

# *Reading International – propositions for developing a collaborative art space in the intersection between art school and community*

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**Maayan Sheleff  
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**(Un)Commoning Voices  
and (Non)Communal Bodies**

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Maayan Sheleff and Sarah Spies (Eds.)  
**(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies**

We would like to thank all the artists, speakers and writers who participated in the project *(Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies*, or contributed to this book:

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**Maayan Sheleff  
and Sarah Spies (Eds.)**

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## Editorial—(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies

Maayan Sheleff and Sarah Spies

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This book is somewhat of a hybrid between a retrospective catalogue and fragments from academic research trajectories that corroborate discrete yet interconnected curatorial perspectives. The initial event series, under the composite title *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, was a project co-curated by us for Reading International, UK (November 2018–April 2019) that conjoined our research areas, creating various connections between studies of the voice and theories of the body via the politics of performativity. The project was a series of workshops, performances, and an exhibition, interrogating the relationship between participatory artistic practices and protest through the performative scores of collective bodies and voices. The interdisciplinary program was initially inspired by the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, established by open networks of women to protest nuclear weapons near Reading (1981–2000). The subsequent conceptual underpinning of the series interrogated political and social engagement organised around a common “score” and equally, how a score emerges from bodies and voices in communion. These temporary assemblies all engaged different tactics of social and feminist practices and collective embodiment, thereby complicating a collateral understanding of power and agency by highlighting the dis-ease and reparation inherent in collective or communal modes of address and participation.

The first phase of the programme started with a series of talks and workshops in November 2018 led by curator Susan Gibb, curator and dramaturge Florian Malzacher, artist Dmitry Vilensky/Chto Delat, and choreographers and dancers Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome at the Zürich University of the Arts and Tanzhaus Zürich. The second phase took place within Reading International Festival (Reading, UK) between April and June 2019 and included works by Zbyněk Baladrán, Željka Blakšić, Marco Godoy, Mikhail Karikis, Tali Keren, Rory Pilgrim, Jack Tan, and Katarina Zdjelar alongside a newly commissioned “Training”

by Public Movement, workshops led by Noam Inbar, Nir Shauloff, and Michal Oppenheim, and a performance at the Greenham Common Control Tower by Nina Wakeford. The third phase is this publication, which offers a retrospective rendition of the various projects and events, alongside an extended theoretical overview and affiliated critical and creative positions, affording another (re)framing that sanctions a different euphony of voices to address the semblances of cultural and artistic complexities in the aftermath of the viral pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck while we were working on this publication, and the response to it around the globe seemed to enhance and complicate many of the issues that we were addressing. Although the situation is rapidly changing, with some countries continuously moving in and out of quarantine, social distancing measures are still present, and the physical collectivity of bodies seems distant. Mass surveillance further silences communities that were already marginalized, and increased border closures in many locations add additional limitations to an already threatened freedom of movement. Far-reaching social protests have spread globally, demonstrating against governmental failures to deal with the crisis and the increasing violence that is inflicted upon vulnerable communities, among many other issues. As we are all attempting to comprehend the constantly changing reality, bodies and voices continue to infiltrate and shift borders, and new alliances are rising. As co-curators of the project *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, we could not have imagined the multitude of meanings engendered by the title in the presumed aftermath of this viral choreography—some related to the forced distancing of bodies and to the further silencing of voices, others to the simultaneous performative enactment of solidarity as a sensorial activist response. Some of the texts in this volume have therefore attempted to respond to this ongoing crisis by acknowledging the absence of the usual socialities and relationships between bodies and voices in the wider global context. We are ultimately interested in how the project series and publication can address this current viral interval from within the different choral dispositions and dispersions of voices and bodies, as the precariousness of embodiment—especially certain forms of embodiment—is yet again brought to the fore.

Maayan Sheleff's "The Voice and the Body in and as a Collective—Commoning and Refusal," a chapter from her PhD research, offers a critical overview of the cultural and conceptual construction of commoning within socially engaged and participatory arts practice and situates *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* within this context. Brandon LaBelle's codex for the "mouth" as the political conduit of subjective embod-

iment in *Lexicon of the Mouth* (2014) provides a prism from which Sheleff reads the various works in the exhibition. She also aligns Claire Bishop's notion of conflictual participation as enabling the aesthetic and the political to coexist with Oliver Marchart's notion of "Conflictual Aesthetics" as a curatorial and artistic practice in order to cultivate a permeable reading of Public Movement's *Emergency Routine* (2019) and Tali Keren's *The Great Seal* (2016). Finally, she discusses the role of the curator as an organiser and mediator via the motioning of "conflictual" curatorial practice, focusing on the two aforementioned works, alongside the two workshops that initiated our project: one by Dmitry Vilensky and the other by Last Yearz Interesting Negro.

"Unsafe Safety—A conversation Between Florian Malzacher, Jonas Staal, and Maayan Sheleff," began with the discursive purpose of reflecting on the project *Training to the Future* by Florian Malzacher and Jonas Staal as a utopian training camp that aims to collectively reclaim the means of 'producing' the future. Subsequently, it developed into a multi-layered conversation in two parts, *before* and *after* the training camp (and the pandemic). The text relates different strands of thinking about assemblies, identity conflicts, and curatorial positions to the current challenges brought about by the Covid-19 crisis, making physical assemblies "dangerous" and enhancing online participation.

Sarah Spies' "Curatorial Coda: Postscript on the Assemblage of Voices and Bodies" suggests that the curatorial approach of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* tends towards the multiversal milieu, as it constellates the process of curation along the trajectories of collaborative, performative, and embodied artistic practice. Jasbir K. Puar's notion of the "queer assemblage" is positioned as a central conceptual relation, as it provides a more rhizomatic acknowledging of intersectional paradigms within the spectrum of signification and/or representation systems. *(Un)Commoning Voices* as an assemblage then explicitly acknowledges the spatial, temporal, and corporeal rearrangements that affective trajectories summon where bodies and voices—as the often liminal and partial manifestation of subjective embodiment—are mostly unstable. Nina Wakeford's *an apprenticeship in queer I believe it was* and Michal Oppenheim's *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women* are discussed as micro exemplars of the relational assemblages of bodies and voices.

Susan Gibb's "Practices, Doings, and Actions at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution and in the Work of Myriam Lefkowitz and Snejanka Mihaylova" provides a reflection on the currency of time as a fissure of curatorial practice when given meaning as an artistic and political

technology. Gibb provides an astutely detailed overview of the ethical, political, and artistic dimensions of *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution* via the enfolding of Lefkowitz's and Mihaylova's expanded practices. An ancillary reading of Gibb's articulation of her own process of curation in relation to the practices of both artists amplifies a cadence of slowing, softening, and listening into the emergent futurity of collective and processual practices.

Edgar Schmitz's "Choreographic Composites, On Loan for Now and All Messed Up (London, July 2020)" articulates the affordances of the current dispersion and consideration of the ongoing project *choreographic* and its concern with how movement is scored. Initially set up to provide infrastructure for one-off productions at the intersection of artistic, curatorial, and discursive labour, it subsequently evolved into processes of re-counting work(s) by borrowing from choreographic modes and conventions. Schmitz also argues that the current troubling turbulence caused by the pandemic crisis foregrounds the interplay of organisational form, interspecies deathliness, and globally racialised necropolitics. When considered through the *choreographic* prism, its imaginable potential and conceptual parours becomes even more multifaceted and complex.

Susanne Clausen's "Reading International—Propositions for Developing a Collaborative Art Space in the Intersection Between Art School and Community" interrogates the possibility of new models of working together by involving artists, students, and communities in order to make the "art school" more site-specific. Clausen relays Gregory Sholette's notion that these approaches and their formations are key for the construction of varied counter-public spheres in order to consider what new and emancipatory teaching and self-empowering learning might look like for artists in the university context. She concludes that any construction of the "art school" needs to be more self-determined, flexible, and responsive to the local context. This involves the creative sensitivities, voices, and bodies of artists, curators, students, and audiences to share authorship whilst negotiating the overlap of institutional framing.







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# The Voice and the Body in and as a Collective—Commoning and Refusal

Maayan Sheleff

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Maayan Sheleff's *The Voice and the Body in and as a Collective—Commoning and Refusal*, a chapter from her PhD research, offers a critical overview of the cultural and conceptual construction of commoning within socially engaged and participatory arts practice and situates *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* within this context. Brandon LaBelle's codex for the mouth as the political conduit of subjective embodiment in *Lexicon of the Mouth* (2014) provides a prism from which Sheleff reads the various works in the exhibition. She also aligns Claire Bishop's notion of conflictual participation as enabling the aesthetic and the political to coexist with Oliver Marchart's notion of "Conflictual Aesthetics" as a curatorial and artistic practice in order to cultivate a permeable reading of Public Movement's *Emergency Routine* (2019) and Tali Keren's *The Great Seal* (2016). Finally, she discusses the role of the curator as an organiser and mediator via the motioning of "conflictual" curatorial practice, focusing on the two aforementioned works, alongside the two workshops that initiated the project: one by Dmitry Vilensky (Chto Delat) and the other by Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome.

## Commoning and Community: A Very Brief History

Community-based practice, social practice, and participatory practices have been buzzwords in artistic discourse for at least three decades, with various sub-terms and genres being coined and adopted by artists, curators, and theoreticians. In her canonical book, Miwon Kwon wrote about the birth of these practices in the US during the 1990s, their various manifestations, as well as problems and critiques.<sup>1</sup> Kwon focused on the US but emphasised that there were many other manifestations of site-specific and community-based practices all over the world. She described the emergence of what was coined by Suzanne Lacy as "New Genre Public Art"—

engaging public art in which the relationship between the artist and audience may itself be the artwork.<sup>2</sup> Relating to her case study of the exhibition *Culture in Action* in Chicago (1993, curator: Mary Jane Jacob), she mentioned that the works also coincide with what critic Arlene Raven has identified as “Art In the Public Interest”—activist art dealing directly with social issues using traditional art media as well as non-traditional forms including dance, demonstrations, guerrilla theatre, oral histories, and street art. It encourages coalition-building in pursuit of social justice for the disadvantaged and representation of minorities. It endorses institutional empowerment of artists so that they could act as social agents. It also calls for museums and funding agencies to use their influence to change government policies on social issues.<sup>3</sup> Raven relates these works to the lineage of the avant-garde’s efforts to integrate art and everyday life during the 1960s and 1970s. Lacy also relates them to the development of activist communities of common interest during the 1970s and 1980s, or as she calls them, “various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and media artists and other activists... (who) have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audience, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology.”<sup>4</sup> Such interests, according to Lacy, lead to the challenging of aesthetic norms, an attack on the boundaries of specific media or the spaces of presentation, and a questioning of cultural values and aesthetics of individual artistic authorship. Its focus shifts from artist to audience, from object to process, from production to reception and to engagement and shared authorship. According to Kwon, instead of focusing on the physical conditions of the site, the focus of art now is on a social issue of those who occupy it.<sup>5</sup>

These descriptions might have equally been said about artistic tendencies of the last decade, relating to protest movements that came in response to the US mortgage crisis and the European financial crisis of 2007–8. Interestingly, when Kwon discusses the various ways the term “community” was used in the 1990s for political gain, and how the art tendencies she described came in response, she mentions how neo-conservatives define a “real” community as based solely on ownership of property. They called these so-called communities to protect their needs and defend their territories, thus attacking leftist social policy.<sup>6</sup> Currently, these kinds of arguments are being used more and more all over the world, mostly by right-wing governments. They are cultivated to justify exclusive, ultra-capitalist, anti-ecologist and anti-democratic laws, as if those are being set against “foreign” threats to the wholeness and interests of a certain “community.”



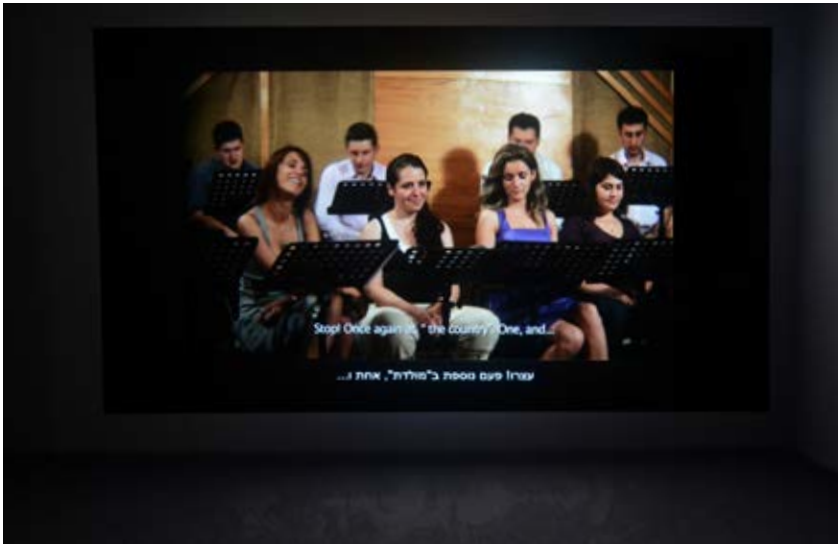
Chito Delat, *A Tower: The Songspiel* (2010), installation view in *Preaching to the Choir*, Herzlyia Museum, Israel, 2015, curator: Maayan Sheleff

### **A Choir as a Temporary Community**

The project at the centre of this book, (Un)commoning Voices and (Non) communal Bodies, is part of my ongoing PhD research that focuses on the political potential of the human voice in participatory practices, and on how participatory artworks and curatorial practices of the last decade deal with the rise of totalitarian and demagogic voices. A participatory project could be defined as one that creates a temporary community (either by working with an existing one or by creating a framework for the identification of a group of people). Within any community, however one defines it, there is always a tension between the individual and the collective voice. The format of a choir could provide an example: a collective structure which enables the individual voice among the different group members. It could involve various forms of collaboration, from following a solo conductor, through polyphonic improvisation, to a democratic formation of shifting vocal leadership. It emphasises the tension between the one and the many. It constitutes a temporary community that behaves according to a certain score. It asks its members not only to speak up or raise their voices if they wish, but also to listen very attentively to each other.

### **Choirs as a Non- Homogenous Collective**

Choirs have surfaced in the art world in recent years as in the activism realm, as part of the protest movements of the last decade. A choir is a musical ensemble of individuals singing in unison, different voices that together form a single, yet non-homogeneous voice. Many cultures boast



Irina Botea, *Before a National Anthem* (2010), installation view in *Preaching to the Choir*, Herzlyia Museum, Israel, 2015, curator: Maayan Sheleff

historical choral traditions. One of the ancient forms of choir that is the most influential on Western culture is the chorus of ancient Greek drama. It evolved from earlier Dionysian religious rituals,<sup>7</sup> particularly dithyramb singing, but differed from these rituals as an independent medium and a tool for self-governing.<sup>8</sup> Already then, the chorus held political power by virtue of its momentous role as mediator between the actors and the audience, between the live human drama taking place on stage and the eternal myth underlying the tragedy.<sup>9</sup> It illustrated a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints within a hierarchical civil structure, and reflected the meaning of being a citizen to the audience: the audience watched the actors, but at the same time was observed by the chorus that addressed it directly, and remembered that it, too, was a part of the same political sphere in which the protagonists operate.<sup>10</sup>

The chorus is the voice of the writer, and simultaneously, the voice of the people; an entity that represents law and order, and at the same time indicates the possibility of their violation. It thus constitutes a communal space. The audience experiences the characters' deeds in a manner which creates a sense of responsibility and renders the other present, not via representation, but through identification and understanding, by way of solidarity. Hence, it is not surprising that choirs have played a major role in demonstrations and protests wherever processes of political change have shown themselves recently. Through the performative occurrence defining them, they call for solidarity, since they operate as a single body,



Marco Godoy, *Claiming the Echo* (2012), still from video

yet make room for the individual voice within the crowd. They discuss specific local occurrences, yet call for collective responsibility that goes beyond geographical, religious, or ethnic boundaries.

Choirs have evolved in different ways throughout Western history, and have, in many instances, tried to generate unification rather than encouraging a democratic multiplicity of voices. Church choirs served as a vehicle for religious elevation which prompts obedience to religious laws, while in Communist countries, singing was an important instrument for identification with the values of the regime. Workers' choirs were used to raise morale and to create a professional "esprit de corps," which would dull the mundane difficulties and social gaps. In Israel, for instance, singing groups and military choirs fostered identification with the values of Zionism, primarily the motif of sacrificing oneself for the state. Concurrently, from Brecht's epic theatre to cinematic musicals, choirs were also used in a manner reminiscent of the self-reflexive complexity of the Greek chorus. Such choirs produce estrangement and defamiliarisation, deviating from the dimension of illusion and fantasy, and calling for critical observation; they suspend the everyday to raise questions about the human condition. Thus, a self-reflexive duality was always at the choir's core: on the one hand, it reflects the luring power innate in a manifestation of uniformity; on the other hand, it enables imagining a new, more democratic political system. This duality, between a dystopian accentuation of the unequal power relations that come with extreme nationalism,

to imagining a utopic future of collective solidarity, is at the heart of this research, and returns throughout the theoretical examinations and the works exhibited in the various projects.<sup>11</sup>

### **Assemblies as Protests**

Curatorial and artistic projects in the form of an assembly or a gathering, with debates around various forms of collectivity and performative public speaking, have also become more present in the last decade. Often the boundaries between conference and protest, choir and demonstration are blurred. These practices are in fact anchored in the political overhaul of 1989 and the art-historical turn it engendered, as well as in the artistic tradition of video and performance practices from the '60s and '70s. 1989, which Claire Bishop coined as "The Social Turn,"<sup>12</sup> signified a turning point and was a catalyst for the rise of socially and politically engaged art. Artists responded to the fall of the Eastern Bloc, the acceleration of capitalism and the corresponding rise of Anti-Globalisation movements with a critique of the post-socialist, all-encompassing neoliberal economy and its unifying and numbing effects. During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, these tendencies correlated with a surge in video art and with a blurring of boundaries between art and activism and between documentary and fiction, as seen for example in the seminal *Documenta11* (2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor and others).

The new surge of participatory, political, and performative practices, which is at the centre of this research, developed as previously in relation to the economic and political crisis that began between 2007-2009. The economic crisis in the US and in Europe<sup>13</sup> along with the ongoing political conflicts in the Middle East were followed by upheavals in many parts of the world which peaked in 2011, mostly protesting against international financial policies and economic injustices. As in previous protest movements, artists took important roles in the upheavals: demonstrations functioned like performances, and performances turned into demonstrations. These tactics put new emphasis on notions of solidarity, community, and equality, and relayed themselves to a wide audience through documentation posted and shared online. The Internet is also considered to have had a major impact on sparking the political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa known as The Arab Spring<sup>14</sup> (2010-2012). Protesters disseminated images and videos and managed to bypass censorship, transfer information between activists and raise worldwide awareness. The common mode of dissemination for "art" and "activist" messages was thus further blurred through its often similar online presence. However, we still often ask ourselves whether these iterations have an impact outside of the artistic and activist communities of common interests. Whether they make their way to other circles and infiltrate them, challenging people's percep-

tions and undermining prejudice, or, like the virtual echo<sup>15</sup> calling Narcissus on the social networks endlessly in vain, do they only reinforce our existing concepts and self-adornment? Do we merely preach to the choir?

### **(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies**

*(Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies*,<sup>16</sup> curated by Sarah Spies and myself as part of Reading International,<sup>17</sup> UK (November 2018–April 2019), attempted to respond to these questions. As previously mentioned in our introduction to this book, the project included a series of workshops, performances, and an exhibition, interrogating the relationship between participatory artistic practices and protest via the performative scores of collective bodies and voices. The interdisciplinary program was inspired by the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, established by women to protest nuclear weapons near Reading (1981–2000).

Building on the conversations around creative commoning and performative knowledge production, *(Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies* examined performativity across choirs and choreographies. It looked at political and social engagement organised through artistic and curatorial practices via bodies and voices. These performative assemblies engage tactics of social and feminist protest and notions of decolonisation. It shifts from collective embodiment to subjective individuation, complicating an easy understanding of power and agency.

In an era of democratic decay, we looked again towards the “commons” as the ubiquitous space where the multitude of voices and bodies can appear as performative ensembles to protest hegemonic power structures and negotiate the differences between “language—an abstract socialising apparatus—and our embodied, sensual experiences,”<sup>18</sup> The “Common(s)” in art—the general interrelatedness of human realities,<sup>19</sup> the “performative (Un)common(s)” —generative destructive dynamics,<sup>20</sup> and the “(Under) common(s)” —the less socially visible aspects of organisation and interaction,<sup>21</sup> all offer different ways of working and being together that constitute the social condition as the conflictual realm of a reimagined ‘us’.

We were interested in this ‘us’ as the moment when we turn our bodies towards each other and listen collectively. We believed that by doing this we create spaces for negotiating nuanced differences. We therefore asked: how do we participate in reiterative collective acts and what political impact (if any) is gained? What do hegemonic scores look and feel like, and what would alternative or activist scores sound like? How can voices and bodies undermine fear and invite empathy? Can the repetition of darkness ever create light? How do we, as individual subjects, participate in these collective acts, or resist them?

### **The Voice and the Body; Entanglements In the Mouth, or the Mouth as a Site of Choreography**

One of the theoretical references that tied Sarah and me together was Brandon LaBelle's *Lexicon of the Mouth*.<sup>22</sup> LaBelle is interested in the paralinguistic, the manifestations of the voice that are not merely language or discourse but an expanded, experimental realm of vocal uttering. At the centre of his research is the mouth, which according to him "functions to figure and sustain the body as a subject, a subject within a network of relations... as a primary conduit that brings into contact the material world with the depths of the body, the mouth continually unsettles the limits of embodiment. It performs as an extremely vital link—the essential link—to the world and those around us, to echo and vibrate with a multitude of forces that pass through its chamber."<sup>23</sup>

The mouth is thus the link between the inside and the outside world. It connects the voice that leaves us to be in the world, to our body and the subjectivity which it entails. In this context, LaBelle mentions Mladen Dolar's statement of the voice projecting from the body to circulate out there: "A bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal."<sup>24</sup> As opposed to Dolar, LaBelle is interested not in the object-hood of the disembodied voice, but in its remaining corporeality. The mouth to him is a liminal place of tension between language as an abstract, socialising system, and our embodied, sensual experiences. He puts into question what Dolar identifies as the "acoustic" nature of the voice, a sounded event which can no longer be identified with its source, turning every emission of the voice to a sort of "ventriloquism."<sup>25</sup> Against this definition of the voice as an "object," which creates a break between what we see and what we hear, between the promise of an agency to its fulfilment, LaBelle prefers to refer to the voice as "tension," a struggle to constitute the body that is trying to be a subject.<sup>26</sup>

LaBelle turns to Fred Moten to acknowledge his treatment of the voice as precisely what resists forces of objectification, the voice as an "irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning," an irruption in other words that is always already a someone intervening onto the structures of the social.<sup>27</sup> The mouth according to LaBelle is thus the place of creating oneself as a subject, as it is so radically connected to both language and the body; it is the place of constant struggle between the force of objectification and the demand for subjectivity. It mobilises and animates social relations in both an interruptive and a connective way: "The voice stretches me; it drags me along, as a body bound to its politics and poetics, its accents and dialectics, its grammars, as well as its handicaps."<sup>28</sup>





Noam Enbar and Nir Shauloff, *The Book of Challenges* (2019), workshop at Saint Laurence Church, Reading International, UK, 2019.

To have a voice is to be recognised as a subject, but it is also to wish to be desired, to locate oneself near the other. Thus, the mouth, for LaBelle, is a device for modulating the limits of the body, for exchanging knowledge with the world and the other. The constant movement between incorporation and expulsion, attachment and loss, opening and closing, the reverberation of surfaces between inside and outside, makes the mouth, according to LaBelle, the site of a “rhythm of somatic orientation, production, contact... choreography.”<sup>29</sup> As such it remains vulnerable to the intrusion of another, always in a state of flux, constantly becoming a subject which has a voice, but also, a part of a collective, a choir of sorts: “The mouth not only shapes voice, but also fills it in; it is a cavity by which to capture additional voices, to put them on the tongue, supplying us with the potentiality to reshape, impersonate, sample, and reconstruct who we can be.”<sup>30</sup> In this poetic theory, the voice meets the body and raises questions of (un)commoning—whether we use our voice to create a temporary community or to separate and distinguish ourselves from it as unique individuals.

I would like to reflect on the works that were included in the main exhibition of *(Un)commoning*<sup>31</sup> through these prisms, except for the one by Tali Keren, which I will return to later on: in *The Perfect Sound*, a video by Katarina Zdjelar,<sup>32</sup> one of the protagonists is continuously repeating the



Katarina Zdjelar, *The Perfect Sound* (2009), still from video

sounds that the other makes. In the claustrophobic cinematic frame, only the two faces are shown, their mouths and voices stretch when constantly pronouncing and repeating certain syllables, arousing a disturbing feeling in the viewer. This documentation of an accent-removal class for an immigrant, conducted by a speech therapist in Birmingham, UK, reflects the strenuous attempt of the young trainee to adjust and amend himself in order to blend into the community to which he immigrated. As accents are a strong attribute of identity, and the voice and the mouth, as described by LaBelle, the place of defining oneself as a subject, the removal of one's accent is an attempt to unmake a subject, or, in other words, erase one's identity, in order to become unnoticeable. This is particularly potent in the UK, where speech reveals not only one's origin but also one's place in the remnants of a class system. As Mladen Dolar notes in his text on this work in the catalogue for Zdjelar's participation at the Venice Biennale: "It inevitably brings to mind the tribulations of Eliza Doolittle and the haughtiness of Professor Higgins, transposed into an aseptic environment of a rarefied abstract space, with the colourful Covent Garden flower girl now replaced by a host of nameless immigrants."<sup>33</sup> Going back to LaBelle, the work focuses on the mouth as a place of tension, where a struggle occurs between the unique individual (voice) qualities of the protagonist, to the attempts to train and order him into the structure of the society, so that society would be able to accept him.

The sense of ventriloquism, or speaking someone else's words, is also evident in the work *Królową* by Marco Godoy,<sup>34</sup> that was commissioned for *(Un)commoning* and was shot during a workshop for Reading-based cho-risters and singers. The participants were invited via an open call to sing a

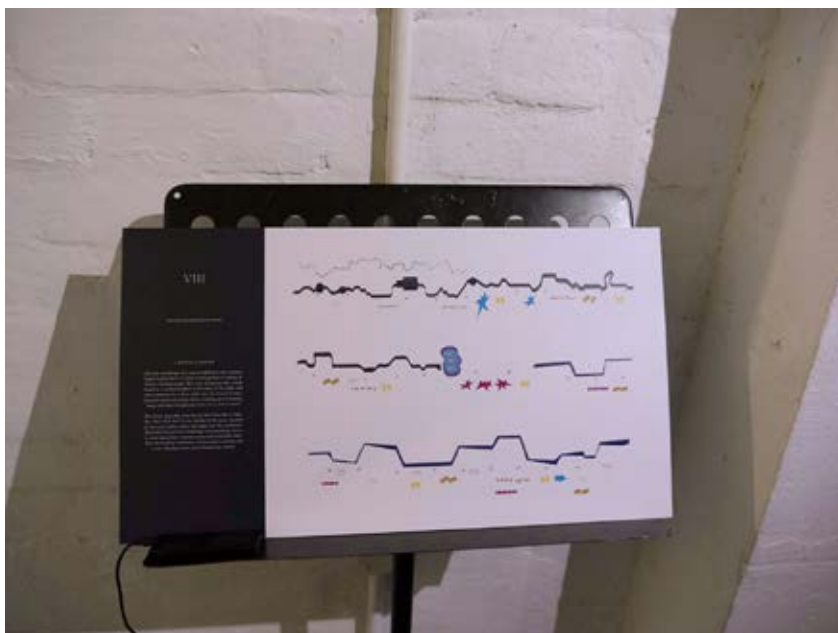
new version of the British National Anthem, “God Save the Queen,” in the Polish language. By shooting the process along with its inherent failures, Godoy was interested in the re-examination of national symbols and sentiments through the act of translation. The Polish language was chosen, as Polish immigrants were the last community to immigrate into the UK after Poland had joined the EU, and one of the communities who were often negatively targeted by Brexit endorsers. Godoy is performing what he calls “hacking” the national anthem, an opposite process of what is usually expected from an immigrant—the identification with national symbols and rules foreign to him/her. The act of translation here, when performed by British singers, involves an embodiment of the experience of non-belonging through language, via an estrangement of something well known and taken for granted.

The work is part of Godoy’s continuous research into the voice and its inherent physical aspects. He believes that what emerges in a choir’s performance can have a transformative capacity for participants and audiences, a counter power to the way nations and religions have used the human voice throughout history as part of their systems of legitimising authority. The work was shot in a way that accentuates its process-based nature as a workshop, where the participants are training and the song is being repeated and exhausted, never sung as a whole. At times, the singers are asked to sing with a ball in their mouth, an act which on the one hand serves as a literal handicap to their voice, and on the other reflects the objectifying and at times violent powers that demand identification and loyalty from immigrants. At the same time, the ball is also a reflection of the manipulations of participatory practices, and points out again the mouth as the place of struggle between the need to be acknowledged as a subject against the forces of silencing.

*Hearings*,<sup>35</sup> by Jack Tan,<sup>36</sup> explores the tension between language as a legislative and governing force that attempts to order and objectify the subject, and the mouth and voice as a place where hidden emotions are exposed. The installation comprises eight graphic scores and audio recordings. It is part of a wider collaborative project between the artist and the Community Justice Centre (CJC) called “Voices from the Courts,” including an artist’s residency at the State and Family Courts of Singapore.<sup>37</sup> During his residency, Tan listened to the soundscape of the courts, paying particular attention to the experience of the litigator and the words that he or she used, recorded the voices, and documented what he heard as drawings. The artist then turned the drawings into graphic scores, which have been interpreted and performed by the ACJC Alumni Choir.



Jack Tan, *Hearings* (2016), installation view and live performance with Kate Smith and Nuno Veigain in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019



Jack Tan, *Hearings* (2016), detail from installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019



Marco Godoy, *Królową* (2019), production photo, *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, Reading International, UK, 2019

For this exhibition, the scores were shown on notation stands alongside their respective short musical compositions sung by the choir. The audience could follow their route and listen to what came together in a sort of litigative opera. The scores and musical pieces relate to emotional states, moments of anticipation, and the movements and halts of bureaucratic forms and processes, and attempt to deconstruct and humanise this ordering machine. Tan's choir mixes verbal moments with non-verbal iterations, turning them into a sort of incoherent opera that attempts to follow an emotional trajectory rather than a logical one, exposing the legislative language, which is perceived to be the most logical, as being subjective nonetheless.

The question of representing another through language also comes up in *To Be Framed*,<sup>38</sup> a short film by Zbyněk Baladrán.<sup>39</sup> It was shot on the premises of a former military base, not far from the building of *OpenHand OpenSpace*, where the exhibition took place, a building which was by itself a former military keep. In the film, children are seen playing in a way which implies hidden violence. They speak and read words that appear to have been written for them by someone else, asking questions involving representation and visibility. This work asks how it is possible to organise life



Zbyněk Baladrán, *To Be Framed* (2016), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019

without repeating and reproducing violence in a violent world. Is violence simply a part of the dialectic cycle of life and thus impossible to avoid?

Similarly to Marco Godoy, Zbyněk Baladrán is also reflexive towards artistic practices of participation, and looks at his own role in reproducing violence through seemingly naive actions such as the articulation of his ideas. He questions how violent we are when we try to represent someone who is misrepresented or unheard. Or in his own words: “I am interested to what extent do we use behavioral patterns of the so called symbolic violence that are part of our speech and schematic behavior. I wanted the method to be part of the question since one cannot escape the cycle of violence by simply naming it and pointing at it.”<sup>40</sup>

Artist Rory Pilgrim also collaborates with different communities in his work, often teenagers and young adults, as well as people of non-binary genders, but his method of collaboration is different. Rather than asking the participants to read a pre-written script, he uses practices of shared choral assemblies in which the participants voice their personal experiences. Thus, he aims to challenge forms of collectivity and foster attentive listening and courageous speaking. Having been a choir boy in his youth, Pilgrim borrows methods of religious singing and choral practice and subverts them through his unique collaborative process. The coming together





Rory Pilgrim, *Software Garden* (2018), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019

of collective voices remains a spiritual experience for Pilgrim; however, it gains a reflexive, critical depth through the joint narrative of the collaborators.

In *Software Garden*,<sup>41</sup> created during two years of working collaboratively with workshops and live concerts, Pilgrim<sup>42</sup> presents his debut music video album. As in most of Pilgrim's works, the words convey a strong socio-political message that has been put together with his collaborating protagonists. The music, a combination of electronic, techno, pop, and classical string arrangements, affectively tempts the viewer to immerse her- or himself in the seductive atmosphere, until they identify with the protagonists as if they are embodying their words.

*Software Garden* responds to the recent rise in nationalism and isolationism and the increasing polarities between people. It asks how people from different backgrounds can meet from both behind and beyond their screens. As robots and algorithms serve the whims of their masters, is it possible to create spaces that unite the human, ecological and technological with empathy, care, and kindness?<sup>43</sup>

The work is narrated by British poet and disability advocate Carol R. Kallend whose words reflect on her experience of massively reduced access to

care and her desires for a robotic companion to fill this void. Kallend's words Interweave with the voices of others, including singer Robyn Had-don, singer/rapper Daisy Rodrigues, and dancer, artist, and choreographer Casper-Malte Augusta. The choreographic gestures in the work enhance its layered view on technology via moments of touch between humans, robots, and software.

As a collaborative vocal and choreographic collage, Pilgrim's work relates to LaBelle's notion of the mouth as a meeting point between one subject and another, a device for modulating the limits of the body, for exchange-



Rory Pilgrim, *Software Garden* (2018), stills from video



ing knowledge with the world and with others. The concept of a limited or handicapped body and the mouth as a force that stretches it and gives it power is also central to this work, gaining a more layered meaning after the Covid-19 crisis and the gaps in health care that it further exposed.

Another collaborative work that provides a meeting point between voices and bodies is Željka Blakšić<sup>44</sup> *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM*.<sup>45</sup> Exploring the ways in which class and gender divisions in society can be articulated by means of music, the artist collaborated with local activists, independent journalists, and artists in order to compose protest songs disclosing the minority positions in society. She combined texts from various struggles in Croatia, including disenfranchised workers, young people who have lost their right to education, and persons who do not fit heterosexual normativity. In a performance using the form of child-play and children's song, girls aged ten to twelve perform in public space, not conforming to the traditional association of the feminine with the private sphere. The artistic procedure in which the weak—children, moreover girls—represent the weak subverts the usual positions, tackling the issues of the established yet often invisible mechanisms of dominant ideology. In this way, the artist promotes equality and encourages public participation of the younger generation in making decisions concerning public issues.



Željka Blakšić's *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM* (2012-13), still from video



Željka Blakšić's *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM* (2012-13), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019

Blakšić's participatory and site-specific practice is often inspired by the subcultures of the 1990s in Croatia, when punk, anarchist, and ecological movements were having a revival. In fact, she herself was part of the first girl punk band in Croatia when she was sixteen years old. Combining elements of vocal noise and spoken word, the girls in *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM* took apart the activist texts and sang parts of them, combined with the noises of factory workers' machinery such as sewing machines, and with choreography created by them together with the artist. The repetitive structure of the performance as well as the non-verbal elements of the singing again enhance the tension between the logos and the phone, the mouth and the ear, and the potential power of this place of tension to embody and disseminate protest.<sup>46</sup>

Children's agency to protest, as well as the power of noise, are also present in the work *No Ordinary Protest* by Mikhail Karikis.<sup>47</sup> The work asks if sound can mobilise socio-political and ecological change. Karikis adopts the children's science fiction novel *The Iron Woman* (1993) by British writer Ted Hughes as an ecofeminist tale in which public speaking, communal listening, and noise-making become tools of transformation. Karikis worked with a group of seven-year-old children from East London in a



Mikhail Karikis, *No Ordinary Protest* (2018), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019



Mikhail Karikis, *No Ordinary Protest* (2018), production photo



Mikhaïl Karikis, *No Ordinary Protest* (2018), production photo

process aimed to reflect the environmental crisis and the role of noise in protest. They improvised vocally with musical instruments, toys, and masks, spoke and listened to each other, and imagined how noise and voice could take up visual forms similar to the changing landscape. In the story, a female superhero gifts children with the power of noise, and the gift is transmitted further by touch, resonating the collective call of creatures affected by the pollution of the planet. In solidarity with the creatures, the children infiltrate factories and ‘infect’ adults with their demand for action. Again, looking at this work from a post-Covid-19 perspective, it gains a new chilling perspective. With regard to LaBelle’s theory, this work relates to the non-verbal utterings described by LaBelle and the expanded realm of what he calls the Oral Imaginary, or “the poetics of an experimental orality,”<sup>48</sup> as well as the relation between the voice and the body and the individual and collective, through the concept of “infecting” each other with the power to speak.<sup>49</sup>

Karikis creates immersive audiovisual installations and performances that emerge from his long-standing interest in the voice as a material and a socio-political agent. Developing large-scale projects in collaboration with different communities over the past decade, Karikis has focused on legacies of post-industrialisation, human labour and the use of natural resources. Often featuring groups that have been geographically or socially marginalized, his works highlight alternative models of human existence, solidarity and action.

To conclude these thoughts on the exhibition at *OpenHand OpenSpace*, as part of *(Un)commoning*, and connecting back to LaBelle, the works extenuate the mouth as the place of tension between language, order, and power, to a potential arena for protest and subversion via non-verbal utterings, noise, and music. The temporary communities created in the work constantly perform and repeat these rituals of subjugation as well as fight against them. While participating in these acts of commoning, there are always underlying currents of individual dissent, as the artists reflect on their role as instigators, enablers, or provocateurs. A particular attention was given to instances of participation in which the participants were children or young adults. The works show a range of approaches to working with a community that is considered disempowered and is not often heard—between attempts to include the children’s voices via a workshop based process and a non-hierarchical dialogue, to an extenuation of the power relations and pointing to a violence and manipulation inherent in speaking for another.

### **The Movement of the Choir, Ordering of the Subject and Deviant Repetitions**

I mentioned earlier that a significant aspect of this research is the choir’s dual potential to be both a tool for the ordering of the subject, as well as a potential structure to subvert it. An interesting connection in this regard between choirs and choreographies, or more simply put, between the voices and the bodies, could be made through a reference that came out in a seminar I took with professor André Lepecki, entitled “Dance and Power: Choreopolitics in Neo-Authoritarian Times.”<sup>50</sup> Lepecki mentioned the book *Orchésographie*, a study of late 16th-century French Renaissance social dance written by Thoinot Arbeau. The book includes descriptions and drawings of dances from the court to the countryside and notations of relevant music tunes. In *Exhausted Dance*,<sup>51</sup> Lepecki mentions this guide as the first appearance of choreography (literally meaning the movement of the choir) as a method to be learned and practiced and shows its relation to modernity and its making of the subject as “kinetically disciplined.” *Orchésographie* is written as a sort of score but with no intention of having individuals interpret it in their own way. Instead, it is meant to be a strict guide. It is the first instance of choreography in writing, in which the writing by itself becomes performative as it is drawn to mirror and lead specific movements. Interesting as well is that the first example of choreography in the book is a military parade, relating the movement of the collective and the individual to serving the state apparatus. The ordering of the liberal subject happens in the transfer from the order of the movement of the choir, or the collective, to the invention of choreography as an art form captured under the state power (King Louis XIV). The ordering of freedom thus has

always been the ordering of movement. Teaching the bourgeoisie how to dance was also teaching them how to move in society, how to be part of a political order. Choreography, or the movement of the choir, was and still can be, on the one hand, a form of ordering of the body/voice/self, and on the other hand a potential tool to subvert it. This is also an important reminder of the constant relations between the voice and the body, as manifested in LaBelle's theory and in the works included in *(Un)commoning*.

This relates to Judith Butler, who saw the performative process as potentially oppressive, as it normalises bodies and forces them to repeat restricting conventions. On the other hand, she saw performativity as offering a possibility to counter this process, and produce the abnormal and the improper, through dissonant or disruptive gestures of performative identity.<sup>52</sup> Without focusing exclusively on the relations between the exhibited works and Butler's performative theory, it's important to point out the element of repetition which is central to all the works. Butler applied the tools of deconstruction to notions of identity and gender categories, examining the ways in which we "act" our identities. The performative for Butler is thus a set of "stylized repetition of acts"<sup>53</sup> that forges us as gendered subjects. For the performative to become subversive, there would need to be dissonant or disruptive gestures of performative identity<sup>54</sup>.

Butler speaks about the repetitive structure of performativity in relation to Derrida, as a kind of "enacted critique."<sup>55</sup> This kind of repetition (or in Loxley's words, deviant repetition or mis-performance) connects to Derrida's argument that, "The iterability that underlies the possibility of a system of conventions is at the same time the means by which things happen otherwise, the opportunity for 'literatures' or 'revolutions' that as yet have no mode."<sup>56</sup> It also relates to Althusser's concept of "Interpellation," a process in which the subject is produced through hailing or addressing them by a powerful ideology.<sup>57</sup> "The body," Butler suggests, "is not simply a sedimentation of speech acts by which it has been constituted. If that constitution fails, a resistance meets interpellation at the moment it exerts its demand."<sup>58</sup> Thus, performativity is the traumatic force of normalisation, but also the way in which those oppressed by it resist. Participation in a political performance of resistance would then need to involve a questioning of the norms and values while acting them out, and I believe that this kind of repetition is what the works in the exhibition are trying to achieve.

### **(Un)Commoning as Conflictual Participation**

With participatory art practices, there are various forms or levels of participation. Some create a conflictual relationship between the artist and the participants, raising the question of whether one should participate or refuse. Claire Bishop surveys the history, theory, characteristics, and limitations of participatory art in the neoliberal era and describes the rise of participatory art as being a counterpart to the culture of the spectacle. She discusses the tension and debate between the supporters of ethical amelioration that fill in for the failing social agencies, as opposed to another sector of art that supports art as questioning systems of value and morality:

This desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order—be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship. Beginning from this premise, participatory art aims to restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement. But this is achieved in different ways: either through constructivist gestures of social impact, which refute the injustice of the world by proposing an alternative, or through a nihilist redoubling of alienation, which negates the world's injustice and illogicality on its own terms. In both instances, the work seeks to forge a collective, co-authoring, participatory social body—but one does this affirmatively (through utopian realisation), the other indirectly (through the negation of negation).<sup>59</sup>

Bishop discusses the writing of the critical thinker Jacques Rancière,<sup>60</sup> who distinguishes between meta-political art and art that reflects a specific party agenda. Whereas the first form of art opens up into the aesthetic and poetic sphere, the second limits and flattens the message. Bishop's reading of Rancière defines the aesthetic, in the context of social, participatory art, as the ability to think in terms of contradictions—to believe in the autonomy of art as well as in its ability to instigate change. According to Bishop, there is no need to resolve these contradictions by means of a consensual ethical process that relegates the aesthetic and the artistic to the margins, or alternatively by means of formalist art that refuses to take a stance. Good participatory art, according to Bishop, will enable the ethical, the aesthetic, and the political to coexist, and will build on the antagonisms, contrasts, provocations, uncertainty, and ambiguousness to which their coexistence gives rise.

Bishop mentioned how the clash between artistic and social critique is particularly present in certain historical moments of political turmoil, and how new surges of participatory art soon follow: for example, in the

years leading to the rise of fascism in Italy, in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, in the social dissent that led to 1968, and in its aftermath in the 1970s. She connects the current manifestations of participatory art to the fall of Communism in 1989, to the lack of a significant alternative on the left, to the rise of the post-political consensus, and to the almost total subjugation of art to market forces. This produces the paradox in the contemporary Western world, in which participation, which often attempts to criticise consumer culture, is tied to the populist agenda of neoliberal governments, for example, through abusing affective labour.<sup>61</sup>

Oliver Marchart<sup>62</sup> attempts to offer a way in which political art practices could confront this paradox, infiltrate the political sphere and impact it. He proposes seeing the current wave of revolts as a third world revolution, the second starting in 1968 and the first being the events of 1848 in Europe, among them the famous French Revolution of 1848. He suggested that, like the first two waves of protest, where the short-term effects did not seem to be the success of the revolutionary goals, but the long-term effects were very significant, the implications of this third revolution are yet to come.

In his theory on political art practices, Marchart disagrees with Bishop's reading of Rancière: he claims that Rancière provides the art world with what he calls "the spontaneous ideology of the art field"—that every artistic act is already political since it reframes material and symbolic space, and thus there is no need for explicitly political art. Marchart claims that this philosophy legitimises the bad reputation of activist art: "This ideology is structured around a paradoxical trope: not that art, according to its functionaries, is un-political. It is political, but it is political, we are told, precisely in being not political. Art's true 'politics' resides in its complexity, obliqueness, and remoteness from every political practice in the strict sense. The less art is explicitly political, we are led to conclude from this, the more political it actually is. For this peculiar reason, we do not need explicitly political art."<sup>63</sup> Instead, Marchart calls for a "Conflictual Aesthetics"—"an aesthetics which is conflictual in a double sense: it conflicts with the aesthetics of the spontaneous ideologists of the art field (the aesthetics of simplistic complexity); and it seeks to work out the political implications of conflictual artistic practice. It is, in this double sense, both a conflicting aesthetics and an aesthetics of conflict."<sup>64</sup>

Marchart gives examples of projects that answer his definitions of conflictual aesthetics, projects that propagate, agitate, and organise. Among them, he mentions Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir as well as Liberate Tate, and he often addresses the actions of the Israeli perfor-



mance group Public Movement, to which I will return shortly. Marchart claims that propaganda doesn't have to be a manipulation, and that political art should use counter-propaganda: a dissensual and minoritarian propaganda against a doxa defended by the hegemonic forces with their supposedly consensual propaganda, in order to "wake up people from their dogmatic slumber."<sup>65</sup>

The conflict between participating and refusing in the temporary community created by a project that attempts to be both participatory and political relates to what Marchart describes as being active and passive at the same time, or escaping the traditional dichotomy between passivity and activity. While engaged in what he refers to as an "activist" project (he uses the term following Chantal Mouffe's definition with some reservations), a subject is both, in the language of Louis Althusser, interpellated by "ideological state apparatuses" as well as re-articulating the conditions of his or her own subjection.<sup>66</sup>

Throughout his book, Marchart also attempts to define what entails a political artistic or curatorial action, as being collective, strategic, organised and conflictual.<sup>67</sup> It's important to differentiate between Bishop's notions of participation and Marchart's definition of collaboration, although they both speak about creating a conflictual collectivity via the artistic act. While Marchart speaks about a collaboration between a group of artists or curators, Bishop speaks about the participation of a temporary community in a work authored and directed by an artist, particularly various forms of non-consensual collaboration. I would like to examine two works from *(Un)Commoning* through these prisms.

Commissioned for *(Un)Commoning, Emergency Routine* was a "First-Step Training" (as defined by the artists) by Public Movement,<sup>68</sup> a performative research body based in Tel Aviv, investigating and staging political actions in public spaces since 2006. Their current interest in counter-terrorism is an organic progression of the group's study of state choreographies. They have collaborated with state institutions in Israel, Asia, and Europe. Among them are the Special Forces of the Heidelberg Police, Heidelberg Fire Fighters, Special Forces of the Vienna Police, the Rescue Unit of the Israeli Army, the Finnish Counter Terror Unit and the Veteran Honor Guard of the Taiwanese Army.

Public Movement's projects, often a work-in-progress that never becomes a finalised "performance," research how methods which are used in combat training, states of emergency, and counter-terrorism create and form new public choreographies. Their study, collection, and categorisation of

*Emergency routine*—excerpts from the performer's script



*Hi, good morning. My name is Eitan. Thank you for coming on time. We have 20 minutes together. Let's walk.*



*We stand at the heart of a university campus. We are used to this kind of space: a familiar public setting where our body behaves and moves without thinking. Nowadays, we're asked to pay more attention to our surroundings. To be aware and responsible individuals. The unexpected became something to expect.*

Public Movement, *Emergency Routine*, First step training, Edith Morley Building, University of Reading, Whiteknights Campus, Reading, UK, 2019.



*Special units develop various methods of preventive security. By this I mean using advanced intelligence which recognizes potential incidents before they occur. When a special unit is called upon a mission, the very first step would be to position their bodies in relation to their target. These strategies are being trained and traded by countries and professionals alike. For years, Israel serves as a major agent of knowledge and expertise in this field.*



*As we speak, teams are acting inside the cities: staging night arrests and practicing emergency scenarios in residential and state buildings. Just like our building. We are going to scan the structure as a team. Let's assume there's a suspect on one of the floors. We are going to move together.*



Tali Keren, *The Great Seal* (2017), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019

physical forms of ordering of the subject, a “Choreopolis” of sorts, enables them to produce counter civil forms of demonstration, assembly, and resistance through locally specific participatory projects.

*Emergency Routine*, developed by Dana Yahalomi, director of Public Movement, together with Gali Libraider and Nir Shauloff, relates to the new modes of security alert that morph city centres into potential battle zones. It analyses and demonstrates bodily techniques that in recent years are being trained and traded jointly by countries and special units. The urgency to return to a “body to body” encounter is staged as a meeting between an audience of one and a Public Movement delegate, a counter-terror expert from Israel. It was performed in and around a public building at Reading University, exploring and deciphering its architecture and its potential function in an imagined Emergency Scenario. This exchange of knowledge was raising questions about borders between defence and offence, obedience and protest, order and chaos.

Tali Keren<sup>69</sup> is a media artist from Israel, working in NY. Her works focus on the formation of ideology, violence, and political identity. Her work for *(Un)Commoning*, *The Great Seal*,<sup>70</sup> was an immersive installation that investigated the intersection between art, propaganda, religion, and politics. The piece invited viewers to step onto a fictitious stage at the annual



Tali Keren, *The Great Seal* (2017), installation view in *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, exhibition at Open Hand Open Space, Reading International, UK, 2019

Washington, DC Summit of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and assume the role of keynote speaker. CUFI mobilises millions of American Evangelical conservatives who view Jewish rule over the land of Israel and the occupied territories with Palestinian self-governance as a precondition for Christ's Second Coming and the imminent Battle of Armageddon. By using a presidential teleprompter and a karaoke "sing-along" machine, participants are invited to perform speeches compiled from those delivered at past CUFI summits. By assuming the role of the preacher, the participants are confronted with the power of public speaking.<sup>71</sup> The work was shot and completed in 2015, before Brexit and the Trump presidency, thus it is somewhat prophetic in shedding light on the power of populism and propaganda and their role in the development of isolationism and nationalistic sentiments.

Throughout the interactive performance, visitors stand on a rug emblazoned with the design for the original Great Seal of the United States, proposed by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson in 1776 and subsequently rejected by Congress. Franklin and Jefferson's Great Seal reimagines the biblical story of the Israelites exodus from Egypt with America framed as the "New Zion." The myths linking the United States and Israel as two settler colonial projects are thus embodied in the seal, raising thoughts about the movement of people through history, its role in creat-

ing empires and nations but also in creating counter waves of refugees, and of the relation between the power of the voice to freedom of movement or the lack thereof.

An interesting connection between these two works is the concept of pre-enactment, which according to Marchart was coined by Dana Yahalomi, the director of Public Movement, with regard to their work. Pre-enactment is the enactment of an event that has not yet happened or “the artistic anticipation of a political event to come.”<sup>72</sup> More specifically, Marchart describes it as a training for a future outbreak of a conflict. As such, it invites a reiteration of the performance in a political context, if one should occur, as he describes happened with one of Public Movement’s projects.

While Keren’s project is in fact a re-enactment of existing events, its setting in a fictive conference and the technology-based design and interface gives it a chilling futuristic edge. And although it is not imagining a future conflict, at least not on the surface, the speeches hint to the prophecy of the Evangelists regarding Christ’s Second Coming—this according to them is preconditioned by Jewish rule over Israel, and followed by seven years of wars and disaster.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the interface itself creates a conflict as it lures the participants to interact as well as to determine if and how they would like to re-enact this propaganda, and whether they consider these speeches as conflictual. In fact, it is a sort of opposite tactic than the one used by Public Movement: if the latter inserts an artistic performance into a political context, the first takes a political performance and inserts it into an artistic context. It hints at the thin line between a political conference and a demonstration, and the different potential uses of public speech, for propaganda and for protest. As Marchart commented about the time loops of history, acting is always both re-enacting and pre-enacting.<sup>74</sup>

As a form of participatory encounter, both works provoke an uneasy feeling, a strange mixture of exhilaration, temptation, and fear. The intimacy that is gained from the format of one participant is negated with the stand the participant takes in front of the public, or the other “members” of his or her imagined “community”: in Keren’s work, she or he is confronted with performing in front of an audience, both real and virtual. In their position as speakers, the participants are singled out as the authoritative voice and become aware of the potential impact of their words on themselves and others. In a way, this is not a collective act, one of Marchart’s definitions for a political action, but a reflection on collectivity that disrupts its perception—the participant is singled out, alone, and forced to consider where he or she stands in this supposedly homogenous and obedient crowd.

In Public Movement's project, the accidental audience members in the public space become potential threats or victims, and the "training" disrupts their everyday movement (another one of Marchart's definitions for a political artistic act). The format of a one-on-one performance was recently developed by Public Movement as a form of "training" which entails a transference of information, turning the participant into an agent of shared corporal knowledge. The participant becomes the carrier of the information she or he received from the authoritative performer, and is asked to rearticulate the knowledge of the governing entity. The performer here is not disguising himself as an agent of state power, like in the works of the Yes Men, for example, but is an actual representative of a violent force—he is a real, trained anti-terror expert. Thus, the joint action of the performer and the participant is not a satirical or aesthetic representation aimed to mock those in power, but an act of identification that sharpens the moral questions the participant is faced with: is there enough subversion here from a mere reproduction of violence? On which side am I on? And from there could come an understanding of the problematics of being in constant crisis mode, without addressing the conditions that produced it. Or, in other words, questioning what price we pay for feeling safe.

The work deliberately creates a sense of ambiguity with regard to its stand towards these questions. Through the eyes of the performer, the campus becomes a hostile environment in which danger can appear at any moment. Intimately held and led by him, the participants, as we learned from observation and from collected testimonies in the aftermath, found it difficult to refuse or object to the scenario they were taking part in. As they encountered other students and teachers in their voyage through campus, individuals who were engaged in their daily routine unaware of the "fake" nature of the performance, the participants became accomplices, turned, through the eyes of others, from saviours to threats. The project asks to confront the participants with exactly this—their obedience, their inability to refuse, the temptation of the imagined sense of safety established by gaining the secret knowledge of the authority. Through this inner bodily conflict, they become aware of other possibilities to address this transfer of knowledge, within the campus—the ultimate sphere of knowledge transfer; other than paradigms of power, of weak and strong, citizens and rulers, threats or victims.

The idea of a training or a rehearsal, negating the notion of a complete and final performance, implies that the artists do not know the answer to the moral questions that they are asking, and the training becomes the arena in which, through the act of embodying knowledge, the participant is asked to confront these questions and answer them for him/herself.



“Preparedness proposes a mode of ordering the future that embraces uncertainty and ‘imagines the unimaginable’ rather than ‘taming’ dangerous irruptions through statistical probabilities. The archival knowledge of the past is replaced by the enactment-knowledge of continual rehearsal of the performance to come.”<sup>75</sup>

### Conflictual Curating

We discussed conflictual aesthetics and political art, but what would a conflictual or political act of curating entail? How can curators engage in counter propaganda, antagonistic, agitative actions, and how would those differ, if at all, from the artistic ones? In a way, the organisational part is already an inherent part of curating, but collectivity is not, as (classic) curating is still mostly a lonesome hierarchical position. Looking back at *(Un)Commoning* and particularly at curating these two examples of (pre-) enactments, I would like to differentiate between them through the curatorial care of the exhibition space. While Tali Keren’s project was part of a group exhibition, and adapted from a previous installation setting, Public Movement’s performance was conducted in the University building and commissioned particularly for this space. Going back to Marchart, I will use his definition of the curatorial function as the organisation of public space. Marchart calls political curatorial practice “organizing the impossible,”<sup>76</sup> since he claims that it is impossible to self-generate antagonisms, but space becomes public in the real sense only when antagonism occurs. I would like to raise a question regarding the role of the curator, in regard to organising the impossible from a different angle.

Curating entails much bureaucracy, diplomacy, psychology, and often unpaid emotional labour. While describing a curatorial project as a collective effort, one often fails to look at all these roles as a collective act as well, one that attempts to organise the impossible while trying to infiltrate the bureaucracy of hegemonic institutions. Behind the scenes of *Reading International*, a different effort was needed for an exhibition at a former-military-keep-now-artist-run-exhibition-space, than for a university building. In fact, while trying to organise a training for an imagined terrorist attack in public space, we curators, as well as the director and producer of the festival, had to engage in various diplomatic and bureaucratic efforts, trying to convince a Kafkaesque courthouse, a run-down and dystopic yet friendly police station, and a fancy new social security office, before we managed to win over the University building. And even there, both artists and curators heard many times that this would simply be impossible. All institutions were quite horrified by the blur between an art project and a real-life terror attack that might excessively scare the participants, as well as from the various shifts from their usual way of doing things. Rules and



regulations either had to be established or bypassed in order to make this happen. Perhaps these aspects of curatorial actions are where the true political sense of curating lies? In the non-heroic, behind-the-scenes conflicts that no one ever hears about? Political as they create tiny fractures in the hegemonic institution's function—a function which is designed according to the agendas of governing bodies. And perhaps they are political because they are driven by an artistic concept, which turns curating into a collective organisational effort, at times despite its own will? At the same time, another perspective could claim that these qualities and actions of the curator as a mediator and diplomat, with their aim to make conflicts disappear, in order to be able to produce imagined conflicts, are in fact anti-political. Either way, I will look at the act of curating as occurring in the liminal space between enabling the appearance of a conflict to the taming of its borders.

Another look at the role of a curator as mediator could arise from the two lectures and workshops that made up the first part of *(Un)Commoning* in Zurich. The talks and panel discussion by Susan Gibb and Florian Malzacher leaned towards curatorial strategies that emphasise performativity as a central mode of artistic production and the various expanded artistic effects and political potentials it offers. Susan Gibb's<sup>77</sup> *To Be Touched, to Listen: The Sensorial Scores of Myriam Lefkowitz and Snejanka Mihaylova* shared aspects of the creative practices of both artists and their respective scoring processes that prioritise sensorial modes of perception outside of the usual contexts of representation. Gibb revisited the questions that arose from these practices and from her perception of performative curating in the text she wrote for this book. Florian Malzacher's<sup>78</sup> lecture, titled *Marathons, Assemblies, Living Exhibitions: Performativity as a Curatorial Strategy*, asked how "theatre-like" strategies can enable "reality making" in art, and how, as a consequence, the creation of temporary communities in performative contexts might be part of shaping social and political realities. Malzacher asked how the understanding of dramaturgy, narration, process, use of space and time, and the co-presence of the audience could influence the curatorial work. How can it be used to create specific concepts, coherent projects, to contextualise differently, and to foster a dialogue between artworks, artists, audiences, and society. Connecting to previous notions I brought up in the research regarding the performative, Malzacher followed J. L. Austin, Judith Butler, and others in their belief in the performative capacity to transform reality with cultural utterances. These issues were revisited, challenged, and complicated via a conversation I had with Malzacher and artist Jonas Staal and which turned into the next text in this book.

In addition, two workshops that were open to the participation of the curatorial platform's MA and PhD students, as well to other artists, activists, curators, and dancers, offered two very different communal experiences: one that emphasised the voice as the locus for antagonistic identity constructs, and another that tested the body as a non-verbal tool for commoning and uncommoning. The first workshop entitled *The Right to Represent: Between Exploitation and Commemoration* was led by Dmitry Vilensky from the collective Chto Delat and tested ethical and aesthetic questions of representation in current political art practices, through staging a participatory trial based on the case of Emmett Till, thus proposing a more complex position of empathy and solidarity. The second workshop was led by dancers and choreographers Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome<sup>79</sup>: *Unruly Bodies* facilitated collective embodied movement processes to create choices about sensation and pleasure as political gesture. The artists were interested in disturbing the (perceived) boundaries between choreographic, social, verbal, and intimate shared spaces by offering practices for unruly bodies in unruly times.

Dmitry Vilensky's<sup>80</sup> workshop, which I assisted, took as its starting point the case of Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* at the Whitney Biennial, as well as many other similar controversies. Vilensky was interested in how anti-representational strategies dominate both within new political movements and in socially engaged art, reducing the debate to a clear and oversimplified scheme: representation equals hierarchy and is thus bad. The corresponding antithesis is that a rejection of representation equals the absence of hierarchy and is therefore good. For this seminar, Vilensky suggested studying not only the case of the attack on Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket*, at the Whitney Biennial but also to bring to attention other similar cases which come from recent practices and from the history of art and mass media images. He suggested taking a position between two different approaches—exploitation of the traumas and victims and practices of commemoration and tribute to the fallen. Each of the participants was supposed to be called to take a position and advocate his/her view on an image—this could be expressed not only verbally but also through gestures and body language. Most of the discussed images could be related to different types of catastrophes, which raised another crucial question—does catastrophe have universal or particular characteristics? To speak about it, does one need to live through it, or can we trust any position of empathy, solidarity, and truth-telling? At the end of the seminar, we were supposed to stage a public trial in a form of a "Learning Play," open to audiences, where we would introduce and discuss certain cases and personal accounts and see if we could find a common ground for judgment.

While Vilensky's workshop created a conflictual realm of participation through language and testimony, Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome asked whether bodies could 'speak' without censoring information, collapse patriarchy through investing in the imaginative and unruly, and disturb perceived boundaries between choreographic, social, verbal, and intimate spaces. They asked: what if our speaking/mumbling/voicing bodies found power inside the "unformed" or "non-namable"?

In a conversation with Jonas Staal and Florian Malzacher, which forms the next text in this book, I went back to *Truth is Concrete*,<sup>81</sup> a project curated by Malzacher, and examined its relation to *(Un)Commoning* and also to a recent project by Staal and Malzacher, *Training to the Future*.<sup>82</sup> One issue that came up in the conversation was the question of curating conflictual or non-consensual participation, similar to how Bishop describes it in relation to art practices. Malzacher and I discussed the role of curators as mediators and how they fluctuate between the need to make the participants feel safe and the wish to complicate their understanding. We went back to look at over-identification as a curatorial method, particularly the format of the 24-7 marathon as an ironic take on capitalism but also as a way of creating intimacy and alliances. We also discussed how today's political climate, with its fake news and propaganda, is different than the climate which enabled *Truth is Concrete*: how identity politics impact the political and artistic discourse and change the way people think about assembling and protesting, and in which ways antagonism and provocation could still be utilised in a meaningful manner.

In this regard, I brought up the two workshops as opposing ends of the spectrum of assembly: the first, with Last Yearz Interesting Negro, included non-verbal gestures and choreographies of togetherness. Through embodiment, it enabled an experiential understanding of the fragility of commoning and group identification, not withholding conflictual moments involving the friction and dissensus between bodies. The second, with Dmitry Vilensky, attempted a different kind of embodiment: a performative debate through re-enactment that, despite its directly verbal and provocative nature, was more cunning and less exposed in the manner in which it purposefully accentuated identity politics. The seeming clash between these two approaches was especially present in the joint discussion at the end of the day. As it turned out, the majority of Vilensky's workshop was a testimonial arena where people spoke about cases in which what they considered political correctness or identity politics jeopardised the integrity of an artistic/activist act. At some point, it felt like an AA meeting where everybody confesses what is not allowed to be said out

loud outside of the “safe space” of the group, encouraged by a charismatic guru. When we met at the end of the day with the other workshop participants, and the participants were asked to share what they spoke about, there was a dissonance between the blunt outspokenness of Vilensky’s workshop, still inspired by our politically incorrect cult atmosphere, to the silent glances and quiet reflection of the participants of the workshop led by Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome. Interestingly, both workshops were meant to have ended with a performance that could be shared with the other group and with an audience, but both workshop tutors decided eventually that a performative finale felt wrong. However, Vilensky and I decided to share some of the test cases that came up during our workshop with the larger group, and while doing so, I realised that this might have been the wrong decision. Without taking part in Vilensky’s workshop as a whole, laying the groundwork for stretching notions of representations and trauma, and without the performative estrangement of a “Learning Play,” the stories shared by the participants sounded insensitive. Being part of this workshop, but also being the host to all the artists and to the audience, I embodied the conflictual role of the mediator: on one hand, I was afraid to offend some of the artists and participants, whose voices were not heard, but on the other hand I wanted to let people speak freely, and in general not to be a self-censor. This kind of conflict continues to occur in my work as a curator and was also touched on by Florian Malzacher in the first part of our conversation, as well as by Jonas Staal in the second part of this ongoing dialogue, in relation to engaging with participants in his own artistic practice.

The second part of the conversation conducted with Staal and Malzacher, after *Training to the Future* and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, brought up issues regarding the possibility of protest and assembly in times of social distancing, the challenges of online assembly and the rise of surveillance technologies. It asks how assembly and collectivisation can be manifested in various localities and different contexts, through scores and new forms of knowledge transfer. It probes the alternatives that activists and political art practitioners face at a time of crisis and as a response to its abuse by neoliberal and right-wing agendas, and describes the challenges in engaging the crisis as a transformative moment. Relating to the concept of pre-enactment brought up earlier, it examines the idea of “training” as a form of knowledge transfer that turns the trainees into agents and potentially future trainers. At the end, it returns to questions of speaking versus listening and how imagining the future could be very different in non-Western contexts, where one’s speculative dystopian future is already another’s actual present. We probe the role of the artist and curator as providing care and support, and at the same time facilitat-

ing antagonistic situations. We call for a participatory tactic that facilitates a feeling of unsafe safety, in Staal's words: "safety in order to be able to be unsafe."

- 1 ——— Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA/London, England: The MIT Press, 2002), 82-155.
- 2 ——— Lacy writes about the convergence of the emergence of the term with the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* sculpture from Federal Plaza in NY, after a long controversial court case. The removal was considered a victory for the community-oriented approach to Public Art, in which the so-called community rejected high art in favor of more artistic accountability for "the people". The term New Genre Public Art was officially coined for a three-day symposium organised by Lacy and others, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern art in November 1991. Suzanne Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimage and Metaphorical journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 11, 19, 20.
- 3 ——— Arlene Raven, *Art in the Public Interest*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 1, 4, 18.
- 4 ——— Lacy, *Cultural Pilgrimages*, 25.
- 5 ——— Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 106-111.
- 6 ——— Ibid., 112-114.
- 7 ——— For example: "The performance of any ritual in tragedy is the encounter of the theatrical performance with the actual praxis of that ritual in the religious life outside the theatre. Recent studies of Greek religion reveal that descriptions of rituals in the tragedies are so elaborate and rich in performative components that scholars use tragedy (and comedy) as a reliable source of information for the reconstruction of the rites." Nurit Yaari, "What Am I to Say While I Pour These Funeral Offerings," *Stage Image, Word and Action in Aeschylus's Libation Scenes*, *Journal of Dramatic Theatre and Criticism* (Fall 1999): 50.
- 8 ——— Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa City, 2002), x-xix.
- 9 ——— This paragraph on Greek tragedy is inspired by a conversation I had with researcher Nir Shauloff, who was also a collaborator in two projects in (Un)commoning: the workshop with Noam Inbar and the performance with Public Movement.
- 10 ——— Paul Cartledge wrote about the political importance of Greek tragedy in classical Athens, as it was staged by and for the polis of the Athenians, organised by the government. He mentions the combination of religious processions and rituals of sacrifice that made their way into the theatre alongside political ceremonies that were performed before the theatre. In addition, he mentions the importance of the tragic theatre to Athenians as part of their political education and for the understanding of democracy, a learning process in how to be active citizens and participate in open debates and acts of self-governing. He claims, through examples of various plays, how they do not only reflect pre-existing political ideas but problematises and questions them in a non-didactic manner. Paul Cartledge, "'Deep Plays': Theatre as Process

- in Greek Civic Life,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–21.
- 11 ——— Parts of this text were written for the catalogue of *Preaching to the Choir*—2015 exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Art, Israel. Participatory projects involved choirs as a political voice, via videos, performances, workshops and events. Artists: Chto Delat, Effi & Amir, Željka Blakšić, Irina Botea, Omer Krieger and Nir Evron, Luigi Coppola, Marco Godoy and Tali Keren. Curator: Maayan Sheleff.
- 12 ——— Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontent;” *Artforum* (February 2006): 179–185.
- 13 ——— The financial crisis of 2007–2008 was a severe worldwide financial crisis, related to extreme risk-taking by banks in the US, leading to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and followed by an international banking crisis and a European debt crisis, which began with a deficit in Greece in 2009, both sparking a global recession, which, until the coronavirus recession, was the most severe recession since the Great Depression.
- 14 ——— The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s. It began in response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, starting with protests in Tunisia.
- 15 ——— Frances Dyson writes about the shallow echo of social networks: “Resonance—with its attributes of sympathy, empathy, and common understanding—is reduced to echo: the shallow repetition of the loudest voice. In this day and age, the loudest voice does not necessarily represent the common people, it does not resonate with their wishes, nor engage with their demands, but responds to the markets, to currency trading, flows of money, bond rates, and credit ratings.” Frances Dyson, *The Tone of Our Times: Sound, Sense, Economy, and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2014), 2.
- 16 ——— *(Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies*. Participating artists, speakers, and writers: Zbyněk Baladrán, Željka Blakšić, Susan Gibb, Marco Godoy, Chto Delat/Dmitry Vilensky, Noam Inbar and Nir Shauloff, Jamila Johnson-Small/Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome, Mikhail Karikis, Tali Keren, Florian Malzacher, Public Movement, Michal Oppenheim, Rory Pilgrim, Edgar Schmitz, Jack Tan, Nina Wakeford, and Katarina Zdjar. Curated by Maayan Sheleff and Sarah Spies. The project included two parts: Part #1: ZHdK, Tanzhaus-Zürich, 2 and 3 November 2018; Part #2: as part of *Reading International*, UK, in various spaces and location around the city of Reading—OpenHand OpenSpace, St Laurence Church, Greenham Common Control Tower, and the University of Reading, 23 April – 2 June 2019.
- 17 ——— The project in Reading included an exhibition and several workshops and participatory performances, all part of *Reading International* 2019. *Reading International* is Reading’s contemporary visual arts organisation. Led by artists from the Reading School of Art at the University of Reading and hosted by a mixture of partners within the town, *Reading International* produces several major projects each year, in which artists and curators are given a platform to make new work in response to the unique social and historical context of Reading and wider Berkshire.

Each programme includes a series of educational activities by a range of artists, curators, writers, academics, and students and aims to establish ongoing collaborations with international arts institutions and engage with a wide range of local community groups, schools and children.

Reading International is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England's Ambition for Excellence Programme, the University of Reading and Reading Borough Council. This project was also supported by an Artis exhibition grant.

- 18 ——— Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York/London/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).
- 19 ——— Bojana Cvejić, Bojana Kunst and Stefan Hölscher, "Commons/Undercommons in Art, Education, Work," *Journal for Performing Arts Theory* 23 (2016). Published by TkH (Walking Theory).
- 20 ——— Alice Lagaay and Michael Lorber, *Destruction in the Performative* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012).
- 21 ——— Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York/Port Watson: Wivenhoe, 2013).
- 22 ——— LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*.
- 23 ——— Ibid., 2.
- 24 ——— Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 73.
- 25 ——— Ibid., 70.
- 26 ——— LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 5.
- 27 ——— Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 14.
- 28 ——— LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 5.
- 29 ——— Ibid., 10.
- 30 ——— Ibid., 12.
- 31 ——— (Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies – Exhibition: Zbyněk Baladrán, Željka Blakšić, Marco Godoy, Mikhail Karikis, Tali Keren, Rory Pilgrim, Jack Tan, and Katarina Zdjelar, OpenHand OpenSpace, Reading, UK, 26 April – 2 June 2019.
- 32 ——— Katarina Zdjelar – *The Perfect Sound* (2009), Single Channel video, 14:30.

Katarina Zdjelar (born in Belgrade, lives and works in Rotterdam) is an artist whose artistic practice encompasses video and sound works, publications and the creation of platforms for speculation and exchange. Zdjelar represented Serbia at the 53rd Venice Biennale and has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally at such venues as Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo; Frieze Foundation, London; Casino Luxembourg; The Chelsea Art Museum New York; De Appel, Amsterdam; Hartware Medien Kunstverein, Dortmund; Museum of Contemporary Art MACBA Barcelona; MCOB Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade; Muzeum Sztuki Lodz and Powerhouse, Toronto. Most recently she was awarded the Dolf Henkes Prize 2017 and won the kinderprijs for the Dutch Prix de Rome Award 2017. Zdjelar teaches internationally and is a core tutor at Piet Zwart Institute (MA Fine Art), WdKA Rotterdam, and MAR (Master Artistic Research) at the KABK, Den Hague; she is also a board member of Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.

- 33 ——— Mladen Dolar, *But if you take my voice what will be left to me?* Exhibition catalogue, 53rd Venice Biennale, Serbian Pavilion, 2009. With texts by Anke Bangma, Mladen Dolar, Frans-Willem Korsten, Jan Verwoert, Branimir Stojanovic, Katarina Zdjelar.
- 34 ——— Marco Godoy, *Krolova* (2019), single-channel HD video.  
 Marco Godoy (Madrid) has recently exhibited his work at Madero Madrid, Centre Georges Pompidou, Liverpool Biennial, Stedelijk Museum's-Hertogenbosch, Edinburgh Art Festival, Dallas Museum of Contemporary Art, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Lugar a Dudas in Cali, Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and Whitechapel Gallery in London. He has an MA from the RCA, London, where he lived and worked for several years.
- 35 ——— Jack Tan - *Hearings* (2016), Multimedia installation, live performance at the exhibition opening, performers: Kate Smith and Nuno Veiga.
- 36 ——— Jack Tan (London) uses law, social norms, and customs as a way of making art. He creates performances, performatives, sculpture, video, and participatory projects that highlight the rules that guide human behaviour. Jack trained as a lawyer and worked in civil rights NGOs before becoming an artist. Recent projects include *Karaoke Court* (2014-ongoing) a singing dispute resolution process, *Four Legs Good* (2018), a revival of the medieval animal trials for Compass Festival Leeds; his Singapore Biennale presentation, *Voices From The Courts*, examining the vocality of the State Courts of Singapore (2016), *Law's Imagination* (2016) a curatorial residency at Arebyte exploring legal aesthetics, his solo exhibition *How To Do Things With Rules* (2015) at the ICA Singapore, and *Closure* (2012), a year-long residency and exhibition at the UK Department for Health looking at the liquidation of their social work quango. Jack was the 2017/18 Inaugural Art & Politics Fellow at the Dept of Politics and International Relations, Goldsmiths College, and has also taught sculpture at the Royal College of Art and University of Brighton.
- 37 ——— Some segments of the text on Tan's project are taken from the artist's website: <https://jacktan.wordpress.com/art-work/hearings/>.
- 38 ——— Zbyněk Baladrán - *To Be Framed* (2016), single-channel HD video, 8 min.
- 39 ——— Zbyněk Baladrán (Prague) is an author, artist, curator, and exhibition architect. He studied art history in the Philosophy Department of the Charles University (Univerzita Karlova) and in the studios for Visual Communication, Painting and New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts, both in Prague. In 2001, he co-founded Display, a space for contemporary art, which in 2007 was transformed into Tranzitdisplay. Together with Vit Havránek, he curated *Monument to Transformation*, a three-year long research project on social and political transformations. He was a member of the curatorial team (through tranzit.org) of Manifesta 8 in Murcia, Spain (2010). He took part in the 11th Lyon Biennial, in Manifesta 5 in Donostia/San Sebastian (2004), in the 56th Biennale di Venezia (2013) and in MoMA (2015). He is represented by the Jocelyn Wolff Gallery in Paris, Gandy Gallery in Bratislava, and Hunt Kastner in Prague.
- 40 ——— <http://www.zbynekbaladrán.com/to-be-framed/>.



- 41 ——— Rory Pilgrim - *Software Garden* (2018), single-channel HD video, 50 min., courtesy of Andriesse-Eyck Galerie.
- 42 ——— Rory Pilgrim (born in Bristol, lives and works in Rotterdam and Isle of Portland). Recent solo shows include: *Between Bridges*, Berlin (2019) Andriesse-Eyck Gallery, Amsterdam NL (2018), South London Gallery, London (2018), *Rowing*, London (2017), Plymouth Art Centre, Plymouth (2017), *Flat Time House*, London (2016), *Site Gallery*, Sheffield (2016) and *sic! Raum für Kunst*, Lucerne (2014).
- 43 ——— Some segments from the text about this work were taken from the artist's website: <https://rorypilgrim.com/software-garden-cycle-1/>.
- 44 ——— Željka Blakšić aka Gita Blak (Zagreb) is an interdisciplinary artist who works with performance, 16mm film, video, and installation. Blakšić has exhibited extensively throughout the U.S. and Europe. Her recent performances and exhibitions have been presented at Filmwerkstatt Düsseldorf (Germany), *Framer Framed* (Amsterdam), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Herzliya Museum (Israel), Gallery Augusta (Helsinki), Los Sures Museum (New York), *Recess* (New York), AIR Gallery (New York), *Offenbachplatz* (Cologne), BRIC Contemporary Art Gallery (New York), and many others. She was a recipient of the 2017 Residency Unlimited and National Endowment for the Arts Award for a NYC-based artist, 2016 Recess Session Residency and Via Art Fund Grant; 2014/15 AIR Gallery Fellowship in New York, 2012 The District Kunst und Kulturförderung Studio Award in Berlin; 2010 Paula Rhodes Memorial Award in New York City, etc. Most recently, she was a resident at Fondazione Pistoletto in Biella, Italy, and MuseumsQuartier in Vienna, Austria. Currently, she is working on a project at Alserkal Avenue in Dubai, UAE.
- 45 ——— Željka Blakšić aka Gita Blak: *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM* (2012-2013), single-channel video, 8 min. The work was commissioned by BLOK (curatorial collective) for the Urban Festival 2013 – Festival of Contemporary Arts in Public Space, Zagreb.
- 46 ——— Some segments of the text about this work were taken from the artist's website: <https://www.gitablak.com/work#/maritime/>. Others were written for the exhibition *Preaching to the Choir* which I curated in 2015 at the Herzliya Museum, Israel, and which showed *WHISPER – TALK – SING – SCREAM* as well.
- 47 ——— Mikhail Karikis - *No Ordinary Protest* (2018), single-channel HD video, 7.48 min, commissioned by MIMA, the Whitechapel Gallery, and Film and Video Umbrella.

Mikhail Karikis is a Greek-British artist based in London and Lisbon. Karikis was shortlisted for the 2016 Jarman Award and the DAIWA Art Prize 2015. Group exhibitions include Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016, IN; British Art Show 8, UK (2015-2017); 19th Biennale of Sydney, AU (2014); Mediacity Seoul, Seoul, KR (2014); 2nd Aichi Triennale, Nagoya, JP (2013); Manifesta 9, BE (2012); Danish Pavilion 54th Venice Biennale, IT (2011). Solo exhibitions include Mikhail Karikis, MORI Art Museum, Tokyo, JP (2019); *Children of Unquiet*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, IT (2019); *No Ordinary Protest*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2018-2019); *Love Is the Institution of Revolution*, Casino Luxembourg Forum d'art contemporain, LU (2017).

- 48 ——— LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 12.
- 49 ——— Some segments from this text are edited from the artist's website: <http://www.mikhailkarikis.com/2018/08/30/no-ordinary-protest/>.
- 50 ——— "Dance and Power: Choreopolitics in Neo-Authoritarian Times," seminar with professor André Lepecki on performance and politics, Kelim Choreography Center, Bat Yam, Israel, 2019, supported by Artis and Outset.
- 51 ——— André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New-York/London: Routledge, 2006).
- 52 ——— James Loxley, "Being Performative: Butler," in *Performativity* (London/ New York: Routledge Press, 2007), 113- 123.
- 53 ——— Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edition (New York/London: Routledge, 1999), 179.
- 54 ——— Loxley, "Being Performative: Butler," 113- 123.
- 55 ——— Ibid., 123-124. According to Loxley, Butler adapts Derrida's deconstruction of the distinction between serious and non-serious speech acts: The non-serious (or the fictional one, and for our purpose, the artistic acts), are a citation of the serious (or the "real" ones), one that could serve to undermine them. This iterability and citationality is what, in fact, exposes the process in which performativity constructs gender or other forms of identity constructs, and enables a pervasive performativity. This way, performance need not necessarily be a participation in normalising identities and stabilising power relations, but a kind of "enacted critique."
- 56 ——— Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 100.
- 57 ——— Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).
- 58 ——— Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), 155.
- 59 ——— Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/NY: Verso, 2012), 275.
- 60 ——— Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?," in *Living as Form, Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time Books and Cambridge, MA/London, England: The MIT Press, 2012), 34-45.
- 61 ——— Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 276-277.
- 62 ——— Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin: Sternberg Press and Cambridge, MA/London, England: The MIT Press, 2019).
- 63 ——— Ibid., 6-7.
- 64 ——— Ibid., 15.
- 65 ——— Ibid., 23.
- 66 ——— Ibid., 26.
- 67 ——— Ibid., 25, 115.
- 68 ——— Public Movement, *Emergency Routine*, "First-Step Training," work in progress, 2019, Edith Morley Building, University of Reading, Whiteknights Campus, Reading, UK.
- Public Movement director: Dana Yahalomi; Public Movement Research and Development team: Gali Libraider, Nir Shauloff, Dana Yahalomi. Instructor: Eitan Chinitz.

- 69 ——— Tali Keren is a media artist (born in Jerusalem, lives and works in Brooklyn, NY). Her works focus on the formation of ideology, violence, and political identity. Keren's recent solo exhibitions include *The Great Seal* at Eyebeam, New York and at the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, and *Heat Signature* at Ludlow 38, MINI Goethe Institute, New York. She has exhibited and performed her work in venues such as: Anthology Film Archives, New York; Museum of Moving Image, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Socrates Sculpture Park, New York; Times Square, New York; the Jewish Museum, New York; Museumsquartier, Vienna; Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen; The Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon; Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. She is currently an artist in residence at the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP). Keren received her B.F.A. from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem (2009), and earned an MFA from Columbia University, New York (2016).
- 70 ——— Tali Keren – *The Great Seal* (2017), interactive multimedia installation, site-specific iteration, courtesy of Il Collection, Luxembourg.
- 71 ——— Segments from this text are taken from the artists' website: <https://talikeren.com/The-Great-Seal>.
- 72 ——— Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, 114.
- 73 ——— More about the relationship between Trump, the Evangelists, and the end of the world: <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-will-bring-about-end-worldevangelicals-end-times-779643>.
- 74 ——— Ibid., 122.
- 75 ——— Claudia Aradau, "The Myth of Preparedness," *Radical Philosophy* 161 (May/June 2010). <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-myth-of-preparedness>.
- 76 ——— Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics*, 95
- 77 ——— Susan Gibb is a curator based in Amsterdam, where she currently works for the performance focused arts organisation If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution and teaches at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO). She is originally from Sydney, Australia, where she ran an independent curatorial initiative Society.
- 78 ——— Florian Malzacher (Berlin) is a performing arts curator, dramaturge, and writer. From 2013-2017, he was artistic director of Impulse Theater Festival (Germany), and from 2006-2012, co-programmer of Steirischer Herbst festival (Austria). As a dramaturge, he has worked with artists like Rimini Protokoll, Lola Arias, Mariano Pensotti, and Nature Theater of Oklahoma. He has (co-)curated, e.g., the 170-hour marathon *Truth is Concrete* on art and activism (Graz, 2012), the performative conference *Appropriations* (Ethnological Museum Berlin, 2014), the congress *Artist Organisations International* (with Jonas Staal and Joanna Warsza, HAU Berlin, 2015), and the performance series *Sense of Possibility* (St Petersburg, 2017). His latest publications include *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* (2014), *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (2015), *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy* (2017).
- 79 ——— Last Yearz Interesting Negro (London, UK) makes shows that work with in-between spaces, syncopation, trance states, internal narratives, intensities, overwhelm, electronic music, and small dances to affect/disrupt/deflect/distort/reflect gaze(s) directed towards their body, and

to cope with Being. Resultant choreographies are stage/dreamspace/battleground, working through questions of presence, visibility, responsibility and pleasure, building atmospheric landscapes through the live unfolding of the tensions between things that produce meaning, for situating and expanding (or dismantling) their 'identity' and turning it into theatre.

Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome (London, UK) is of English and Chilean descent, and is a dance artist and choreographer working since 2009. Her practice involves dancing-voicing as a political gesture, presented between established arts organisations, alternative spaces, and club scenes. Performance, collaboration, and curation allow her to create spaces enabling reorientation around "otherness." Crafting queer spaces, nurturing communities where care and consent promote exploration and activism is central to her practice. Furthermore, working with pop/punk bands, electronic music producers, sound artists, and visual artists in live/electronic music settings and galleries enables her to reach audiences in environments which excite her appetite.

- 80 ——— Dmitry Vilensky (b. 1964 in Leningrad) is an artist and educator. He works mostly in collective practices and focuses on developing large-scale architecture constructions, educational seminars, and learning plays, graphic works, and films. He is the founding member of Chto Delat (What is to be done?), a platform initiated in 2003 by a collective of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism. Vilensky is also an editor of the Chto Delat newspaper and main facilitator of a School of Engaged Art in St Petersburg. He has participated with Chto Delat in their recent exhibitions and performances including: MUAC (The Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo), Mexico (solo show 2017); KOW BERLIN (solo show in 2017 and 2015), São Paulo Biennale (2014), *Really Useful Knowledge*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2014), *Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789–2013* – Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (2013); *FORMER WEST: Documents, Constellations, Prospects*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2013); 10th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2012); Chto Delat in Baden-Baden, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, 2011; *Chto Delat Perestroika: Twenty Years After: 2011–1991*, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, 2011; *Ostalgia*, New Museum, New York, 2011; *Study, Study and Act Again*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2011; and *The Urgent Need to Struggle*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 2010. He is also the author of numerous contributions to the art press, a participant in symposiums and conferences, and a guest teacher at many international art academies.
- 81 ——— *Truth is Concrete, Political Practices in Art and Artistic Practices in Politics*, curators Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza, 2012, in the framework of the *Steirischer Herbst* Festival, Graz, Austria. *Truth is Concrete* was a 24/7 marathon camp, with around 300 lectures, panels, tactic talks, performances, concerts, films, workshops, and a parallel, self-curated, spontaneous open marathon.
- 82 ——— *Training to the Future* was held in September 2019 in the framework of the *Ruhr Triennale*. The curatorial text described the project as such: "Training for the Future is a utopian training camp where audiences

become trainees in creating alternative futures, learning how to decolonize society, how to use extraterritorial waters for political action, create new forms of encryption, enact intergenerational climate justice, socialize artificial intelligence and campaign transnationally. Futurologists, progressive hackers, post-national activists, transnationalism, theatre makers, artists, and many others offer concrete exercises in alternatives to the present-day crisis within a training installation developed by artist Jonas Staal, situated in the Jahrhunderthalle Bochum. It seems a consensus today, that what is ahead of us can only be imagined as a disaster. Training for the Future instead aims to collectively reclaim the means of production of the future.”

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## Unsafe Safety

### A Conversation Between Florian Malzacher, Jonas Staal, and Maayan Sheleff

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*Unsafe Safety—A Conversation Between Florian Malzacher, Jonas Staal, and Maayan Sheleff*, began with the discursive purpose of reflecting on the project *Training for the Future* by Florian Malzacher and Jonas Staal, a utopian training camp that aims to collectively reclaim the means of ‘producing’ the future. Subsequently, the conversation developed into a multi-layered conversation in two parts, before and after the training camp (and the pandemic). The text relates different strands of thinking about assemblies, identity conflicts, and curatorial positions to the current challenges brought about by the Covid-19 crisis, making physical assemblies ‘dangerous’ and enhancing online participation.

#### **Before—A conversation between Florian Malzacher and Maayan Sheleff in a cafe in South Tel Aviv, April 2019**

M: Can you tell me about *Training for the Future*<sup>1</sup>? What are you planning? What do you mean by training?

F: *Training for the Future* departs from the simple observation that many of us have difficulties to imagine a future which is worth living for. Not only do we not expect it to bring much positive, we often also don’t have our own visions of it, no desires or goals that are not only reactive. At the same time, we can see that it is desperately necessary to be active in shaping this future. So, the idea of the training is that you can learn something that helps you to be prepared for the future—but also to claim part in influencing or at least imagining it.

In contrast to the terms “seminar” or “workshop,” the concept of training also suggests a more physical or practical approach—the presence of our bodies will play a role in this, the training groups will be rather large, and



*Truth is Concrete* (Graz, 2012), © Thomas Raggam

the time together rather tight. One could say, the training is a proposal; it offers a beginning of something you might want to continue later on. But you also might disagree with some of the approaches: The trainings are quite diverse and sometimes might even be contradictory in their visions.

M: What is the difference between the training here and the “Marathon” in one of your previous projects, *Truth Is Concrete* (2012),<sup>2</sup> which was also an intensive form of participatory knowledge transfer?

F: *Truth is Concrete* happened almost seven years ago—a lot has happened since. When we organized this seven-day marathon in 2012, it was still a time of optimism: social movements became visible and strong around the world. But at the same time, it was no pure, no naive enthusiasm anymore. When we started working on *Truth is Concrete*, Occupy Wall Street was not even thought of yet. And when it happened, OWS had already been evicted. So, it was a time where there was a huge desire for exchange and sharing experiences and practices.

It seems to me the tone has changed fundamentally since then. There is much more confrontation between different groups, movements, communities. There is—sometimes rightfully so—a focus on differences rather than on the common ground, which was a basic assumption for *Truth is Concrete*. I don’t think the openness, enthusiasm, and generosity towards each other would be possible today—for many reasons.

M: I think that this is an important issue, as it connects to concepts of agonistic pluralism and how the changing reality sheds a different light on them. Think, for example, of Claire Bishop’s seminal claim that the best

participatory projects cause the participant to feel confusion and discomfort and often involve conflict or even provocation.<sup>3</sup> Today, with the fake news and the right wing's advanced propaganda, things are at times so absurd and extreme that it becomes impossible to draw the difference between reality and satire. On the other hand, as you mentioned, subtleties disappear also on the side of the activists—maybe as a counter reaction. Would projects like *Please Love Austria* by Christoph Schlingensiefel<sup>4</sup> or the Yes Men's tactical media<sup>5</sup> be as effective today as they were a decade ago?

F: No, many of these approaches wouldn't work anymore—they were specific in context and time. Obviously today, other activist and/or artistic strategies have to be developed. Think, for example, of Jonas Staal's "New Unions"<sup>6</sup> which is based on the assumption that we need to build new alliances, that we have to find common ground. At some point, it was confronted by a strong demand first to change the underlying structures and conditions before moving on to the idea of unionising.

Still, while these seem to be contradictory aims—to unionise vs. to focus on divisions and differences—we should not forget that they may happen in different time frames. There is usually only a small window of time for movements like #Metoo or Black Lives Matter—it is a matter of "now or never." So, the strategy is to push as hard as possible since all the demands were ignored for so many years and nothing has changed. But at the same time, it is necessary to not forget the other timeline, in which it is just as necessary to create unions in order to change the path of this planet towards the manifold catastrophes that become more and more tangible.

M: When you and Jonas are imagining the future you will be training for, would you say that it is more useful, as an activist strategy, to imagine utopia or dystopia?

F: For me, *Training for the Future* is about developing utopias—or maybe rather: pragmatic utopias. There are already so many science fictions that imagine dystopian worlds... So, the interesting thing is: are the utopias we are imagining common utopias, or divided and divisive ones? I have the hope that artistic strategies help to open some pathways within the current landscape of confrontations. We need safe spaces and agonistic spaces at the same time. So, what is the relationship between the two? Again, there is not necessarily a contradiction, perhaps they just need to be considered as different modes of time.

M: Maybe you need to feel relatively safe within an agonistic space, if that's possible.





Reverend Billy at *Truth is Concrete* (Graz, 2012), © Thomas Raggam

F: Yes, because being in a safe space might change your personal situations—but not your social and political situation. You need to enter agonistic spheres in order to fight for your hegemonic project. And you need to create radical safe spaces—because mediocre safe spaces just produce superficial consensus.

M: Another thing that I often ask myself is if we ever reach larger audiences outside the communities of artists and activists, and does it even matter? Because these projects attract a certain kind of crowd.

F: I'm all in favour of projects that are able to reach larger audiences. But right now, it seems we also need to communicate in smaller circles of artists and activists to figure things out. And after all: these people are multipliers. At TTFE, all trainers and trainees work in different contexts and can carry things further, in many different directions. Also, I believe that the idea of the training is bringing something to the art world which is not very present there. Sometimes it is necessary to focus on the art world in order to show that art can create these different kinds of spaces.



Final Assembly at *Truth is Concrete* (Graz, 2012), © Thomas Raggam

M: In this project, do you see your role as a curator, as an artist, or as a dramaturg? And do you see an echoing between the kind of artists you are interested in and your curatorial or collaborative methodology?

F: I never see myself as an artist. For me, it is more productive to play with the roles we play, to see how the roles of artists and curators complement each other, overlap, clash, convene. A curator has to do things (and sometimes *can* do things) that within the role of an artist are more problematic or not desirable—and vice versa. Everybody assumes that the role of the artist offers—at least on paper—more freedom. But sometimes that's not even true.

The other aspect is, that at some point in my life, I decided not to take on the role of an artist because I encountered some artists whose visions and practices seemed so much more radical or much more consequent than mine. For me, this is still one of the most important aspects of the role of “a good artist.” And it is this consequence of a few artists and a few activists that I am drawn to and that I try to connect and contextualise in my own way.

With *Truth is Concrete*, the aim was to bring together *a lot* of people—artists, activists, theorists, audience—and to create a context, a platform, a curatorial concept that would enable something that might otherwise not happen. So, from the beginning, it was about pushing the limits of the

curatorial role beyond being merely a host—and at the same time serving a bigger political and artistic purpose.

So, in this regard I would say *Truth is Concrete* was a curatorial proposal, while *Training for the Future* is much more driven by the artistic approach of Jonas. For me, that means that certain decisions I would clearly leave to Jonas. I might discuss them or try to influence them—but in the end, they are artistic rather than curatorial decisions. But this is an undefined field—and that's productive. And, of course, every collaboration differs. In another project I am currently working on—a performance by the Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera—it is a completely different kind of collaboration.

Either way, these kinds of collaborations are different from other curatorial work. I like the idea that curating does not necessarily mean endorsing. So, in other projects, it is also possible to have a more critical or agonistic relationship with the artists you work with. Struggling with each other can also be a form of collaboration.

M: I want to go back to what you said about the curator as a host. Do you feel that as a curator-host you sometimes go between two positions: one is to make your guests comfortable and the other one is to push them outside of their comfort zones in order to get something interesting out of them?

F: Of course, but in any case it is about creating the best setting for whatever encounter you are aiming for—be it a friendly or an unfriendly situation. But, again, in the role of a curator I would not overstep certain lines in dealing with an audience which some of the artists I work with might. Maybe I am too cowardly, but I would rather like to consider it not to be my role. For example, when Joanna Warsza, Jonas, and I created Artists' Organisation International (AOI),<sup>7</sup> it became quite a confrontational event. It was very productive this way, but as a curator I would usually be more transparent, explain the rules of the game beforehand. I would have tried to make it more peaceful—and in this case I believe that would have meant less interesting.

As for the *Trainings*, I would say: they are a rigid proposal, but there is no hidden agenda, while artists like Renzo Martens or Artur Zmijewski are working with what Pablo Helguera called “involuntary participation,”<sup>8</sup> which basically means that they don't lie but also don't necessarily tell the whole truth. To a degree, they deceive their participants—and this is something I won't do in my practice as a curator. I might invite artists to do it for me, though.



*Artist Organisations International* (Berlin, 2015), © Lidia Rossner / Artist Organisations International

M: I think it's a curatorial thing to be mediators and "save" your participants, be they artists or audiences, when they feel too uncomfortable, because you invited them under certain conditions. When Sarah (Spies) and I curated the first part of *(Un)commoning Voices*, *(Non)communal Bodies*, we held two workshops for the MAS and PhD curating students at ZHdK. One was with Jamila Johnson-Small/Last Yearz Interesting Negro and Fernanda Muñoz-Newsome and included non-verbal gestures and choreography of togetherness. The second, with Dmitry Vilensky from Chto Delat, was a performative debate about the controversy with Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, and included some provocation regarding identity politics. At the end, we had a joint discussion with all the participants. Taking into account the explosiveness of the content, I felt the clash between the provocative attitude of Dmitry and the subtle activist attitude of Jamila and Fernanda so strongly that I almost couldn't bear the thought of making people who I invited so uncomfortable, maybe even offended. On the other hand, I was careful not to be a self-censor, or to project my own sensitivities on others. As Dmitry was aware of our attempts to navigate between these two positions in the conversation, he asked me later over a drink: Why do curators always have to be such moderators?

**After—A Zoom conversation with Jonas Staal, Florian Malzacher, and Maayan Sheleff, April 2020**

M: Originally, when I invited you to have this conversation, I was planning to ask you about your post-event thoughts—what you had planned and what eventually happened. In the meantime, we found ourselves in an unexpected and overwhelming situation with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Currently, many countries are in the midst of a lockdown, and no one knows how long this situation will last. So, it seems relevant to ask first if and how you would have imagined the future differently if you did this project now, and would “assembly” even be possible?

F: Of course, I also have been wondering what it could mean to demonstrate while having to keep distance. There is the example of the recent Tel Aviv demonstrations. I really liked the picture from above with everybody keeping a two-metre distance in a very strict pattern. It was about creating an image.<sup>9</sup> Then there are also other examples from Germany and Poland, where kiosks or takeaway restaurants were allowed to be opened, while demonstrations weren't permitted. So, people instrumentalised the cues (with a distance of 1.5 metres between each person) in front of some takeaway cafés for their demonstration. That happened with a pro-asylum demonstration in Berlin, and protests against abortion laws in Poland. I was also thinking of the famous “Standing Man” performance by Erdem Gündüz in Istanbul, which is also about a demonstration that could not happen anymore. So, in a way, there are choreographies and formats for absent demonstrations, paradox assemblies that remind us that we cannot assemble. If we had scheduled the training one year later, could we have adapted the training in a meaningful way to the current situation or would we just have cancelled?

J: I don't see any scenario in which we would have cancelled, even if we would not have been able to physically gather. I think the notion and format of the training could have generated many different forms in terms of instructions, collecting different methodologies, including alternative organisational forms that are emerging from the coronavirus crisis.

In some sense, maybe the starting question for the training would not even be that different, because before the coronavirus crisis we were asking how can we organise to challenge the means of production of the future, and now we would ask exactly the same question. In a way, what we are inheriting now in the coronavirus crisis is the consequence of our lack of organisation to ensure durable social infrastructures before.

What I have been observing in this crisis is how much it confronts us with choices of the recent past. Like in Greece, where I am at the moment, a new right-wing government was elected. They are hiring IC (intensive care) beds from private hospitals—for tens of thousands of euros per bed. If we would have voted the Syriza government back into power, that would never have happened; they would instantly have nationalised the private health care infrastructures, at least for the period of the pandemic, as it happened in the context of the Podemos-led government in Spain. So, on one hand, there is the question of how do we train and organise an assembly in the context of the pandemic; on the other hand, the pandemic is kind of mirroring all of the made or lost choices of the recent past. What we could have organised and what we didn't now gets amplified in the present. But that does not undermine the urgency of our training, it just amplifies it.

M: It's as if the subconscious is now surfacing, and everything becomes more extreme. I've just read that Trump is banning all immigration starting from today. He also, of course, already gave benefits to oil companies. And in Israel, Netanyahu is basically taking the country hostage in order to prevent himself from going on trial. So, it is kind of like an enhanced mirror of what was already happening.

J: Enhanced, yeah, that's the word.

F: To come back to the training: if we can't come together physically, what can be transferred to an online space? And what can't?

J: If we wouldn't have been able to physically gather, my first thought would be to ask each of the trainers to set up instructions for the trainees to be sent. But not to try to hold on to the existing format and do the training in the form of a big Zoom meeting with 450 people as if we can somehow continue the situation as it was before. I think then it would be more about instructions of how to gather within the direct and existing surroundings, to acknowledge and build on the way the pandemic has site- and culture-specific impact.

I am thinking about that a lot now because apart from the different campaigns that I am involved in directly related to the pandemic, there are also projects in the near future where some forms of assembly were planned which now would have to happen in a compromised social-distanced form. But am I willing to conceptualise parliaments where people have a 1.5-metre distance? And how does that relate to the core idea of the assembly? I feel very resistant to the idea of facilitating this atomisation

process that is manifesting now as a result of an inherited crisis of capitalism, which has created the conditions for this virus to emerge and circulate at a rapid pace. The total precarisation that is going to manifest as a result of our added dependency on telecommunications is one big exercise for companies to figure out: “Oh, actually we don’t need that office space, or actually our teachers work much harder when we put them online.” This all feels like the amplification of dynamics that should be rejected in their entirety.

So, I feel resistant to facilitating a choreography that naturalises the crisis, that naturalises the pandemic. We need to get to the origins of how this crisis manifested in the first place and why, and identify who is benefitting from it. Who was already benefitting before and is trying to establish hegemony even further in this new era of coronavirus capitalism.

F: I don’t know, I sometimes feel that this discussion is just adapting to a discourse that was already there. So, the virus has to fit into a certain logic of critiquing capitalism. And yes, it is partially true: capitalism didn’t go down, the gap between rich and poor is even more visible, and the ones that always profit also profit from the virus. But on the other hand, some things are happening as well—things that we did not expect, like the nationalisation of certain infrastructures in some countries or the oil price dropping below zero. Of course, it’s important not to romanticise rather anecdotal events—but how could we learn something from these experiences?

For me, there is a performativity in these kinds of assemblies we were talking of that emphasises a lack. We cannot give up on the idea of getting close. We have to be aware of the phantom pain of all of this onlineness. I actually like the idea of producing assemblies that cannot be assemblies just in order to produce exactly this desire. Like Erdem Gündüz on Taksim Square was showing that something is missing: a man standing alone where there used to be a demonstration. It was not about replacing the demonstration, it was about showing that the demonstration could not happen anymore.

And maybe we just should not give in, we should not just overproduce and pretend we are happy with this situation, but rather ask how can we produce a desire to come together again? And keep this desire alive, so that we don’t get used to it. And at the same time acknowledge the need to stay at a distance. We should make the tension visible—and not release it by going in either direction.

As you, Jonas, pointed out when launching “Collectivize Facebook”<sup>10</sup>: this is not a substitute, it’s just a pragmatic solution for the moment. So, how can we make this physically felt, this desire and political necessity of assembling? And at the same time acknowledge the necessity not to be able to do that at the moment.

M: For me, it raises a lot of interesting questions about participation because I think that even before, online participation was often about being visible. There was always this race—which, of course, is also connected to neoliberalism—to be visible and produce more content. And now there is this acceleration of the need to be visible; you have to constantly produce attractive online content and invent new platforms, which, of course, you can’t, because you have to take care of a two-year-old child or you’ll be fired or you’re hungry. So, in a way I think participation online is always infected, sorry about the irony, with this sort of neoliberal purpose. So with online participation, engagement is always mediated by various agendas, and if we are in a sort of crisis, the temporal virality constantly intensifies the crisis, like an echo. And somehow when you’re together in the physical space, you create a different kind of temporality, less infected by all this propaganda. You feel your body and the closeness of other bodies in a tangible way, and then the participatory engagement is completely different.

J: That’s absolutely true, but at the same time I remember that the way the training camp came about was also as a critique of the very form of the assembly. The idea was to move from assembly to training because of the risk of the assembly slowly becoming a kind of substitute for political action: as long as we are together, as long as there are bodies in a room discussing something, it feels like we are doing “something.” And after the assembly, there is another assembly and another assembly, and it can risk becoming a self-serving paradigm. What would it mean to shift towards the training, to somehow embrace an aspect of disciplining? Not disciplining as a punishing act, but as a way of expanding our capacity of collective action. For me, this question still holds very much in this particular moment in time.

It’s obvious that together with the pandemic there is also a different virus spreading, I call it the “red virus.” There are more reawakened socialists in the world than ever before because suddenly everyone wants universal basic healthcare, basic income, well-paid care-workers and cleaners, and the like; this is a huge base and potentiality that could turn this moment into a transformative one. But that won’t go without a fight, and it still needs incredible organisational discipline. We need a militant imaginary of where we want to get to. What is the kind of world we want to build through this crisis? How does this crisis make visible what is wrong, and



what it is that we want to achieve? But we also need structural trained constituents that can enforce these futurities to become reality, because it's very clear that our opponents, whether it's the authoritarians or neo-liberals, or the combination of the two, have had their plans to exploit crises ready for a long time. Erdoğan knew exactly what he wanted to do, the right-wing Greek government knew exactly what they wanted to do, when it comes to mass precarisation or corporate benefit, or when it comes to dismantling independent democratic institutions. I think we were working on the idea of the training camp to have our own plans and trained constituents ready for such moments as well. So, if there is any form in which we would continue this now, I think we would have to acknowledge the changed choreographies of our intimacies, of our gathering, but at the same time it would have to focus directly on how to spread this red virus, and how to enforce this reawakened social imaginary.

F: I agree, the trainings now would have a much clearer focus. We offered a very wide array of futures and approaches, and now they would have to be narrowed down. The task would be clearer. I really like the idea of manuals or tasks or structures that would be worked with in different places. We already had discussions about the possible Eurocentrism of the last edition and about its context specificity and the problems that might come with that. There was, for example, a controversy around the training given by Heath Bunting, who recommended touching the police as a strategy to confuse them. And some people said: well, if you do this where I come from, you'd just get beaten up. So, this strategy is obviously not universal.

So, by decentralising the trainings, they could become even more specific. They would have to acknowledge what you can actually do, in what kind of lockdown you might be trapped, what the specific social situation is in the concrete space you are in. This would actually be a gain: to understand what tools, strategies, weapons actually can function in which concrete context.

M: One example of a local specific context in terms of surveillance could be how the medical masks were used by protesters in Hong Kong to confuse the facial recognition in cameras. Now that the masks are obligatory in many places, maybe they could be used in other subversive ways? Or remember the propaganda and graffiti robots by the *Institute for Applied Autonomy*? They designed robots that deliver propaganda and draw graffiti so that you can't find and arrest their human sender. The robots protected the people who wanted to deliver their message anonymously, and now they could potentially also protect them from getting infected...

technology can somehow be imagined in different ways than just facilitating Zoom conversations.

But I also wanted to go back to the concept of training, because the specificity of contexts brings up some issues regarding why a certain person is a trainer and another a trainee—why should this person delegate their knowledge to other people, and shouldn't the knowledge be transferred in a less hierarchical way?

J: For me, using the terms trainer and trainee is not necessarily an imposition of hierarchy, as trainees can easily become trainers and vice versa. What we chose was to highlight competencies related to questions of reclaiming the means of production of the future from people who have been invested in these questions for several decades, when it comes to protest choreography or hacking, for example. But acknowledging competence is not a denial of the fact that there are also other competencies. A different starting question would have resulted in a different division of who can be temporarily regarded as a trainer and who can be temporarily regarded as a trainee. On top of that, if a trainer does their work well, a competence is transferred and, at the end of the training, a trainee becomes a potential trainer. So, for me what seems to be hierarchy is more about a temporal recognition of competence related to a specific question and an undoing of the division of knowledge through the training, because essentially that knowledge is redistributed, and you end up with more trainers than trainees.

Returning to your previous comment, the question of surveillance is crucial—for example, in relation to all of the different apps that are being developed to speed up the “re-opening” of economies for the coming year. Apps through which people will continuously be receiving messages whether they have or have not been in close contact with someone who might be carrying the virus, and are imposed to stay at home in quarantine for another period of time, or might be rejected entry to use public transport systems or going to public spaces, in one form or another. There are a lot of technological tools of surveillance that had difficulty getting into the public market because of resistance against privacy infringement, and now have a perfect occasion to be fully put to the test because when there is a sense of collective emergency, people are obviously much more willing to give up what previously seemed to be extremely important civil liberties. Just out of a sheer desire of getting out of the crisis as soon as possible. And this is what makes it hugely difficult to engage crises transformatively, because it is exactly in crisis that people desire to return to an idea of the “normal.” Even if you hated that normality, it seems better than

being at home jobless or not even having a home, or being evicted from your house in the middle of a crisis because you can't pay your rent or mortgage. This explains, for example, why in a country like the US, where it would be most rational to vote for Bernie Sanders in a moment like this, the desire for Biden becomes even bigger. Because it is the person that represents this idea of a pre-post truth normality. So, that also puts a challenge on how to engage a crisis transformatively; it is even more difficult to mobilise people now for a promise that everything will change, because everything has already changed, and that is what makes people so fundamentally and understandably anxious.

F: Just a remark in regard to surveillance and tracking technologies: one of the divisions amongst the trainers and the trainees in the last edition of TFTF was mirroring the classic division within the left between those believing in technology as a means of change and those being very sceptical towards or even against technological advancement. That's also an interesting aspect to revisit at the moment: How much do we believe technology can be part of a progressive change, and where is it a mere threat, a danger? Again, this seems to be a question to which the answers are constantly shifting—especially in a time where tracking apps might to a degree be something that can help us move more freely again.

J: Here is again the enhancement of already existing policies and infrastructures. For me, when the pandemic started, I wanted to cancel most of the running projects in order to think through what is happening now and not to stick to business as usual and blindly facilitate even more precarious economies that are emerging from this crisis. The lawsuit that lawyer Jan Fermon and I mounted against Facebook was the only one that we stuck to, though, although there was this huge sense of absence not to be able to launch it with 400 people at HAU Theater in Berlin as planned, and miss all the antagonisms and intimacies that are part of bringing an idea into the public domain and trying to mobilise for its support. But at the same time, it felt, at least for me, like a campaign that fit the moment, because everyone has worked for Facebook and no one was ever paid for it. You have a stake, they owe you, so we should own them. We are in a crisis, we need income, and we are even more dependent on social media for which we labour as unpaid data workers. So, somehow it felt like a strategy in which you could use this desire to return to normality: Yes, we will maintain the Facebook platform, you will remain a member, but with an added value, that you will be co-owner, that you will finally be paid for the work that you have done. So, I am very much thinking of how to strategically anticipate the desire to return to normality, and how to turn that normality into an alternative future. Yes, we will keep all of these infra-

structures that we are so used to and that create our sense of daily life, but the change will be a change of ownership, a change of purpose, a change of who benefits. I feel that this is the moment when we have to struggle over the infrastructures that we have, but under a fundamentally new paradigm.

F: But from what you say, it becomes very clear that we actually need training now, because the state of emergency becomes a state of permanence. It is already becoming more or less clear that it will be like this for at least this year, maybe next year, maybe forever, and infrastructures will be built. Yes, these infrastructures will provide a few more intensive care beds, but they will also entail a lot of other stuff that we will not be so happy about. So, wouldn't that be the moment to actually launch a training—which might be digital, might be instructions, might be assemblies in fifty different places organised with only ten people at each place—all kinds of forms? And to have a clear focus on what we need to prepare, to train for right now—for the immediate future—and the future after that?

One good thing about the training is that it's a form of disciplining yourself to act, but at the same time, because of their diversity and their different approaches, they also offer food for thought on the format itself. A training is a proposition that you have to follow in a certain moment and only afterwards you can criticise it. So, it actually is a vulnerable proposition—but one that you have to acknowledge with your whole body.

J: I agree that the training is a form of reflection through an embodied experience. And it is a question whether reflection makes sense at all, or has any purpose, without an embodied experience in the first place. There is the challenge to politicise the virus as something that shows a violence in an existing system but opens up the possibility of transformation at the same time. I would say it would be a kind of training for collectivisation; it would need to be something that is much more focused, as you said Florian, on this particular moment, and on the very slim window of opportunity that it provides, but with a huge renewed politicised constituency that is unwillingly more socialist than it has ever been before. It even counts for many neoliberal governments that have been forced to put in place certain measures that they would otherwise have condemned as the worst cultural Marxist propositions.

I am wondering if collectivisation is not another form of assembly, if it's a form of assembly through infrastructure. Similar to the way that I can see social distancing as something that simultaneously represents a social closeness, socially distancing because I want to care for another body, for another human, for a community. We can also see this distancing as a way

of being closer to one another or enabling the possibility of closeness from a collective mindset, a collective mindset that we might not have experienced the same way before in this extremely atomised and individualised society that we are part of. What are we talking about when we talk about collectivisations? We are talking about infrastructures that distribute agencies, agencies of health, agencies of education, agencies of economic viability, and we are much more in that mindset now than we were before. Because we have to, for as long as this virus is active, we have to continuously think of all of our actions in this sense of an interconnected infrastructure. And that can lead to even further atomisation and surveillance or that could lead to another form of reclaiming our collective properties, materially, psychologically, intimately.

F: Well, fifteen, twenty years ago, there was a lot of writing by Internet theorists and activists about the great chance of collaboration as a form of working together without the need to know or even like each other. It was a favourite myth for many Internet pioneers. So, there is a danger in just following that route. But on the other hand, there is the intimate, direct contact, the limited number of people you can interact with, that also plays a role. So how does it not just become an abstract or even esoteric concept of feeling connectivity with millions? How do we negotiate both aspects?

J: It is also related of course to the question of what is collectivisation, because we have become very used to understating the term in relation to real existing socialism. But what if collectivisation is neither a strengthening of the transnational corporations, nor a strengthening of the nation state? So, collectivising Facebook would not be nationalising Facebook. Rather, it's about opening up a spectre of the transnational: collectivising Facebook essentially means to transform it into a transnational self-governing cooperative of 2.5 billion users.

F: Why do you seem to avoid a certain vocabulary that was used in the discussion around the commons a couple of years ago?

J: It has more to do with the way that the rhetoric of the commons was so easily integrated into a lot of the neoliberal discourses, or even as a way for states to abandon responsibility. Pointing towards citizens commoning social security in so called "bread funds," for example, then leads to the rhetoric: "Look, it's great, citizens can do it themselves, that means they don't need us, that means that whatever is left of our budget we can invest in making sure that we have a tax-free haven in Amsterdam South, so that we can get more corporations to register in the Netherlands." In

such a scenario, the commons has less to do with common ownership, and more with the state relieving its duties to citizens.

F: It's interesting that you put an economic aspect in the foreground. Isn't there a danger that the very description of all relationships as being economicised is actually—performatively, so to say—producing partly this very economisation? So, it's again an economic model of thinking about collectivity and commons...

J: Well, it starts from acknowledging a personal benefit: you worked for Facebook, you were never paid by Facebook, they owe you, and you should own them. But in the steps following, this process opens a possibility of new forms of transnational social organisation that go far beyond personal interest towards a collectivised form of being.

For me, the shift from commons to collectivisation is a very similar shift to the one we made from assembly to training. We are still speaking about the same thing somehow, but we are trying to add the components that include notions of discipline, confrontation, ownership, and not exactly hierarchy but acknowledgment of the fact that we live in a world where there is a fundamental division of power. A world where there are fundamental class differences, which is what this pandemic makes visible as well, and which in the micro-political sense was also very visible at our training camp, when one person says, well, your training of how to deal with the police would never work in Malaysia where I would be beaten up if I would even dare to utter a word.

F: What I like about the term collectivising are the concepts of the collective and collectivity lingering behind it—for me, that opens more options than only an economic point of view.

J: So, are we starting a collectivisations training then?

M: While you are planning your new project, I have another aspect of the trainings for you to think about: I think that one of the interesting things that came out of the unofficial conversations during *Training for the Future* is not only about the police brutality in a local-specific context. What actually touched me the most was when some participants spoke about forms of communication and listening, and how cultural differences and multiple identities are not being taken into account. How when somebody is given a microphone they don't necessarily feel comfortable using it, and how some people are not comfortable with the format of the confession that Westerners are so keen on; how some people don't like to be

*Training for the Future, 2019*

Jonas Staal, in collaboration with Florian Malzacher

Photos: Ruben Hamelink, Produced by Ruhrtriennale



*Training Choreographies of Togetherness* by Public Movement  
(Maayan Choreesh & Hagar Ophir)



*Training Beyond Welcome — Agitprop for the Future* by Arrivati  
(La Toya Manly-Spain & Asuquo Udo) / Schwabinggrad Ballett (Nikola Duric & Liz Rech)



General assembly



Training *Intimacy Encryption* by Irrational (Heath Bunting)



singled out and asked to speak, while others felt that they didn't have the opportunity to be heard, because they don't feel that they can cut in when another person is talking, unless there is a long pause in the conversation. All these things, I think, are really interesting. In a way, they also come up when people are speaking online, maybe even more acutely because it is such a clumsy, awkward, alienating medium. Perhaps this is also something to think about if you're working on another training.

F: Yes, but what you described is also related to the problems of assembly: in a way, the training tried to offer a different format where it's basically not about having the microphone, even the human microphone. Or rather: it is actually very clearly decided who has the microphone. So, part of this critique sounds like wanting an assembly.

M: No, not necessarily, I think it was just a call to think about forms of listening and forms of speaking, that maybe there are more forms or other forms than what we think we know.

F: Rightfully so, but still the trainings purposely offered an admittedly quite rigid, very different way of interacting, listening, and talking than assemblies. So, it was actually very clearly stated what they aimed for and what they did not aim for. Yes, there are many other ways of doing this. But the training tried to investigate one very specific direction of talking, not talking, and listening.

M: Assemblies could bring up relating comments, at least from what I remember from *Truth is Concrete*. I remember how some of the participants felt that some women didn't feel comfortable talking, or that some of the white, Western men were talking too much. It's interesting how even in an assembly where there is a supposed attempt to have a non-hierarchical conversation, similar issues come up. It's not that they shouldn't come up, antagonisms are, of course, important, and these discussions are by themselves mind-opening, but maybe there is more to explore there.

J: I remember from that conversation mainly one of the comments that was made, which was: we are training for the future, but our present is not the same, how can you even assume that our futures would be? And this for me relates very directly to existing disparities, economically, culturally, infra-structurally speaking—it really talks about class differences on a global scale that are amplified in a context such as this, in which every participant, every trainee has different feedback. On a personal level, I feel that if we would organise the training camp again, I would put much more emphasis on the care aspect, which was so well structured into the methodologies

of the final two trainings by Arrivati and the Schwabinggrad Ballett, and the laboratory of insurrectionary imagination. They showed the training space as a space of care that enables an unsafe safety, safety in order to be able to be unsafe. I realised how exceptional it is to have that competence, to be able to work in that way together with a group; it means to have an embodied understanding of what collective work is. We should learn from that as organisers. What are the keys and tools we give beforehand to feel that there is something to fall back to when necessary? That is one important thing I took from this training experience. The other I already mentioned has to do with these disparaged presents and different futures—it really shows the difficulty of the fact that we were training without a social contract. You bring a lot of people together to train for a variety of futurities, but we don't have a social contract amongst each other, we are not part of the same party, we haven't subscribed to the same programme; we are essentially training for the possibility of having one.

The risk of working without such a common understanding is that discomforts and inequalities have no mechanism to be addressed structurally, and it becomes the responsibility of individuals to speak out. Whereas a meaningful organisation has a social contract that enforces shared principles, whether it comes to gender equality or the insurance of equal participation. In our training camp, this was lacking, but this is simultaneously the paradox, because we are trying to train for a set of different futurities in order to be able to assemble such a social contract; we can't presume it already exists. But then at the same time, it shows how much it is needed, like a basis of principles that doesn't make everyone individually responsible to voice their discomfort, but in which there is a structure to assure that this discomfort is always addressed and that organisations are corrected or disciplined whenever necessary if they do not live up to these principles.

M: Or auto-errored if they are always correct.

J: Auto-errored—yeah.

M: But I actually think unsafe safety is really beautiful, and it relates to what Florian and I spoke about in our previous conversation, pre-trainings and pre-corona, about the range between over-identification, involuntary participation, and other forms of making people feel uncomfortable. I think that “unsafe safety” is a really precise way to put it, but not so easy to achieve.

J: No, not easy at all.

- 1 ——— The project was held in September 2019 in the framework of the Ruhr Triennale, described by the curators as “a utopian training camp where audiences become trainees in creating alternative futures...It seems a consensus today, that what is ahead of us can only be imagined as a disaster. *Training for the Future* instead aims to collectively reclaim the means of production of the future.”  
[https://www.ruhrtriennale.de/en/agenda/130/JONAS\\_STAAL\\_FLORIAN\\_MALZACHER/Training\\_for\\_the\\_Future/](https://www.ruhrtriennale.de/en/agenda/130/JONAS_STAAL_FLORIAN_MALZACHER/Training_for_the_Future/)
- 2 ——— *Truth is Concrete, Political Practices in Art and Artistic Practices in Politics*, curators Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza, 2012, in the frame of Steirischer Herbst Festival, Graz, Austria. *Truth is Concrete* was 24/7 marathon camp, with around 300 lectures, panels, tactic talks, performances, concerts, films, workshops, and a parallel, self-curated, spontaneous Open Marathon.
- 3 ——— Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?,” in *Living as Form, Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time Books; and Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2012), 34-45.
- 4 ——— “This project, which resembles the like Big Brother reality show, was attended by 12 asylum-seekers, that have lived one week in a shipping container nearby the theatre in central Vienna. Every day, through a vote by phone or internet the Austrian people chose the two least popular people that were ejected and then deported to their native country.  
 The project was carried out during a period a tense discussions in Austria around immigration and nationalism with Jorg Haider’s nationalist Austria People’s Freedom Party enjoying strong support.”  
<https://museumarteutil.net/projects/please-love-austria/>
- 5 ——— <https://theyesmen.org/>.
- 6 ——— “New Unions is an artistic and political campaign that departs from the current political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental crisis of Europe with the aim of assembling representatives of trans-democratic movements and organizations to propose scenarios for new future unions. New Unions considers the crisis of Europe simultaneously as a crisis of the imagination, and as such rejects both ultra-nationalist parties that demand separation from the European Union and seek to return to a mythical notion of the nation-state, as well as the political-economical functionary elite that has used the EU for its austerity politics. Instead, New Unions argues for the need for third, fourth, fifth options in the form of alternative scenarios for transnational unionization.” <http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/new-unions-1/>
- 7 ——— “Artist Organisations International brings together over twenty representatives of organisations founded by artists whose work confronts today’s crises in politics, economy, education, immigration, and ecology. Artist Organisations International explores a current shift from artists working in the form of temporary projects to building long-term organisational structures. What specific artistic value and political potential do such organisations have? How do they perform? What could be their concrete impact on various social-political agendas and possible internationalist collaborations?”  
<http://artistorganisationsinternational.org/>

- 8 ——— Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011).
- 9 ——— See, for example: <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/israel-thousands-protest-against-netanyahu-amid-coronavirus/>.
- 10 ——— “With over two billion users today, Facebook impacts our social, economic and political lives in an unprecedented way. In response, artist Jonas Staal and lawyer Jan Fermon initiated a collective action lawsuit to force legal recognition of Facebook as a public domain that should be under ownership and control of its users.”  
<http://www.jonasstaal.nl/projects/collectivize-facebook/>

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# Curatorial Coda: Postscript on the Assemblage of Voices and Bodies

## Sarah Spies

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Sarah Spies' *Curatorial Coda: Postscript on the Assemblage of Voices and Bodies* suggests that the curatorial approach of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* tends towards the multiversal milieu, as it constellates the process of curation along the trajectories of collaborative, performative, and embodied artistic practice. Jasbir K. Puar's notion of the "queer assemblage" is positioned as a central conceptual relation, in that it provides a more rhizomatic acknowledging of intersectional paradigms within the spectrum of signification and/or representation systems. *(Un)Commoning Voices* as an assemblage then explicitly acknowledges the spatial, temporal, and corporeal rearrangements that affective trajectories summon where bodies and voices—as the often liminal and partial manifestation of subjective embodiment—are mostly unstable. Nina Wakeford's *an apprenticeship in queer I believe it was* and Michal Oppenheim's *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women* are discussed as exemplars of the relational assemblages of bodies and voices.

The curatorial approach of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* is arguably multiversal, not only for its deliberate traversal and at times cacophonous interplay of discreet 'voices' and 'bodies', but perhaps more so in the attempt to constellate the process of curation along the trajectories of collaborative, performative, and embodied artistic practice. As co-curators, we were interested in this dynamic because it devolves the traditional authorial forms of curatorial power by disassembling consolidated curatorial subjectivities as an ideological prerogative and by distributing the production of meaning across a rhizomatic assemblage of entanglements and affects. Pierre Bal-Blanc and Vanessa Desclaux enclose this within the emergent forms of curatorial practice that prioritise "the dissolution of the fictive unity of the subject through a multiplicity of embodied practices."<sup>1</sup> Beatrice von Bismarck refers to is as "relations-in-motion" where "actions, constellations, spaces, and contexts participating

in the production of meaning are transformed into a constitutive part of artistic practice.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Gabrielle Brandstetter’s underpinning of the attentive signatures of the curatorial via a “poetics of attention,” or more essentially “involvement as a mode of the curatorial,”<sup>3</sup> function as productive power relations that are generated more horizontally across, arguably, multiple permeable and extra-curatorial roles via interrogative gestures, a “socio-poetic” laboratory as such. From these intertwined perspectives, the unfolding and accumulation of multiple ‘voices’ within the curatorial framing of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* signal its constellated aggregation, essentially undoing any adherence to author-centric chronologies of curatorial subjectivities. Perhaps this is more akin to the methodological approaches of curatorial consortia where the intersections of spectatorial subjectivities and participatory practices are activated instead. The most pertinent image for our curatorial approach, however, is emulated via Jasbir K. Puar’s notion of the “queer assemblage” as the performative incentive for an affective range of bodies—and visceral voices—entangled with discursive fields and layers of signification.

Puar suggests that it “enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies...interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects to each other.”<sup>4</sup> She also argues that it provides a more rhizomatic acknowledging of intersectional paradigms within the signification systems of representation in corroboration with the spatial, temporal, and corporeal conjunctions, implosions, and rearrangements that affective trajectories summon. Puar claims that the shift from intersectionality to assemblage, closely related to the Deleuzian assemblage as a “series of dispersed but mutually implicated networks,” corrodes the divisible analytics of race, class, gender, and sexuality bound to the politics of intersectionality and attunes rather to the interlaced forces that fuse and disperse “time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.”<sup>5</sup> This seems to loosen the tendencies of intersectional deadlocks that demand “the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time”<sup>6</sup> and tend to undermine performative processes where notions of subject formation in all its human complexity is still within the imaginary and the political. Rather, bodies and voices—as the often liminal and partial manifestation of subjective embodiment—are unstable assemblages that cannot be seamlessly segregated into identity formations. Assemblage within the curatorial mode therefore does not focus on content as the locus of knowledge/cultural production or subject formation but on the performative and often participatory generation of relations,—relational patterns to be precise. The fundamental shift in the valuation of the curatorial process is inscribed even within the title of the project—*(Un)Commoning Voices and*



Michal Oppenheim (2019), workshop series photos, *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women*, Saint Laurence Church as part of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, Reading International, UK, 2019. Photo courtesy of Michal Oppenheim.

*(Non)Communal Bodies*—as no definitive thematic content is foregrounded but signals rather an attempt at the arrangement of more fluid, differential, or deviating alliances. This is the conceptual uptake and creative spectrum of the portmanteau-like amalgamation of both (un)commoning and (non)communal. Furthermore, the currency of the curatorial engagement via the assemblage, within its sense of timeliness and economy of relational exchange, always asks what is prior to and beyond what gets established or experienced. Two particular examples from the performance and workshop programme, respectively—Nina Wakeford’s *an apprenticeship in queer I believe it was* and Michal Oppenheim’s *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women*—extrapolates these relational assemblages of bodies and voices in discreetly divergent ways.

Nina Wakeford’s *an apprenticeship in queer I believe it was*, originally produced as a result of a commission from the British Film Institute and the Wellcome Collection in 2016, and re-performed at the Greenham Common Control Tower Museum as part of Reading International and *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* in 2019, navigates an interesting tension in the replay between the commons of radical arts practice and the inherent unfurling of multifarious voices and bodies distributed across time, space, and medium. The Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, which was active from 1981 to 2000 and was established by women



Michal Oppenheim (2019), workshop series photos, *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women*, Saint Laurence Church as part of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, Reading International, UK, 2019. Photo courtesy of Michal Oppenheim.



to protest nuclear weapons housed near Reading at RAF Greenham Common, provides precisely such an unstable yet clearly situated site where communion with multiple, and often divergent, voices and bodies are possible. Wakeford states that the Greenham Common Watchtower iteration “explores the capacity of the women’s peace camp to transform the identity of those who lived there.” The filmic material includes thousands of images of forget-me-nots from the nearby memorial Peace Garden, photographed one by one on 16mm film and combines this footage with words from first-person accounts of women who were interviewed in a study of the peace camp, alongside archival documents, and a song. Re-performed in the Control Tower and relayed to the audience below, the flowers and the words of the women are broadcast across the landscape where previously the women themselves were surveyed. Wakeford’s explication reveals the intimate act of shared embodied listening operating at the level of the individual in relation to dispersed collectivities prior and beyond the immediate experience—in this case via the voices of the women in absentia as apparent dissonants across time—as potential sites where alternative communal assemblages of being together, both imagined and real, can unfold. Brandon LaBelle offers a perspective for these processes of embodied enactment that possibilise performative voices, in that it is “expressed in the migration of voices, the shifting of the body, the animation of knowledge, as well as the deepening of attention, in short, the production of radical sharing.”<sup>7</sup> The “radical sharing” of the queer assemblage in this context permeates beyond the direct experience of Wakeford’s performance to summon the sway of the historical interlocking and intermingling of thousands of women’s voices and bodies that gravitated towards and through Greenham Common’s cartography and the various ways that individual subjects participate in collective acts, or refuse them.

Michal Oppenheim’s *ChorUs: Voice Lab for Women* workshop series in the assembly hall of Saint Laurence Church in Reading (UK) offered an open inquiry into what the role of women’s choral singing might presently be. Oppenheim facilitated daily experimental voice and movement rituals that supported participants in their exploration of new ways of singing and listening together to find emergent sound forms and nascent movement patterns that developed via the sonic and affective bleed between the individuals and the collective. Oppenheim referenced these practices as “voice-body improvisations,” vocal and movement meditations that continuously explore the relationship between individual voice and communal ensemble. The experiential quality of this workshop series invites the sensitive and responsive attentiveness and affective transformation that communion with performative bodies and voices afford. This shared



Nina Wakeford (2019), *an apprenticeship in queer I believe it was*, performance at Greenham Common Control Tower Museum as part of *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies*, Reading International, UK, 2019. Photos courtesy of Susanne Clausen.

exchange of intimacy in moving together through experiences of collective embodiment registers via the minutiae of subtle shifts that continuously affect participants both internally and in relation to the group. It only exists in the possibility of seeing, sensing, and imagining our own body-voices through the reciprocal experiences of and with others. These processes provide different ways of working and being together that constitute the social condition as a conflictual yet reimagined realm in the moment when we turn our bodies towards each other and listen collectively, perhaps even differently. This, above all else, is perhaps also what can be offered to the wider collective, a new attunement to each other, a mode of collective attention towards each other, a different kind of listening into the silence and stillness because we have to pay unabating attention before we speak and move together again. These performative methods, which Oppenheim skilfully and sensitively developed and guided into a closed performative sharing towards the end of the workshop series, sees the assemblage as a micro-configuration that always extends the individual beyond any

contingent, coherent, or definitive experience of themselves. Puar's notion of the porous swirling together and transmission of affects between bodies is particularly pertinent here, as the transformative processes embedded in the curation of the workshops can only be realised via arrays of entangled embodied participation.

Assemblage as a curatorial approach is perhaps uncommon, as it tends towards more oblique and even opaque modes of artistic production in a culture that expedites precise and categorical renditions of subjectivity. Its inherent dynamic of multiplicity is changeable, perhaps even unstable, and sets "relations in motion" that cannot be anticipated or fully grasped. Conceivably, curatorial processes that intentionally activate queer assemblages always expands individuals and collectives beyond known delineations of self and ensemble. It is invariably pervious, perpetually contaminated, and provides necessary slippage in a cultural environment that seeks excessive containment.

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- 1 ——— Pierre Bal-Blanc and Vanessa Desclaux, "Living Currency," in *The New Curator: Researcher, Commissioner, Keeper, Interpreter, Producer, Collaborator*, eds. Caroline Milliard, Rafal Niemojewski, Ben Borthwich, and Jonathan Watkins (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 175.
  - 2 ——— Beatrice von Bismarck, "Relations in Motion: The curatorial condition in visual art – and its possibilities for the neighbouring disciplines," in *Curating Performing Arts*, eds. Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupajić, and Petra Zanki (Frakcija: Performing Arts Journal #55, 2010), 52.
  - 3 ——— Gabrielle Brandstetter, "Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial," in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 126.
  - 4 ——— Jasbir K. Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 121–122.
  - 5 ——— Ibid.
  - 6 ——— Ibid., 125.
  - 7 ——— Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the mouth: poetics and politics of voice and the oral imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), x.

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# Practices, Doings, and Actions at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution and in the Work of Myriam Lefkowitz and Snejanka Mihaylova

## Susan Gibb

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**Susan Gibb's *Practices, Doings, and Actions at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution and in the Work of Myriam Lefkowitz and Snejanka Mihaylova* provides a reflection on the currency of time as a fissure of curatorial practice when given meaning as an artistic and political technology. Gibb provides an astutely detailed overview of the ethical, political, and artistic dimensions of *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution* via the enfolding of Lefkowitz's and Mihaylova's expanded practices. An ancillary reading of Gibb's articulation of her own process of curation in relation to the practices of both artists amplifies a cadence of slowing, softening, and listening into the emergent futurity of what we do together.**

Central to my practice as a curator has been an interest in production—most simply put, the why and how artists make their work, and the conditions shaping this process. I most often pursue this through commissioning and a hands-on approach to supporting artists in the realisation of new work. This requires me to attune to the artist's current lines of questioning, provide practical support, and share in the risk of moving towards an outcome that is unknown. Timeframes are often long, contingent, and required to change in response to forces within and outside of the artist's control. Throughout these processes, the cause and effect of each decision is assessed and gently accrued to give context. Within such close proximity, I understand my role as a curator from an empirical and embodied point of view, moving from direct observation and experience towards a position from which to speak. As an artist-friend Giulia Crispiani commented, I allow the "artist's practice to act on me." Importantly, by foregrounding

production I am also challenged to remain accountable to the live, concrete, and structural questions it brings forth, resisting representation as a *raison d'être* in favour of practices, doings, and actions. I'll reflect on these interests in relation to *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, where I worked as a curator from 2013-2019, and the practices of two artists commissioned within its programme, Myriam Lefkowitz and Snejanka Mihaylova.

*If I Can't Dance* is an itinerant arts organisation based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Defining it is the fact that it operates without a fixed presentation space. Instead it co-opts the form of a production office to commission performance-related work and research in long-term engagement with artists and curators, and presents the development and outcome of these projects intermittently at partnering arts organisations internationally. This enables *If I Can't Dance* to have a decentralised and networked mode of working, with the inertia of the organisation moving outwards to responsively locate itself across disciplinary boundaries and cultural contexts as each artist and project demands. It also enables *If I Can't Dance* to direct its economic investment into time-and-materials rather than bricks-and-mortar. Through doing this, *If I Can't Dance* eschews the "museum" and the "exhibition" as the primary site for collection and display, instead favouring alternate configurations of space, time, and social relation. As Vivian Ziherl, a former curator of *If I Can't Dance* astutely observed, time might be best thought of as *If I Can't Dance's* house.<sup>1</sup> I often pair this sentiment with the words of Every Ocean Hughes (f.k.a. Emily Roysdon) in her score *Uncounted\** (2014) in which she asks, "What is time if not activism?"<sup>2</sup> Within *If I Can't Dance's* curatorial framework, time is given meaning as an artistic and political technology.

Founded in 2005, *If I Can't Dance's* structure and focus can be attributed to a number of converging circumstances. First and foremost, its founders Frédérique Bergholtz, Annie Fletcher, and Tanja Elstgeest found themselves in a particular shared position—curators of visual arts programmes at different theatre festivals in the Netherlands. They decided to use this coincidence as inspiration to collaborate, pooling their resources and research in order to offer artists a multi-stage platform to develop and present new work. Second was the renewed interest in performance found across the visual arts sector, and which emerged to address the medium's previously marginalized representation within institutional collections, as well as a shifting trend towards economies of experience—Marina Abramović's presentation of *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim and the first iteration of PERFORMA were, for instance, also staged that year. Third were the critical prerogatives of New Institutionalism, a term used to describe

curatorial, art educational, and administrative practices that emerged in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, and which as described by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger were characterised by being “adaptable and open to change,” and where “production, presentation and reception/criticism were not successive and separate activities; they happen simultaneously and frequently intersected.”<sup>3</sup> Fourth was that all three curators were women.

This last point was acknowledged by naming the organisation after the famous quote of the Lithuanian feminist and anarchist activist, Emma Goldman. Her words were adopted as a curatorial mandate to be enacted. As Bergholtz, Fletcher, and Elsseest wrote in their early statement about the organisation’s intentions: “If I Can’t Dance believes in this unique potential of art, being both critical and celebratory. We like to embrace Emma Goldman’s statement, as it suggests that the search for agency and that the potential for empowerment lie in all elements of life and cannot be regulated to a firmly cordoned-off arena named the political.”<sup>4</sup> Through this, they set out not to stage political art per se, but to move from an understanding of the political force of art as an active agent within life at large.

They also looked to performance scholar Prof. Peggy Phelan and her statement: “Live art performance remains an interesting art form because it contains the possibility of both the actor and the spectator becoming transformed during the event’s unfolding. [...] Of course, a lot of performance does not approach this potential at all, and of course many spectators and many actors are incapable of being open to this anyway. But this potential, this seductive promise of possibility of mutual transformation is extraordinarily important because this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical.”<sup>5</sup> For *If I Can’t Dance*, Phelan’s words connected to the concept of performativity, as first outlined by the linguist J.L. Austin, and further elaborated by Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and more recently Karen Barad, amongst others. For them, the notion of performativity contested the construct of self as stable or separable from context. More recently expanded developments also acknowledge the desire and will of artists to disrupt the behavioural patterns of ascribed meaning onto the subject via socially instituted scripts to critique the behavioural rubric of governmental, institutional, social, and cultural apparatuses.

While these ideas continue to guide *If I Can’t Dance* fifteen years after its founding, the organisation frequently reflects on the question of what it means to maintain a commitment to performance today, especially in light of its rapid ascent to an ubiquitous rather than marginalized medium. While further complicating the terrain is the muddying of the “performative” as a concept, with it being loosely appropriated in the art world as a

vague descriptor for anything to do with staging or performance. How might the transformative potential of the “performative” still be channelled? To consider this, I will briefly look to two artists who worked with *If I Can’t Dance* during my tenure, and whose practices decisively direct their performative force in new political and social directions, and which typify recent trajectories in performance that *If I Can’t Dance* has sought to support.

Both Myriam Lefkowitz’s and Snejanka Mihaylova’s practices can broadly be described as interdisciplinary and are composed by the creation of relational experiences; Lefkowitz brings together her education in social sciences and dance to create scores that use touch and darkness to stimulate augmented perceptive experiences in one-on-one and collective encounters, while Mihaylova brings together philosophy and theatre to write and perform textual scores for thought staged as collective acts of listening, receiving, and giving voice. Both artists also share an interest in developing and presenting their work in real social situations. Lefkowitz inhabits the social infrastructure of the state alongside the spatial configuration of the public commons, be it city streets, public libraries, gym halls, and swimming pools for weeks if not months at a time, while Mihaylova for the past six or so years has located her practice within the Orthodox faith; moving from a study of the Gospel of Thomas to conversion and learning the psalters (Byzantium hymns and poems of the Psalms) to assist a priest in the village of Malko Tarnovo to perform the Divine Office, as its congregation has been lost to poverty and decay in the region. Furthermore, teaching, workshops, and various forms of publishing extend their ideas via the social relations and reception that these forms enable. In this way, their work is not staged as suspended states of exception, but operates as quieter, gentler insertions into the everyday reality that they live alongside, negotiate, and are viewed in relation to.

In both, time is also characterised by the concentrated “presentness” that each asks for—a listening rather than speaking. This is most easily exemplified by Lefkowitz’s use of the word “attention”—its utterance is an instruction to focus in the here and now in a manner both urgent (this needs attention) and generous (to give time)—and Mihaylova’s concept of the “inner stage,” through which she articulates where the audiences’ spectatorship is directed: to one’s perceptive apparatus, the moment that sensing translates to thought. The experiential nature of both practices also makes the use of Lefkowitz’s and Mihaylova’s work a complicated example, as neither is easily illustrated via direct visual or textual description. For example, in viewing Lefkowitz’s *Walk, Hands, Eyes (a city)* one sees a person with their eyes closed being guided by another, while Mihaylova’s

work often takes the form of collective work via conversations, readings, or recitals of song. It appears unspectacular in its effects, while at the same time alters the assumed order of the space without disrupting the movement passage. Rather than a radical break or change, each practice exerts a subtle influence and accounts for the subjectivities it questions. Its full effects remain hidden to those who are not engaged within its sensorial confines, or in the case of Mihaylova, the result is internalised in each audience member's mind.

What Lefkowitz and Mihaylova are staging is a fragile theatre that operates with the barest means of body, time, and space. They steer clear of theatrical tricks like illusion, as well as the art of representation, locating their work in the apprehension of experience and the bodily mechanics that allow us to perceive the world around us—the movement between the senses and cognition. How do moving affects and energies find themselves in words and actions? How do they move between us to shape us as people and a community? And how can they let us apprehend anew the social relationships and structures of power we participate in? Perhaps this is the politics of their work, a call for an attention both urgent and generous, to be paid to the moment-by-moment making of meaning. It's a witnessing of the movement between feeling and thought, as an understanding of this is where any seed for change will occur.

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- 1 ——— Vivian Ziherl, "In the Time of Trying: If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution," in *Curating Research*, eds. Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions; Amsterdam: De Appel, 2014), 196.
  - 2 ——— Every Ocean Hughes (f.k.a. Emily Roysdon), *Uncounted\**, last accessed 8 September 2019, <[http://everyoceanhughes.com/content/1-work/3-uncounted/roysdon\\_uncounted.pdf](http://everyoceanhughes.com/content/1-work/3-uncounted/roysdon_uncounted.pdf)>.
  - 3 ——— Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger, "New Institutionalism Revisited," *OnCurating* 21 (Dec. 2013), last accessed 8 September 2019, <<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-21-reader/new-institutionalism-revisited.html#.XXWMTC2ZPOQ>>.
  - 4 ——— Frédérique Bergholtz, Annie Fletcher, and Tanja Elstgeest, "About If I Can't Dance," last accessed 1 September 2018, <<https://www.ificant-dance.org/about>>.
  - 5 ——— Peggy Phelan, "Performance, Live Culture and the Things of the Heart," in *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers*, ed. Marquard Smith (London : Sage Publications, 2008), 136.



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# Choreographic Composites, On Loan for Now and All Messed Up (London, July 2020)

Edgar Schmitz

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Edgar Schmitz's *Choreographic Composites, On Loan for Now and All Messed Up* (London, July 2020) articulates the akimbo affordances of the current dispersion and consideration of the ongoing project *choreographic* and its concern with how movement is scored. Initially set up to provide infrastructure for one-off productions at the intersection of artistic, curatorial, and discursive labour, it subsequently evolved into processes of re-counting work(s) by borrowing from choreographic modes and conventions. Schmitz also argues that the current troubling turbulence caused by the pandemic crisis foregrounds the interplay of organisational form, inter-species deathliness, and globally racialised necropolitics. When considered through the *choreographic* prism, its imaginable potential and conceptual parcours becomes even more multifaceted and complex.

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When I started it in 2016, *choreographic* was a way of collaborating with invited guests from the fields of choreography and (post-)dance on one-off productions at the intersection of artistic, curatorial, and discursive labour.<sup>1</sup> Across a series of conversations in 2018/2019, it allowed me to turn away from curatorial concerns and toward re-counting work(s) by borrowing from choreographic modes and conventions.<sup>2</sup> In March 2020, it was going to be “choreographic devices” at the ICA, produced with Murat Adash and Ofri Cnaani, until we decided to reschedule at the onset of the pandemic because so many members of our communities and networks were immobilised, and some of the most vulnerable would have been unable to attend for the sake of having to protect themselves from exposure.<sup>3</sup> And as I write this now, it has become impossible once more to think proximity and contact without accounting for knees and grass and tarmac and necks and teargas and bullets as their primary forms of mediation.

### **1 for now**

*Choreographic* is concerned with the materiality of composite productions, the (dis-)articulation of movement, the affordances of infrastructural form, and aims to speculate on these across different scales and fields of production. *Choreographic* is an attempt to re-purpose forms, formats, as well as language games and modes of production from choreography and post-dance, and aims to test their affordances as differently textured frameworks for what we used to call contemporary art. Amidst the pandemic's turbulence and the manifold shifts to the ways in which multi-material constellations have been (de-)regulated over the last few months, this seems both obscenely pertinent and severely inappropriate.

Some of the *choreographic* proposition's broader horizons have all but imploded: attempts to imagine, or conjure into existence, the ability to intervene in the orchestration of the wider choreographic constellations of social organisation and governance, for instance, only really seem to survive on the conspiracy end of things or at the level of obscenely individualised modes of conduct in defiance of herd immunity fascisms and ableist impositions alike.

The more operational aspects of an expanded *choreographic*, though, have only asserted themselves more aggressively over the unfolding of the pandemic so far: it has become violently clear that multi-dimensional assemblages of bodies and spaces, movements and temperatures, animate as well as inanimate surfaces, are co-productive of life as well as death, and that their relative balances may be subject to volatile re-calibration; that inter-species constellations involve all sorts of agents; and that zoonosis may indeed turn out to be one of the animating dimensions of how time and space are shared in more-than-human constellations.

It has become graphically obvious that choreographies of movement are mainly concerned with allocating degrees of immobilisation, and that the distribution of these degrees of immobility is intimately tied to how unevenly life and its opposites are being shared out in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the handling of COVID-19 aligns itself with the Mediterranean as yet another necro-choreographic technology of now, movement is once again asserted as one of the contested dimensions of the present, precisely in that it is withdrawn as one of its available qualities.

And at least for now, the recent re-orientation of materiality from contiguous spaces toward protective barriers also seems to have re-oriented the concern for somatic registers. Touch and proximity are re-asserted as problems worth attending to, rather than the redemptive horizons of pro-

to-therapeutic practice formats. And the ways they are orchestrated demonstrate once more, with all the necessary structural violence, how overdetermined questions of transmission, (im-)mobility and materiality, contact and form always already are.

Much of this boomerangs back from before COVID-19 and bounces off the ways in which the handling of the pandemic caricatures the interplay of organisational form, inter-species deathliness, and globally racialised necropolitics. What follows is what seemed worth salvaging from those earlier moments of *choreographic* toward a shifting sense of now.

## 2 back then

*Choreographic* is concerned with how movement is scored, with the nature of composite productions, and with the affordances of infrastructural form. It deals with the expanded materialities of artistic labour, is suspicious of the habituated language games and artificially contained production modes of (a lot of) “contemporary art,” and aims to suspend their scripts with a materialist infrastructural matrix that allows for re-arrangements and re-choreographing.<sup>4</sup>

If choreography can be understood as the animation of bodies and materials, it always and necessarily needs to account for the supports and infrastructures that allow for their articulation (articulation in both the semantic and the gymnastic sense). It needs to function as an expanded register of diverse co-productive materialities that can be brought to bear upon the ways in which we deal with what we refer to as art, curating, or organisational productions; and it can allow for these to be variously re-arranged, re-distributed, and scored differently.

This is first of all a methodological adjustment, and as such it carries some primary commitments—that re-thinking and re-engaging can generate difference and produce a change in what is possible. And that such forms of differences, in their commitment to multiplying effect registers and articulations, can be mobilised against the kind of impoverishment that goes with the highly privatised choreographies of neoliberal governance—including its postures of statist sovereignty as well as its equivalents in the notion of discrete and ostensibly singularly authored work.

Beyond the ability to challenge the habituated scales of what falls within the reach of choreographic concerns, there are some further aspects to how *choreographic* attempts to intervene in the distribution of what was formerly known as curating, artistic practice and/or cultural work. Language distribution is central, absolutely crucial, and a sense that the mul-

ti-materialities of a lot of choreographic and post-dance practice are more amenable to re-setting habituated hierarchical distributions than most other forms of artistic work these days. And since this tries to go against the grain of a permissively generalist notion of artistic and cultural practice, part of the exercise is the possibly awkward need to rehearse a hyper-specificity that might just be mis-fitted against the smoothly expansionist notion of what used to be known as “contemporary art.” Included within that is the ambition that *choreographic* might have some momentary resilience against the various subsumptions of the curatorial.

*Choreographic* does not come out of a strictly analytical project. It is not invested in understanding or examining or producing an archaeology of choreography in the visual arts, or indeed choreography itself as a field. The project is trying to assert criticality as an affirmative set of moves that play out in the inhabitation of given frameworks. This means to assert criticality not by the operations of an analytical skillset or set of operations, but instead, by enabling forms of affirmation that enable the production of situations, possibilities, horizons, circulations, and conceptualisations. This includes the shuffling of given habituated categories, and terminologies are an important such set of categories. The bluntest I can put it is that *choreographic* as a set of language games is playing with the idea of de-formatting institutional practice by suspending a set of given parameters through which we habitually orient practice.

What seemed interesting to me in the early stages of mobilising choreographic engagements was a really rich vocabulary to constitute very differentiated accounts of the relationship between performances and their backgrounds, the diverse technologies that contribute to the realisation of a production, how they configure the relationship between a figure and their setting, what duration does in relation to narrative potential or what a plot is, through to the ways in which something like a protagonist might be constituted, enacted, and presenced. And I was intrigued by how differentiated these practices and the languages around them were, in a way in which the visual arts language often is not. Because of the permissiveness of contemporary art as a somewhat generalist regime for often very specific sets of practices, its languages are largely speculative and inventive, but also fairly irresponsible to the compromised animacies of, say, training regimes, body technologies, or lighting formats.

A lot of choreographic work in the visual arts context intersects with this in multiple ways: current choreographic phenomena operate between the fields of professional choreographic practice, a set of concerns within the field of contemporary visual art, and the legitimating functions of its museum infrastructures and curating practices. Mobilising them as a way

into a conversation about the protocols of current art and indeed the contemporary, means to acknowledge up front that such endeavours necessarily have a strictly finite, and probably very short, life span. The very suggestion that choreographic work is even marginally distinct from current visual arts at large is temporally bound and defies the nature of a strong claim that can be owned and territorialised in the full sense; it is contingent upon the dynamic development of the field and the different fields it contributes to, and firmly time-bound for that reason. Given contemporary art's reliance on discursive, financial, and geo-political infrastructure, this is also the notion's licence to inhabit these multiple mobile intersections. Engaging them, *choreographic* inevitably ends up rehearsing what a desirable texture or consistency for a critical project might be, and at the same time renders a committedly promiscuous counter-portrait of a cluster in the process of absorption.

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- 1 ——— <http://art.gold.ac.uk/choreographic/>
  - 2 ——— <https://vimeo.com/294998565>
  - 3 ——— <https://www.ica.art/live/choreographic-devices>  
<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/304716/choreographic-devices/>
  - 4 ——— <https://netwerkaalst.be/en/the-shadow-artist-1>

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# Reading International—Propositions for Developing a Collaborative Art Space in the Intersection Between Art School and Community

## Susanne Clausen

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**Susanne Clausen's *Reading International—Propositions for Developing a Collaborative Art Space in the Intersection Between Art School and Community* interrogates the possibility of new models of working together by involving artists, students, and communities in order to make the “art school” more site-specific. Clausen relays Gregory Sholette's notion that these approaches and their formations are key for the construction of varied counter-public spheres to consider what new and emancipatory teaching and self-empowering learning might look like for artists in the university context. She concludes that any construction of the “art school” needs to be more self-determined, flexible, and responsive to the local context. This involves the creative sensitivities, voices, and bodies of artists, curators, students, and audiences to share authorship whilst negotiating the overlap of institutional framing.**

Reading International is a new contemporary art organisation located within the Reading School of Art at the University of Reading. It was founded and initiated in response to ongoing discussions with artists, academics, and students about how we might establish new models of working in education and to respond to the growing pressures and the increasing frustration of students who find it hard to see future possibilities or career progressions within the “art world.” At the same time, it is an attempt to reflect on the existence of the art school within a regional environment: to find out if it could act as a regional contemporary art hub, to explore its possibilities in connecting and engaging with the different rhythms of the local arts community, and to interrelate and raise ambitions for its co-existence and future. Building on my experience in collaboration and self-institutionalisation under the collective umbrella of Szuper Gallery and developing critical partnerships with challenging institutions, as well as

working as an artist in a university, we wanted to create a new “container”: a space that could involve artists, students, and the community in order to make the art school more site-specific, and arguably more useful for its members. With partners and collaborators, we set off to imagine the art school as a public arena within the university that opens its life beyond the academic community and actively engages with a wider public. We asked how we could create a space that is less separated from the professional sphere, where artists collaborate with students and other organisations, and how we might be able to create a dynamic cultural space in a regional environment.

The question of what collaboration could mean in an art school remains pertinent. In 2006, I conducted an interview study with different artists, questioning their understanding of collaborative processes in teaching.<sup>1</sup> From this material, I created a video re-enactment. What I found in the interview process was that the respondents saw similar working strategies or parallels between creative processes and teaching situations, and they identified different moments of co-authorship and collaboration. The models included the “invisible teacher” who creates art-life-education cross-overs, where teaching involves spending time together. Another model was that of the art lecturer as a “director” who conducts the student team, similar to models of art production, creating situations that enable students to develop work in collaboration. A further model emerged of the art lecturer as a “midwife”—metaphor for a caring role, supporting the student ‘giving birth’ to new ideas, sharing moments of creation. These descriptions already open up obvious connections to “curatorial” strategies that might equally involve strategies of caring, directing, socialising, and so on, as a way to describe the process of collaboration between artists, curators, and partners.

Reading International presented itself as an opportunity to create a new device, and as a way to co-operate with different artists, curators, educators, and host partners within the institutional framework of the university, and thereby invent a new place that could fill the gap of a missing contemporary art space in the town. Artists and curators were invited to respond to a specific context of the town or the university and were placed between a partner enterprise and the art school. The basis for the partnership with the local hosts differed from organisation to organisation, and in the process it was agreed that partners would provide us with the space/container and allow us to fill it with new content and new propositions for interpretation. This approach brought with it a distinctive clash of ideas, works, and discussion. It was also an opportunity for different constituents to meet and to interact, facilitated by a programme of talks,

events and workshops. By embedding students in all parts of the project, as artist assistants, technicians, workshop leaders, exhibition guides, and interviewers, we might be able to argue that the art school has invented a new way of delivering 'professional practice' by immersion. And what has been encouraging throughout is that our hosts have trusted us with this process. The challenges that have arisen are those that come with all forms of collaboration and are what continue to drive the conversation.

### **What can the art school offer the local art community?**

Reading is a commuter town and digital industries hub situated thirty train minutes west of London. It has a small number of long-standing community arts organisations, whose focus is to support its local base of artists, most of whom struggle to make a living within the arts. The town has two museums with a decidedly local and historical focus, but the cultural community agrees that the town lacks a more international contemporary art space. The local arts economy is fundamentally based on a large community of volunteers who are willing to give their free time to organise cultural events and activities in the town. Like in many regional towns, artists and cultural workers find themselves based outside the typical art centres for a number of different reasons. Some stayed in town after graduating from the art school, others moved here with their family, or have been here all their lives. There is local pride for local activities, but there is no 'art scene' and there is no art industry for its workers to benefit from. There is a lot of enthusiasm in towns like Reading to create an exciting cultural offer, but resources and professional structures are slim. Although this is not a rare situation for communities of artists generally, in the regional context it limits participation on a more professional level to those people who are either hugely enthusiastic or those who can afford to give their time for free to organise cultural events. In addition, this also limits the scope and scale of activities and sometimes it makes it harder for those volunteering to look outside and embrace more ambitious opportunities. And so whereas the art system has become a large operating machine in capital cities, continually in need of skilled and educated labour to create and deliver content, this has yet to develop in some of the regions.

The volunteer culture puts even more pressure on the community of art graduates, who have already accumulated enormous debt and who at the same time are encouraged to seek as many internship and volunteer opportunities as possible to increase their employability prospects. The volunteer culture benefits the regional arts economy, but conversely there is also a defined lack of economic opportunities for younger artists in the regional environment and so few will remain in the town. Gregory Sholette has examined artists' working conditions and the power of the market using



the cosmological term of “Dark Matter,” referring to the mass of non-reflective particles that are invisible and yet are estimated to make up most of the universe. Sholette argues for a way of thinking that allows for those who claim to make ‘art’ to define it on their own terms and examines how these self-defined cultural practices operate within a changing economy. He considers what he calls the “structural darkness” within which most professionally trained artists appear to exist, without commercial success—those who operate through other kinds of economies consisting of often informal or micro-institutions, and a variety of activities which are based on volunteer work, on pleasure, and on the free dispersal of goods and services, all of which are activities that focus on accessibility and wider reach. It is also comprised of all those artists working as educators in art schools and universities, as art fabricators and installers, but it also includes the world of independent activities, small art collectives, as well as hobby artists, community art workers, teachers, and so on. These practitioners create work that infiltrates high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate websites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines in ways that do not set out to recover a specific meaning or use-value for art world discourse or private interests.<sup>2</sup> While recognising the limitations, Sholette explores new ways to articulate the politics of the many who operate around the edges of the few in the spotlight and outlines how the divisions between the “dark” and “bright” sides are almost arbitrary, independent of education, talent, or other qualities assigned to the elites. He argues that these practices and their formations are key for the construction of another or counter-public sphere and advocates for the articulations of the invisible.<sup>3</sup>

“Why do we create communities and how they are maintained?” asks South Korean artist group Okin Collective.<sup>4</sup> In their video work, *In Search of How to Revolve, or Its Contrary* (2018), they document discussions among a group of artists based in Incheon, a small port city located just outside Seoul, the South Korean capital. These discussions were strangely reminiscent of the regional situation of our project in Reading. The conversation between these artists might seem trivial, but they point out what it is like living as an artist outside Seoul, in a country where so many things are centred on the capital. The group of artists at the centre of the video work named themselves metaphorically after the practice of “revolving” or “rotating,” a movement central to Korean martial arts techniques, such as Taekwondo, which is notable for its rotating kicks, its flying, twirling, and spinning movements. This rotational body movement in Taekwondo is a catalyst for the generating force aimed to increase the power and impact of the employed technique. It increases the power of the muscles significantly and is meant to improve self-esteem, confidence, and power or

radiance. This seemed a fitting metaphor for what might be needed for a community of artists who aim to develop a sense of presence in a regional location.

How can we use the situation in an art school to explore thinking through and with artworks and exhibitions, and to use this process as a way to connect with the local community? Who are the community members who want to connect with us and how can we mobilise each other and recognise the interdependencies and possibilities that open up in the spaces between university, art school, artists, and cultural organisations that have the potential to reciprocally provide cultural benefits, and to initiate an important dialogue between the flow of information and resources? By setting up an organisation within the university, we had hoped to provide a starting point, a way to help to bridge this gap by developing a platform for discussion, exposure, and exhibition, and crucially for connection to a variety of artists working in the intersection of these fields, possibly animating a choreography between the different streams of people and ideas.

### **What is going on in the art school?**

As artists and educators based in a university context, we have had many discussions about the role of the art school and the university and the way we should shape or develop our activities. We observe the neoliberal education project and students who see themselves as consumers rather than active, responsible bodies, taking ownership of their education. Many of us are engaged in collaborative and curatorial work, setting up groups and spaces or publishing platforms alongside our educational work, and this narrative has often shaped our understanding of teaching as an interface. We have been looking for what new and emancipatory teaching and self-empowering learning might look like for artists in the university context.<sup>5</sup> As the so-called educational turn has become more pronounced, we have seen numerous self-organised art schools, free talks, and workshop programmes spring up in the UK and around the world. The reasons for these are complex, but in the UK they can certainly be attributed to escalating student fees, overall cuts to arts funding and university budgets, or the neoliberalisation of education itself. What is obvious from this trend is that many are looking for an art school to be more self-determined, flexible, small-scale, site-specific, and responsive to the local context.

Luis Camnitzer has pointed out that the art system still differentiates between those who make art and those who appreciate it. Those who make “the art” are subject to the criteria of meritocracy, and the educational system aims to select and distil those who rise to the top.<sup>6</sup> The work of those few is meant to attract as many viewers as possible to sustain the market. As a consequence, the role of the art school is thus to produce



*Creating Ruin*, Lada Nakonechna, 2018, Reading International.  
Photos: Pavlo Kerestey (left), Susanne Clausen (right)

both those who can feed into the market and those whom they develop as support industry, mediators, researchers, and curators, whereas the real opportunities for those arriving in the ‘bright’ (elite) spheres of the art market is and will remain slim. And, of course, the different sides interfere with and influence each other. Ostensibly, it is also clear, as Boris Groys points out, that “artworks are not just commodities, but also statements made in the public space, where the majority of people see them not as buyers but as consumers of meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

As an art organisation, located both in a university and in a regional environment, it seems obvious and relevant that we should therefore seek to operate our art school as an “open system” as Camnitzer suggests, “focused on improving communal creativity and communication”<sup>8</sup> and at the same time try to develop a sense of cross-pollination with the outside world. Like others, we argue for an art school that is site-specific, in that it enters into dialogue not only with the wider realms of art and society, but also with its closest environment, the local town community. We have developed a network of partner organisations, both local and international, who have entered a space of mutual support, acting as hosts to the projects developed by us with our partners in mind. This is both a conceptual and practical framework, because the university does not have a gallery and in actual fact has very limited free space for exhibitions and public events. This was a negative situation at the beginning, but it has helped to build bridges and forge partnerships. The process of setting up an arts organisation for the benefit of students, artists, and the community has

opened up new questions about the results of this process and how we can successfully develop new ways of working together from within the university.

By starting a public programme of exhibitions, events, and talks designed to connect the art school with the wider arts community, we have asked the question of what a site or organisation within the art school designed to increase our reach could be. What could this organisation look like, how could we make it useful to the students, to ourselves and others? What are the power relationships within our institution and with our partners? How can we negotiate from inside the institution and continue the discussion on how to change? How does our own position have to change, or the perception of the students?

Artist and educator Dean Kenning outlines the inherent contradictions imposed on art lecturers and art students through the discourse of the value and measurability of professional practice. He argues that the expansion and implementation of teaching of professional practice on fine art courses could actually have a detrimental impact on the inherent ambitions of critical and political art education, in which all contemporary art schools traditionally stand. His analysis of the entrepreneurial neoliberal discourse shows how in fact the same format and paradigms that are used in the teaching of students with the aim to professionalise them is used to reinstate the already inherent inequality faced in the art system, instead of opening up access to the university and to the field of art. He argues for different ways of teaching and for re-defining the role of art education in facilitating a more democratic conception of art, rather than to pretend to enable 'career success' by teaching tropes of professionalism. He challenges what he regards as a hollow notion of entrepreneurship and instead proposes a possibly different, critical professional practice "capable of transcending the 'reality' of individualist, market competition whilst addressing real world issues of work, career, and finance."<sup>9</sup> He argues that it is necessary for pedagogy and curriculum to pay attention to both locality and to student backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps we therefore need to develop an increased awareness of whom we are teaching and where are we teaching, and how we can make our content relevant to both the local situation and the wider international framework of art production and critical thought. Maybe we should try to connect artists and students with the locality of the school and its wider community through engaging all participants in a range of discussions and activities. What happens when we invite artists to work with students and local partners in the context of both the art school and the wider local framework? As an art school located outside an international art centre,

perhaps this could be a way to activate and link with new audiences to produce meaning with and for those audiences and to create a ripple effect of this rotational force, the force that Okin Collective sought to evoke.

The scope of collaboration in any such project is extensive and involves the creative sensitivities, voices, and bodies of artists, curators, students, and audiences to figure out each time anew how to successfully communicate with each other, share authorship whilst negotiating its institutional framing. We have continually asked ourselves how we can maintain the criticality of this fragile new container and how can we defend a way to run projects with soul and with love, in a collaborative, less competitive nature, as artists, curators, and educators.



*Nightwalks with Teenagers, Mammalian Diving Reflex, 2018. Photos: Pavlo Kerestey*



*The Sound of Words*, Helen Cammock, 2018, Reading International.

Photo: Pavlo Kerestey

Since December 2017, Reading International has worked with 65 artists and delivered to an audience of 44,000 people, produced more than 65 events, exhibitions, performances, screenings, and talks, conducted workshops with over 1,000 participants, including local audiences, partners, youth groups, and schoolchildren. The curatorial, educational, and artistic collaborations involved curators, artists, doctoral students, and academics. There were 120 students involved as performers, exhibition guides, interns, artist assistants, invigilators, technicians, and administrative assistants, both voluntary and paid. Seventy community members and local artists engaged in seminars, and fifty teenagers were involved in different productions.

Between 2016 and 2020, projects were hosted in a variety of spaces, including a Nepalese café (Matt Copson and Alastair MacKinnon), a central tower block (Scott King and Matthew Worley), a local arts charity (Abel Auer at the Rising Sun), the local history museum (The Critic as Artist at Reading Museum), several schools, for example, Mammalian Diving Reflex and Ultra-red at Maiden Erlegh School, the Museum of English Rural Life (Steven Claydon), a community arts centre (Rochelle Goldberg, Veit Laurent Kurz, Stefan Tcherepnin, Hanna Törnudd 'Ante Phylloxera' at Jelly), the town central library (David Raymond Conroy, Ghislaine Leung, Cally Spooner and Jesper List Thomsen), the university (Studio for Propositional Cinema, Public Movement, Marco Godoy), billboards and

hoardings (Helen Cammock), the local medieval ruin (Method Fund and Lada Nakonechna at the Abbey Ruins), and many others. *(Un)Commoning Voices & (Non)Communal Bodies*, with its exhibitions events and workshops, was hosted by OpenHand OpenSpace, St Laurence Church, the university, and Greenham Common Tower.

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- 1 ——— Susanne Clausen, 'The strength of the system, my experiences of it, was that in fact, oddly enough, it was actually a very collaborative enterprise already' and 'Teaching as a Critical Fine Art Practice', ADM- HEA, Higher Education Academy, 2006.
  - 2 ——— Gregory Sholette, "A Journey into the Dark Matter of the Art World," accessed 30 September 2018, [http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/04\\_darkmatterone1.pdf](http://www.gregorysholette.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/04_darkmatterone1.pdf), 2.
  - 3 ——— Philip Glahn, "Public Art: Avant-Garde Practice & the Possibilities of Critical Articulation," *Afterimage* (Dec. 2000). Cited by Gregory Sholette in *Dark Matter*.
  - 4 ——— Korea Artist Prize, 2018 <http://koreaartistprize.org/en/project/2018/>.
  - 5 ——— A conference organised by Dorothee Richter at the Zurich University of the Arts in 2018, focused on re-imagining Black Mountain College.
  - 6 ——— Luis Camnitzer, "Thinking About Art Thinking," *e-flux* (2015) <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/thinking-about-art-thinking/>
  - 7 ——— Boris Groys, "Education by Infection," in *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 29.
  - 8 ——— Camnitzer, "Thinking About Art Thinking."
  - 9 ——— Dean Kenning, "Art World Strategies: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Professional Practice in Fine Art Education," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/14702029.2018.1500112.
  - 10 ——— Ibid.





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## Contributor Biographies

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**Susanne Clausen** is an artist, curator, educator, and a Professor of Fine Art at the University of Reading. She is the Director of Reading International, which she founded in 2016. She works and publishes often under the name Szuper Gallery. Susanne creates performances, videos, and multimedia installations and drawings. Previous international exhibitions and performances have been shown at Ludwig Museum, Budapest; GRAD, London; ICA, London; Western Front, Vancouver; Perm Museum of Contemporary Art, Russia; Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland; the MacKenzie Art Gallery and Curtain Razors, Regina, Canada; Kunstverein Bregenz; Kunsthalle Helsinki; Shedhalle Zurich; Künstlerhaus Bremen; Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong; Lenbachhaus Museum, Munich; and Kunsthalle Vienna.

**Susan Gibb** is a curator based in Vancouver, where she is the executive director of Western Front, one of Canada's leading artist-run centres for contemporary art and new music. Previously she was curator of *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, a curatorial production house for performance-related art and research based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands; and the initiator of *Society*, a twelve-month independent curatorial project in Sydney, Australia. She has held teaching positions at the Dutch Art Institute (DAI) and the School for New Dance Development (SNDO).

**Florian Malzacher** is an independent performing arts curator, dramaturge, and writer. From 2013-2017, he was artistic director of Impulse Theater Festival (Germany), and from 2006-2012 he was co-programmer of the multidisciplinary arts festival *steirischer herbst* (Austria). He has (co-)curated numerous events, mostly with political inclinations like the 170-hour marathon camp *Truth is Concrete* on artistic strategies in politics (Graz, 2012), the performative exhibition *Appropriations* (Ethnological Museum Berlin, 2014), the congress "Artist Organisations International"

(HAU Berlin, 2015), “Sense of Possibility” on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the revolution (St. Petersburg, 2017), or “Training for the Future” (with Jonas Staal, 2019). He has (co-)edited several books, including on the theatre companies Forced Entertainment (2004), Rimini Protokoll (2008), and Nature Theater of Oklahoma (2019). Among his publications are *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics* (2014), *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (2015), *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy* (2017), and *Gesellschaftsspiele. Politisches Theater heute* (2020). He is based in Berlin.

**Edgar Schmitz**’s work renders escapist backdrops from film, sculpture, animation, and writing. His architectures and soundscapes are concerned with developing modes of withdrawal from the given terms of the present, and he often collaborates with protagonists, settings, and matter of all sorts to animate the infrastructures he works within to the point where they start providing the raw material for speculative cinematic versions of the near future. His work was part of *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* (Van Abbemuseum, 2006), *No Soul for Sale* (Tate Modern, 2010), British Art Show 7 (Hayward Touring, 2010/11) a.o., and has been presented in solo exhibitions at ICA, London (with Liam Gillick, 2006), FormContent (London, 2010), Cooper Gallery (Dundee, 2012) and Himalayas Art Museum (Shanghai, 2015). Schmitz was Shadow Artist at Netwerk Aalst for 2017-20 and is currently working on *Alovestorysomewherearound2046* (with Pieterneel Vermoortel), *Choreographic* (with Murat Adash and Ofri Cnaani), *Animate Assembly* (with Verina Gfader and Esther Leslie), and *Imminent Futures* (with Sophia Hao). His *Hubs and Fictions* book (with Sophia Hao) was published by Sternberg Press in 2016, and he is a Reader in Art at Goldsmiths.

**Maayan Sheleff** is an independent curator as well as the artistic advisor of the Art Cube Artists’ Studios in Jerusalem and the curator of its international residency program. She is a PhD candidate at the Curatorial Platform, the University of Reading (UK) and ZHdK (CH), exploring the use of the voice in participatory, performative, and political practices in relation to protest movements of the last decade. Sheleff was previously the curator of the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. As an independent curator, she has curated projects at the Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht; Reading International, UK; the Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo; Madre Museum, Naples; Herzliya Museum, Israel; Shift Festival, Basel; Tranzit, Prague; and the Bloomfield Science Museum, Jerusalem, among others. She teaches at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem. Her recent publications include “Unsafe Safety”, for ICI Research (2020) and “Fear and Love in Graz,” in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy, Performing Urgency #4*, eds. Florian Malzacher and

Joanna Warsza (Berlin: House on Fire, Alexander Verlag and Live Art Development Agency, 2017).

**Sarah Spies** is a choreographer, performance curator, and senior lecturer in contemporary dance and performance art. Her choreographic and curatorial work relates to research-based public programmes, and she has created performative work within international museum and festival settings alongside publications on time-based performance. She is part of Manchester-based artists-led curatorial collective *Accumulations* and the international artists exchange programme MAHALA/Temporary Occupations and AFiRlperFOMA Biennial. She has received funding from Arts Council England, Artists International Exchange, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and Artis, amongst others, and she holds a practice-based PhD from the Curatorial Platform, the University of Reading (UK) and ZHdK (CH).

**Jonas Staal** is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization New World Summit (2012–ongoing) and the campaign New Unions (2016–ongoing). With BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, he co-founded the New World Academy (2013–16); with Florian Malzacher, he is currently directing the utopian training camp Training for the Future (2018–ongoing), and with Laure Prouvost, he is co-administrator of the Obscure Union. Exhibition-projects include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016), *The Scottish-European Parliament* (CCA, Glasgow, 2018) and *Museum as Parliament* (with the Democratic Federation of North Syria, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2018–ongoing). His projects have been exhibited widely at venues such as the V&A in London, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, M\_HKA in Antwerp, and Moderna Museet in Stockholm, as well as the biennales of Berlin (2012), Kochi (2013), São Paulo (2014), Gothenburg (2017), Warsaw (2019), and Taipei (2020). Publications and catalogues include *Nosso Lar. Brasília* (Jap Sam Books, 2014), *Stateless Democracy* (with co-editors Dilar Dirik and Renée In der Maur, BAK, 2015), *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018), and *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (The MIT Press, 2019). Staal completed his PhD research on propaganda art at the PhDArts program of Leiden University, the Netherlands.

This book is a hybrid between a retrospective catalogue of the project *(Un)Commoning Voices and (Non)Communal Bodies* (Reading International, UK, 2019), and fragments from academic research trajectories that corroborate discrete yet interconnected curatorial and artistic perspectives. The conceptual underpinning of the series engendered various connections between studies of the voice and theories of the body, via the politics of performativity, by complicating the collateral understanding of power and agency inherent in collective or communal address and participation. The imaginary expansion of the title in the aftermath of the pandemic's viral choreography, with the forced distancing of bodies and further silencing of already marginalized voices, alongside the simultaneous performative enactment of transnational solidarity, has prompted the texts in the publication to respond to the ongoing crisis, within a wider timely context.

**Maayan Sheleff** is a curator and a PhD candidate at the Curatorial platform, the University of Reading (UK) and ZHdK (CH), exploring the agency of the voice in participatory, performative and political practices. She curated projects at the Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht, the Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo, Madre Museum, Naples, Herzlyia Museum, Israel and the Bloomfield Science Museum, Jerusalem, among other venues. She was co-curator of the first Tel Aviv-Jaffa Biennial. Her recent publications include “Unsafe Safety”, for ICI Research (2020) and “Fear and Love in Graz”, in *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats. Performativity as Curatorial Strategy, Performing Urgency #4*, ed. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: House on Fire, Alexander Verlag and Live Art Development Agency, 2017).

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