

TITLE: Prefigurative Performance in the Age of Political Deception

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“Prefigurative interventions are direct actions sited at the point of assumption – where beliefs are made and unmade, and the limits of the possible can be stretched.” (Boyd 2012: 82)

## ABSTRACT

The most notable forms of activism in recent years, prefigurative interventions and occupations, are comparable to theatrical performance by embodying, situating and interacting hypothetical scenarios. The mutual points of political performance lies in open-ended, horizontal performance practices such as site-sensitive interventions, tactical media, applied theatre and cognate modes of interactive performance. Whilst several examples of such overlapping performance phenomena are given and justified in the article, the political disciplines also face mutual challenges from hegemonic politics and thus share a need to adapt their performative effects into sustainable social movements.

## PREFIGURING THE STAGE

When David Graeber arrived at Bowling Green on Lower Manhattan on August 2 2011 he saw something suspicious:

“Wait a minute, are those guys WWP?,” Graeber asked his friend Georgia Sagri.

“Yeah, they’re WWP”, the performance artist replied. (Graeber 2013: 25)

Despite the fact that a general assembly had been announced in *Adbusters*, a Canadian magazine for culture jammers, the Workers World Party had appropriated the event with their old school protest arrangements. Anarchist activists called them “the Stalinists” due to their vertical hierarchy with preset agendas, preprinted signs, megaphone speeches, marches in platoons and head-on confrontations with the police. The planned general assembly, however, had a horizontal organization with “space for spontaneity, creativity, improvisation” (ibid: 26). The day before Sagri had suggested an open-ended arrangement in a conversation with Graeber: “Why not make the assembly the message in itself, as an open forum for people to talk about problems and propose solutions outside the framework of the existing system” (ibid: 22). To assume such an outside position, the anarchists disrupted the party meeting and managed to win over a “horizontal crowd”, who subsequently broke out in smaller groups to plan their next move through four tactics: “Outreach, Communications/Internet, Action, and Process/Facilitation” (ibid: 33).<sup>1</sup> The aim was to gather a new general assembly the following month, when the group would migrate to Zucotti Park, a peculiar public/private sanctuary that would serve as the base for Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the 99% movement in the months to come.<sup>2</sup> Among performance artists such as Georgia Sagri and Reverend Billy, the occupiers established what Graeber calls a prefigurative politics, “the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create” (Graeber 2013: 23).

This echoes the definition by one of the original theorists of prefigurative politics, namely Carl Boggs who explicates the concept as “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs 1977: 100). Boggs refers to a more than century old anarchist lineage including syndicalists, factory occupiers, local councils, soviets, and the more recent and intellectual New Left. Despite significant differences, the preceding movements had in common organizational activities outside statist Marxism and, in particular, centralist and bureaucratic Leninist *Realpolitik*. (ibid: 101, 104) More than three decades

before OWS, Boggs foreshadowed the benefits and limitations with the horizontal and direct democratic tactics of the occupation groups. The benefits with prefigurative politics, according to Boggs, is that it “generates leadership organically rooted in the local workplaces and communities that is directly accountable to the population” and in institutions that are “centered outside the dominant structures”(ibid: 104). The precarity with such politics is exactly the flip side of its benefits, namely a “hostility to coordination and leadership [which] enabled the ruling forces to monopolize the political terrain” (ibid: 105). Lacking “ideological homogeneity and strategic direction, prefigurative politics was bound to disintegrate on its own...” (ibid: 107). Boggs refers to the French upheaval of May 1968 which “gave birth to an unprecedented number and variety of local groups – action committees, factory councils, student communes, neighborhood groups – most of which collapsed from their own spontaneism” (ibid: 119). Boggs’ reservations clearly resonate with some of the significant challenges of the occupy tactics, namely how to link the spontaneity of horizontal and participatory assemblies to efficacious social movements – or, as Boggs puts it in 1970s terms, “prefigurative communism” versus “state power struggles”.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly though, it was the refusal to set an agenda, appoint a central leadership and directly confront the dominant power structures that made Occupy so successful. In their pamphlet *Declaration*, Hardt and Negri (2012) identify three principal qualities of the occupy movements, all in line with their concept of multitudinal democracy (Hardt and Negri: 2004): the sedentary modus operandi, the leaderless organization and the struggles for the common (Hardt and Negri 2012: 7). These three qualities agree with Boggs and Graeber’s notions of prefigurative politics whilst their relations to the national politics in the US is less evident.

There is no doubt that the occupiers and their high-profile backers in national media (not least the Nobel prize laureates in economy, Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz) changed the narrative in the 2012 election as two fundamentally disparate worldviews collided: a past prototype sanctioned by the Tea Party movement and a future prefiguration by the Occupy movement. That time the latter model prevailed although with quite uncertain links to the re-

elected president, Barack Obama, who has done little to dismantle the joint stratum and interests of Wall Street and Washington. The links to the current presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders are much clearer. Charles Lencher, once a part of the TechOps in Occupy and now a co-founder of People for Bernie Sanders, claims that “Sanders’ rise in this election cycle is inconceivable without Occupy Wall Street having elevated the conversation around inequality and the way that the 1% are ravaging this country. You just can’t imagine one without the other” (Lencher in *The Guardian*, 09/17/2015). Sanders resonates Stiglitz’s critique about the 1% and Graeber’s switch phrase of the 99%. But, more importantly, Sanders has taken over, or been given, a pervasive grassroots movement which mainstream media has ignored since the autumn 2011 but which has obviously endured the media shadow along with the discursive popularity of the economically and statistically oriented slogans. Brett Banditelli, who has a background in Occupy Harrisburg and who now serves as national digital organizer in People for Bernie Sanders says that “there were hundreds of digital assets and small groups before Bernie even made his speech on Vermont lake” due to the fact that “a lot of occupiers and a lot of community activists across the country came out” (ibid.). By now the activists have accepted that it is necessary to gather around and cast votes for a leader. Even so, the question remains whether this is the best tactics for a radical change. In a recent interview Noam Chomsky expressed admiration for Sanders’ campaign but also stressed that his “campaign ought to be directed to sustaining a popular movement which will use the election as an incentive that then go on – and unfortunately it’s not. When the election is over it’s going to die and that’s a serious error” (10/25/2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUc8ukdVtMs>). It is not entirely clear how Chomsky can know the fate of Sanders’ campaign, especially if it is a prolongation of an already emerging and rising movement. As an anarchist Chomsky is of course not primarily concerned about who becomes president in a country where special interests have eroded democracy in favor of a neoliberal plutocracy, but who can divest power from individual leaders and financial institutions to popular movements. And even for someone with Chomsky’s experience and knowledge, the impact of Occupy came as a positive surprise even

though he has raised concerns about the subsequent stages of the movement. At the time of writing this article, it seems clear that the next stage was indeed catalyzed by Sanders' campaign and that it is quite possible that this will grind to a halt when the campaign is over and a much less radical leader becomes president.

## THE PREFIGURATIONS OF APPLIED THEATRE

In terms of performance practice, prefigurative activism bears strong resemblances with applied theatre (a.k.a. social drama) whilst the general assembly is cognate to its principal methodology, namely devising (a.k.a. collaborative creation). Applied theatre and devising are indeed reactions against 'vertical' legacies of authorial and directorial theatre and imply a set of approaches to social challenges through shared organization, applied facilitation and pedagogical participation guided by critical reflection and, of course, a dose of performance skills. It involves cross-disciplinary typologies such as communal, educational and political theatre (Nicholson 2004: 8), participatory strategies of theatre 'for', 'with' and 'by' target audiences (Prentki and Preston 2009: 10), forms of project ownership relayed by facilitation, participation and intervention (ibid: 11), and alternative approaches to dramatic instantiations outside conventional theatre spaces (Prendergast and Saxton 2009: 11-13). As in Boggs' caution of efficacious prefigurative politics, however, it is difficult to ascertain given links between participatory performance practices and political efficacy in applied theatre. Earlier research in the field has pointed out that the complexity and vastness of social or political processes will always leave the matter of change through theatre "open to debate" and merely permit indications of a "general efficacy" in society over time (Kershaw 1992: 252).

In the light of the evaluative complexity and in the wake of the collapsed post-cold war ideological dichotomies, a de-politicized phase has dominated applied theatre research in the new millennium. This is evidenced in the current "affective turn" in the UK, where the institutional label of "applied theatre" was established and where suggestions of "the end of

effect” is giving way to affective theatre practices and discourses (Thompson 2009), utopian imaginations of discrete projects and sites, (Nicholson 2011) and strategies of instilling and imparting hope (Anderson and O’Connor 2015). Hence, it would be quite natural to accept the shift from effect to affect due to the immeasurable estimates of political change if it wasn’t for all the political changes that have taken place by performative means around the world in recent years. The affective turn has coincided chronologically with exceptionally effective actions that have toppled governments by direct democratic means in the Arab spring, several occupy movements which altered the narratives and policy-making in local, national and global politics, a surge of efficacious campaigns through social and new media and a variety of political activism through tactical media, street performance and innovative social formations and movements.<sup>4</sup> Many campaigns and changes have suffered drawbacks and nothing less should of course to be expected in the macro-political contexts at stake, but there are also various examples of political change from small communities to national assemblies that can be traced back to the 2011 occupations, as, for instance, the governing Coalition of the Radical Left party, Syriza, in Greece and the Podemos party in Spain.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Tunisia the setbacks and violent crackdowns in Northern Africa and Middle East have been disappointing, not least the post-revolution period in Egypt where the Tahrir Square revolution in Cairo which was prefigured as a model for OWS.

It is important to realize, though, that occupations are continually emerging in numerous places and countries to date, although without media attention. Likewise political performance initiatives are materializing using participatory and anarchist tactics cognate to the occupy concept and thus applied theatre, such as the ‘cultural open space’ of Embros Theatre in Athens, the theatre and assembly spaces in Lavapiés, a part of Madrid where the indignados indeed created the Podemos in one of the theatres, and, a more recent example, the Belarus Free Theatre whose *The Price of Money* (livestreamed in November 2015, see <http://moc.media/en/bft/srf/join/>) was directly influenced by the Occupy movement. It is equally important to keep in mind that this kind of political action and theatre have been used

for longer than the past four years in countries without umbrella terms like ‘occupy’ or ‘applied theatre’ or its institutional consolidation with publishing industries and resourceful higher education institutions. Ironically, occupation tactics and applied theatre is now used in the global North against neoliberal austerity programs in similar ways and for cognate purposes as tactics such as civil disobedience and tent embassies have been used in the global South against colonial oppression and structural adjustment programs for quite some time.

Hence political strategies have generated alternative tactics for quite a long time and in various places in the world by gradually turning from the double negative position of protests in the fringes of hegemonic systems where groups and individuals resist phenomena they do not accept, or want to represent, embody or become, to tactics that offer affirmative alternatives to hegemonic ideologies or regimes, either outside or inside structures of power. The latter tactics have been organized through movements and positions, often by bottom-up perspectives of precariats and autonomist economic politics,<sup>6</sup> such as reclaim, not in my name, occupy, tent embassies, and hit-and-run performances like Pussy Riot’s punk prayer. The two different approaches can be termed *intratactical* and *paratactical* strategies and both can be considered as contemporaneous prefigurative politics. In what follows I will exemplify a case of intratactical strategy that intervene inside dominant systems, whilst paratactical strategies will be exemplified in terms of instantiations outside hegemonic spheres.

## PREFIGURATIVE INTERVENTIONS THROUGH TACTICAL MEDIA

A significant intratactical practice can be seen in the interventionist activism of the performance and tactical media group The Yes Men. The duo, consisting of Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos (their activist alter egos are Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano), have become recognized for their identity corrections of corporate representatives and fabricated messages through media events. Once the fake positive news has been dispatched, it has to be renounced by the corporations’ actual representatives to the detriment of their own business

profile as the corporations or federal institutions must take back the positive piece of news. The most renowned example occurred in 2004, twenty years after the Bhopal disaster in India where about ten thousands of people died after an explosion at a chemical factory plant. Servin acted as the spokesman 'Jude Finisterra' of Dow Chemical (now owner of Union Carbide, the company responsible for the disaster) on BBC World with a potential audience of more than 200 million viewers.<sup>7</sup> Finisterra pledged on live television to liquidate Union Carbide and compensate the victims in Bhopal, sanitize the factory grounds and finance research into chemical risk products for a total of \$12 billion. Within 20 minutes, Dow Chemical's share price fell with over 4% on the Frankfurt stock exchange. By the use of tactical media and performance, The Yes Men managed to get inside and have an effect on three concurrent systems: global media, politics and finance. Their actions may be viewed as the ultimate Situationist prank (*détournement*), although with macro-perspectives and effects within the media and digital sphere that the 1960s avantgardists could hardly have imagined.<sup>8</sup>

In 2011 Mike Bonanno of The Yes Men arranged a so-called Yes Lab with Amanda Newall at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm along with some of Newall's students, a group of activists and the author of this article. In a session that resembled the introduction of an applied theatre project, or indeed the strategic planning of the OWS general assembly, Bonanno presented a modern history of activism and the particular tactics of the Yes Men and then gradually handed over the critical discourse and creative decision-making to the rest of the group through dialogue and hands-on experiments (material installations, formulating press releases, devised plans for site-specific interventions, and so forth). We had already decided to target IKEA due to the company's tax evasion and its aggressive investments into the public sector of Sweden, e.g., through acquisitions of residential suburbs in Stockholm and joint ventures with private healthcare companies. Newall sewed a multi-purpose jacket to fit a mock representative of the company, whilst others constructed a hybrid piece of furniture that joined a comfort chair with bicycle wheels, which consequently turned into a DIY wheelchair for elderly and disabled. We then went to Skärholmen in southern Stockholm



which hosts the largest IKEA store in the world and let the spurious salesman in the yellow jacket demonstrate the product with the help of a perfectly designed pamphlet. It took about ten minutes before security guards broke up the intervention, but by then a significant number of customers had already shown an interest in our “Poäng Mobil”. After the interference we divulged our identities and purpose, let the jacket out with a large text saying “tax fraud” and spoke to costumers about IKEA’s elusive finances and ideology.<sup>9</sup> The mediality of the Yes Men helped the dissemination of the action; as soon as word got out that Bonanno was on his way to Sweden he got offered appearances on Swedish Television, the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* and a talk at the Modern Museum. And so a centre-fold article with images from the IKEA action ended up in the national newspaper *Svenska Dagladet* and contributed to the critical force against IKEA’s parasitism on the Swedish welfare state.

A more recent Yes Men campaign (2014) is revolving around the arguably largest ecological disaster zone in the world, namely the tar sands oil fields in Alberta, Canada. The extraction of tar sands and conversion of bitumen into crude oil demand an exploitation of an ecosystem and wetlands the size of Florida and causes high levels of air and water pollution. The pollution is generally described in news flashes as a threat to natural resources and animals, but the Yes Men are approaching the devastation from an indigenous angle of approach and in close collaboration with an activist from the Athabaskan Chippewyan First Nations with the artist pseudonym Gitz Crazyboy. In connection with the film festival in Toronto in 2014, where the Yes Men showed their latest full length film, *Yes Men are Revolting*, an official sponsor of the festival and one of the tar sands main investors, The Royal Bank of Canada, was targeted. Accompanied with a hidden camera, Crazyboy went into the bank and explained his situation:

- I’m having some issues with my account. The issues that I have are the investments that RBC has within the tar sands. Unfortunately, the community I come from is being heavily affected by the pollutions and the toxins coming downstream from the

tar sands. So biodiversity is being lost, our fish are being polluted and animals are being sick. They just released a report about mercury hotspots. These things cause cancer. They get into the biostream. We eat that and we end up dying. There's a lot of cancer, a lot of people are dying right now. [ref.]

A bank representative is getting increasingly nervous about the presence of the activist whilst the teller are showing more sympathy by acknowledging that "they [RBC] know people are opposed to it". "But," he continues, "as a teller, there's nothing I can do to influence that." This leads to the decisive move in Crazyboy's divestment campaign against RBC as he closes his account. A fellow activist asks him if he closed his account and then shouts out that an account has being closed, which, in turn, makes Mike Bonanno outside on the sidewalk cue a flash mob which then brings a carnivalesque performance into the bank office. In terms of applied theatre it would be considered as a Boalian piece of invisible theatre, but instead of provoking a problem-posing (Freirian) situation which begs inquiry, the covert Yes Men action lies closer to a counteraction to a situation that has already been identified, analyzed and deconstructed. This ready-made action is a symptom of an advanced information society where competition over services usually serve commercial purposes unless someone turns the service against its own ideological logic and short circuits its purported free market options.

In yet another intervention on the anthropocene tar sands situation, the Yes Men intervened, again with Gitz Crazyboy, at a Homeland Security Congress in Washington DC. This time Servin held a speech as 'Benedict Waterman', an alleged representative from the US Department of Energy whose silver wig insinuated an earnest hippie type whose power was too big to be questioned or disrupted. After his speech about independency from fossil fuel companies and a call for everyone to push the US government to do the right thing ("We are all the department of energy"), the word was given to Bana Slowhorse (Gitz Crazyboy) from the Bureau of Indian Affairs who testified about the impact of the tar sands excavations in Alberta. He then invited everyone to join hands and take up a ring dance to a native American

drummer and a cappella singer, celebrating future renewable energy. With quasi-Indian attributes like headbands and feathers on their heads, the contractors look as amusing as they seem amused by the upbeat and cohesive cultural event. What they celebrated was the policy decision to roll out the so-called American Renewable Clean-Energy Network (AmeriCAN), which will convert the US to 100% renewable energy 2030.

## PARATACTICAL INSTANTIATIONS THROUGH OCCUPATIONS

If The Yes Men use intratactical and Trojan horse strategies to get inside the infrastructure of corporate cultures, Occupy Wall Street chose to stand outside although in close proximity to the targeted power sphere and over a longer period of time.<sup>10</sup> OWS spread to numerous cities in the US and around the world, but were itself a reflection and manifestation of the democratic uprising that took effect after protests in Western Sahara in November 2010 and then on to what was to be established as the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and several other North African and Middle Eastern countries.<sup>11</sup> At the back of the great recession and its superimposed austerity programs there had been significant occupations in Greece (Syntagma Square in Athens) and Spain (Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid; Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona) before the instantiation of OWS. However, due to a well-designed organization along with the media gravitas and cosmopolitan focus on New York, OWS became globally visible and efficacious within a few weeks. This happened without an appropriation of mainstream media as in the case with the Yes Men; rather, the media outlets gravitated toward the occupiers. Hence, strategically OWS differs from conventional protest movements and intratactical actions by enhancing the degree of autonomy outside of or juxtaposed to power spheres. This is by no means an autonomy that makes activists independent from or in any way neutral of political power structures, but rather establishes prefigurative and highly charged relations with ‘incoming’ social and political forces – police authorities, media, intellectuals, celebrities, politicians, and so forth.

What is it, then, about the charged distancing effect that makes prefigurative tactics potentially effective? In literary analysis, parataxis is a mode of writing that places semantic units side by side, or arranged in other kinds of juxtapositions, with coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions. According to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet and literary theorist Bob Perelman, “[p]arataxis is the dominant mode of postindustrial experience” (Perelman 1994: 313) as we are constantly subject to unconnected mini-narratives in cascades of digital media, televised ads and commercial spaces in the public sphere. Using fragmented and horizontal rather than monolithic styles of writing invites readers to play an active part in creating reciprocal meanings and aesthetic qualities across semantic chasms. Parataxis is, inter alia, a participatory, or writerly, mode of literature that has been used in everything from contemporary poetry and commercial advertisement to get people to act on their impressions rather than simply decoding messages. In the modal scope of paratactics, there is room for aspect changes à la *détournement*. A classic case in point is Jenny Holtzer’s inversion of an urban space for commercial messages with the phrase: ‘Protect me from what I want’ (Holtzer 2013). The Yes Men operates in the same modal register, although with aspect changes as narrow as Jastrow’s duck-rabbit figure between and betwixt activist and corporate personas. OWS’ paratactical space between Zucotti Park and Wall Street not only established a gravitational force field for political and media players but also a prefigurative acculturation of public services that exemplified a possible world at an concrete empirical proximity to the global financial institutions.<sup>12</sup> The micro-democratic experiment was arranged with soup kitchens, libraries, educational sessions, counseling services, entertainment and, of course, political forums. Conducting the services within the frame of the occupation closes the chasm between performance and labour, between Goffman’s social dramaturgy of front and backstage persona, between Schechner’s restoration of behavior of first and repetitive actions – in short, between the aura and simulacra of efficacious political action. It is easy to fall into the mainstream media jargon and associate the prefigurative initiatives with youthful utopia, but the occupation was set against a rather ominous horizon. “Occupy,” Graeber states, “was and remains at its core a forward-looking youth movement – a group of forward-looking

people who have been stopped dead in their tracks” (Graeber 2013: 69). Graeber is referring to young people who play by the rules of society and invest large amounts of money in student loans only to end up with long-term unemployment and make installments into a predatory neoliberal economy. Meanwhile, as if in a parallel world, the young people can see how “the financial class completely fail to play by the rules, destroy the world economy through fraudulent speculation, get rescued by prompt and massive government intervention, and, as a result, wield even greater power and be treated with even greater honor than before” (ibid.).

#### PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS IN AFRICAN COMMUNITY THEATRE

A cognate activist youth movement that is devoting as much personal and political stake in the creation of public opinion through performative means are the East African youth I studied (Johansson 2011) in reference to community-based theatre against AIDS a few years ago – and incidentally wrote about in *The Drama Review* (Johansson 2010). It is not only that the student-loan arguments in the global North echo the urge of educational aspirations among young people in Tanzania, but the two geopolitical scenarios also share a similar exposure to global political economy. In *The Democracy Project*, Graeber’s criticism pertains to Wall Street in New York as well as the global financial institutions in Washington DC. In the 1990s, when Graeber was active in the Global Justice Movement on a par with anthropological studies, he analyzed the policies and ramifications of the structural adjustment programs as they were rolled out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>13</sup> The latter programs resemble the current superimposed austerity measures against Greece by the Central European Bank in Frankfurt. The ramifications of such programs always hit hardest against the public sectors of society, which was deeply unfortunate in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s when people stood in need of viable health care services and educational opportunities in the face of the emerging AIDS pandemic and other resource-intensive crises.

So how can rural African youth possibly stand up to global forces of injustice? They usually have scarce financial means, a basic education, seldom a lasting job and therefore no considerable political sway. Against these odds there are possibilities of change, which have to do with motivation and approach. When it comes to motivation it is crucial to consider something that Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn keep/kept reminding activists of, namely that all cases of democratic change have taken effect at a grassroots level. Reforms are almost never given to people, but conceptualized, acquired and enacted by bottom-up approaches, initially often by devised alternative regimes and, if those gain popular resonance, more sustainable modes of public opinion and community building. If young African groups have the courage to muster a collective motivation to create public opinion, they can stage it in prefigurative ways.

Examples of self-reliant governance in the developing world are typically exemplified by non-governmental organizations or micro-finance schemes run independent of procedural governmental and banking systems. Community-based theatre is no exception as it establishes independent projects with backing (often seed-funded pilot ventures) from NGOs or community-based organisations, and with objectives and outcomes that go beyond quantifiable measures. There is an extensive discourse going back several decades regarding the precarious forms of aid and ownership of African theatre. Economically it has always been controversial to be dependent on foreign aid in African theatre as the ideas and methods of theatre practitioners are independent-minded (Kerr 1995). On the one hand it means that the level of recognition and status of the group increases, but on the other hand it means that the group is subject to the competitive and highly unreliable market forces and aid policies. Hence there have been disparate positions regarding the conditions of economic (in)dependence for genres like theatre for development. In South Africa it is quite obvious that financial self-reliance is a worthy achievement (Morris 2010); conversely, however, it is looked down on in some parts of East Africa, which is more dependent on foreign aid. Penina

Mlama (1991) and similar minded scholars are strictly opposed to commercial ventures in community theatre due to the risk of corrupting serious social agendas. Vicensia Shule (2011) goes as far as to say that the dependence on NGO backing makes theatre for development in Tanzania “a manifestation of neoliberalism”. Pedagogically and politically, the early Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o maintains a grassroots position for postcolonial and linguistic reasons (Barber 1997), whilst Femi Osofisan (Boon and Plastow 1998) perceives educational institutions as the pivot for social change. All these positions are of course perfectly comparable with discussions in the North, it is just that we prefer to call aided theatre ‘subsidized’ or ‘supported’ theatre and voluntary participants in community centers backed by NGOs for ‘non-profit theatre associations’. Hence, whilst sponsorship from an international organization is perceived as a crutch in the South, it is seen as a mark of success in the North.

In the southern Tanzanian village of Likokona a theatre group, who tackled the pressing issues of AIDS and was supported by UNICEF, put on a series of critical performances for a local audience that targeted the stakeholders, the local council, as well as the local population themselves (Johansson 2011: 74-78). Rather than regurgitating the epidemiological bullet points of international aid organizations – such as the generic ABC-formula about Abstaining sex, Being faithful and using Condoms – the theatre activists pursued site-specific issues and local determinants of the epidemic on performative premises. They started by performing a poem about how UNICEF had abandoned the group after giving them seed money that did not even cover the costs of a simple shack. (The local council was supposed to take over the support to make the project sustainable, but that did not happen.) A short comical skit followed which portrayed a group of local people, quite possibly implicating both the audience and the performers themselves, engaging in unsafe sexual conduct under the influence of home-brewed alcohol and drugs. Then came a performance that was an altogether more serious and substantial affair.

A woman has consulted a local counselor after being disowned by her own brother in the wake of her husband's passing. Officially there is a forty-day mourning period for widows in this part of the country, but the woman shows clear signs of distress after this period. In the Mtwara region, a matrilineal area of Tanzania, the maternal uncle is expected to look after the family economy, but that is a traditional protocol for Makoa and other ethnic groups in the area which has been disrupted by colonial invasions (by Arabic, German, and English forces successively), national boundaries (between Tanzania and Mocambique) and religious fault lines (between traditional belief systems, Islam and Christianity). The woman finds herself at the tail end of this history, deprived of her means and thereby also her possibilities to pay for her kids' education, all because her brother thinks that his sister's seven-year education led to nothing. So he commits a breach of protocol by confiscating the household economy, which makes her take him to court. Once again, however, the woman finds herself on the wrong side of history as she is not familiar with the contemporary protocol of bribing the judge to get a favorable trial. The verdict in support of the brother causes a minor upheaval both among fellow performers and spectators, who invade the playing area. But the show was not followed by a post-performance discussion, which is usually the case in community-based theatre. As I spoke to informants and spectators after the show, it was clear that the plot had cut too close to the bone for people to speak up. They engaged in face-to-face discussions, but not in a public deliberation. The reason for the reluctance was not that the plot foreboded a future of destitution for a woman who now had to sell her body (and most likely get HIV) to feed her kids, or that her brother disowned her, or even that the legal system is corrupt. Cutting too *close* to the bone in this case implied a paratactical proximity to the local district office. The performance took place under an Acacia tree so close to the district office that the politicians and civil servants inside it could hear and see what was depicted in the performance. The event was an affirmative act by a group of young people who charged up a contact zone, separate but adjacent to a political centre to make visible (rather than represent) and exemplify (rather than imply) where the actual centre of attention ought to be placed for the audience in Likokona.<sup>14</sup> This is a prefigurative act insofar as it goes beyond performative



effects in the communicative sense of the word, by providing direct access to a strip of reality, which is feasible for performers and/or spectators to enact in decisive ways. The latter provision comes with a certain risk taking as it proposes a direct action for political change. But even if it was not acted upon by the audience in Likokona, the performance still instantiated a counter-manifestation to the political status quo of the village and reverse the invasive macro-political impact by rolling back the liability of financial corruption through the nearby district office and toward greater power centers associated with regional offices, the national government and the international financial institutions that prioritize globalization over belonging, speculation over security, development over health, and wealth over people.

#### PERFORMATIVE PLEAS BEFORE AN ELECTION

To identify the political qualities of this kind of activist performance, I will discuss two final examples that can clarify the difference between performative and prefigurative acts. The first case is a counter-example, which sheds light on the difference in question although via negativa. In anticipation of the 2015 British general election the Royal Court Theatre put on *Who Cares* (by Michael Wynne 2015) about the National Health Service (NHS). The promenade performance meandered through a dussin spaces in two buildings and one alleyway at Sloane Square in central London. Ambulating actors led spectators between cleverly scenographed medical spaces, holding monologues as health workers, patients, cleaners, politicians and lobbyists. Performatively, the drama raised a warning against the underhanded privatization of the universal health insurance, whilst the formal qualities oscillated between promenade theatre, verbatim/testimonial theatre, performance lecture, in-yer-face theatre and straightforward political theatre. The show was topical and appealed directly to potential voters in the audience prior to the election; the urgency was palpable on the day before the election on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2015 when I saw the show, even if it did not

prevent a landslide victory for the Conservatives (which in fact meant about 25% of the eligible electorate due to a relatively low turn-out).

Eventually the performers and spectators, who were divided in two groups during most of the performance, came together in an arena arrangement with levels that resembled an old operating theatre. The levels also signaled an escalation of societal stratifications; among health executives, departmental advisors and top politicians emerged a woman called Julie Bailey who linked in a citizen perspective to the national scenario. Julie lost her mother due to medical malpractice caused by a governmental cost-cutting programme, which, in turn, led to a huge number of ‘excess deaths’ a few years ago (cf. *The Telegraph*, 6 January 2013).

Julie’s mother would probably have died quite soon anyway, but not due to negligence and unprofessional conduct, so she wrote a letter the NHS Chief Executive. When he stonewalled her, Julie turned to the local newspaper and made the front-page. After that Julie contacted the Healthcare Commission, launched a campaign called “Save the NHS”, which in effect triggered a national inquiry. The inquiry produced the so-called Francis Report and this was presented to the parliament in 2013. Whilst the scandal developed during a Labour government, it was meant to be amended by the subsequent Conservative government but the NHS continues to be compromised. Hence the motivation behind the commissioning of *Who Cares*.

The character Julie, a citizen whistleblower, was given agency through her activist role and this gave the performance a sense of immediacy if not authenticity – not least in relief against of the election where questions about the NHS heated up again. Julie Bailey is actually a real person, by the same name (cf. Julie Bailey in Wikipedia), and her verbatim lines are based on a long-term research project by playwright Wynne. There were also direct appeals to the audience. A character called Jacky speaks about the democratic deficit of British politics and its top-down reorganization of the NHS after a party (Conservatives) has been elected. “Why aren’t the public bothered? Do you think it’s bread and circuses? I think to a degree people

have got Sky TV and six beers so who cares?”<sup>15</sup> Note the shift to the second-person pronoun in the second line. The last two words of the quote mention the title of the play and were set up by a pause and an intense inspection of the audience before being delivered. Hence, the performance had performative qualities in the form of direct speech based on verbatim testimonies that advocated actionable decisions for the spectators. But does this make *Who cares* a prefigurative performance? Not necessarily.

Rather than suggesting a clear-cut definition of prefigurative performance, however, the genre will be justified by negotiable reasoning. There is no doubt that a prefigurative political performance ought to realize possibilities to access and enact public opinion, whether it transpires through direct democratic tactics or by an indirect although efficacious sway on a political situation. Prefigurative politics directly links, or even overlaps, performance and activism – and therefore it is nearly impossible to separate the aims and purposes of performers and spectators in prefigurative performances. A performance can become prefigurative inside a political sphere, or by giving the audience a decisive role in an interactive scenario, and activism can obviously be prefigurative by instantiating performative pressures on a closely related political site. But can a performance be prefigurative when it occurs within a theatrical frame, on a theatrical stage or in a cognate controlled space that curtails public participation, presented by actors bound by a script and a given outcome? Due to the question’s contingent relational aesthetics and the extended mandate for emancipated spectators, it is impossible to make a precise distinction or definition. So I will let the polar question hang in the air and instead present another, arguably *more* prefigurative, case.

#### THE ACTIVIST PREFIGURATION OF *POLITICO*

*Politico* was a production that also preceded an election, namely the Swedish general election in 2014. The author of this article came up with the concept and wrote the script, whilst the artistic director of the theatre organization die Buhne, Birte Niederhaus, directed the show.

The “script” was a rather porous blueprint for performers to devise and the directorial process also left a lot of room for processual and site-specific interpretation and collaboration. It was performed in a vast subterranean hangar outside Gothenburg called Aerozeum, which was installed in the 1950s to protect the Swedish air force during the cold war. Just as *Who Cares, Politico* was a promenade performance with a series of stations but based on an open-ended and interactive concept that generated radically different endings of the shows.

The situation in Sweden resembled many other European countries: after the election for the European parliament in the spring of 2014, a right-wing Euro-skeptical party had gained momentum and was about to make further advances in the national election.

Sverigedemokraterna (The Sweden Democrats) is a nationalist party with roots in a fascist and antisemitic organization from the 1990s. Since then they have made attempts to whitewash their past, dressed up in jackets and ties, substituted their anti-Jewish for anti-Muslim sentiments, proposed a 90% cut in immigration and driven a populist agenda with benefits and privileges for Swedes to the detriment of people with a non-Swedish background or lifestyle. It was especially the latter nebulous identity politics we wished to explore.

Another right-wing party, namely Svenskarnas parti (The Swedes’ Party) which is overtly militant and Nazi-inspired, also became increasingly visible in public life before the election.

Liberal democracy was under threat and risked being appropriated by undemocratic forces through democratic means. This is exactly what we wanted to stage in a way that made the audience integral to a scenario whereby direct actions through participatory democracy counteracted the vulnerability of a liberal democratic order. A crucial challenge was to explore the democratic predicament in the presence of an audience that would almost certainly share and affirm our political views. So we turned it into a formal experiment which would make it impossible for spectators to simply look on, think and nod from their seats.

The idea was to conduct a citizenship test to see how a democratic process could lead to anti-democratic results with the help of a tacit spectatorial agreement and a few manipulative

tactics. The event started with a bus ride to the underground site half an hour north of Gothenburg.<sup>16</sup> On the bus a convivial hostess informed everyone about the evening's procedures, not unlike a tourist guide, and gradually lured the audience into a discussion about what it is to be a Swede. To get a reaction four planted actors helped to strike up the conversation by referring to mildly patriotic experiences like being homesick from far away places. The audience was informed that the ultimate purpose of the citizenship test would be to decide for oneself whether to remain Swedish or opt for world citizenship.

The atmosphere changed drastically at the point of entrance into the gloomy underground world of Aerozeum. The spectators walked down a long ramp lined with military aircrafts and documents from the cold war, only to end up in a line for registration. Almost every spectator gave up their full name, birth date and four-digit security number, which is the key to all personal data in Swedish central archives. Visitors were also asked how many times they had travelled outside Europe in the past year. The responses provided a good opportunity to use confidential information when the performance later turned more sinister.

The first station was a 'Swedish test' where the spectators' historical and cultural knowledge was examined. An actor infiltrated in the audience showed herself to be quite eager to discuss the origins of the nation with connotations to its unique ethnicity. Another actor (a young man of Iranian descent) starts to giggle in response to the patriotic woman. The next test was a physical contest, which contributed to a sense of ambiguity in the fine balance between leisure and compulsion. A random member of the audience gets called to the office over the HiFi-system of the hangar. Small rather than large gestures of uncertainly established the psychological ambience of the event. The environment as such was intimidating enough for people to be on the look out for any exaggerated theatricality; we knew we had to be one step ahead of the spectators, especially those who guarded themselves against the idea of being subject to a social experiment of course.

Next, the spectators were led into a seminar room for an ethical test. This time the test leader was a blond man with slightly erratic tics and intonations who shared out tricky controversial topics based on scenarios with ultimatums where one or another person, often of different ethnicities, must be excluded to redress an ethical dilemma. Surprisingly many spectators did not seem to realize that dilemmas often provide impossible options for decision-making. After that it was time to vote, which took place in a communications central in an ascetic cavity in the middle of the mountain. Voting was mandatory and any non-vote counted as a ticket out of the country. After the vote the audience arrived at the end station. A moment of temporary comfort offered spectators coffee and a biscuit to live piano music.

The test leaders then gathered on a stage and started the final act by showing audio-visual surveillance footage of the voting procedure. The spectators were told that the footage was shared with a regional office to guarantee the fairness of the voting procedure. In fact the surveillance tape was recorded weeks before in Stockholm, but as the exact same arrangement and props were used in the performance, no one could detect where or when the footage was taken. This was only one of many aspect changes of the democratic procedure used for the alleged purpose of transparency and impartiality but which can be used for the contrary purpose, that is, for selective, exclusive and undemocratic purposes. To emphasize the delicate ambiguity of democracy, the test team made sure to extend their gratitude to the audience by saying that their voluntary contribution to the citizenship test is important for the country's "new democracy" (an allusion to a former nationalist party called Ny demokrati/New Democracy). The result of the voting was then conveyed (with the same outcome in every performance), namely a landslide victory of 94% in favor of the "Swedish Alliance" – a political designation for the option of Swedish citizenship that had not been used up to that point. Even if a majority of the audience voted for world citizenship, individuals in this part of the audience would have had to assume, on the spot, that they belonged to the tiny 6% minority. This, in turn, contributed to an uncertain relational sense of being in a crowd of potential political adversaries.

The voting result made a test leader put on a pre-recorded speech by the leader of the Swedish Alliance. The speech came through as quite familiar talking points of the Sweden Democrats, but was in fact a translation of an election speech called “Proclamation to the German Nation” by Hitler from February 1933. The speech was slightly shortened, but otherwise only changed by names and dates – “Swedes” instead of “Germans”, familiar names of political factions, a reference to the EU referendum instead of The Treaty of Versailles, and so forth. It was, however, a speech with more specific nationalist connotations than the audience had bargained for in the previous tests, so at this point the performance assumes the form of a performative *coup d'État*.

The next revelation concerned the ones in the audience who were to be expelled. A name of a spectator (not an actor) who gave away his or her name at the registration is called out, but after a few moments of deliberation between the test leaders the name was withdrawn. Instead three of the planted actors were selected, but by then it was fair to assume that quite a few spectators were nervous about being called up on stage. The apprehension was reinforced by the tentative selection process whereby one person at a time is being called, not necessarily because of his or her vote for world citizenship but due to his or her past offenses and misdeeds (remember that most spectators gave away their security numbers and thus the access to their official records at the beginning of the show). The audience was then given the opportunity to exonerate one of the three deportees, so another voting process was initiated. There was one blond woman, one woman with dark features and one man with dark features on stage. The test team begins by asking spectators who want to save the blond woman and a planted actor in the front row immediately raises his hand, which makes other people follow suit. Commonly, or spontaneously, the majority of the audience voted in favor of the blond woman, only to be told in the next moment that they can only vote for one person. This process eventually singled out the man with dark features as the expelled in almost every performance, despite that his past records were far less problematic than the blond woman's

track record. He did, however, refuse to vote for any type of citizenship and would not state the purpose of a trip to Iran the previous year. He tried to explain that he visited his terminally ill grandmother, but it was too late for vindications at this point and he was lead away.

The latter moment functioned as the *peripetia* of the performance's "fascist turn" as people chose to take collective action and intervene. On the opening night the audience shouted down the actors and the event dissolved into a quite boisterous discussion. More commonly, though, the moment of arrest and eviction caused physical interventions from the audience. One audience simply walked up and obstructed the excluded person from being escorted out of the hangar. Another smaller audience, which was recorded for documentary purposes (available online, see endnote 16), walked out with the deportee, despite warnings about the consequences from the actors. Yet another audience were quite young and did not dare to disrupt the performance but engaged in a lively discussion on the bus ride back to Gothenburg. *Politico* had more than five different endings as a result of the audiences' willingness to step in and alter the course of events. It was the audiences who made the performance prefigurative – they broke through the theatrical frame and extended the performative speech acts into embodied counteractions, they altered the modality of a "worst case scenario" into an affirmative action of direct democracy. The spectators had not been prepared for the critical turn of events and yet they did not settle for the role as mere onlookers or so-called emancipated spectators who disidentify with the artwork but took on the role of Boalian spect-actors and devised a "space for spontaneity, creativity, improvisation", to speak with Graeber. Unlike the performers in East African community theatre, however, the actors in *Politico* were not eager to lead a post-performance deliberation (I led one in the only performance I had an opportunity to see), so the event dissolved in a contact zone of possibilities and eventualities that was "sited at the point of assumption" (Boyd 2012: 82) where a more participatory and radical democracy is within reach.



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Prefigurative politics and activism are characterized by affirmative rather than confrontational tactics, applied with and facilitated within agonistic frameworks in public but enacted by creative and desired future scenarios – in brief, it is geared by forward-looking young people who project possible worlds by showing how it can be envisioned, created and inhabited. The conditions of prefigurative actions are primarily performative as they require stagings and acting out of invented circumstances although within realistic modal bounds. This makes it cognate to various types of applied theatre, which has also been used as a multimodal resource to intervene or instantiate alternative scenarios in or nearby sites of unjust power regimen and deficient democratic governance. The next step for prefigurative activism might involve studies of best practices in applied theatre as it implies a participatory leverage in public life to adapt occupations to social movements – and perhaps even political campaigns if its leadership distribute its influence to popular mobilization and demand in participatory and sustainable ways. Even if people mobilize and get involved, the question in politics as well as the arts will be how occupations, tactical media interventions, *détournement*, tent embassies, punk prayers, community-based theatre and other modes of activist performance can turn a critical mass or a multitude of prefigurative democracies into organized social and politically self-governing movements. Boggs sees the horizontal, dispersed and small-unit activism as a “problem” among anarchic workers visavis centralized hegemonies, whilst anarchists like Graeber and Chomsky seem to view micro-democratic activism favorably against the odds of corporate interests, media and governance although with the knowledge that democratic reform has always come from the upsurge of grassroots movements. However, none of the mentioned political thinkers seem to be particularly interested in artistic strategies, but as long as the participatory assemblies and prefigurative actions remain site-related to power centers and aspire to embody possible political worlds, intratactically and paratactically, they are can viewed, conceptualized, created and applied as performance.

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<sup>1</sup> There is something inherently funny with meta-protests. Back in the 1990s I was part of a performance devised by Ambjörn Johansson in Stockholm, Sweden. Friends of the Earth had a meeting in a park against the French nuclear tests on the Moruroa atoll in Polynesia, until we crashed the event by driving up in high speed to the audience with a bright yellow Renault. There Ambjörn abruptly stopped the car, ran out with a fellow activist, unloaded a large block of ice from the trunk while the other guy dug a hole in the ground. The ice was then buried in the ground, the grave was pierced by a wooden stick, from which a long thread was unwound for about five minutes in a direction away from the meeting. My role was to sit in the backseat of the Renault and make out with my girlfriend. That day I learned that there can be as wide a difference between protest groups as between protesters and their targets.

<sup>2</sup> Graeber coined the "We are the 99%" movement after reading a column by economist Joseph Stiglitz (2011) in the magazine *Vanity Fair*, called "Of the 1%, By the 1%, and For the 1%".

<sup>3</sup> This has also been addressed by Noam Chomsky (2012) and Donatella della Porta (2013: p. 188). I will not go into detail about the differences between Boggs and Graeber concerning the concept of prefigurative politics – for more on this, see Daniel Murray (2014), who claims that Boggs goes further than Graeber's activism by discussing counter-institutions with ambitions to transform relations of production and power.

<sup>4</sup> Research literature on such events, tactics and movements are more likely to be found in fine arts discourse – cf., e.g., Achar and Panikkar (2012), de Cauter et.al. (2011), Bradley and Esche (2008) just to mention but a few recent anthologies.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of OWS it is not meaningful to separate out affective and effective aspects as it was based on a combination of, to borrow Luke Yates' quintupled definition of prefigurative activism, "collective experimentation; the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings or frames; the creating of new and future-oriented social norms or 'conduct'; their consolidation in movement infrastructure; and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages and goals to wider networks and constituencies" (Yates 2015: 1).

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<sup>6</sup> R. Gill and A. Pratt (2013). “Precarity and Cultural Work in the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work” in *On Curating.org*, Issue # 16/13.

<sup>7</sup> The Yes Men. 2004. About the Bhopal disaster on BBC World. Accessed 20 June 2015.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiWlvBro9eI>.

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Mouffe (2008) identifies the Yes Men’s interventions as satire but this is clearly a too generic genre designation for what they are doing.

<sup>9</sup> On April Fools’ Day 2015 the Yes Men enacted corporate representatives from Shell and BP respectively on Russia Today (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGPUr0Iaz80>, seen 03/04/2015). This time, however, the media outlet was in on the act as the arranged interview with the oil company public relations representatives was followed by a conversation with the performing artists about their most recent film *The Yes Men are Revolting* (2014). What is obvious, however, is that the talk in both segments pertains to the same register of critique, which is about the discursive and embodied facades and cover-ups of corporations and media jamming pranksters. What the Yes Men are doing is invisible theatre through media tactics, however not of the activism or their acting techniques per se, but of the corporate alter egos. In other words they are enacting public relations and media segments as corporate representatives.

<sup>10</sup> There is a video clip of Mike Bonanno (one of the Yes Men) on Wall Street, resisting police arrest in virtue of his awareness of his own rights as a citizen and journalist – see the clip here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2iIVlkKmJg> (seen 06/04/2015).

<sup>11</sup> The start of the Arab spring is commonly ascribed to the protests in Tunisia in 2011, but Noam Chomsky insists that it actually started in Western Sahara (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201210251143.html>) as early as November 2010. Western Sahara has been colonized by Morocco since 1976 and even as the Saharawis have put up resistance against the brutal Moroccan regime ever since, the 2010 protests gave echoes in North Africa and inspired young Tunisians and others to organize an internal movement of resistance.



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<sup>12</sup> I will not go into the political motivations behind the 99% movement here, but wish to recommend the book that I think has explicated the correlations between economic disparity and its democratic harm most convincingly, namely Joseph Stiglitz' *The Price of Inequality* (2013).

<sup>13</sup> The reasoning was later reflected in Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> I have also witnessed performances where theatre projects indeed have integrated politicians into performance events and its ensuing deliberation (cf. Johansson 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Wynne, *Who Cares*, London: Faber & Faber, 2015, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> A fifteen minute online video of the Swedish performance (dress rehearsal) is available here: [https://vimeo.com/111840058?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=clip-transcode\\_complete-finished-20120100&utm\\_campaign=7701&email\\_id=Y2xpcF90cmFuc2NvZGVkfDlhYTc4YzFiYjAwNWYwMmI1ODExZTE5YjBhZDAzYTU5MTY4fDI1MDYzMjg1fDE0MTU5NzQyMDR8NzcxMQ%3D%3D](https://vimeo.com/111840058?utm_source=email&utm_medium=clip-transcode_complete-finished-20120100&utm_campaign=7701&email_id=Y2xpcF90cmFuc2NvZGVkfDlhYTc4YzFiYjAwNWYwMmI1ODExZTE5YjBhZDAzYTU5MTY4fDI1MDYzMjg1fDE0MTU5NzQyMDR8NzcxMQ%3D%3D)