

## **To embody the other.**

### **The use of Parrhesia in assamblearian practices**

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What I am presenting here today is a portion of a larger research that I am developing in a PhD program called Curatorial/Knowledge at Goldsmiths University<sup>1</sup>. One of the intends of this research is to take account of experimental radical practices that are being developed in the art field and also in the field of social movements. My concern is to think that the very act of analysing their specific methodologies might disclose forms of doing that could deploy new strategies to reorganize curatorial practices as well as those of the institution and beyond.

Within the art field, the example I am following as a radical experimental form of practice is one called Cine sin autor, Authorless Cinema. CsA is a collective that reorganises cinema production under the notion of what they claim as to be an authorless practice. This form of practice takes a first radical gesture which is to provoke the disappearance of the author in order to construct a new methodology of work. The space that this disappearance uncovers, releases new places for enunciation that are newly occupied in the form of the assembly.

What I will do next, due to time and complexity, is not to focused on this disclosed gesture of disappearance despite its relevance but on the constituency of the new space that this gesture generates. However, having said this, I think it is important to locate at least broadly the terrain in which I think this very move of disappearance becomes effective inside the artistic field and beyond. To do so I am going to describe briefly two scenarios in which I think assamblearian modes of practices in combination with the use of truth-telling –parrhesia- produce interesting transformations and new forms of experimentation. One of the scenarios has to do with the forms of collaborations being addressed by the so called “social engage art practices” and the other scenario has to do with the way in which capital uses or misuses language as communication. Then I will explain my vision on how different assamblearian methodologies, that inaugurated by the 15M movement in Madrid and that practiced by CsA authorless practice, change the field of

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<sup>1</sup> The project of curatorial/knowledge is simultaneously a teaching program for post-graduate research and a mechanism for bringing together the experiences of working within art institutions and environments with modes of theoretical reflection and analysis being explored within the university. See <http://ck.kein.org/>

collaboration and the used of language by introducing truth-telling –parrhesia-

### **First scenario**

#### About collaboration in social engage art practices.

During the last twenty years the collaborative practices addressed by certain artists have grown fast and have been object of analysis, agreements and disagreements among cultural practitioners and theorists<sup>2</sup>. There have been many concerns that tried to analyze its differences with very precise surgical procedures, almost to the point of exhaustion.

Despite the fight for legitimizing and delegitimizing its function within the art field, what is true is that the notion of the collaborative has introduced important innovations braking boundaries in the terrain of the art. It has opened a field of relationality between artist themselves, artists and curators, the relation of these actors with institutions and of all of them with its audiences. It has unfolded new modes of work and intervention incorporating the art practices and its sites of production into new constellations.

But, affected especially by the extreme capitalization of our subjectivities, this notion also endorses counter-effects, distortions, confusion and perversions<sup>3</sup>. Among all these movements my intention is to transgress the exhausted notion of collaboration through shifting the disputes of power positions from a field of paralyzing and unproductive tensions into a field of possible new forms of deployment.

Maria Lind (2007) in her text “The collaborative turn” made an interesting “glossary” of the different collaborative practices and its distinctions focusing her essay in the varied artistic methodologies drawn by working together. What was originally propelled by the term “relational aesthetics” – coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) as “an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space” (p. 14) – has

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<sup>2</sup> The disputes between Grant Kester and Clare Bishop are some of the most polarized. See the text Bishop, C., (2006.) “The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents” Artforum, February 2006, pp. 179–85

<sup>3</sup> See text Wuggenig, U. (2004). “Burying the Death of the Author” in Artist as Producer. Republic art. [http://republicart.net/disc/aap/wuggenig03\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/aap/wuggenig03_en.htm). Last visit March 2013

delivered through the years all sorts of collaborations that have enriched self-definition by searching and sharing with others.

In this regard, what interest me are not necessarily the forms of relation constituted throughout the years between artists working together nor those of artists working with publics. But rather, whether the potentiality that a radical refusal to perpetuate role positioning between agencies will disentangle and whether this would be of help in the search for the inauguration of new places of enunciation.

The relational field shared between artists and their audiences has often been defined by quantitative parameters measured by the amount of implication and influence of the participants in decision making processes or by their implications in the definition of the structural parts of the projects as a shared authorship or co-authorship<sup>4</sup>. It is especially this form of giving account that puts into evidence the amount of effort that has been put into preserving the delimitation of the roles played by each.

On the other hand, it is true that these collaborations have been also recognized for acknowledging qualities such as their capacity for generating critical awareness, their cultivation of a sense of belonging, by the individuals or representative communities involved, and for the empowerment and transformations that they produced within the contexts in which they worked.

But having said this, what actually produces controversy in these practices in its relationality with its publics, is the way in which social power positions are addressed and are played out for each artistic initiative. What would be relevant in this regard would be to see whether the model of work associated with socially engaged art practices serves to stretch the field in which they are situated, inaugurating new questions by breaking the established categories for role definitions.

In this production of new modes of human relation there is a door to walk through and an invitation has been made. Hence, as Bourriaud said, “the viewer can be a witness, an

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<sup>4</sup> See text Beech, D. (2010). “Include me out”. London: Visual into social at <http://visualintosocial.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/include-me-out-dave-beech/>

associate, a client, a guest, a co-producer and a protagonist”(Bourriaud, 1998: p. 168). However, the concrete designation of these roles has always remained the privilege of the artist. Any role, different to that of the artist, is tied to the strategies designed by him/her in order to guide the processes of definition of the work and of its desire to engage with others.

It seems there is a line that always needs to be drawn concerning roles and their definitions in the relation between artists and publics. This line demarks a limit. This limit has been pushed in different directions and in different ways, but never to an extent in which the figure of the author is radically put into question, dissolved or put at disposal.

If art has become a site that produces specific sociability and states of encounters: who is who, what am I doing here and what am I searching for in the other? If the viewer can be “a witness, an associate, a client, a guest, a co-producer and a protagonist”, the artist has been condemned to be a motivator, a manipulator or a facilitator. All these categorizations need to be opened up for revision. And for this revision negotiation, legitimization, property and the fight for the control of power positions and disciplinary knowledge must be placed at the centre of our discussion.

## **Second Scenario**

### About the relevance of language for capital

How is language used today?

Today we see how the domain of capital has conducted a transition from a society that structured life around the logic imposed by the factory into one that structures life under that of a computerized and networked technology of communication. The former used the assembly line for mediating the human workforce for production and the later uses

communication. This new technique of power is engineered with language that is used as the source of information through connectivity.

Today one of the qualities that shape the space we live in is our capacity to demonstrate how social we are able to be. This gets highly represented on the empowerment of the social virtual nets where language and communication is performed as to be our most precious tool, making it act sometimes as a political tool or, in most cases, as a mere mode of exchange.

This mere mode of exchange puts to work the human capacity for relationality, a rather incorporeal force, which exponentially augments through the help of connectivity. All movements, situations and knowledge are filtered through data capture infrastructures able to scan everything in real time with the help of language in the form of communication. The mechanical adjustments and readjustments of the industry of communication do not pursue an increase in production but to produce and distribute accurately, according to the demands that the consumer expresses through relationality. Thus, when relationality increases, the amounts of data capture increase likewise: how, where and what we do become pieces of information relevant to designing the strategies for covering all sort of demands.

Some of the changes taking place in the transformation from industrial to communication societies have been addressed by philosophers such as Christian Marazzi and Paolo Virno, both devoting their analysis to the procedures of post-Fordist capitalism. According to them, while the assembly line in the factory rejected any form of language, today production cannot be conceived without maximizing it through the act of communication.

In his book *El sitio de los calcetines* (Italian: *Il posto dei calzini*), Christian Marazzi gives materiality to this change using the term “linguistic machines”. Paolo Virno in *Grammar of the Multitude* similarly employs the term the “factory of the soul”. In both what we see, is that neither our body nor the assembly line are the forces for production. Today, from offices, houses, streets and even deserts, language and communication –

immaterial forces with no end product – are the medium that lubricates the new industry. The entire world has become the “factory of the soul” (Virno, 2004).

In the logic of this new paradigm in which our capacity for relationality reaches its top scores, participation should be intensified as much as possible and increased to as many people as possible. This new form of managing life encourages us to share information at any time between anyone making language become the fluid that lubricates the engines of the new machine (Marazzi, 2003). A form of language, by the way, that Virno characterizes as “Idle talk”, which according to him, is “a contagious and prolific discourse without any solid structure” (Virno, 2006: p. 42). This means that any form of language serves as useful information and that any one is skilled to participate and should form part of it.

Authors as Michael Hardt have recognized the potentiality that language has when it is used as a means of production. Its qualities of sharability and of generativity augment through exchangeability when it is used and re-used by many (Hardt, 2009) .

Moreover, Hardt (2009) recognizes that having incorporated language as our means of production, today everyone counts with the talent and skills to act politically. This does not mean that everyone is “immediately acting politically but rather that they can act politically, that they have the necessary capacities” (p.26) to do so. The paradox comes when other authors like Peter Pál Pelbart remind us of the kidnapping of language when we, as victims of its potentiality, are using a language that speaks for ourselves. Pal Pelbart says:

When all the language is hijacked by a spectacular democratic regime, and stands alone in a separate sphere in a way that it no longer reveals nothing and no one is rooted in it, when communicativeness, what usually guaranteed the common, is exposed at its maximum and disrupts the communication itself, we reach an extreme point of nihilism. How do we disengage from such a totalitarian communicativeness and

completely emptied? How do we challenge the instances that expropriated and transcendentalized the common? (Pelbart, 2009: p.36. Self translation)

How could we make use of a language that, as a means of production, enhances its potentialities of being shareable, generative and exchangeable but fight against a language that, at the same time, is speaking for ourselves. How can we achieve a position in which what we do is to speak “in language”<sup>5</sup>?

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#### Using parrhesia as truth-telling in contemporary practices

Here it would be useful to finally enter into the notion of parrhesia as a practice of truth-telling. How parrhesia uses language as the medium to relate the verbal activity of truth-telling –the logos, the rational discourse- with the bios –the cares of life, the way one lives.

How this might give us clues of possible operational modes for using the potentialities of language, that of its sharability, generativity and expansivity but “disengage from the totalitarian communicativeness that expropriated this capacities” (Pelbart, 2009: p.36). And finally, if this might bring language out of the flux of capital.

Foucault analyzed parrhesia and the evolution of its practice in a series of lectures given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983 under the title of Fearless Speech. His research in parrhesia focuses not in understanding truth as such but truth-telling.

According to Foucault (2001), parrhesia means freedom of speech. It was a verbal activity practiced by Athenian citizens. It was first considered to be a civil right by which

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin distinguishes between communication in language and through language: “What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language. Languages, therefore, have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates through these languages.” Benjamin, W. (1996) “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” in *Selected writings. Volume 1 1913-1926*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (p. 63) London, England: The Belknap press of Harvard University press.

every citizen could speak in the assembly and participate in the political life. In the Hellenistic period the place for parrhesia got restricted to the king's court and his assessors. And at the end of the fifth Century parrhesia remained as an education of the soul through the care of oneself.

In those times, in the art of discourse parrhesia and rhetoric stood in strong opposition. The continuous long speech was a rhetorical or sophistical device, whereas dialogue was a major technique for playing the parrhesiastic game. In parrhesia the logos spoke the truth and in rhetorics the logos was not capable of such truth-telling. Parrhesia in political life was a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen. And in philosophy parrhesia was regarded as an art of life, a "techné tou biou".

There are specific qualities that this verbal activity requires as to be considered parrhesia. The speaker, the parrhesiastes, relates to truth through frankness. What he believes is what he says and what he says is truth. The parrhesiastes always discloses truth and in so doing he is taking the risk of speaking truth to others. Therefore parrhesia is an act that comes from "below" and is directed towards "above", since the risk of speaking truth implies a criticism to others and/or to oneself. The act of disclosure is not an act delivered under any form of oppression but is considered a duty someone feels as its own. The one who chooses to take the risk to speak the truth is then considered courageous.

In the political parrhesia, parrhesia as a civil right, the disclosure of truth had the intention to protect the course of the welfare state. In the parrhesia as discourse, the Socratic parrhesia, the disclosure of the truth aimed to achieve the truth of someone's life, "the kind of relation someone has to truth"

Let's have a look at some of the examples that could be seen as renewals of the Greek parrhesia where the task of truth-telling could turn our present verbal activity and freedom of speech into a political and creative practice in where language distanciates from using the means of communication the way it is employed by the industry and where we as subjects are able to use a language that does not speak for ourselves.



The two examples I account below, in my view, recall parrhesia as a political manner and as a personal attitude for the care of life. This means that parrhesia in these practices is not only a form of criticism that implies to take the risk of speaking truth in front of others but it also involves a criticism to oneself and a search for a correlation between what one says and how one lives. These examples are social and creative practices that use the assembly as their methodology. My interest is to show how parrhesia is key in activating these assemblarian methodologies as well as to show how they renew some of the values involved in the classical practice of the Greek parrhesia.

The 15M movement in Spain has recuperated and put at its center the assemblarian methodology as the modus operandi for political contestation and also as a mode of being that has empowered the reorganization of life in the city by its citizens as neighbours.

To explain this, I would like to put attention on the anthropological and ethnographic research and set of hypotheses that the project Prototyping, led by young Spanish researchers Alberto Corsini and Adolfo Estalella, have conducted over the last years. A body of texts<sup>6</sup> produced as proposals that far from trying to categorize the social movement specific constituency, instead, they give strength to some of its unique potentialities of transformation. To its power of becoming and renewal with regards to previous modes of life in the city hoping to expand our understandings of the rights to it.

These assemblarian methodologies emerged as a practice first in the Sol Camp -Acampada Sol- to be later spreaded onto the city through the territorial demarcations of the existing neighbourhoods. We should remind first that what any assembly oughts to possibilite is always to exercise freedom of speech through verbal activity. Apart from that the 15M assemblarian groups have always given emphasis to another key element of their events. For neighbours gathering in these assemblies what seems to be of relevance is the constant rehearsal on the construction of collective knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> The following two texts have been of special interest to me: "Assembling Neighbors: The city as hardware, method, and 'a very messy kind of archive'" at <http://www.prototyping.es/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/assembling-neighbors.pdf>, "The interior design of (free) knowledge" at [http://www.prototyping.es/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Corsin-Estalella\\_Interior-Design-Free-Knowledge.pdf](http://www.prototyping.es/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Corsin-Estalella_Interior-Design-Free-Knowledge.pdf) and "Asambleas populares: el ritmo urbano de una política de la experimentación" (Draft) at [http://www.prototyping.es/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Estalella-Corsin\\_Ritmo-Urbano-Experimentacion-w.pdf](http://www.prototyping.es/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Estalella-Corsin_Ritmo-Urbano-Experimentacion-w.pdf)

In the view of Corsini and Estalella (2012) what actually allowed them to produce collective knowledge is their capacity to be sites of experimentation where the forms of regulation delimited by a set of methodologies being agreed beforehand merge with the acceptance and valorization of the unexpected event that always configures and reconfigures the assembly by breaking the given demarcations and protocols.

The set of methodologies that are agreed beforehand are thought in order to ensure the course of the assemblies. They are a combination of protocols of mediation, facilitation and translation that combine the rigore of stablishing turns to speak, settle order and duration with a sensibility to ensure and promote the care for the other and for oneself. All of them are there to safeguard freedom of speech and respect, viability and endurance, reflection and consensus.

Now, to Estalella and Corsini (2013), these practices are open source infrastructures able to test, enquire and even to exceed the existing classical urban topoi by its very mode of being. The transformation of the classical urban topoi they refer to, takes place as a consequence of mainly three shifts that the techniques being practiced in their form of assembling facilitate.

First, is to favour the exploration of consensus against decision making and vote counting. The assembly is considered to be not an end in itself but a process that constantly searches for a collective construction. Secondly, the promotion and cultivation of sensibilities towards the stranger based on the care for the other against mere negotiation. The one within the many is not any one but a situated subjectivity that exposes his/her life to the collectivity. And the third one comes as a consequence of the two previous practices. What it then follows, is that the capabilities for producing a unique event out of each assembly increases. And that uniqueness of each celebration has the power to deterritorialize and reterritorialize the public space.

“Methodology for Assemblies” says Corsini and Estalella (2013), “includes a sociology of roles, a praxis for conviviality, and a spatial and cultural layout.” (p.5) All these seen under a parrhesiatic logic could be interpret as if what takes place in these assemblies is a “mutual confession in a group” which puts in practice “salvation by one another” In one’s own salvation, the other members of the community have a decisive role as necessary agents enabling one to

discover the truth about oneself and in helping the other to do so.

Having said this, we should not forget that the context of extreme precariousness of life delivered by the policies of cuts that put into risk the state of the social domain play a significant part in shaping the rehearsals of the assemblies making them function as well as organs that articulate responses to imminent urgencies. They are collectivities for whom their primary concern is also the development of strategical movements to fight against the disappearance of the public rights and against the exploitation that the market economy is imposing into citizens. What I mean with this is that as the “practice of parrhesia” is for me a component that helps to transform the constituency of these stances in events of recognition of the one within the many, of singularity within multiplicity defining its being together as unique transformative processes, we should not forget that the response to urgencies will always prioritize efficiency and strategy, transforming the event of knowledge into an event of direct action.

Having analyzed the 15M assemblies, my concern now is to show how the virtues of parrhesia also conform the central component of a creative practice as it is the case of CsA. Moreover, how this type of practice touches upon the ways artist and audiences have been bouncing around the roles of power and its forms of negotiation in the so called social engage art practices. This example breaks radically the ground around which these strategies have been readjusting the roles of artists and publics inaugurating new places and forms of enunciation.

To explain this, I would like to get now more into detail about the procedure under which the Socratic parrhesia is articulated and how it relates to the event of the assembly when it takes place in the artistic practice of CsA under the notion of the non-author figure.

The Socratic parrhesia, following Foucault (2001), occurs between two interlocutors. In order to assist to a parrhesiastic event there is one of the speakers that acts as a *basanos*. In Greek, a *basanos* is a black stone which is needed to test the genuineness of gold by examining the streak left on the stone when “touched” by the gold in question. -In order to fulfill the role of the *basanos* in the Socratic parrhesia one needs to be able to speak freely, meaning that what one says accords exactly with what one thinks, and what one thinks accords exactly with what one does. If this

happens, the speaker will have a “basanic” role with his interlocutor and would be able to encourage the other in the disclosure of truth in his logos and his bios. The basanos serves here as the guidance figure for truth telling.

Having said this, let's see how this is what takes place in CsA assemblies. How within the assembly, the author rehearses continuously, from his new place of enunciation as a non author, his basanic role against which the collectivity tests their own potentialities for the care of the self and the education of the soul.

In CsA practice, the author figure, by an exercised of loss of his power of authority and property can open a new place for enunciation in which the author subscribes himself as to be one within many in a collectivity of beings. To produce an entry into the freed space that the non-author inaugurates, the author should first be able to act as a basanos in relation with the collectivity. This means that, he can not only enunciate the loss of power but he/she needs to think as he/she says and moreover act accordingly. So the author needs to be rehearsing its new position as a non-author constantly. When he does so in a collectivity the new place for enunciation is then occupied by “a group that rehearses mutual confessions” and which takes place in the form of the assembly. In there, the community has again a decisive role to play as necessary agents that enable each other to discover the truth about oneself and help each other to gain access to a “happy life”.

The verbal activity that takes place in these assemblies is a parrhesiastic exercise where language is a medium for truth-telling where the speaker is continuously relating his logos to his bios. Therefore the language being used here achieves to escape instrumentality, refusing to use a language that speaks for ourselves by using singular forms of language that responds directly to the form by which each person rehearses its access to the world.

To rehearse one's own access to the world through a verbal activity in CsA methodology one needs to address parrhesia –truth-telling- as an exploration into one's own experience of life developing a kind of techné which is deployed through the testimonies of the collectivity aiming to achieve a techné tou biou -an art of living-. These techniques were in the case of Greek and Latin authors, says Foucault, specific recipes and exercises one had to read, to reread, to meditate

upon, to learn, in order to construct a lasting matrix for one's own behavior.

In the case of CsA the configuration of the matrix for one's own behavior is constituted by addressing experiences in the form of one's own testimonies. A testimony is precisely a verbal activity of truth telling based on the specific experiences one lives. Our bodies become tools with a voice that constantly labours around the process of life and its vulnerability. A voice, which is as alive and active as the living organism to which it serves. Would then language be of help as a medium in which to explore the terrain of the new places for enunciation? Are we transforming our language abilities into a capacity that within present artistic practices could be used for political action?

Does experience in this case encourage a counter movement against the violence of power? Does it encourages to practice a form of distancing from the norms and modes of subjectivation that the technology of power has given to life through the routines of language and communication?

Going back to what Corsini and Estalella valued as a capacity that laid in the methodology of these assemblies as a challenge for being able to transform the urban topoi under the specific technics being accounted earlier, is what makes me think of a topoi of the self/soul or techné tou biou as what is being challenged and transformed in CsA methodology through a Socratic parrhesia.

It seems clear, at least for Corsini and Estalella (2011), that the methodology of the assembly, has revealed itself as to be considered a new infrastructure in the city able to inscribe a change in its forms of modulation, just by the very act of being, in the specific way they conformed themselves.

What is the capacity of intervention that CsA assemblies can apply in the forms of production of the art domain? Does the practice of parrhesia within the asamblearian methodologies produces a change in the forms of being together? Does language as the medium for communication change when truth-telling is involved in verbal communication?

What parrhesia is to offer in these asamblearian methodologies?

Hardt recognized that by having incorporated language as our means of production, today everyone counts with the talent and skills to act politically. This does not mean that everyone is “immediately acting politically” Hart says “but rather that they can act politically, that they have the necessary capacities” to do so. My last question is: Would it be parrhesia as it is used in the assemblies capable to transform language from a tool at capital’s disposal into a tool at life’s disposal?

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