Taking place: Parrhesiastic Theater as a model for artistic practice
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Citation
Kamma, E. (2021, December 2). *Taking place: Parrhesiastic Theater as a model for artistic practice*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247035

Introduction

The topic of this dissertation is the relevance of the practice of parrhesia — which I understand as 'courageously speaking one's mind' — for critical contemporary artistic practices. I approach the issue as an artist-researcher concerned with socially engaged artistic practices. As I will describe below, my experience of the playful, humorous, and sharply critical attitude of Gezi Park protesters speaking their minds in Istanbul in 2013 not only inspired and motivated me, but also led me to critically reconsider my own courage in positioning myself within contemporary artistic production. This dissertation aspires to provide new insights into how tensions between the roles of individual and group, "I" and "we," may open up a parrhesiastic space for critical artistic practices.

I examine parrhesia both through a discursive process (the writing of this dissertation) and through *Casting Call*, a series of artistic attempts, events, and manifestations. In *Casting Call* I employ performative strategies inspired by characters from European popular culture, art, theater, and cinema – characters who purposely risk speaking their minds through scenes of laughter and excess – to address aspects of miscommunication between citizens of the European Union due to its many languages and regional rituals. This has enabled an investigation of whether a parrhesiastic space may be possible among viewers and participants.

Throughout this dissertation I work along a Moebius strip schema, which continually shifts from me as individual artist to dialogic collaborations to writing about the process. My research subject is investigated through a circulation process within which concepts such as communication, dialogue, and listening are continuously performed and put to the test. By creating artistic works and reflecting on the works being made, I attempt to answer the following research questions:

Research Question

Would it be possible for local and traditional European forms of parrhesiastic theater – by which I mean events, actions, and performances staged by characters who courageously speak their minds through scenes of excess and laughter, that take place in public view and incite the spectator's agency to speak their own minds – to relate to and/or provide new insights into critical artistic practices today? If so, how? What is the place and role of caricature today?

Sub-questions

In looking at parrhesiastic theater as a model for artistic practice, would it be possible to think of it as both the process toward an event and as the event in itself?

Would it be possible to think of the parrhesiastic theater artist as a hybrid*, assuming a role between archive, amplifying instrument for other voices, and caretaker? A caretaker functioning both as an individual enacting parrhesia him/herself *and* as an "assembler" — in the sense of Charles R. Hulbeck's "Let it run until it happens: this is in my opinion the slogan, or *should* be the slogan, of the assemblers" (Shattuck 1992, 135) and keeping in mind Louise Bourgeois' remarks on assemblage as a work of love, emphasizing its restorative and reparational powers (Bourgeois 1998, 142-3)? A caretaker inviting and enabling several voices to run until a polyphonic testimony emerges through a curatorial (caring, healing) artistic practice?

How can I, as an artist, investigate what happens in this process of attempting to speak up, share a joke, address listeners, grasp their attention, and provoke dialogue through a hybrid post-media artistic practice, ranging from drawing and writing to time-based media and performance?

How I Got Involved in the Topic: *Oh, for some Amusement*!

The notion of parrhesia entered my life and became my personal "basanos" or touchstone during an artist-in-residency placement in Istanbul in 2012-13 – during the time of the Gezi Park events. I went to Istanbul to work on my project *Oh, for some Amusement!*, which was originally an artistic investigation into two forms of entertainment belonging to the Ottoman popular theater tradition: *Karagöz* and *Ortaoyunu*.[1] Traditional Ottoman theater is characterized by a loose episodic structure of unconnected and fragmentary scenes; in Karagöz shadow theater, two-dimensional figures cast their shadows on a screen, laughing, singing, dancing, and engaging in "acts of communication that are paradoxically non-communicative," according to Turkish theater historian Metin And (2008, 25-9). He emphasizes that misunderstanding is exaggerated in the dialogues between figures of different ethnicities in Karagöz in order to produce laughter. The protagonist is always a local character who symbolizes the "little man" living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. He possesses limitless power to criticize social and political misconduct, despite the authoritarian regime.[2]

Ortaoyunu was a popular theater form (now extinct) with a plot similar to *Karagöz*, but performed by human actors in any given space. Literally meaning "theater in the round," *Ortaoyunu* took its name from the circle created by the audience sitting or standing around the actors and their two theatrical props: the "screen" and the "shop." By visiting the Karagöz Museum in Bursa, watching performances, meeting and interviewing *Karagöz* puppeteers *(hayali)*, and diving into archival and historical material, I sought to understand how these traditions encourage feelings of inclusivity among the members of their multi-ethnic audiences. My interest was strictly from a perspective of an artist whose work is situated in process-based, in-between-media, and socially engaged artistic practices.

By June 2013, six months after my initial trip to Istanbul, the focus of my project *Oh, for some Amusement!* had changed from the traditional context of theater devices to the contemporary practice of public speech in relation to the Gezi Park events — the sit-in protests against urban development plans to transform Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park into a shopping mall. These public protests developed into anti-government manifestations that spread to other cities in Turkey. I was living one metro station away from Taksim Square. With my new Turkish friends and colleagues, I visited the park on a daily basis during the events, until tear-gas attacks forced the protesters to leave the park on June 16, 2013. These protests were characterized by an unusual degree of creativity, where satire, irony, and outright mockery were deployed as weapons against the political regime. The figures of *Karagöz* came swiftly to my mind — actual people taking the place of *Karagöz* to embody the little man, setting up the stage for their own protest purposes. Through their actions, the protesters intensified

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and eventually transformed Gezi Park's social space into a podium for critical and humorous interventions, open to everyone. Witnessing the Gezi Park protesters using theatrical tools to speak out for their cause helped me establish links between traditional, local forms of theater and the current re-articulation of public space. This also made me question how such humorous and local practices of protest and free speech may be of relevance to the practices of socially engaged contemporary art.

Taking Place: "Parrhesiastic Theater"* as a Model for Artistic Practice (2016-ongoing)

Following my work period in Istanbul and the realization of my 40-minute single-screen film *Yar bana bir eğlence. Notes on Parrhesia (2015)*, I incorporated the insights I was afforded in that city and shifted the focus of my attention to Europe.[3] The revitalization of semi-forgotten practices that encourage inclusivity through entertainment is important to me, because I tend to the diagnosis that Europe (and the world at large) needs to reflect anew upon the sources and fundaments of democracy. Laughter, irony, and mockery have always been indispensable carriers in the development of a public discourse in which "the people" speak back.

I decided to investigate the conditions for opening up a parrhesiastic space in the field of art through a PhD program, namely PhDArts. In this way I would develop a method and strategies for a systematic investigation of my topic through the use of artistic tools and situate my research process within the discourse of contemporary critical artistic practices at the intersection of visual arts, performance and film, to communicate* it, and to critically contribute as an artist to public debates on the arts, engagement, and the role of play, participation, laughter, excess, and provocation. I would do this through a focus on theatrical tools and performative strategies deriving from old popular practices.

My research subject requires developing ways of working with others that test the limits of what it means to speak up today and, eventually, what this means for a community of people living together. I examine my research questions through three axes, which I consider crucial for evaluating parrhesia's relevance for contemporary artistic practices.

I. The Trouble with the Social and Shared Experience in Contemporary Art Practices

Departing from my own experience of working on long-term self-initiated artistic projects, in a process-based and community-engaging direction since 2010, in the dissertation I consider examples of shared experience within contemporary artistic production in recent years. In doing so, I look at relations between artist, spectator, and participant, thinking along the lines of participation and collaboration, together with, through, and against art movements such as Fluxus, Dada, Situationism, Relational Aesthetics, and artists, thinkers, art historians, philosophers, critics, Peter Bürger, John Dewey, Claire Bishop, Allan Kaprow, Hal Foster, Peter Dews, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Jacques Rancière, to name but a few. In examining manifestations of the term "social" in art, I focus on specific approaches, from social interaction as the actual work and the production of a social space in relation to "conviviality" in Relational Aesthetics, to happenings, events, participation, and the appropriation of

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1   *Oh, for some Amusement!* was initiated in December 2012, following an invitation to research and produce a new art project during a four-month residency at PiST///, an artist-run platform based in Istanbul.

2   *Karagöz*'s glorious period of fearless speech and fierce political satire came to an abrupt end during the authoritarian reign of Sultan Abdulaziz (in power from 1861 to 1876).

3   I use the term "Europe" here as it is defined by and framed within the current European Union and its cultural and political heritage policies (see, for example, https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/country-links).

social forms by artistic practices, specifically the blurring between art and everyday life in the 1960s and 1970s. I also briefly discuss the role of the process for the development of an "experience," and individual versus collective reception.

II. The Competitive Claims Made for Truth by Different Media

> If everything is possible, then nothing is true.
> And that, to me, is the abyss we stare into.
> (Ken Burns quoted in Brin 1998, Chap. 1)

Today suspicion rules: is what I see on internet true, or is it a hoax? Increasingly, it can be argued, there is a lack of trust in the role of the image as evidence, a lack of clarity about how image and words relate, a depreciation of both images and words. They are often perceived as products for immediate circulation and consumption, immaterial and therefore "weightless" in a virtual reality. What is the role of the senses when images and words endlessly proliferate and are transmitted around audiences of contemporary online users?

Through online social media and devices such as selfie sticks, virtual communities and networks are currently witnessing a different type of participation. The selfie de-subjectivizes in the sense that the individual tends to be just a figure in a context instead of someone who speaks up and changes that context. Instead of emphasizing subjecthood to establish individuality, a selfie stick enables one to flatten oneself as an image.

According to Italian communist theorist and activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi, we are witnessing a mutation "in the texture of human experience, and in the fabric of the world itself," because the dominant mode of social interaction is shifting from "conjunctive concatenation" to "connective concatenation" (Berardi 2014, 12). In conjunction, the communication process between living and conscious organisms can be understood as a singular event that does not follow a preconceived logic or model, allowing for the organisms to be affected by each other; in the connective mode, interactions follow the logic of digital communication systems, whereby distinct units and structures indicate or permit links with other similarly identified elements, each element remaining distinct throughout the process and interacting only functionally.

What media can reveal truth today? I suspect that the experience of collectively leading our lives on and off social media, alternating between physical and online presence, has a direct effect on how we speak our minds and therefore on parrhesia's contemporary role. I sense that a cross-examination of media (performance, digital film, and social media) might be a way through which words, actions, and images, can be directed toward a revealing of truth.*

III. Desire for change/transformation: How to develop parrhesiastic emancipatory tools?

> He (Demonax) was Cypriot by birth, from a family not undistinguished for wealth or position. … He despised worldly success and devoted himself entirely to freedom and the frank expression of ideas. Until the end, his life was upright, sound and morally unimpeachable, furnishing proof of the keenness of his own mind and philosophy's inherent worth. (Dobbin 2012, Lucian 133 Demonax [3])

The urge to exercise parrhesia myself, to take my place as an artist and share it with others by critically addressing the system of artistic production, without becoming didactic or manipulative, became my main driving force. I feel affinity with Lucian's Cynic philosopher Demonax, "for whom the practice of truth is a mild, curative, therapeutic practice, a practice of peace and not of insults and assaults," according to Foucault (Foucault 2011, 199). I suggest that parrhesia can have a place within the field of contemporary art through mild, curative, therapeutic practices,[4] and it is my intention to lead spectators or participants there. Such practices are suited to my personal traits. Furthermore, I diagnose a lack of care within individualistic Western European societies, a toleration rather than an acceptance of other positions; it is certainly possible to speak, but there is an unwillingness to deeply listen to the other. I examine this in relation to political theorist Bonnie Honig's reflections on the importance of a holding environment for a democracy. Voicing these concerns both on my own and with*, against*, and through* others became essential in order to address them in a satisfactory way.

1. Writing as an Emancipatory Tool

I understand engagement with oral and written language as self-emancipatory, because it allows me to take a critical distance from my own artistic practice, and re-evaluate it by intertwining making, thinking, and writing.[5] Being able to use words to communicate and reflect on my research and artistic processes means putting myself in a position of autonomy. To clarify: I do not claim to take the position of an autonomous modern subject; I mean that instead of expecting people from other disciplines (such as art historians, curators, and theorists) to speak on my behalf about my artistic practice, as the case has traditionally been, I find my own voice not only through art but also through language, making my own law for myself on how to communicate. I consider "artists' writing"* an indispensable tool for artistic research and situate myself among a rapidly increasing number of art practitioners and researchers who are engaging in developing methods and strategies that reflect on their practices, and claiming a space of articulation through a variety of tools, from language to image to performance.[6]

2. Truth / Verité / Waarheid / Αλήθεια: Parrhesia After Babel?

In writing this text, I may be able to write "truth" in English, say "*verité*" in French, understand "*waarheid*" in Dutch. I may also question the term "post-truth" and delve into etymologies. The English etymology of "truth" suggests it is to be understood in terms of faithfulness, and "*verité*" as the quality by which things appear as they are. I do not relate to the English etymology, nor am I interested in debates about what is true or not true. None of the above can act as a substitute for my primordial understanding of the Greek word: αλήθεια.* For me, parrhesia is a question of ethics and of passion. I am therefore very much interested in addressing these questions: What is essential — cannot be concealed or forgotten — for hetero-

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geneous cultures to live well together? How to articulate and challenge opinions in a world of broken English, which conceals, pacifies, and smooths out the particularities of terms in each native language? How much is omitted in communication between foreign cultures that use English as a common denominator? We tend to believe we understand each other very easily, despite our different cultural backgrounds and native languages, when communicating in today's lingua franca.

Η Άρνη σύμφωνα με την αρχαία ελληνική μυθολογία ήταν η πηγή που βρισκόταν στον κάτω κόσμο, στη Λήθη, από όπου έπιναν οι νεκροί για να ξεχάσουν τι άφηναν στον πάνω κόσμο... According to ancient Greek mythology Arni was the underworld's source, in Oblivion, from which the dead would drink to forget what they left behind in the upper world...

3. Theatron* and the Performative

PERFORMATIVITY*
SPACE ◄-------- experience / agency / affect* --------► TIME
THEATRICALITY

To investigate how performativity, theatricality and the performative may be implicated in parrhesiastic practices, I will look into French philosophers Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, US philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's performativity, and German curator Ute Meta Bauer's proposition of theatricality as a critical device.

4. Public Time: Remembering as an Act of Resistance

In approaching parrhesia as a concept related to acts of not forgetting, I take into consideration artistic practices concerned with memory as an act of resistance, as well as Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of *public time*,[7] and media theorist Sara Sharma's call for "politicizing how we inhabit time" and "reimagining time as a collective struggle" (Sharma 2014, 142).

A description of the dissertation's content

Prior to analyzing my method — setting up and rehearsing* a parrhesiastic theater parade — I briefly introduce certain characteristics and conditions of parrhesia. This serves as Chapter One. In Chapter Two: Parrhesia in art, I examine the methodology of the parrhesiast artist. To do this, I draw from seven artists and their practices, based on the characteristics examined and analyzed in Chapter One. I then analyze my own method in Chapter Three, interweaving different narratives, ranging from the parade's elements (Characters, interactions, and strategies of visualization) to the Moebius strip as a schema that guides my research. Finally, Chapter Four contains a summary of the film treatment for my project *Casting Call* as well as its structural elements. Chapters Three and Four both include documentation of various attempts — which I call rehearsals* — to activate these elements and a reflection on them: I consider what it means to develop an artistic project in continuous discussion and exchange with both the artistic and academic world, as well as with local communities. Chapter Four is followed by my conclusion to the dissertation. The complete list of Characters, the Script, and the commissioned jokes can be visited in Appendix 1 and 2. These are succeeded by a correspondence between Sahra Huby, a dancer and collaborator on the Casting Call project and myself, regarding our test shoots in November 2019 in Maastricht.

    My method of writing takes place through a Narrator who speaks in four distinct voices, those of the four Meta-Characters of the parade (The Ghost, The Glossary, The Academic/ Philosopher, and The Engaged Artist). The main voice of the Narrator is that of the Engaged Artist*. The three other voices, those of The Ghost, The Glossary, and The Academic/Philosopher, come to her aid as other fields of knowledge. The four voices — we — "speak" differently throughout the dissertation. The Ghost's voice is that of imagination and has a historic dimension, which needs to be deciphered by the reader. The Glossary consists of a selection of concepts and terms that have been crucial for the Narrator's process of writing. It occupies an autonomous space in the dissertation, informing the other voices. The Glossary offers insight into the Narrator/Engaged Artist's personal understanding of these terms, indicating affinities with specific thinkers through a subjective and idiosyncratic reading of the terms' histories. The terms' presence throughout the four main chapters is indicated by a star.

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7   Castoriadis defines public time as "the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as a domain for its activities" (Castoriadis 1991, Chap. 5).