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Taking place: Parrhesiastic Theater as a model for artistic practice

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Research Summary

This research project addresses the question how 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 — possibly relate to and/or provide new insights into critical artistic practices today. In this context, the project also examines the place and role of caricature today.

I approach the issue as an artist-researcher concerned with socially engaged artistic practices. The experience of the playful, humorous, and sharply critical attitude of Gezi Park protesters speaking their minds in Istanbul in 2013 led me to critically reconsider my own courage in positioning myself within contemporary artistic production. Throughout the dissertation I work along a Möbius strip schema, which continually shifts from me as individual artist to dialogic collaborations to writing about the process. The 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. The 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.

The dissertation explores the notion of 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. Furthermore, I examine how several thinkers, writers, and activists of the 20th and 21st centuries relate to the notion of parrhesia and in what ways they may find it relevant for contemporary society and art. These include moral and ethical aspects of parrhesia examined through contemporary societal lenses, such as the use of new media, the internet, and virtual reality (David Brin). I also examine how these conditions and characteristics of parrhesiastic theater in Greek antiquity manifest in several contemporary visual artists’ practices and works, and the strategies they have used to bring parrhesia into being, aiming at constructing a portrait of the parrhesiast-artist through these examples of artistic strategies.

Parrhesia is examined both through a discursive process (the writing of this dissertation) and through *Casting Call*. In this way, the artistic body of work (*Casting Call*) and the written component (dissertation), within which *Casting Call*’s script is contained, complement each other. To address aspects of miscommunication between citizens of the European Union due to its many languages and regional rituals, I employ performative strategies in *Casting Call* inspired by old, stereotypical characters from European popular culture, art, theater, and cinema.

The artistic part of the research project is conducted through the format of a parade, which corresponds with the subject matter of parrhesia. The parade builds up and evolves in a successive manner, through the augmentation of a heterogeneous collection of commissioned texts, characters, props, voices. In the preparation of the parade, the Characters are carriers of historical knowledge, invoking collective memory. The parade appropriates old entertainment strategies and tools in bringing people together, not to re-enact an old parade, but rather to enable participants to “appear” in common view: in *Casting Call*, a mix of professionals, extras, respondents, and accidental audience members (bystanders) were invited to speak their minds by using the Parade’s collection in playful ways. They joined improvised public mises en scène that functioned halfway between stages and filmsets. *Casting Call* is conceived as an ongoing rehearsal, a continual attempt to generate parrhesia and question its role in contemporary art.

My investigation into local and traditional European forms of parrhesiastic theater provided me with an understanding of the urgency for artistic practices to critically reflect upon

the social role of the artist in the current Western European context. By undoing dignity and seriousness, art reveals uncomfortable truths about social conventions and issues. Revitalizing an old parrhesiastic practice triggers social awareness and enables the expression of political consciousness for both spectators and performers. In attempting to relate to local communities, *Casting Call* bridged many distances. The aim for us as participants was to understand what happened when we come together, and to embrace, when necessary, the impossibility of communicating.

In my search for parrhesiastic theater as a model for artistic practice, the tensions and compromises regarding my various tasks within this research project led me to a reconsideration of my own role in it: the artist-as-researcher oscillates between the sovereign prerogative of the artist and the need for justification of the research. This becomes apparent both through the dissertation's written component and the format of an exhibition, an installation unfolding as a parade.