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Taking place: Parrhesiastic Theater as a model for artistic practice

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Conclusion

My personal experience of courageous and comic expressions of protest throughout the Gezi Park events in 2013, when I was conducting an artistic investigation into forms of entertainment belonging to the Ottoman popular theater tradition, led me to wonder if such old practices might be of interest for critical artistic practices today. I invented the term parrhesiastic theater* and asked myself if and how it could be considered as a model for artistic practice. From a theoretical perspective, I began my exploration into parrhesia by looking into the forms, conditions, and characteristics of parrhesiastic theater in Greek antiquity, both through Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis of the concept as a mode of discourse and by visiting the Greek sources. By looking into contexts within which parrhesia was practiced in Greek antiquity, I decided to include the Epicurean approach as a counter-balance to Foucault's three forms of truth-telling (the Cynic, the Socratic, and the political), all three of which position the parrhesiast in opposition, against the other(s), be it one or many. The Epicurian approach is an antique form that considers the notion of parrhesia from a perspective of inclusivity, within a heterogeneous community. Furthermore, I examined how a number of thinkers, writers, and activists of the 20th and 21st centuries relate to this notion and the ways in which they may find it relevant for contemporary society and how art can contribute to this discussion. Despite their different approaches and concerns, Castoriadis, Havel, and Brin seem to converge on the political dimension of parrhesia, placing emphasis on citizen responsibility. For Castoriadis, Havel, and Brin, it is evident that "genuine politics" cannot be separated from its moral and social dimensions. In the cases of Brin and Byung-Chul Han, moral and ethical aspects of parrhesia are examined through contemporary societal lenses. Their writing reflects on the challenges and dilemmas presented to contemporary Western societies regarding what speaking one's mind might mean today. These include the use of new media, the internet, and virtual reality (Brin), a "general positivization of society" leading to burnout achievement-subjects, and the phenomenon of "deconflictualization" (Byung-Chul Han). As Pajmans illustrates, art contributes to this discussion, by proposing other positions not through discourse but through the enhancement of imagination.

I then examined how these conditions and characteristics of parrhesiastic theater in Greek antiquity manifest in seven contemporary visual artists' practices and works, and the strategies they have used to bring parrhesia into being. My aim was to construct a portrait of the parrhesiast-artist through these examples of artistic strategies. To do this, I also considered Foucault's art-historical stopping points in *The Courage of Truth*: Cynical art, the literature studied by Mikhail Bakhtin, and the figure of the modern artist. In addition to Foucault, I considered Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* to examine how he relates the historical avant-garde movement of Dada to cynicism. I also briefly looked into the Dadaist undercurrent that runs through the 20th century. In parallel to my theoretical explorations, I worked at various locations: I physically experienced local forms such as the Carnival of Binche, Maastricht Carnival, Limburgs Museum, the buuteredners, and caricature — in short old popular practices of entertainment in Belgium and Netherlands — as well as reading about them.

In looking into antique parrhesiastic positions, parrhesia in contemporary visual artists and in old popular practices of entertainment, the aim of my research was to investigate how parrhesia has been practiced in the past and whether such methods may be reused and put to the test in contemporary Western European public and semi-public urban spaces. Instead of re-enacting them through a distanced critical perspective, I placed myself in the middle of the research: I started realizing drawings of myself in various parrhesiastic positions and postures. The drawings visualized imaginary attempts to answer the question of how could I speak my mind. In these drawings, old popular forms, comic representations such as *The Joker* and *The Fool* merged with contemporary imagery such as *The Selfie-Junkie*.

I started thinking of my drawings as parrhesiastic characters and the format of a parade as a method through which they could come into life and interact in contemporary Netherlands and Belgium. The Characters would be built on the basis of old, stereotypical characters from several European historical periods (antiquity, the Middle Ages, and so on).

As a device, the parade would enable me to:

1. define the main concepts and a network of related concepts for parrhesiastic theater*
2. understand and analyze historical examples of parrhesiastic theater*
3. detect where we (contemporary viewers, participants, and makers) are now in comparison to these examples
4. appropriate, reenact, and partially revive these examples to enable this detection
5. disseminate and diffuse the material resulting from the above

I developed a working method that corresponds to the subject matter of parrhesia. Being aware that the investigation of parrhesia always implies the existence of an Other, I decided to conduct the research through the concept of the Möbius strip, as a format that flips between individual and dialogical attempts.

My Parade draws examples and inspiration from old celebratory parades filled with laughter and excess. It focuses on popular European artists and practices of entertainment from the past. Its Characters invoke the voices and figures of Old Parrhesiastic Laughers to activate the contemporary viewer. They are revitalizers of dormant powers within specific localities.

The parade appropriates strategies and tools for bringing people together, enabling them to “appear” in common view. It does not reenact an old parade, however. It starts from my drawings and a monological approach before reaching out to others, including professionals such as dancers, writers, costume makers, puppeteers, and performers, as well as amateurs, volunteers, and invited and accidental audience members. The parade builds up and evolves in a successive manner, through the augmentation of a heterogeneous collection of texts, characters, props, voices, and people joining, becoming part of it. To the series of attempts, events, and manifestations stemming from this parade I gave the name *Casting Call*.

Casting Call is a continual, still ongoing attempt to generate parrhesia and question its role in contemporary art through negotiating the tensions inherent in acts of dialogical understanding. In this attempt, a mix of professionals, extras, respondents, and accidental audience members (bystanders) were invited to speak their minds by using the Parade’s collection of commissioned texts, characters, props, and voices in playful ways. They joined improvised public mises en scène that functioned halfway between stages and filmsets.

A parade engages with public space in two ways. It is a moveable temporary public space in itself, and at the same time, in theatricalizing existing public space, it traverses, permeates, and disrupts. In public space, one is confronted with what other people think and how they live their lives. My choice to create a public playground to play with concepts people take very seriously in their own lives follows a historical tradition of play as indispensable for training toward an attitude of speaking out. I align myself with political theorist Bonnie Honig, who emphasizes the importance of imagination and play as resources, especially for those humans deprived from a healthy democratic holding environment (Honig 2013, 70–72), and Ute Meta Bauer, who suggests that through play and theatricality one can overturn the rules of the chess game of life, creating change (Bauer 2016, 20).

In the period between 2017 and 2020, several public mises en scène took place in various locations in the framework of *Casting Call*, in which people could “appear” in common view by making use of the above-mentioned collection of texts, characters, props, and costumes. It was important to keep the possibility open for an event to occur, while also recording the process to ensure that the event would not be forgotten. It became crucial that I keep track of what is at stake when several individuals come together, and how creative processes

may unfold among them. During our actions and negotiations as participants, we were continually exposed to ourselves as well as to the camera’s eye. By documenting aspects of the rehearsals, we were able to look back and inspect our own actions recording public time.

In *Casting Call*, I use the film shoots as a pretext to bring together and create a temporary social space that enhances future social imaginaries. I document these attempts in order to address virtual and future audiences, while also offering a live experience. The result is largely shaped by the choices of multiple actors and participants.

To recapitulate my research sub-question: “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?” In my efforts to answer this question, I started on my own by placing myself in the middle of the research, working as a solitary artist. I then reached out to others and investigated this process with, against, and through them. I explored the model of parrhesiastic theater by creating situations within which the limits of the roles in relation to the authority of artist, maker, participant, and performer were claimed, negotiated, and examined through hybrid stage sets positioned between visual arts, performance, and film. In these situations, the performers continually fell in and out of role of the characters they assumed. Between several roles and limitations, *Casting Call* developed into a site of negotiation for all tensions and disagreements, where we as participants were confronted with the limits between “I” and “we.” In this transitional social space of the parade, which was approached as an ongoing rehearsal and practiced in the space between observation and imagination, I keep asking the question “How can I, as an artist, practice my ability to create a kind of shared sense of what is true or meaningful?” I do this by inviting others to join, bringing together bodies affecting and being affected, making them part of the question.

In attempting to answer my sub-question “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?”, the methods I developed on my own and in working with, against, through others for the purposes of this parade provided me with the answer: it is not only possible but necessary to think of such theater as both the process toward an event and as the event itself. Once more, I wish to draw attention to Massumi’s definition of the time of the event as a transversal time, which “enables, and requires, you to rethink all of these terms — bodily capacitation, felt transition, quality of lived experience, memory, repetition, seriation, tendency — in dynamic relation to each other” (Massumi 2014, 104). Collaborative formats and dialogical attempts are not limited to the time of the work’s production, but extend in time before and after its making. In this research project, it is the circulation from the process to the product and back again through its documentation that matters.

My research project consists of an artistic body of work (*Casting Call*) and a written component (dissertation), within which *Casting Call*’s script is contained. These two complement each other. Although *Casting Call* is ongoing, there is an outcome: a body of work ranging from drawings through which I enacted the Characters of the parade on paper; costumes and props used by the performers I collaborated with in their attempts to enact the Characters in public space; video notes highlighting how the process of *Casting Call* materialized in different stages; and accompanying textual material. This body of work stems from the rehearsals and try-outs of this ongoing process. It accumulates and is worth caring for because it permits the collectivity of the participants to go back and inspect what has happened.

The research is disseminated to several types of audience — in artistic, academic, and broader contexts — through both its artistic and discursive bodies taking on various formats: performative events, discursive events, interventions, and exhibitions. As an exhibition, it takes the form of an installation unfolding as a parade, demonstrating the steps taken, providing evidence of what I have been writing about — exhibits as testifiers — and inviting the

visitor to partake in a sensorial experience. It is an installation of works as remnants of the research process — leftovers to be cared for — that document several parts of the process, from imagining to actualizing parts of the parade. They include printed journals, film notes (shot between 2017 and 2020), drawings of costumes and characters, performance documentation, and objects (such as props, costumes, and displays). These have served as aids, testers, and witnesses through the project's circulation from solitary individual practice to participatory dialectic attempts to address an audience.

In my search for parrhesiastic theater as a model for artistic practice, the tensions, struggles, and compromises regarding my various roles and tasks within this film project led me to the answer regarding the following research sub-question: “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?”. To this I would respond that parrhesiastic theater artists often work in hybrid ways; they combine various mediums and assume multiple roles in their practices. A long list of contemporary artists, from Christoph Schlingensief (actor, artist, theater maker, provocateur) to Jeanne van Heeswijk (artist, curator, collective projects- training for the not-yet) to Kader Attia (artist, curator, and founder of La Colonie), to name just a few examples, testifies to that. However, I argue that these roles primarily serve the artists’ attempts to develop strategies of dissent, confrontation, provoke engagement and produce affect, enhancing the possibility for their own and other voices/bodies to “appear.” I therefore positively identify the parrhesiastic theater artist as someone assuming a number of roles, but not as a hybrid.

My explorations into contemporary artists and visual arts strategies demonstrate that in our current highly complex and multilayered reality, in which we live with an abundance of mediated images, more refined, context-specific strategies are required to enable parrhesia. At the same time, confrontational laughter is arguably under threat: in recent years sensitivities around political correctness have become fraught as the struggles of certain social groups to claim their right to be taken seriously, instead of assuming marginal positions in society, have intensified.

In attempting to apply local and traditional European forms of parrhesiastic theater* in Western European urban spaces, settings, and situations (Brussels and Maastricht) in our “post-truth” era, I have largely been confronted with failure, apathy, indifference, complicated situations, and/or the audience’s desire to be entertained. With the exception of local buuteredner Jan Heffels, who in performing his jokes several times on the spot (at the center of Sittard Markt) attracted a local Dutch-speaking audience tuning in to his intended meaning, it was difficult for a character to function as the local character-representative of the people in the culturally diverse and multilingual urban European settings of *Casting Call*.

There are several reasons for this: a limited understanding of the social role of art as a spectacle to consume or amuse rather than an experience to engage with; caricature functioning when it mocks others (safe irony) but not appealing to spectators to see themselves in it; the impotence of caricatural figures to collectively represent in a diverse multicultural universe of individuals; concern about the possibility of causing offense; and broken lines of tradition reinvented and redistributed as spectacle, whether in the form of a commercial en-

terprise (Maastricht Carnival)⁵⁰ or cultural heritage (Carnival of Binche). My investigations with performers on location in public spaces of Belgium and Netherlands in comparison to my readings on old practices prove to me that caricature’s contemporary place and role is limited. Recent developments in politics such as the US Capitol events show that fiction has become reality. We are currently experiencing a twisted and reversed order of things, as a consequence of the joker having become the king.

In response to my initial 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?”, I conclude that because all of the above experiences indicate phenomena which limit the role and place of comedic popular traditional practices of parrhesiastic theater today — apathy, distraction, the need to be entertained, sensory overload — it is worth asking this particular question over and over again: how is it possible for imaginative processes to be enabled and encouraged, in order to lead to a parrhesiastic stance through humor, laughter, and excess? I suggest that the above question should be understood from a perspective of an expanded version of parrhesia, including possibilities for those who do not know, the not-yet-trained, to claim their right to “appear” by finding other ways together, for example through our bodies, as Judith Butler suggests.

My investigation into local and traditional European forms of parrhesiastic theater provided me with an understanding of the urgency for critical artistic practices to reflect and act upon the social role of the artist in the current Western European setting. Back in 2012, philosopher, dramaturg, and performance theoretician Bojana Kunst warned about how populist and neoliberal rhetoric has been undermining and attempting to dismantle any frames that cultivate the commons, art being one of them, for several years (Kunst 2012).

In her 2020 article “What should we expect from art in the next few years/decades? And what is art, anyway?” curator and cultural producer Carmen Salas proposes a revival of the relationship between art and ethics in order for art “to take a larger social dimension. Art is about risk taking, resistance, empowerment and transformation” (Salas 2020). Artist Domenico Dom Barra argues in turn that by “shifting the focus from the art piece to the art practice and from the artist to the community, art can influence society with its practices... It’s about acting and not about making” (Salas 2020). In the same period, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has argued for a Green New Deal, insisting on the necessity of connecting the artist with the social environment through governmental support and through art institutions embracing their “collective role to support artists and culture at this time” while strengthening the relationship between the public and the arts. His references are art historian George J. Mavigliano, philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, and director of the WPA federal art programs (1935–43) Edgar Holger Cahill, who all placed emphasis on the role of art in daily life, connecting art to society (Obrist 2020).

The last five years have often brought me to question the role of institutions and the role of audiences, but even more so the artist’s role in the circle of production and dissemination. Speaking one’s mind is a transformative practice that constantly deconstructs and redrafts the limits between one’s self and the other(s). Art is also a transformative practice that may enable and nourish the individual, as well as feed social imaginaries. Participatory nourishing systems between artist, the audience or public, and the institutions involved are urgently

needed, for creating conditions for both individual and shared reception. Strengthening the relation between the “I” and the “we” cannot happen in a capitalist logic of speedy efficiency. Cultivating the right conditions requires engagement and shared responsibility from all participants (the artist, the audience or public, and the institutions involved), allowing for public time to be spent together in conviviality with a sense of joint liability.

Back and forth in time, I kept questioning my own position in the middle of it all. From the Cynics to the modern artist to our times, a trace of the artist as a social spy with militant extensions remains. As spies, parrhesiast-artists constantly make use of their senses: they observe, listen, and smell social* issues and situations and react to them in expressive, sensational ways. They are able to both keep a certain distance from an issue in order to observe it clearly, but also come very close, be affected by it, and transform it through their art. Parrhesiast-artists address these issues and situations through their practice: they confront, move, and affect other people because they have already been confronted with, embodied, or enacted these issues themselves. In communicating such embodiments and enactments, they mobilize their imaginations and critical attitudes as well as those of their audience in turn.

Although “truth” is a very contested term, parrhesiast-artists persist in seeking it out through the power of senses and affect, using artistic freedom of expression as a weapon. Humor, irony, play, fiction, satire, irrationality are employed to facilitate a parrhesiastic attitude. Through their artwork parrhesiasts-artists attempt to define “a time and a place, in other words a dramatic scene where truth can emerge, where subjects can be recognized in the act of truth” (McGushin 2007, 9). They create set-ups that function as reflective surfaces; it is up to the viewers’ imagination and ability to mirror themselves and discover their own truth in these set-ups. In the present complicated and loaded post-modern, post-truth landscape, contemporary parrhesiast-artists often decide to function underground (by seducing, deceiving, tricking, undermining), instead of employing straightforward approaches regarding art and truth relations, in order to grasp and hold the viewers’ attention.

Whereas not all parrhesiast-artists make explicitly political work, political questions do underpin their work. By political I mean the possibility for imaginative processes to be enabled and expressed, by making associations not previously imagined and by daring to disassociate from existing associations. Parrhesiast-artists care for the conditions needed so that they can persistently ask the question, “How can I, as an artist, practice my ability to create a kind of shared sense of what is true or meaningful?” and maintain the courage to challenge, disrespect, confront, and disrupt normality, rules, and the status quo. Paradoxically, although truth-telling is enabled by the use of play, irrationality, fiction and so on, the freedom deriving from them is often accompanied by a sense of powerlessness, traditionally the price to pay for assuming marginal positions and occupying cultural-social spheres of exception, where play and irrationality would be possible. Several historical examples in the trajectory from the Cynics to the modern artist and movements like Dada and Punk testify to that. However, the increase in numbers in recent years both of artists-activists such as Tania Bruguera, Guerrilla Girls, Ai Weiwei, Quinsy Gario, but also of artists, thinkers, writers, curators such as the ones I already mentioned in this document, seem to suggest that a paradigm shift is currently taking place. These practitioners are not so much guided by a need for destruction and/or a reaction against tradition, a Dadaist ‘undercurrent’. But rather these practitioners are guided by a sense of engagement in social change, re-evaluating boundaries between the “I” and the “we”, blending and challenging traditionally assumed functions and characteristics. To give an example, the artist and the curator: Boris Groys makes a distinction between “the sovereign, unconditional, publicly irresponsible freedom of art-making” from the “institutional, conditional, publicly responsible freedom of curatorship” (Groys 2009b). In the case of artists-researchers, the boundaries between responsible and irresponsible freedom are becoming blurred. The artist-as-researcher oscillates between the sovereign prerogative of the artist and the need for justification that makes systematic research public.

Parrhesia and art meet in this act of appearing, of making visible. For Boris Groys “art’s function is rather to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked” (Groys 2009b). For Foucault, it is due to lack of visibility that “the parrhesiast performs his role”, in unveiling the “interplay between human beings and their blindness due to inattention, complacency, weakness, and moral distraction” (Foucault 2011, 16). Foucault and Groys add that the task for both the artist and the parrhesiast is to show, not to solve the problem: the parrhesiast “leaves the person he addresses with the tough task of having the courage to accept this truth, to recognize it, and to make it a principle of conduct” (Foucault 2011, 16) and “The goal of art, after all, is not to change things — things are changing by themselves all the time anyway” (Groys 2009b). To pessimistic views on art’s powerlessness, I counter that art does have the power to change society: as an artist-parrhesiast, one may help others see; by pointing, appearing, making visible, he/she may help others face realities overlooked and uncomfortable truths, and lead them to a change of conscience in turn.