Prefigurative Performance in the Age of Political Deception

Ola Johansson

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 and Mitchell 2012:82

When David Graeber arrived at the Bowling Green park in Lower Manhattan on 2 August 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 an Occupy Wall Street general assembly had been announced in *Adbusters*, a Canadian magazine for culture jammers, the WWP (Workers World Party) had appropriated

Figure 1. A UNICEF-supported theatre group performs a scene about a woman who has consulted a local counselor after being disowned by her brother in the wake of her husband's death. The court scene was performed outside the Likokona district office. Likokona, Tanzania, 2004. (Photo by Ola Johansson)

the event with their old school protest arrangements.[1] 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" (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" (22). To assume such an outside position, the anarchists disrupted the WWP 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" (33).[2] The aim was to gather a new general assembly the following month, when the group would migrate to Zuccotti Park, a public/private sanctuary that in the months to come would serve as the base for the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) 99% movement.[3] Performance artists such as Sagri and Reverend Billy,[4] along with 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" (2013:23).

Graeber's definition echoes the proposals of Carl Boggs, one of the original theorists of prefigurative politics. Boggs 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" (1977:100). Boggs refers to a century-plus anarchist lineage that includes 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 that were outside the limitations of statist Marxism and, also in particular, centralist and bureaucratic Leninist *Realpolitik* (101, 104).

As a genre, prefigurative performance is understood by means of negotiable reasoning rather than a clear-cut definition. There is no doubt that a prefigurative political performance ought to

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1. The Occupy Wall Street movement was started in 2011 by Micah M. White and Kalie Lasn. The movement is organized around general assemblies, which are open forums for all who want to attend and which aspire to make direct democratic decisions based on general consensus.

2. There is something inherently funny about 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 at high speed to the audience in 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 and 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 great a difference between protest groups as between protesters and their targets.

3. Graeber coined the slogan "We are the 99%" after reading a column by economist Joseph Stiglitz in the magazine *Vanity Fair* called "Of the 1%, by the 1%, and for the 1%" (2011).

4. Reverend Billy is the artist Bill Talen (see for example Lane 2002).

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offer the spectators a chance to enact public opinion. Prefigurative politics connects to, or overlaps, activism. It is impossible to separate the aims of the performers from those of the spectators. A prefigurative performance gives the audience a decisive role in an interactive scenario. But can a performance be prefigurative when it occurs within a theatre and is presented by actors bound by a script and by hewing to a given outcome? It is impossible to say definitively.

More than three decades before OWS, Boggs foreshadowed the benefits and limitations of horizontal and direct democratic tactics. The benefit of 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" creating institutions that are "centered outside the dominant structures" (1977:104). The precarity of such politics is exactly the flip side of its benefit, namely a "hostility to coordination and leadership [which] enabled the ruling forces to monopolize the political terrain" (105). Lacking "ideological homogeneity and strategic direction, prefigurative politics was bound to disintegrate on its own" (107). Boggs referred to the French upheaval of May 1968 that "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" (119). Boggs's 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 put it in 1970s terms, "prefigurative communism" (103–06) versus "state power struggles" (121).[5] Interestingly though, it was the refusal to set an agenda, appoint a central leadership, and directly confront the dominant power structures that underpinned the impact of Occupy. In their pamphlet *Declaration*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 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 (2012:7). These three qualities are in line with Boggs and Graeber's notions of prefigurative politics but their relationship to national politics in the United States is less evident.

There is no doubt that the Occupiers and their high-profile supporters in the US 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 society modeled on the letter and spirit of the constitution sanctioned by the Tea Party movement and a future prefigurative politics as enacted by the Occupy movement. The latter model dominated the narrative in the election, although with quite uncertain links to the reelected president, Barack Obama, who did little to dismantle the close ties between Wall Street and Washington.

The links between Occupy and the 2016 presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders are much clearer. Charles Lencher, once a part of the TechOps committee in Occupy and later a cofounder of People for Bernie Sanders, claimed 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" (in Gabbatt 2015). Stiglitz's critique of the 1% and Graeber's switch phrase of the 99% resonated with Sanders and his supporters. But, more importantly, Sanders took over, or was given, a pervasive grassroots movement that the mainstream media has largely ignored since the autumn of 2011 but which obviously endured, presumably due to the discursive perseverance of the 1%/99% slogans and their underlying political urgency.

5. This has also been addressed by Noam Chomsky (2012) and Donatella della Porta (2013:188). For more on the differences between Boggs and Graeber concerning the concept of prefigurative politics, 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.

Brett Banditelli, who was active in Occupy Harrisburg and who served as national digital organizer for People for Bernie Sanders, has said that "there were hundreds of digital assets and small groups before Bernie even made his speech on the Vermont lake" due to the fact that "a lot of occupiers and a lot of community activists across the country came out" (in Gabbatt 2015). When the 2016 presidential election season started many Occupy activists accepted that it is necessary to gather around and cast votes for a leader. Even so, the question remains whether this is the best strategy for a radical change. In an interview Noam Chomsky expressed admiration for Sanders's campaign but also stressed that his "campaign ought to be directed to sustaining a popular movement which will use the election as an incentive but then go on—and unfortunately it's not. When the election is over it's going to die and that's a serious error" (Empire Files 2015).

It is not clear how Chomsky could know the fate of Sanders's campaign at the time of the interview, especially as it was growing exponentially as a nationwide movement. As an anarchist Chomsky is, however, not primarily concerned about who becomes president in a country where special interests have eroded democracy in favor of a neoliberal plutocracy, but rather champions whoever can move 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 (spring 2016), it was clear that the next stage of the Occupy movement was indeed catalyzed by Sanders's campaign. It is quite possible that this will grind to a halt when the campaign is over and a much less progressive leader becomes president.

The Prefigurations of Applied Theatre

In terms of performance practice, prefigurative activism bears a strong resemblance to applied theatre (Prendergast and Saxton 2009) while the OWS general assembly is cognate to applied theatre's principal methodology, namely devising (a.k.a. collaborative creation; see Oddey 1996). 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 2005:8); 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 (11); and alternative approaches to dramatic instantiations outside conventional theatre spaces (11–13). As per Boggs's caution about efficacious prefigurative politics, however, it is difficult to ascertain given links between participatory performance practices and political efficacy. Earlier research in the field has pointed out that the complexity and vastness of social and political processes will always leave the matter of change through theatre "open to debate." All we can be sure of is applied theatre's "general efficacy" over time (Kershaw 1992:252).

In light of the evaluative complexity of appraising the effect of applied theatre and in the wake of the collapsed post–Cold War ideological dichotomies, a depoliticized phase has dominated the discipline in the 21st century. This is evidenced by 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 (O'Connor and Anderson 2015). Hence, it would be natural to accept the shift in research focus from effect to affect due to the immeasurable assessment 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 an exceptionally effective activism that has toppled governments by direct democratic actions,

including some that were part of the Arab Spring and several Occupy movements that altered the narratives and influenced policy-making in local, national, and global politics.[6] There has also been a surge of efficacious campaigns through social and new media and a range of political activism staged through tactical media, street performance, and innovative social formations and movements.[7]

However, many campaigns and changes have suffered setbacks. Nothing less should be expected in the macropolitical 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 activist movements in Europe, as, for instance, the governing Coalition of the Radical Left party, Syriza, in Greece; and the Podemos party in Spain. With the exception of Tunisia, the setbacks and violent crackdowns in North Africa and the Middle East have been disappointing, not least the postrevolution period in Egypt where the Tahrir Square revolution in Cairo was prefigured as a model for OWS.

It is important to realize, though, that offshoots of the 2011 activist movements are continually emerging in numerous places and countries, often without media attention. Likewise political performance initiatives are materializing through the use of 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 movement created the Podemos party in one of the theatres; and, a more recent example, the Belarus Free Theatre whose *The Price of Money* (2015) was directly influenced by the Occupy movement. It is equally important to keep in mind that this kind of political action and theatre was around before OWS in countries without umbrella terms like "Occupy" or "applied theatre." Ironically, occupation tactics and applied theatre are now used in the global North to oppose neoliberal austerity programs in similar ways and for purposes comparable to such tactics as civil disobedience and tent embassies, which have been used for decades in the global South against colonial oppression and its successor tyrannies.

Clearly, political strategies have generated alternative tactics for a long time and in various places in the world by gradually turning from protests in the fringes of hegemonic systems, to tactics that offer affirmative alternatives to hegemonic ideologies or regimes, either inside or outside structures of power. These developing tactics have been organized in response to sociopolitical movements and positions, often with the bottom-up perspectives of the precariat and economic autonomists (Gill and Pratt 2013), such as Reclaim, Not in My Name, Occupy, tent embassies, and hit-and-run performances like Pussy Riot's punk prayer. The inside and outside approaches can be termed *intratactical* and *paratactical* strategies and both are examples of prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative Interventions through Tactical Media

A significant intratactical practice is that of the Yes Men—Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos—whose activist alter egos are Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno. The Yes Men became known for posing as corporate representatives issuing fabricated messages and performing media

6. 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's 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" (2015:1).

7. Research literature on such events, tactics, and movements is more likely to be found in fine arts discourse; see for example Achar and Panikkar (2012), de Cauter et al. (2011), and Bradley and Esche (2008), just to mention a few anthologies.

events. Once the Yes Men have dispatched their fake positive news, the actual corporations' representatives have to denounce it, to the detriment of their public image. The most renowned example occurred in 2004, 20 years after the Bhopal disaster in India where thousands of people died in an explosion at a chemical factory plant, and thousands more of their injuries and related diseases. Servin acted as the spokesman "Jude Finisterra" of Dow Chemical (owner of Union Carbide, the company responsible for the disaster) on a 3 December 2004 BBC World program with more than 200 million potential viewers (razorfoundation 2007). Finisterra pledged on live television to liquidate Union Carbide and compensate the victims in Bhopal, sanitize the factory grounds, and finance research into risky chemicals for a total of $12 billion. Within 20 minutes, Dow Chemical's share price fell over four percent on the Frankfurt stock exchange. By means of tactical media and performance, the actions of the Yes Men had an effect on three concurrent systems: global media, politics, and finance. Their actions are 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.

In more recent years the Yes Men have broadened and diversified their activism. (Chantal Mouffe [2008] identifies the duo's interventions as satire but this designation is clearly too generic for what they are doing.) In 2011 Mike Bonanno of the Yes Men arranged a Yes Lab with Amanda Newall at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, which I attended along with some of Newall's students and a group of activists. 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. Then he gradually handed over the critical discourse and creative decision-making to the rest of the group through dialogue and hands-on experiments (material installations, 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 in the public sector of Sweden, for example, through acquisitions of residential suburbs in Stockholm and joint ventures with private healthcare companies. Newall sewed a multipurpose jacket to fit a mock representative of the company, while others constructed a hybrid piece of furniture that joined a comfort chair with bicycle wheels making a do-it-yourself wheelchair for the elderly and disabled. We then went to Skärholmen in southern Stockholm, the site of the largest IKEA store in the world, where the spurious salesman in the yellow jacket demonstrated the product with the help of a perfectly designed IKEA pamphlet by Anne Marte Overaa. It took about 10 minutes before security guards broke up the product demonstration. But by then a significant number of customers had already shown an interest in our "Poäng Mobil." After the arrival of security forces, we divulged our identities and purpose, opened up Newall's jacket with flaps saying "tax fraud" in large letters and spoke to customers about IKEA's elu-

Figure 2. Yes Lab intervention at IKEA in Stockholm, 15 December 2011. The action featured the "Poäng Mobil" DIY wheelchair kit, constructed in the Yes Lab led by Igor Vamos and Amanda Newall. (Photo by Amanda Newall)

sive finances and ideology.[8] The notoriety of the Yes Men helped the action. As soon as word got out that Bonanno was on his way to Sweden, Swedish Television wanted him to appear, the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* wanted an interview, and he was invited to talk at Stockholm's Modern Museum. A centerfold article with images from the IKEA action was featured in the national newspaper, *Svenska Dagladet*, bringing further attention to IKEA as a parasite feeding on the Swedish welfare state.

Figure 3. Jacket by Amanda Newall, specifically made in the blue and yellow colors of Sweden and IKEA, with "SKATTEFUSK"—tax fraud—on one of the flaps. 14 December 2011. (Photo by Amanda Newall)

A 2014 Yes Men campaign revolved around the arguably largest ecological disaster zone in the world—the Alberta, Canada, tar sands oil fields—where wetlands the size of Florida are being ruined by high levels of air and water pollution. The pollution is usually described as a threat to natural resources and animals, but the Yes Men approach the devastation from the angle of the destruction of indigenous culture. The Yes Men are in close collaboration with Gitz Crazyboy, the pseudonym of an activist from the Athabascan Chippewyan First Nation. At the 2014 Toronto Film Festival where the Yes Men showed their latest full-length film, *The Yes Men Are Revolting*, they targeted the Royal Bank of Canada, an official sponsor of the festival and one of the tar sands main investors. Filmed by 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 pollution and the toxins coming downstream from the tar sands. So biodiversity is being lost, our fish are being polluted, and animals are getting 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. (TRNN 2014)

A bank representative is seen getting increasingly nervous about the presence of the activist while the teller is more sympathetic, acknowledging that "they [the 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. He closes his account. A fellow activist shouts that an account is being closed. This cues Mike Bonanno outside on the sidewalk to bring a carnivalesque flash mob into the bank. This could be considered

8. On April Fools' Day 2015 the Yes Men enacted corporate representatives from Shell and BP respectively on *Russia Today* (goingundergroundRT 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 façades and cover-ups of corporations and media-jamming pranksters.

Boalian invisible theatre except that instead of provoking a problem-posing (Freirian) situation, the covert Yes Men action is more a counteraction to a situation that has already been identified, analyzed, and deconstructed. This ready-made action highlights an advanced information society where competition over services usually serves commercial purposes unless someone turns the service against its own ideological logic and short-circuits its purported free market options.

In yet another tar sands intervention, again with Gitz Crazyboy, the Yes Men's Servin appeared as "Benedict Waterman," a spokesman for the US Department of Energy, at a Homeland Security meeting in Washington, DC (Democracy Now 2014). Waterman's outsized silver wig suggested an earnest hippie-grown-old who proclaimed the need for independence from fossil fuel companies; Waterman called for everyone to push the US government to do the right thing ("We are all the department of energy"). Then Waterman ceded the microphone to "Bana Slowhorse" (Gitz Crazyboy) from the Bureau of Indian Affairs who testified about the impact of the tar sands excavations in Alberta. Slowhorse invited everyone to join hands and perform a ring dance, accompanied by a Native American drummer and a singer, celebrating future renewable energy. With quasi-Indian attributes like headbands and feathers on their heads, they celebrated the American Renewable Clean-Energy Network (AmeriCAN), which commits the US government to 100 percent renewable energy by 2030. Of course, this was a Yes Man send-up.

Paratactical Instatiations through Occupations

If The Yes Men use intratactical and Trojan horse strategies to get inside the infrastructure of corporate cultures, Occupy Wall Street stood outside—although in close proximity to—the targeted power sphere.[9] The Occupy movement, which spread to numerous cities in the US and around the world, was itself a reflection and manifestation of the democratic uprising that took effect after protests in Western Sahara in November 2010 leading to the Arab Spring.[10] Also preceding OWS were demonstrations against austerity programs in Greece (Syntagma Square in Athens) and Spain (Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid and Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona). OWS became globally visible and efficacious within a few weeks of its start because the media gravitated toward cosmopolitan New York. Strategically OWS differs from conventional protest movements and intratactical actions (such as the Yes Men) 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—media, police, intellectuals, celebrities, politicians, and so forth.

What is it that makes prefigurative tactics 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, "parataxis is the dominant mode of postindustrial experience" (Perelman 1994:313). 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 trends across semantic chasms. Parataxis is,

9. There is an interesting video clip of Mike Bonanno on Wall Street during the occupation, resisting arrest by virtue of his own rights as a citizen and journalist (see herb420ful 2011).

10. 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 as early as November 2010 (Tangerino Beduino 2011). 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 echoed throughout North Africa and inspired young Tunisians and others to organize an internal movement of resistance.

inter alia, a participatory, or writerly, mode of literature that has been used in everything from contemporary poetry to commercial advertisements prompting people to act on their impressions rather than simply decoding messages.

In paratactics, there are aspect changes à la détournement. A classic case-in-point is Jenny Holzer's inversion of an urban space for commercial messages with the phrase: "Protect me from what I want" (Phaidon 2013). The Yes Men operate in the same modal register, although with aspect changes as narrow as those perceived in Joseph Jastrow's duck-rabbit figure betwixt and between activist and corporate personas. OWS's paratactical space between Zuccotti 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 in empirical proximity to global financial institutions.[11] The micro-democratic experiment was arranged to include 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 labor, between the front and backstage persona of Erving Goffman's social dramaturgy (1959), between the first and repetitive actions of Richard Schechner's restoration of behavior ([1977] 1985)—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 of Wall Street was set against an 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" (2013:69). Graeber is referring to young people who have played by the rules of society and invested large amounts of money in student loans only to end up with long-term unemployment making payments to 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" (69).

Prefigurative Politics in African Community Theatre

A cognate activist youth movement that has as much personal and political stake in the creation of public opinion through performative means as the Occupy movement is the group of East African youth I studied (Johansson 2011) in reference to community-based theatre against AIDS a few years ago—and wrote about in *TDR* (Johansson 2010). It is not only that the student loan arguments in the global North echo the educational aspirations among young people in Tanzania, but also that the two geopolitical scenarios share a similar exposure to the global political economy. In *The Democracy Project*, Graeber's criticism pertains to Wall Street in New York and to the global financial institutions in Washington, DC. In the 1990s, when Graeber was active in the Global Justice Movement, 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.[12] The World Bank programs resemble the current austerity measures imposed on Greece by the Central European Bank in Frankfurt. The ramifications of such programs always hit the public sectors of society hardest. This was deeply unfortunate in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s when people needed health care and education in the face of the AIDS pandemic and other resource-intensive crises.

11. 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's *The Price of Inequality* (2013).

12. The reasoning was later reflected in Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011).

So how can rural African youth possibly stand up to global forces of injustice? They usually have scarce financial means, only basic education, seldom a lasting job and therefore little political sway. Against these odds there is still the possibility of change based on motivation and approach. Concerning motivation, it is crucial to consider something that Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn keep/kept reminding activists: all democratic change takes effect first at a grassroots level. Reforms are almost never *given* to people, but conceptualized, acquired, and enacted bottom-up. If African groups can muster the courage to foster collective motivation that sways public opinion, they can stage their own future in prefigurative ways.

Examples of grassroots governance in the developing world are exemplified by NGOs or micro-finance schemes independent of governmental and banking systems. Community-based theatre is no exception. There is an extensive discourse going back several decades regarding the precarious forms of aid to and ownership of African theatre. Economically it has always been controversial for African theatre to depend on foreign aid (Kerr 1995). On the one hand, taking foreign aid means increasing the recognition and status of the group; on the other hand, the group is subject to competitive and highly unreliable market forces and aid policies. Hence there have been disparate positions regarding how accepting aid affects the (in)dependence of theatre for development. In South Africa it is obvious that financial self-reliance is a worthy achievement (Morris 2010); but self-reliance is looked down on in some parts of East Africa. Penina Mlama (1991) and like-minded scholars are strictly opposed to commercial ventures in community theatre due to the risk of corrupting serious social agendas. Vicensia Shule says that depending on NGO backing makes theatre for development in Tanzania a manifestation of neoliberalism (Shule 2011). Pedagogically and politically, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o maintained a position in the 1970s promoting grassroots independence for postcolonial and linguistic reasons (1997), while Femi Osofisan perceived educational institutions as the pivot point for social change (1998). All these positions are of course comparable to discussions in the North; it is just that in the North we call aid "subsidy" or "support" and the theatre organizations "nonprofit corporations." Sponsorship is perceived as a crutch in the South but 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 from sex, Being faithful, and using Condoms—the theatre activists pursued site-specific issues and local determinants of the epidemic. 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, but that did not happen.) A short comical skit followed portraying a group of locals—representing the audience and the performers—engaging in unsafe sexual conduct under the influence of home-brewed alcohol and drugs. Then came an altogether more serious and substantial performance:

A woman has consulted a local counselor after being disowned by her brother in the wake of her husband's passing. Officially there is a 40-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 money, but that traditional protocol for Makoa and other ethnic groups in the area has been disrupted by colonial invasions (Arabic, German, and English successively), national boundaries (between Tanzania and Mozambique), and religious fault lines (between traditional belief systems, Islam, and Christianity). The woman, at the tail end of this history, is deprived of her means and thereby also her ability to pay for her kids' education, 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 money. She takes him to court. Once again, however, the woman finds herself on the

Figure 4. Likokona court scene performed with the district office in the background. At the end of the scene, the woman walks away after losing the case against her brother. Likokona, Tanzania, 2004. (Photo by Ola Johansson)

wrong side of history as she is not familiar with the contemporary protocol of bribing the judge to get a favorable verdict. The verdict in support of the brother causes some turmoil among fellow performers and spectators, who invade the playing area under the mango tree. People were upset to see the performance end with an unfair ruling and yet the show was not followed by an ordered 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 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. In this case the discomfort was due to the literal 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 could hear and see what was depicted in the performance. The event was an affirmative act by a group of young people who made explicitly visible (rather than implied) where the actual center of attention ought to be for the Likokona audience.[13] This is a prefigurative act because it goes beyond performative effects and provides direct access to a reality that the performers and/or spectators enact. This comes with a risk because it proposes taking direct action for political change. But even if it was not acted upon by the audience in Likokona, the performance still

13. I have also witnessed performances where theatre projects have actually integrated politicians into performance events and the ensuing deliberation (see Johansson 2010).

instantiated a counter-manifestation to the political status quo of the village; it showed corruption in the nearby district office; it radiated outward toward greater power centers associated with regional offices, the national government, and international financial institutions that prioritize globalization over belonging, speculation over security, development over health, and money over people.

Performative Pleas before an Election

To identify the political qualities of this kind of activist performance, I offer two examples that clarify the difference between performative and prefigurative acts.

In anticipation of the 2015 British general election the Royal Court Theatre put on Michael Wynne's *Who Cares*, about the National Health Service (NHS). This promenade performance meandered through a dozen spaces in two buildings and one alleyway at Sloane Square in central London. Actors led spectators between cleverly designed medical spaces, speaking monologues as health workers, patients, cleaners, politicians, and lobbyists. The drama warned against the underhanded privatization of universal health insurance. The performance oscillated between promenade theatre, verbatim/testimonial theatre, performance lecture, in-yer-face theatre, and straightforward political theatre. The topical show appealed directly to potential voters prior to the election. When I saw the show on 6 May 2015, the day before the election, this urgency was palpable—although in the end it did not prevent a "landslide" victory for the Conservatives, which in fact comprised only about 25 percent of the eligible electorate due to a low turnout.

Eventually the performers and spectators, who were separate for most of the performance, came together in a stadium-seating arena. The physical arrangement signaled societal stratifications as doctors and politicians performed on higher levels than nurses and patients. From among health executives, departmental advisors, and top politicians, emerged a woman named Julie Bailey, based on a real person. Julie lost her mother due to medical malpractice caused by cost-cutting that led to a huge number of "excess deaths" (Sawer and Donnelly 2013; see also Bailey 2016). Julie's mother would probably have died soon anyway, but not due to negligence. So Julie wrote a letter to the NHS Chief Executive who stonewalled her. Then Julie turned to the local newspaper and made the front page. After that, Julie contacted the Healthcare Commission, and launched a campaign called "Save the NHS," which in effect triggered a national inquiry. The inquiry produced the Francis Report presented to Parliament in 2013. While the scandal developed during a Labor government, under the subsequent Conservative government the NHS continues to be compromised: the motivation driving *Who Cares*.

The enabled character of Julie, a citizen whistleblower, gave the performance its sense of immediacy, accentuated by the election. Her verbatim lines are based on research by playwright Wynne. There were also direct appeals to the audience by a character called Jacky who points out the lack of democracy in British politics and the top-down structure of the NHS. "Why isn'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?" (Wynne 2015:61). The actor sets up the last two words, the play's title, with a pause and a pointed gaze at the audience. This performative monologue challenged the spectators to take action. But does this make *Who Cares* a prefigurative performance? I will let the question hang and instead present another, arguably more prefigurative, case.

The Activist Prefiguration of *Politico*

Politico preceded the Swedish general election of 2014. The concept was mine; Birte Niederhaus, the artistic director of the Gothenburg-based theatre organization die Bühne, directed. The script was open-ended and porous and Niederhaus left a lot of room for interpretation and collaboration, generating radically different endings for each showing. Like *Who*

Cares, *Politico* was a promenade performance with a series of stations. It was performed in the Aeroseum, a vast subterranean hangar outside Gothenburg built in the 1950s to protect the Swedish air force during the Cold War.

The political situation in Sweden resembled many other European countries: after the election for the European parliament in the spring of 2014, the right-wing party, Sverigedemokraterna (The Sweden Democrats), skeptical of the European Union, was about to make big gains in the national election. Sverigedemokraterna's roots are in a 1990s fascist and anti-Semitic organization. Since then the party has attempted to whitewash its past by dressing up in jackets and ties, but the parallels are still clear: they substitute anti-Muslim for anti-Jewish sentiments, have proposed a 90 percent reduction in immigration, and promote a populist agenda with benefits and privileges for Swedes to the detriment of people with non-Swedish backgrounds or lifestyles. Another right-wing party, the overtly militant and Nazi-inspired Svenskarnas parti (The Swedes' Party) also was increasingly visible in public life before the election. It was especially the xenophobic identity politics we wished to explore.

Liberal democracy was at risk of being overthrown by undemocratic forces using democratic means. We wanted to stage a work that made the audience integral to a scenario whereby direct actions through participatory democracy counteracted the vulnerability of a liberal democracy. We wanted to explore the predicament of democracy with an audience that almost certainly shared and affirmed our political views. We made a performance where it was impossible for spectators to simply look on, think, and nod from their seats. Our dramaturgy was to conduct a citizenship test to show how a democratic process could lead to anti-democratic results with the help of a tacit spectatorial agreement and a few manipulative tactics.

Politico started with a half-hour bus ride to the Aeroseum, north of Gothenburg.[14] On the bus a convivial hostess, not unlike a tour guide, informed everyone about the evening's procedures. She gradually led the audience into a discussion about what it means to be a Swede. Four planted actors helped to move the conversation along by referring to mildly patriotic experiences like being homesick in 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 to opt for world citizenship.

The atmosphere changed drastically upon entering the gloomy underground world of the Aeroseum. The spectators walked down a long ramp lined with military aircraft and documents from the Cold War, ending in a line where each "registered." Almost every spectator willingly gave their full name, birth date, and four-digit security number, which is the key to all personal data in the Swedish central archives. Spectators were also asked how many times they had traveled outside Europe in the past year. Their responses provided confidential information used later when the performance turned more sinister.

The first station was a "Swedish test" where the spectators' historical and cultural knowledge was examined. A plant in the audience was eager to discuss the origins of the nation, noting its unique ethnicity. Another actor (a young man of Iranian descent) started to giggle in response to the patriotic woman. The next test was a physical contest with fitness exercises and throws of hula hoops around upright missiles, which contributed to a sense of ambiguity in the fine balance between leisure, competition, and compulsion. While this was going on, an audience member was called to the office over the public address system. Small rather than large disruptive signals and gestures of uncertainty established a psychological apprehension in the event. The environment as such was intimidating enough for people to be on the lookout 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.

14. A 15-minute video of the Swedish performance (dress rehearsal) is available on Vimeo (Birte Niederhaus 2014).

Figure 5. The voting station in Politico *at the Aeroseum. Gothenberg, Sweden, 2 September 2014. (Photo by Gorki Glaser-Müller)*

Next, the spectators were led into a seminar room for an "ethical test." The test leader was a blond man with slightly erratic tics and intonations who shared controversial topics based on scenarios where people, often of different ethnicities, were excluded to redress an ethical dilemma, as for instance: Would you join the Swedish parents at a daycare center in rejecting an application from a Muslim family who requested halal meals for their child, which meant extra costs that would force the daycare center to close? Would you deny refugees water if your town only had enough for its own population? Surprisingly many spectators did not realize that the dilemmas often provided impossible options for rational decision-making. After the ethics test it was time to go to the ascetic communications room to cast a vote for either remaining a Swedish citizen or becoming a citizen of the world. Voting was mandatory and any non-vote counted as a ticket out of the country. After the vote the audience arrived at the final station. There, they were soothed by some coffee, cookies, and live piano music.

The test leaders then gathered on a stage and started the final act by showing footage of the voting procedure (an overhead camera directed towards anonymous hands filling in voting sheets). 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 because the exact same setting and props were used in the performance, no one could detect that the film was phony. This was only one of many changes in the democratic process used for the alleged purpose of transparency and impartiality that had the potential to be used for contrary purposes, that is, to control and exclude. To emphasize the fragile 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 percent in favor of the "Swedish Alliance"—a political designation for maintaining Swedish citizenship only. Even if a majority of the audience voted for world citizenship, those who did so would assume that they belonged to a tiny 6 percent minority. In other words, the voting was fraudulent, but the audience did not know that it was. The "world citizens" felt that they were a minority in a crowd of "Sweden for Swedes only," their political adversaries.

The announcement of the voting results was followed by a filmed speech by the leader of the Swedish Alliance. The speech seemed to follow 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 names and dates were changed: "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.

Figure 6. Photo of the character (performed by Ola Johansson) who delivers the Hitler speech on film in the performance Politico. *The cement costume was designed and built by Amanda Newall, who also constructed the makeup. 12 August 2014. (Photo by Amanda Newall)*

The next scene concerned those in the audience who were to be expelled. A name of a spectator (not an actor) was 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 to the stage. The apprehension was reinforced by the tentative selection process whereby one person at a time was called, not necessarily because he or she voted for world citizenship but due to past offenses and misdeeds (remember that most spectators gave their security numbers and thus access to their official records). 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 onstage. The test team began by asking spectators who wanted to save the blond woman and a planted actor in the front row immediately raised his hand, which made other people follow suit. Usually the majority of the audience voted in favor of the blond woman. The man with dark features was expelled in almost every performance, despite the fact that his record was far less problematic than the blond woman's. 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. Finally, he explained that he visited his terminally ill grandmother, but it was too late for a vindication and he was led away.

This selection of the one to be expelled was the peripeteia of the performance, a "fascist turn," as people chose to take collective action. On the opening night, the audience shouted down the actors and the event dissolved into a boisterous discussion. More commonly, though, the moment of arrest and expulsion caused spectators to physically intervene. One group of spectators simply walked up and obstructed the authorities from leading the person out of the hangar. Another smaller audience, which was recorded for documentary purposes (see Birte Niederhaus 2014), walked out with the deportee, despite warnings from the planted actors about the consequences. Another audience, comprising mostly students, did not dare to disrupt the performance. Instead, they 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; they changed speech acts into embodied counteractions; they changed the "worst case scenario" into an affirmative action of direct democracy. The spectators were not prepared for the critical turn of events and yet they did not settle for the role of mere onlookers. Instead they became Boalian spect-actors who devised a "space for spontaneity, creativity, and improvisation" (Graeber 2013:26). Unlike the performers in the East African community theatre, 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, "at the point of assumption" as Andrew Boyd described the pivot of prefigurative modality, where a more participatory and radical democracy is within reach (in Boyd and Mitchell 2012:82).

Prefigurative activism is characterized by affirmative rather than confrontational tactics, applied with and facilitated within agonistic frameworks in public but enacted to bring into focus desired future scenarios. In brief, it is driven by forward-looking young people who project possible worlds by envisioning, creating, and inhabiting these worlds. Prefigurative actions are performative as they require stagings of invented circumstances. This makes prefigurative performances similar to applied theatre, which has also been used as a multimodal resource to intervene or instantiate alternative scenarios in or nearby sites of unjust power and deficient democratic governance.

The next step for prefigurative activism might involve studying the best practices of applied theatre in order to create participatory leverage in public life, including political campaigns. But even if people mobilize and get involved, the question in politics as well as the arts will be how 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 horizontal, dispersed, and small-unit activism as a "problem" among anarchic workers vis-à-vis centralized hegemonies, while anarchists like Graeber and Chomsky seem to view micro-democratic activism favorably against the power of corporate interests, media, and governance. However, none of these political thinkers seem to be particularly interested in artistic strategies. But as long as the participatory assemblies and prefigurative actions take place in sites close to power centers (as OWS did) and aspire to embody possible alternative political worlds, intratactically and paratactically, they can be viewed, conceptualized, created, and applied as (artistic) performance.

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