesthetics (Foster 1985: 159).

joined it were positively inclined to take action because they had been already familiarised with the struggle's shape and form (square encampments in other countries) and because its arrival was anticipated in advance. Occupy constituted the rearticulation of a movement model that was easily reproducible hence easier to spread, and the reiteration of signifiers that had been already part of the cultural consciousness. In other words, what made Occupy work was the commitment to a shared idea and a common name ('Occupy'). This foregrounds the necessity of shifting away from the individual to start consolidating commonalities, building more sustained organisational structures and institutions that instantiate collective forms of expression and political will. As Dean (2012: 20) puts it, 'we need to find a mode of struggle that can scale, endure, and cultivate the collective desire for collectivity'.<sup>99</sup>

To do so, as many contemporary theorists have highlighted, the task of the contemporary Left is to establish a strong coalition amongst multiple struggles (political, economic, anti-colonial, ecological, etc.). Butler has advocated for a 'translative project' between these particular movements and the universal claims that are intrinsic to them, whereas Laclau has opted for 'a relation of equivalence' that needs to be established between a plurality of social demands, which in turn depends on the construction of a more global emancipatory imaginary. In this sense, chains of equivalence are always contingent and dependent upon articulatory practices and reconfigurations, since designating a privileged locus of a universal struggle would mean turning the very horizon into a ground. However, if we are to follow Žižek, 'there is always one [struggle] which, while it is part of the chain, secretly overdetermines its very horizon' (in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000: 320). Whereas Laclau and Butler perceive class antagonism as another form of identity politics or as just one particular struggle in a series of social antagonisms, for Žižek, it

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<sup>99</sup> In Dean's theoretical edifice, the tight organisational form of the communist party is the necessary prerequisite to turn a crowd into a 'people' (see Dean 2016b). In sharp contrast to Hardt and Negri (2009: 352), who argue that in present conditions of biopolitical production labour to 'repose any such vanguard political formation' like the party 'is anachronistic at best', Dean (2019: 337) responds: 'The politics has to be built, supported, sustained. The form for that political work remains the party'.

constitutes the very terrain on which other particular struggles compete for hegemony.

Instead of reading Occupy solely as the embodiment of new affective and imaginative practices of commoning and as the invention of a new participatory, non-representational, and prefigurative politics, Dean and NAA offer a different account.<sup>100</sup> For them Occupy reinvents representation by asserting division and by foregrounding a fundamental antagonism—class struggle—that cuts through the social. This can be encapsulated in the slogan ‘We are the 99 percent’, a false nomination that can nevertheless express collectivity by bringing to the fore the very gap between the top one percent and the ‘rest of us’. Instead of adhering to the ‘fantasy of multiplicity without antagonism, of difference without division’, one needs to occupy division and channel it towards ‘the creation of new practices, institutions, and will that remain divisive as they are held open and together via their relation to the fundamental antagonism between rich and poor, few and many, ninety-nine and one percent’ (Dean and Jones 2012). In other words, a language in common refers less to the performative and signifying tactics deployed by social movements, than to ‘the mode of communication of a revolutionary collective coming into being’, since social movements ‘are constituted as they are made visible and audible’ (Not An Alternative 2020).

It is this impetus to affirm signifiers with a lasting meaning and to reiterate symbols that build collective power that continues to inform NAA’s practice up to today. Instead of starting something new, NAA, through its ‘mythic constructions’, endeavours to embolden what is already there. It attempts to collectivise individual and isolated actors who are already fighting from within their institutions, weave together ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ under a common name, and forge them into a broader environmental justice movement. This is the case with the NHM’s forthcoming project that entails the inauguration of the Red Natural History Museum Alliance between Indigenous groups, scientists, and other ‘insiders’ within

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<sup>100</sup> For Occupy as a non- or post-representation movement see Sitrin and Azzellini 2014.

partnered institutions to push forwards a non-extractive and non-exploitative relation with nature and the land. A red sign will signify that the institution has been flipped and that it has taken the side of the common. With every repetition of the red symbol, a red dividing and divisive line will be drawn, accumulating force and demanding everyone take a side. As Dean (2012: 155) reminds us '[d]ivision is common. We have to seize it'.

#### 4.4 Conclusions: The Limits of Artistic Activism

The case studies discussed in this chapter resonate with Marchart's conceptualisation of artistic activism as composing a triad of propagating, agitating, and organising. The function of agitation is to 'stir up, unrest, to unsettle certainties and wake people from their dogmatic slumber', or to strive to 'disaffiliate people from the realm of doxa' (Marchart 2019: 34). Agitation and disruption of 'doxa' constitutes a necessary precondition for the propagation of another, more democratic, worldview to succeed. In the same vein, for a particular political position or struggle to be propagated against rival truths and even have a chance of contesting a hegemonic one, it requires duration and sustainability.<sup>101</sup>

One can now attempt to put the previously examined tactical and theoretical approaches into an instructive dialogue and arrive at some useful conclusions about artistic activism in general. To begin with, the MTL collective, in its *October* article, challenges the very foundations of NAA's notion of 'institutional liberation'. The collective asks: '[w]ould such a liberation itself be somehow institutional or institutionalized, or is it a liberation *from* institutions as they exist in favor of a new practice of anti- or counter-institutionality?' (MTL Collective 2018b: 205, original emphasis). For the MTL collective (and DTP), official institutions seem to be perceived as sites that consolidate and sanction oppressive structures (colonial relations, class divisions, etc.). Institutions are read as fixed arrangements that tend towards 'the reproduction of a reified status quo through symbolic rites of authority, divisions of labor, distributions of resources, and normative forms of conduct' (MTL Collective 2018b: 206). In this sense, if formal institutions encapsulate alienating arrangements, then liberation entails the exact opposite. Liberation constitutes a dynamic and fluid process of releasing people from preassigned arrangements and the enduring and dominating social structures that they are part of. Liberation

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<sup>101</sup> Building on Gramsci, according to whom a 'common sense' comprises the prevalent and taken-for-granted set of ideas and values, Laclau develops the notion of a hegemonic order, namely a particularity that has hegemonised universality.

pertains to 'fugitivity' and motion, to a refusal to settle and to be positioned, which can only be accomplished by an amorphous configuration that is constantly shifting.

In this respect, 'unsettle everything' becomes DTP's guiding principle for the practice of liberation, alluding to the Zapatista form of movement organising that 'comes from below and to the Left'. This also means that the state (and its institutions) ceases to be the vehicle of emancipation and the focus shifts from 'seizing state power' to the construction of alternative forms of social organisation. If institutions are considered ideologically tainted sites, then an anti-authority and decentring stance highlights the strategic importance of building new institutional arrangements from the bottom up. This entails the creation of new horizontal, non-dominating, and autonomous infrastructures, the invention of novel platforms for experimentation and alternate hubs of decolonisation and movement building. In sharp contrast to Dean's repudiation of 'folk-political' localism and to NAA's rejection of small-scale solutions and co-ops, McKee (2016: 240) argues that 'such site-specific projects are essential to a broader organizational ecosystem of an insurgent post-Occupy, post-Ferguson Left'.

Whereas for DTP institutions serve as tactical targets to organise around due to their visibility and as opportunities to bring together different struggles to build counter-power at their gates, NAA assumes a different position. The group unequivocally affirms the social value of these institutions since they are perceived as not identical with their colonial, class, or ideological foundations. By interpreting them as split, it allows NAA to think in terms of tactics of insurgency and of commandeering institutions as part of a social movement infrastructure. Aiming at developing a new 'habitus, its own way of inhabiting the institutional structures', the group seeks to recalibrate its relationship to institutions, to understand them as potential allies, and to activate their resources, infrastructures, and formats (Holmes 2004: 552). Guided by an acknowledgement that there is no outside position in *realpolitik*, NAA perceives institutions as sites of collective and concentrated power, hence sites to be seized. Rejecting a politics perceived in terms of resistance, insurrection, and participation in horizontal networks, it adheres to a communist politics that

prioritises strategising, mobilising counter-power, and building partisan infrastructure. Alluding to a Leninist perspective that centres the state as the locus of power, it also sets out to envision a way of working in and against the institution, as a model for state and corporate takeover.

Whereas both groups operate as platforms for social movements, I would argue that their approaches are irreconcilable. For DTP, ‘movements keep moving and so we don’t want a fixed meaning. Power fixes meaning. We are aware of this and don’t want to get stuck. We don’t want to get commodified. We want to keep moving’ (MTL Collective 2017). From this perspective, fixed names, entities, and strategies are perceived as constraints and are abandoned in favour of fluidity, multiplicity, and perplexity, allowing new shape-shifting formations to emerge across various positionalities and different struggles. Guided by a notion of decolonial freedom and by an understanding that ‘decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity’, DTP seeks to *operationalise intersectionality and weaponise identity politics* (Tuck and Yang 2012: 7). Excavating the entanglement of a multiplicity of structures of oppression, it aims to create these necessary, while uncomfortable, spaces to address the debts we owe one another.

NAA, in contrast, although being deeply attentive to the intricacies of every site-specific struggle, shows a commitment to a name in common and a fidelity to a truth process, while acknowledging that divisions and antagonisms are constitutive of the social. Affirming that ‘collective movements are not fixed entities that precede their modes of appearance’, it argues for the development of a common visual language, tactics, and ways of being together that can lay the groundwork for a ‘revolutionary collective coming into being’ (Not An Alternative 2020). Rejecting the idea of a multitude of singularities coming magically together when the revolutionary moment arrives, it advocates the repetition of common names and symbols, and of tight organisational forms that will allow collective power to be built in the here and now. It is this militant commitment to a collective political subject that can allow power to scale up against the impasse of communicative capitalism and the fragmentation of the Left. This indicates another theoretical point where the two

groups part ways, which can be traced back to their respective positions during Occupy: DTP prefers using the term 'de-occupy' rather than 'occupy' since the latter alludes to settler re-occupation of unceded land, whereas for NAA, the commitment to a common name (Occupy, Gilets Jaunes, etc.) is imperative, even if there are disagreements about its actual meaning.<sup>102</sup>

Both groups' effectiveness lies in deconstructing the myth of museum neutrality and in their commitment to identify the cracks, the splits, and the gaps in any given institutional structure, hence pushing others to take a side. Whereas DTP assumes a more antagonistic, confrontational approach, shaking its fist on the doorstep of the institution, scrutinising its every move, and holding it accountable for every misstep, Not An Alternative's the NHM develops a Trojan horse strategy, first infiltrating the institution, and then operationalising, organising and repurposing the mobilisation that takes place within it. Whereas DTP seeks for 'accomplices', the NHM seeks for 'allies', recruiting the 'friends' who might already work inside the institution and taking advantage of their leverage. Although the two groups' respective approaches hint at a different relation to the institution, it is my contention that both tactics are necessary: it is only when terrains of pressure both from within and from outside converge that institutional transformation starts to seem possible.

This also alludes to the limitations of these groups' tactics. By assuming a position of exteriority in relation to the institution, DTP risks reifying its position, alienating itself from other potential allies, and neglecting the organising that takes place within the institution. In other words, by maintaining a critical distance from it, it risks limiting its efficacy and never establishing a common ground with the institution to effectuate change. One has to highlight an additional danger pertaining to the pitfalls of visibility, since DTP deploys highly theatrical interventions at the gates of the institution, where the performativity of the assembled bodies is documented, replicated, and disseminated via communicative devices and virtual technologies.

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<sup>102</sup> For instance, the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F. 2015) writes: 'Wall Street is an abstract space, everywhere and nowhere at once. By de-occupying it, we created space for collective powers to surge forth and for struggles to connect with one another'.

Indeed, performance has been rendered a core part of communications, allowing a temporary interruption to exceed its local instantiation. According to Butler (2015: 91), the political potency of the protesting body is multiplied by the media that 'extends the scene visually and audibly and participates in the delimitation and transposability of the scene'.

Although it is of critical importance when a counter-hegemonic struggle gets propagated to broader audiences and enters mainstream discussions, there is always the threat of succumbing to the corrosive impact of the 'attention economy' and hence losing control over site-specific narratives. Protest actions can be easily turned into spectacles and media exposure can flatten out the details, nuances, and specificities of a struggle or demand. To put it simply, what gets to count as a win can easily be reduced to a *New York Times* mention and a social media re-tweet, shifting the spotlight from the specific struggle to the activist group that is spearheading the protest. This form of *visibility as activist branding* also alludes to the possibility of co-optation and recuperation of critique by the institution. In other words, disruptive actions that aim at decentring of institutional authority, might be absorbed nevertheless by the institution, recentring it as a space that accommodates critique. This was crystallised in the words of a Whitney museum guard who was welcoming visitors while an intervention was taking place: 'feel free to join the protest, or if you are here for the exhibition you can get a ticket from the counter'.<sup>103</sup>

The risks for NAA lie in the opposite direction. Although the group seems to have accomplished a praiseworthy dialectical interplay between inside and outside tactics, it still risks falling prey to its own tactics. By morphing into an official organisation and accredited institution in its own right, it limits its capacity for more radical gestures that arise from being the generic museum, since it now has to abide by the imposed rules of the museum sector, the same sector that it has set to transform. In addition to becoming insufficiently confrontational by being too close to the institution, partnered museums can also take advantage of the NHM's collaboration

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<sup>103</sup> Museum guard, public statement during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of action (date: 12/4/2019).

with Native Nations to diversify their exhibitions and programming at no cost, without ever undertaking structural changes. If ‘co-optation goes both ways’, museums can always absorb and redirect the NHM’s resources and coalitions for their own benefit, using the group as a scapegoat if things go wrong.

To conclude, I hope that the examination of these two case studies has foregrounded my own twofold argument: firstly, that the stagings of dissensus (with its discursive and embodied manifestation) should not only be perceived as isolated, rapturous, and episodic encounters, but rather as the condensations of much longer protracted struggles that continue on a latent level; and secondly that once the antagonisms have been enacted, a second moment is necessary, a moment of inscription and institutionalisation, where a new, more egalitarian, regime of visibility must be inaugurated. Indeed, according to Marchart (2019: 37), ‘debates and practices have to be organized in order to survive over time; they must be, to some extent, institutionalized’. In other words, while artistic activism can prove instrumental in testing out the ‘antagonistic qualities’ of any given situation, this constitutes only the first step of a longer process of radical change. Hence, it remains an open question, if artistic activism, often premised on artists’ virtuosity to stage scenes of dissensus, to mobilise the media with the deployment of agitational techniques, and to imaginatively propagate counter-hegemonic positions, can be actually embedded in broader political organising and social movements.

If artists are often self-absorbed in the competitive and individualistic setting of the art world, this might be true for artist-activists as well, with the inability of the aforementioned groups to coalesce into a unified front, serving only a good case in point. For artistic activism—a niche in the broader field of political organising—to reach the mainstream, it has first to deal with its own self-marginalisation and limited scope.<sup>104</sup> In order to keep dissensus an open process and not treat it as an isolated upheaval or momentary disruption of the sensible, one needs to build the

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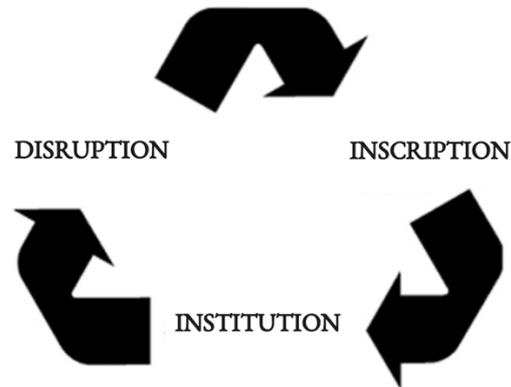
<sup>104</sup> As Mouffe (2007: 5) eloquently puts it, ‘For the “war of position” to be successful, linkage with traditional forms of political intervention like parties and trade unions cannot be avoided. It would be a serious mistake to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony’.

institutions and infrastructures that can allow radical imaginaries to be continuously articulated. This means that artistic activism must align with the tedious long-term organising processes that mass movement building necessarily involves, ranging from unionisation to working rights. It also means that it must exceed the narrow and self-congratulatory confines of the art world.

## General Conclusions

This thesis has attempted to engage with prominent political theorists who conceptualise democratic politics as permeated by contingency and undecidability, echoing Lefort's own argument that the 'hallmark of democracy is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life' (Deutsche 1996: 272). Rancière, Mouffe (2005b: 8), Dean, and Castoriadis, among others, emphasise the inherent divisions and latent antagonisms that cut through the social, arguing that democracy is a disruptive affair and that 'conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization'. Since division and antagonism lie at the core of democratic politics, I attempted to conceive dissensus less as a fleeting and unexcepted affair, than as a method and a democratic practice that can be continuously deployed. Instead of romanticising the moment of disruption, protest, or upheaval and the short temporalities of the event that interrupts any given established order, I have attempted to follow a different path. I argued that although dissensual moments cannot be engineered since they arise unintentionally and sporadically, once they do occur they need to be inscribed, since they confront us with the exigency of taking sides in the division. In addition, I demonstrated that although dissensual events might attract visibility, these are just isolated manifestations of much longer and protracted processes of movement and alliance building. In other words, divisions must be built upon since politics necessarily involve collective agents and struggles that continue on a latent level, even when they are punctuated by more visible and disruptive events. This explicates the reason behind my decision to shift focus not only from disparate acts of disruption and fantasies of insurrection, but also from discourses of difference, heterogeneity, diversity, and cultural politics, to the theorisation of a 'dissensual institutionality'. This signifies the concrete strategies of engagement with institutional terrains in order to produce the concrete material infrastructures to sustain dissent and to encapsulate more democratic imaginaries that can oppose the dominant post-political order. This paradigm shift can be summarised as follows:

*from staging, to inscribing, and then to instituting dissensus (or from disruption, through inscription, to institution).*



**Figure 5.1.** Image by the author.

This theoretical schema was enriched by a comparative study of a wide selection of case studies that were active in the period between 2017-2021. The examined cases present significant points of convergence: a cross-fertilisation between theory and praxis, the utilisation of aesthetic tools to foreground inequalities, the prioritisation of issues of social visibility, and the experimentation with novel organisational structures, instituting architectures, and decision-making processes. At the same time, their points of divergence provoke additional research interest since they offer a broad spectrum in terms of their scale and complexity, but also by the fact that they are situated in extremely divergent localities, cultural contexts, and sociopolitical conditions. In addition, they engage with different institutional settings and production budgets (from multimillion exhibitions to zero-budget interventions), while using different terminologies and inscribing their struggles into various political horizons. These horizons might pertain to decolonisation (Decolonize This Place), communism (Not An Alternative), or democratic and egalitarian politics (Visible, documenta 14, Jonas Staal), which might even be incommensurable with one another. Lastly, the selected cases exemplify a variety of strategies of engagement with the 'Institution' and the deployment of a multiplicity of tactics (exhibition making, construction of assemblies, creative direct actions). Making no claims to

‘objectivity’, these practices have been presented in the words of their actors and have been complemented by my direct observations, reflections, and analysis.

It is my contention that by extrapolating from these case studies and by looking beyond their considerable divergencies, one can draw some useful conclusions. As it has been elaborated thus far, my attempt to theorise a ‘dissensual institutionality’ does not dictate a singular approach, but rather opens a spectrum of possibilities and a wide range of practices, including strategies of decentring, performing, and reclaiming the institution. As the three main criteria that allude to a ‘dissensual institutionality’, I identified ‘taking sides’, translatability, and self-reflexivity, which were validated and enhanced by my case study selection.

Contra the Adornian account of art as protected by a superstructural autonomy, this thesis has argued that the arts and cultural realm is structurally embedded in capitalist exchange relations, with the so-called ‘creative’ industries testifying to the ‘emergence of an “aesthetic” form of capitalism, in transit from the material to the immaterial’ (Eagleton 2016: 152). In this sense, it is crucial to critically engage with its key institutions and to seize control of its infrastructures. Instead of complying with the dominant myth of ‘museum neutrality’ or abdicating the task of confronting existing institutions in favour of strategies of exodus, nomadism, and evacuation of places of power, a ‘dissensual institutionality’ opens the pathway to practices that attempt to hold existing cultural institutions accountable and construct new infrastructures that challenge the consensual order and the neoliberal mode of production. Against the art world’s outright dismissal of politics, a ‘dissensual institutionality’ accepts that there is no outside position and the inevitability of ‘getting your hands dirty’ in realpolitik. Instead of renouncing the supposed purity and autonomy of art (a pitfall into which documenta fell, for instance), such practices not only illuminate the disagreements, conflicts, and latent antagonisms that already exist in the order of visibility and appearance, but also, and more importantly, crack these gaps wide open, sustain the divisions, and organise the side they are fighting for in order to precipitate the democratisation of society.

Translatability signifies the necessity of connecting local stagings of equality with global struggles as well as particular demands with more universal claims, since nothing guarantees that the various social groups' particular objectives will not clash with each other. A 'dissensual institutionality' offers not only the meeting grounds between sameness and otherness, but also the translative tools for political articulation that can provide the basis for a type of 'horizontal linking', allowing the formation of alliances between social movements, parties, solidarity networks, activist groups, etc. This became evident, for example, with DTP's campaign that attempted to articulate a broader horizon of imagination, i.e., 'decolonial freedom', where a multiplicity of seemingly incompatible struggles were inscribed and aligned with one another by making the connections and translating differences through a critical intersectional analysis (Mignolo 2009). This was also the case with d14 that consolidated political links between anti-fascist groups and movements in Athens and Kassel. However, there is still a long way to go before we start giving shape to a mode of institutionality that can serve as a surface of inscription where new political communities can be reinscribed repeatedly and where new forms of contingent and non-essential being-in-common, beyond identitarian politics, can be invented.

An issue that kept resurfacing was the complexities, contradictions, and antinomies that permeate the cultural realm. Indeed, discrepancies between the discourse production of institutional actors (in terms of representation, mission statements, curatorial discourses) and their structural underpinnings (sponsorships, labour conditions, compositions of boards of trustees, organisation models), as well as glaring inconsistencies between the intentions of social actors (artists, curators, activists, etc.) and their actual practices, were recurrent throughout my research.<sup>1</sup> Issuing pompous political statements that cannot be delivered, setting ambitious ends that contradict the means and practices that are enacted to accomplish them, and downplaying the complicity in climate change, institutional racism, toxic

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of a curator: 'The art world is a place of compromise, is a place of contradiction, like every world. I think that everyone is thinking "yes, let's use money from X to do something with it". I do not think that this is an exception, this is the norm, this what everyone is doing [...] This is the absolute default system' (anonymised participant, interview quote, interview date: 15/11/2019, 00:15:00).

philanthropy, economic inequality, and social exclusions, are only some of the common threads that were unveiled and seem endemic on all institutional levels of the cultural field. Such inconsistencies were revealed, for instance, when the official discourse of documenta declared that it is 'owned collectively and by no one in particular, an unlimited number of shares, open to anyone willing to participate, anywhere and anytime' was contradicted by the painful reality that the dislocation of the exhibition made it accessible to only a highly educated, privileged, predominantly European, and art-related audience (Szymczyk 2017: 41). The same goes for the Visible award that showcased cultural practices that are radically democratic but failed to enact these very democratic principles in its parliamentary voting and decision-making process. Hence, self-reflexivity and a self-critical stance seem integral for a 'dissensual institutionality' to signal not only the constant negotiation between discourses, practices, and institutional structures, but also the commitment to expose the contradictions, biases, and naturalised exclusions it might embody by striving to maintain open-ended processes and to be attentive to the dissensual voices that emerge outside its purview.

Setting aside the three criteria that I had set from the outset, three additional points of consideration were brought to light, hinting at possible pathways for future research.<sup>2</sup> The first point of consideration constitutes the proximity of these practices to the Institution. This points to the fact that there is a thin line to be walked between being too close and thus being absorbed, and being too distant, thus politically ineffective. For instance, DTP's creative, albeit confrontational and disruptive, tactics risked alienating the group from other potential allies and from the organising that was taking place within the institution. On the other hand, the NHM, while exemplifying a more diplomatic 'insider' approach, premised on 'performing' an institution and recruiting 'allies' from within the institution, risks falling prey to its own tactics and being neutralised by the very museum sector that it set out to transform. According to Jason Jones, 'We morphed into becoming an

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<sup>2</sup> An additional pathway for future research would be to apply the analytical lenses elaborated in this thesis to other forms of institutions, including social, legal, and political.

institution and a kind of organization in itself and this is our greatest limitation'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by 'becoming' an institution, establishing an advisory board, offering exhibitions, and attending museum directors' retreats, the NHM lost the capacity of being the generic, limiting the spectrum of its modes of engagement and making it more vulnerable to co-optation.

In addition, my research began with the assumption that critical forms of engagement with solidified institutions 'from the outside' (such as artistic activism) and strategies of deconstructing existing institutional arrangements 'from within' (e.g., decentring) represent opposite ends of the spectrum. However, as my research progressed, it became evident that a multiplicity of methodologies can overlap and coincide with one another. In this sense, sharp distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' engagement tactics seem to have little relevance, since, as I have shown, they can operate in tandem and even complement one another. For instance, in the Whitney case, the initial act of dissensus from the museum staff was reinforced by both the external pressure from activists, researchers, and journalists, and by the internal pressure from the participating artists in the Whitney Biennale, compelling the museum to take action. Indeed, the configuration of inside and outside forces seems to be always at play and the distinction between their respective tactics is often blurred. For instance, a hegemonic, top-down institution, like documenta, attempted a decentring within its own structure, opening the possibility of turning into a counter-hegemonic institution; an alter-institution (i.e., the Parliament of Bodies) developed under documenta's wing and promoted its own political agenda; and a diversity of dissensual voices emerged because of documenta's displacement, striving to inscribe their demands, objections, and concerns into the fabric of the institution.

The last parameter that needs to be considered is the question of scale and durability. Small-scale initiatives, like activist mobilisations, might maintain more flexible arrangements and be more attentive to the locality in which they are

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<sup>3</sup> Interview quote (interview date: 3/12/2018, 01:35:00).

situated, however, their limited resources and precarious organisational structures impede them from reaching the mainstream and instigating structural transformations. On the other hand, larger and more durable institutional arrangements, like mega-institutions, might have the accumulated cultural capital, the leverage, and the legitimacy to effectuate structural change, but they are often restricted by the rigidity of the apparatuses in which they are embedded, rendering them 'too big to succeed and too big to fail' at the same time. In other words, there seems to be a continuous tension between consolidating large-scale infrastructures that can endure over time, on the one hand, and maintaining flexible and open-ended arrangements that are attuned to the various struggles and social movements that are already taking place, on the other.

In conclusion, it is my contention that the articulation of a new radically democratic imaginary does not suffice by itself, since even imaginaries need to be embodied and sustained through lasting material infrastructures, institutions, and practices. Hence our task is to engage in the longer and protracted processes of inventing new forms of institutionality (not limited to the cultural realm) that can not only illuminate and amplify novel social demands, but also scale, endure, and sustain collective antagonisms. This thesis has been only a modest contribution to this endeavour. Indeed, it is only the continuity, sustainability, and long-term organisation of social struggles that can forge a passage from dispersed micro-political tactics of resistance to macro-political strategies and a broader counter-hegemonic project for the radical democratisation of society.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Sample Participant Information Sheet



***Invitation to research project:***

Instituting Dissensus: The Democratisation of Cultural Institutions in the 21st Century

***Purpose and value of the research***

This is an invitation to participate in an interview, as part of my doctoral research in the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics. The purpose of this research is to investigate a variety of modes of engagement with arts and cultural institutions. My research conceives of institutions as potential democratic spaces that resist the post-political consensual order, and thus investigates the different ways in which a new institutionally can foster the amplification of a multiplicity of social demands. By exploring a variety of case studies that engage critically with arts and cultural institutions, this dissertation aspires to produce an interdisciplinary research that will both contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate and to policymaking by addressing questions of democracy, equality, and accountability in institutions.

***Who is being invited to participate and what does it involve?***

I am conducting semi-structured interviews with some of the key figures from my selected case studies, specifically artists, activists, theorists, and institutional partners. The participation in the research is voluntary, and the participant reserves the right of withdrawal from the research at any time and without giving any reasons.

***Confidentiality***

With your written consent, the interview will be recorded and then transcribed. Identifying information that is collected will be accessible only by the Principal Investigator and all the necessary precautions will be taken for the secure storage of the data. In the writing-up period all identifying information will be removed in relation to your responses, guaranteeing full anonymity. In case you prefer your name to be used, then quotations will be directly attributed to your name. Digital records will not be used or made available for any purposes other than the research project and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

***What will happen to the results of the research project?***

The transcripts and their analysis will be published in my final doctoral dissertation. Results may also be presented at conferences and be published in journals, articles, and publications.

***Ethical review of the research project***

This project has received ethics clearance from the Department of Politics and International Studies Research Committee of the University of Cambridge.

***Who is organising this research?***

Principal Investigator:

Mr Konstantinos Pittas, PhD Candidate, Department of Politics and International Studies, Girton College, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0JG  
M: [REDACTED], Email: [REDACTED]

Doctoral Supervisor:

Dr Duncan Bell, Professor in Political Thought and International Relations  
Department of Politics and International Studies  
Christ's College, St Andrew's St, Cambridge CB2 3BU  
T: [REDACTED], Email: [REDACTED]

## Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

### Participant Consent Form

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and that the researcher has provided me with satisfactory responses.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can refuse to answer to any questions, and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reasons.

I agree that the interview can be recorded as part of the project and that the data gathered will be stored securely. I also understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified (except as might be required by law).

I understand that only the Principal Investigator will have access to the identifying data provided and that the data will not be retained for longer than necessary in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (United Kingdom).

I consent to the use of the data in research, publications, and educational processes as explained in the Participant Information Sheet.

Select only **one** of the following:

I would like my name used and I understand that what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications, and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.

I prefer to be anonymised for this project.

I understand that this project has received Ethics Clearance by the Department of Politics and International Studies Research Committee of the University of Cambridge and that the Principal Investigator, Mr. Konstantinos Pittas, PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, can be found by email at [REDACTED] and by phone at [REDACTED]

**I agree to take part in this study and I, along with the Principal Investigator, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Appendix 3: Sample semi-structured interview plan

#### Participant information

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Title \_\_\_\_\_  
 Position \_\_\_\_\_  
 Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

#### Interview details

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Place \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time \_\_\_\_\_

#### Interview Target groups:

- \_\_\_\_\_ organisational team and artists
- Grassroots groups collaborating with \_\_\_\_\_
- Institutional partners that collaborated with \_\_\_\_\_
- Local artistic/activist groups that maintained a critical stance to \_\_\_\_\_

#### Conception & Themes

- How would you formulate the political aim of \_\_\_\_\_ in your own words? Has this political aim changed over the years?
- What ways are deployed to make this political statement come through and how is it translated into specific exhibition themes/practices?
- What would you say that the main themes of your current exhibitions are?
- Are these themes addressing mostly current global issues or local concerns?
- Who are the intended recipients of this political discourse, and do you think that the audience can identify with it?

#### More Specific Questions

- What led to the invention of \_\_\_\_\_?
- What is the ideal outcome of \_\_\_\_\_ in your eyes?
- Have your strategies changed over the years?
- What would you say that your main research themes are?
- How does your analytical framework bring struggles together and make the connections without collapsing them?
- Which are your main theoretical references?
- How are you influenced from the institutional critique tradition?
- Could you elaborate on your main strategies of engagement with institutional structures?
- Do you lean towards a more activist or a more institutional approach?
- Could you say a bit more about how the \_\_\_\_\_ evolved from its conception to its materialisation?
- How is \_\_\_\_\_'s anti-neoliberal, anti-nationalistic, and anti-colonial discourse translated into specific curatorial strategies, exhibition themes, and modes of engagement? Do you have specific examples?
- How would you describe the collaboration within your team?
- What was the rationale behind the decision to engage mainly with \_\_\_\_\_ institutions?
- How do you select the institutions with which you collaborate?
- How do you find allies from within existing institutions?
- Could you describe for me some of the initiatives that you have undertaken to approach Indigenous populations, activist groups, and grassroots movements?
- Is there a prioritisation of a certain struggle? Are all struggles of equal importance to you?

### Reception

- Is there a specific target audience for the exhibitions or is it addressed to everyone?
- Do you think that prior familiarisation with the broader discourse of \_\_\_\_\_ enables visitors to decipher easier the critical character of your interventions?
- How would you judge the audience's participation/engagement with the exhibition?
- How do you find the media's response?
- With which groups do you collaborate and in what kind of alliances are you participating?

### Outcomes & Evaluation

- In your view, have the exhibitions (organised so far) achieved their objectives and how?
- Has \_\_\_\_\_'s aim to make a political statement been achieved so far?
- Are you satisfied with the audience's attendance in the venues/public events/educational programmes and what do you hope that visitors have got out of their participation?
- What did the partnered cultural institutions gain from your collaboration?
- Do you think that the political identity of \_\_\_\_\_ needs re-evaluation?

### General & Outcome (Questions for institutional partners)

- What were your initial thoughts when \_\_\_\_\_ first approached you for a potential collaboration? How was this approach made?
- Did you personally and as an institution find resonance with the broader discourse and exhibition themes of \_\_\_\_\_?
- What were you hoping that you (personally and as an institution) would get out of this collaboration?
- Has hosting \_\_\_\_\_ benefited the institution and in what ways?
- Has the institution's operation and exhibition content been influenced in any way after collaborating with \_\_\_\_\_?
- Has \_\_\_\_\_'s arrival established new affiliations with artists and local/foreign institutional partners?
- In your own words what is the main theme and the political message of the exhibition '\_\_\_\_\_'?
- After hosting this exhibition, is it more probable that your institution will pursue further collaborations with activist groups and social movements fighting for \_\_\_\_\_?
- Which processes of self-reflection do you have in place to evaluate your work?

### General questions

- Do you think that museums should be neutral? In what ways can contemporary museums/cultural institutions respond to today's pressing socio-political issues?
- Taking into account the notion of 'institutional liberation' that views museums as important signifiers that need to be seized, how can a museum become a counter-power infrastructure?
- In your eyes, should museums establish closer relationship with native communities, activist groups, and grassroots movements, and if so, why?
- What is the role of artistic activism in today's pressing social issues?
- In what ways can \_\_\_\_\_ contribute to ongoing struggles and to the environmental emergency we are facing today?
- Can exhibitions strike a balance between raising global political issues and encapsulating local struggles?

### Closing

- Thank you very much for the interview, I really appreciate your time. Do you have any questions for me, or any other thoughts you want to share with me?

#### Appendix 4: Interviews' numbers, locations, and dates

The open-ended and semi-structured interview format (Appendix 3) allowed me not only to tailor questions according to interviewees' areas of expertise, but also to steer the discussion back to my research questions whenever it was needed. A total of 54 interviews were conducted during fieldwork, and the below table comprises a detailed breakdown of groups/numbers of interviews.

**Table 1.** Documenta 14 & Parliament of Bodies interview participants categories and numbers

<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Exhibition's organisers, curators, coordinators, etc.	10
Exhibiting artists and theorists	5
Institutional Partners	3
Critical Interlocutors	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

**Table 2.** Visible interview participants categories and numbers

<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Platform's curators, coordinators, advisory board, etc.	4
Institutional Partners	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>

**Table 3.** Studio Jonas Staal interview participants categories and numbers

<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Studio's curators, coordinators, advisory board, etc.	2
Activists and Participants at Training for the Future	2
Institutional Partners	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table 4.** Decolonize This Place interview participants categories and numbers

<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Group's organisers and collaborators	10
Institutional Partners	1
Direct actions' attendees	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>

**Table 5.** Not an Alternative interview participants categories and numbers

<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
Group's organisers and collaborators	6
Institutional Partners	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>

The majority of interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of four interviews that were conducted via email and four via Skype due to Covid-19 restrictions. In person interviews were conducted during fieldtrips in:

- Athens/Greece (February-April 2017)
- Venice/Italy (September 25-29, 2018)
- New York/USA (October 2018-July 2019)
- Gainesville/USA (December 1-10, 2018)
- New Orleans/USA (May 15-22, 2019)
- Bochum/Germany (September 18-22, 2019)
- Paris/France (November 15-20, 2019)

Each interview lasted between 60-120 minutes and was usually premised upon prior participant observation fieldwork during which, not only did I gain a deep understanding of the practice and dynamics involved, but also established close relationships with the participants. Interviewees were selected in advance primarily for their prominent role or area of expertise within each cultural practice and/or institution and were conducted in exhibition environments, studio settings, and residencies. However, a small number of interviews (4) were impromptu during activist interventions and temporary parliaments. All interviewees were informed about the nature of the study upon invitation to interview (Appendix 1) and were requested to sign a consent form that outlined the researcher's obligations to participants and their agreement to participate and be recorded (Appendix 2). Most interviewees requested no anonymity, however, in some cases, where sensitive data surfaced, I was asked to keep confidentiality and anonymise participants.

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