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From Audience Aggression to Participatory Destruction in 3 Easy Steps

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Please log in to the internet and access the co-working pad you see projected on the screen. There is no need to register and no PW required. Comments are anonymous. We will need it for step no. 2, but please feel free to use it for your own pleasure throughout the presentation.

Step no. 1: Burst the balloon you have been given at some point during my presentation, whenever you feel is a good time or the right kind of bad time

We will start with an example of what I think is audience aggression, although the audience member in this case is not sitting in a theater building, but in the kitchen of a little house in a small Northern German city. It is my mother, who is on the phone with her sister. It's December 31, 2016 – New Year's Eve, still early, around 6pm. I am sitting in the adjacent dining room. Her voice is so loud I overhear what she says through the closed door.

After a few casual remarks about everyday life, coping with their diseases of aging etc., the conversation has turned to politics, and her voice has changed completely. In the typical pitch of the ‘enraged citizen’, the *Wutbürger*, at once whining and accusing, her monologue canvasses all the standard topics of popular resentment: Look at the crap going on at schools today, kids playing around with iPads before they can even read and write – no surprise the apprentices fail to match the minimum job qualifications. Of course, they should have shot Assad and Erdogan right away. Local journalists, after they have been investigating racist remarks by some entrepreneur who is offering to help the almost bankrupt city financially, are called bastards. And all the pedophiles everywhere today! Those in power have been betraying us (‘us’ meaning: German pensioners) since the Euro was introduced. Power is really the worst – followed by the confession, “Well, honestly, I wouldn't want to do their job...” – which, however, does not stop the next tirade against the morons who are governing us.

My mother is an extremely sweet person. The hatred thus spilling out of her mouth truly baffled me. And although I have heard her say similar things before in conversations with me or my wife, this situation that unwillingly put me in an audience position and made me

experience her rant like something happening on a stage, like a political version of *La voix humaine*, the telephone monodrama by Jean Cocteau, made me almost burst with anger. Without a chance to object and explain to her why I find her opinion unacceptable, my reaction, after an instant of helpless indignation, took an educated line of escape out of audience aggression: Since I was sitting in front of my computer anyway, I started writing a text, some of which made it into this paper. Escape into reflection, into intense productivity.

In a first attempt, I tried to frame this as a kind of Didier Eribon moment. I tried to understand it in terms of class. Eribon, however, describes his family as firmly rooted in the working class – and their development (the parents and brother turned from Communist Party supporters to Front National supporters) as representative for the entire class in the context of French society since the 1990s – whereas my mother’s personal history is twisted in several respects. Coming from a poor working class family, her marriage with my father, who was 25 years older, socially advanced her to a sort of upper petit-bourgeois environment, with a small house and enough money to live comfortably. The unusual relationship with a man almost her father’s age – and the fact that it was, for all I witnessed during my childhood years, a very happy, loving and fulfilling life together – probably saved her from the widespread type of petit-bourgeois aggression that originates from envy against others who appear to be less unhappy than oneself. It shielded her against the aggression of those who are active commentators, because degrading comments still mean a chance, however fictional, to crush the other’s happiness. But apparently, this did not help against the aggression of the governed, the aggression that afflicts people who – according to a late eighteenth century definition of public that is still, strangely, with us today – are supposed to consider themselves an audience to governmental politics.

If the politicians were family members, relatives, or neighbors, my mother would accept that they make bad decisions, because everyone does. Her approach then would be a motherly one: she would want to help and either offer assistance or give advice. And no matter how incompetent the advice might be in political matters (she admits to having given terribly wrong advice in some personal matters), the hatred would simply be forgotten in the course of a concrete concern. As with the protagonist in Brecht’s play *Die Mutter*, in her case responsibility is an *effect* of routine and experience. But without kin, without a neighbor, without a person who seems close, aggression replaces practical commitment. A reality of resolute care and a reality of vague, vengeful malice coexist in her personality, like two alternative modes of operation. And malice takes over where care cannot detect a proper object.

Obviously, there is enough in the news every day to provoke frustration and anger. I feel it too, and some of the things my mother said in that phone monologue embarrassed me because they made me remember that my emotional responses to news about governmental politics are often very stupid, and certainly are at no safe distance from popular resentment. But while I can rely on writing and the kind of thinking connected to writing – a thinking that takes place in a time of *suspended response* – my mother, like millions of other citizens, does not have any practice in doing something productive *with* the frustration and anger she feels. She never learned to wait and let time work for her. She never learned to defer her affective response, and use that time created by waiting with the responding for reflecting on the issue. She needs to respond immediately. On the rare occasions when we watch TV news together, she expresses her rage and contempt about something that's wrong in her opinion before the newscaster has even finished their sentence.

This is the way our bodies process language – and process any sensory data, actually. When listening to what someone else says, my body does not wait until that someone has completed a sentence, in order to then determine the meaning of that sentence. As soon as two, three words have been identified, cognitive speculations commence as to how this will finish – speculations, which must then be interrupted by further incoming information on the actual proceeding of the speaker, in order to correct an understanding that, technically, is already complete and may have already triggered consequences. All the times when we missed the actual meaning of someone's statement because we were so sure to know what the meaning would be that we didn't listen attentively to the last part anymore, should tell us how rashness is a general condition of our responding.

But without a practical situation involving tangible others, without consequences that might force her to adapt her response, my mother's rash judgment just remains there, in the air, unchallenged and uncorrected. Once expressed, it has fulfilled its mission, since *expressing* themselves is the only thing the members of an audience to governmental politics are supposed to do. Expression replaces action; judgment replaces decision.

Resentful prattle seems the only audience performance rehearsed among the people my mother knows. And before I will move on to say a few things about the concept of the bourgeois audience and its history – about why it was implemented in the first place, and about the political hopes and aspirations it once held – let me emphasize how this type of conversation, which consists of premature judgments that are, by default, *not* open to insightful change, solves the task of entertaining an *activity* in a situation that leaves you without any power to *act*. For, this is the situation of citizens in a sovereign nation-state that

reduces ‘democracy’ to electing a government every couple years. You are not allowed to be passive. If you just stop caring about politics and let others do the job, ruling values will deem you an improper citizen. You are expected to show some kind of activity, while, however, you are not entitled to act politically and, hence, never will experience political consequences of your actions and the necessity to adapt to them (the constitution grants citizens the right to express their opinion in the form of demonstrations, petitions, letters to their deputies, etc. – but none of these activities will constitute a political act, and if any of them does claim such an authority law enforcement will intervene). Resentful prattle is one thing populations of states with a so-called representative democracy have established in terms of an activity without the power to act: You respond affectively at a very early point, and express yourself – and then, moving on to another topic, leave the place and leave your affective statement behind.

If you do that online, on Facebook or Twitter, others may find it where you left it. And then shit happens – then, indeed, a shitstorm may happen, as statements that were meant to be expressive and nothing but expressive, suddenly have consequences *as though* they were actions. They come to have consequences due to a collective dynamic of acclaim, imitation, intensification, modification. Sensitive bourgeois minds have bonded in astonishment about how people can post outrageous comments online, can insult and threaten to rape or kill others, under their real civil names, totally unprotected (and one counter strategy has been to report them to their employers or to the police). I am not saying this to express any sympathy with those people, but I think it is important to recognize that irresponsibility is not a primarily personal deficit here; it is the systemic reality of an audience that judges but does not decide, whose responses are supposed to express, not contribute to actions.

So while my mother does not have an educated practice of being productive as a member of the political audience, a practice of holding back with her responses in order to reflect, producing thoughts and producing elaborate comments – *what if* she had a *better practice of being destructive* than the one she has? A practice of actually destroying something, of *performing* destruction, instead of merely being expressive? A practice that would lead to consequences, and force her to adapt her performance to these consequences, to respond more than once to a responding world? What if our society – which knows non-parliamentary political activism, of course, but which power-wise puts the general population in the position of a political audience – entertained civil collective practices of performing destruction? What if we considered transforming audience aggression into collectively organized destruction an

essential task of a democracy – as a form of participation that complements, and perhaps changes, the established concepts of productive citizen participation?

Step no. 2 in our journey from audience aggression to participatory destruction will be a little shitstorm.

I suppose that all of you are good at holding back your responses. But I would like to encourage you to practice being irresponsible, rash responders for a while now. Please use the comments board – to insult my mother!

Abuse her as offensively, as aggressively, as vulgarly, as violently and of course, as sexually explicit as you can. Shame her, blame her, cover her in filth – anything goes! Nobody will be able to tell how serious you are, since you will most likely only do it to help us with this participatory experiment. You have participation as an excuse. You don't know my mother, obviously, but don't let that stop you. You can redirect your aggression against me to her: What woman can have given birth to such an asshole, who exposes his mother to public disgrace just to pimp up a presentation that apparently doesn't have a compelling argument – otherwise, why would we need these stupid games? Do me a favor – help me, by destroying my mother like you destroy a balloon!

While you do this, I will only require a part of your attention, as I will repeat some well-known things about the behavioral code, the set of rules that defines the bourgeois audience. At a playhouse such as The Globe, in Shakespeare's time, people in the audience would likely have been very quick to respond to anything happening on stage they did not like. A lame beginning, for instance – weak first lines or lousy acting – might have been greeted with shouts, jokes, or spectators might have directed their attention elsewhere: chatted with their neighbors, drunk beer, eyed the prostitutes who were on business in the boxes, or the lords who posed on the wings in their latest dresses. Some, or many, might as well have missed the first minutes of the performance completely. And more than a few probably missed longer parts during the performance.

One could say that in those times, there were people *in* the audience, but '*the* audience' as an entity did not yet exist. To be in the audience meant to be there at the theater, physically, but your attention was *invited* to being divided, because 'the performance' consisted of several things going on at the same time, competing against each other or collaborating in diversion. People in the audience were participants to this simultaneity.

Such an Elizabethan audience still sometimes manifests today. When I lived in Hamburg, back in the 90s, there used to be a little cinema right at Reeperbahn that always had a midnight show. They showed Hollywood blockbusters, nothing special, but people in the audience used to comment the action on the screen as though it were a soccer match and they were watching it live or in a live broadcast. When, for example, in a romantic comedy the female protagonist exuded clear signs of love interest in the male protagonist, which he ‘failed to notice’, because he was shy and insecure and naive, there would be someone shouting, “Now fucking put your tongue inside her already, she’s into you, a blind man can see that, you limp dick!”

Often the audience was more entertaining than the movies. Or more exactly, this audience behavior helped wrest new qualities from these movies, by turning a silent psychological manipulation that targeted the single (think: potentially lonely) individual spectator into a loudly articulated matter of common concern. The cordially aggressive tone of such interventions from the audience reminded us precisely of that which the Hollywood immersion professionalism sought to make everyone forget: that love, even at its most conventionally romantic, is something that occurs between bodies – and that bodies are always in the company of other bodies, always more than one, always more than two.

Wherever we encounter an Elizabethan audience today, however, it is highly unlikely that it will be in a theater that shows ‘art performances’ meeting the globalized European standard of such performances. Whereas sports and entertainment spectacles continue to embrace, to some degree, a dispersed, multi-focal or openly competitive distribution of attention, at the theater the ideal of an undiffused attentiveness has been established; and most of our theaters have since become an architectural-legal-sociophysical facility equipped to implement this ideal.

In the eighteenth century, literature obtained the power to elevate theater to the status of a dignified art (and theater in turn then came to impart this status to dance and to other performances that happened on a theater stage or in some space defined by a theatrical organization of the gaze). As a consequence, a theater performance now needed to prove itself a proper object of aesthetic perception, experience, judgment, and reflection. And in order to institute the aesthetic – to enforce what Jacques Rancière has labeled the “aesthetic regime” – the people in the audience needed to be disciplined: disciplined by theater laws, supervised by a theater police, until spectators would police each other and ensure that everybody kept quiet, sitting still on their assigned seats and fully concentrating on the actors’ performance (or at least convincingly pretending to do that).

If bodies are arrested, locomotion- and attention-wise, this is to enable aesthetic appreciation, to grant them access to an extraordinary kind of value – or rather, to a *reevaluation* of social and economic values. Due to its detachment from practical, action-oriented necessities, this reevaluation introduces the individual to its own proper subjective freedom. Or such is the idea. The reevaluation never really turns into transvaluation, *Umwertung*, since the freedom at issue exists but in a playfully indirect relation to the world. Hence the importance of *only experiencing* the world presented by a work of art, of not being involved in a way that would make that indirectness collapse – and exchange, for instance, the critical irony in respect to certain values for the un-ironic acceptance of a different set of values.

Aesthetic appreciation of art plays a pivotal role in the bourgeois project, because it tries to reconcile conflicting convictions – namely, a belief that all humans are equal and all citizens should have the right to participate in politics, on the one side; and, on the other side, a terrible fear of exactly those humans, as soon as there are many of them and the collective dynamics seems to define the situation and not the virtues ascribed to the individual.

Driven by this fear, the emancipatory movement of the bourgeoisie ultimately decides on a just slightly more liberal version of the system against which it revolts: on an electoral – instead of a hereditary – aristocracy. Both in the American and in the French Revolution, concepts of direct citizen participation based on selecting people by drawing lots (as did the Greeks in the Athens democracy) were first discussed. But then, self-declared anti-democrats gained the upper hand – people like James Madison who, in his famous 10th Federalist Paper, wrote that “[d]emocracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property”. And so, the plan to have a democracy was replaced with that of founding a republic where citizen participation is limited to electing governments (and it is only in the 19th century, by the way, that republics with an elected sovereign were started to be *called* democracies).

The bourgeoisie chooses sovereignty over democracy. And it establishes routines that teach the subjects’ bodies to internalize the sovereign rule – and thereby make everyone *experience* the good in sovereignty. Conceptually, bourgeois theater does exactly that: it rehearses a subjective internalization of the power that is capable of transforming a bunch of people into a well-behaved, properly perceptive and appreciative audience. And the subjective evidence that ‘being-audience’ generates – the refined, aesthetic pleasure and its added-value benefits of a more distinguished judgment and a more thorough reflection – reassures each

individual that this transformation is good, that it is ultimately empowering, emancipating, as Rancière claims in *The Emancipated Spectator*.

Being audience thus connects the political and the aesthetic regime. Every time all go quiet in ad hoc synchronization just as something announces that the spectacle will now begin, the audience exorcises the crowd, the throng, the mob, the pack. In 19th century Germany, which lagged behind in forming a modern nation-state, progressively-minded members of the bourgeois class put their hopes on National Theaters to *create* the republican people by instructing people to be ‘the audience’.

So much for the concept. In material reality, however, for all we know, *insurrection against* this political-aesthetic regime and *subsidiary execution* of its rule coincide in every single body. And therefore, in any such audience there is not merely a potential *for* aggression; but aggression *in the form of a potentiality permanently* influences the actual situation, from before the performance starts until after the audience has left the building. We should not underestimate the brutality of the contradictions to which bourgeois indecision regarding human nature exposes everyone. Sovereignty, after all, attests to a lack of trust humans have in themselves. And to the extent that being convinced of sovereignty’s necessity betrays the failure to imagine a state of free, spontaneous collectivity that will be peaceful and not result in a “war of all against all”, togetherness formed by an internalized sovereign reign can never be unanimously happy, however smoothly it works. Nobody likes to be silenced and arrested (except in SM games, perhaps). And the passive aggression of ‘If I can deny myself the liberty to talk and move for hours, then *you* should be able to pull yourself together too!’ is always ready to break out into punishment of anyone who qualifies as a target object of transference. Latecomers, for example.

Indeed, latecomers are not merely an example for the scapegoat, which audience aggression subliminally searches for. The latecomer is a parody, a mock-symbol of the proper audience member. As I already mentioned, in a bourgeois audience, the individuals need to *suspend* responses. And it is only through the temporality of suspended responses that the people will have spent time *together* in an audience. The attempt to save individualism in a situation that assembles many, regularly denies the spectators a ‘shared present’ – save for that of suspending individual responses, except for the present of waiting.

If a bourgeois audience is a collective, it is a collective of people engaged in making judgments, not in making decisions. It is not a political assembly. And the model for judgment, also concerning politics, is the aesthetic judgment: a judgment that is essentially *reflective* – which is to say that its present is but that of *returning* to an instant that never

acquires full presence – of, potentially, *infinitely* returning to that instant. This loosens, frees up the present, as it were. Just like theater spectators discussing a performance, the citizens are free to contemplate, deliberate and discuss judgments endlessly, free to give in to their rhythms of interest, to conversational meandering, precisely because there will be no time for them to decide anything. Irreversible reactions that would constitute decisive moments are to be avoided while you're being an audience, during and after the show. As an audience, you are *waiting all the way in*. You are waiting for the presentation to start, and once it has started, you are waiting for the presentation to go on. You are waiting as the presentation proceeds, and the finale – however 'closed' or fragmentary the performance presents its piece – will find you still biding your time, leaning forward and backward at once, so to say. Waiting prefigures and redetermines every activity in an audience that is collectively engaged in aesthetic appreciation or its political equivalent. The bourgeois audience moderates collective attendance with an individualism protected by sovereign power, because all that really *matters* in respect to togetherness will have been the waiting.

In the 70s, under the influence of Performance Art, groups like The Living Theater or The Performance Group tried 'participatory theater'. First, they made visitors assemble in the form of the bourgeois audience. Then, while the people were sitting there waiting, the performers made it clear to them that they, the audience, were repressed, and that their being-audience was evidence of repression. In The Living Theater's *Paradise Now*, for example, performers yelled at spectators, ridiculed them, came threateningly close, sat on their laps... Later, at some point, the people in the audience were invited to participate in collective actions together with the performers – a dance that would develop into a kind of orgy, in the Performance Group's *Dionysos in 69*, or the famous "Rite of Universal Intercourse" in *Paradise Now*.

The groups had imagined a transformation of the spectators into fellow members of a community, a shift toward a direct democracy of communicating bodies instead of representation based on repression – a shift that would establish a new cosmic order. What happened, however, often attested to another transformation – namely, barely suppressed audience aggression turning into manifest violence. Female performers found themselves exposed to acts of sexual harassment, sometimes bordering on rape; a male actor was kidnapped and injured. In Berlin, where The Living Theater wanted to perform *Paradise Now* in front of 6,000 people at the Sportpalast, in 1970, the audience forcefully interrupted the show halfway through, chasing the performers away and taking over the stage.

For all their ingenuity in devising methods of torturing their audience, the performers had overlooked that participation would give the people a chance to *take revenge* for what they had been made to endure. And after they had claimed that *they* were *not* repressed, that they were free and ecstatic and generously giving, the group members had no way of escaping. They could not appeal to a sovereign authority to stop the abuse. Their aspiration to embody freedom made their bodies easy targets.

Violence has been a recurrent issue in discussions about participation in art. Art performances that try to initiate participation departing from an audience situation seem particularly likely to incite certain types of physically destructive or offensive, hurtful, hostile acts. Some artists have skillfully worked with that violence (Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* is one of my favorite examples), while others have been caught unprepared by its outburst because they underestimated the level of aggression in an audience that is...just waiting.

My final point today concerns the potential of that revenge of the audience. What if we had more advanced practices of being destructive together, instead of just being aggressive in a state of attendance that simultaneously blocks cooperation between us and incarcerates each of us in an imagined community, while physical collectivity is reduced to waiting and to activities that waiting ensconces? This would be an extended version of my earlier question. And now I would like to use the discussion following my presentation for doing a little experiment. This will be **step no. 3**:

Let us try to find out if we can transform your audience aggression into violent collective action, stress both on 'violent' and on 'collective'. Because the problem with the type of audience revenge that occurs in participatory theater is not that it is violent, I think. The problem is that the spontaneous violence usually has no form of collective organization that would be politically promising. It's either individuals taking advantage of the situation's confusion and non-transparency ('Ok, this orgy is supposed to be nice and tender, but in this huddle I might as well grope these breasts really hard...'). Or one person – the one who makes the most powerful show of their transgression – becomes the leader of the pack, the informal, instantaneous sovereign. Or everybody just freaks out, involuntarily confirming the cliché of how chaotic a situation without control by sovereign power will be. Let us try to organize ourselves in better forms – and find out what these form might be.

Discussions after academic presentations are usually a festival of micro-aggressions. You start with a warm, positive remark (if you're German, you might as well skip that). But even to this conventionally respectful beginning, micro-aggressive nuances can be added. I'm sure many of you are masters – or eager apprentices – in the art of pronouncing words like

“insightful”, “inspiring” (or “spannend”) in ways that communicate discreetly but clearly how lowly you think of the addressee. And once the rhetorical niceties have been delivered, you are free to express disappointment, anger, contempt, repugnance, or a brain-melting degree of boredom, as long as you’re able to pretend convincingly that what you say is all about objective critique, and intended to help not to hurt.

Now, I am happily expecting your critique of my presentation, and I suggest that after each contribution to the discussion we take a moment to identify the micro-aggressions hidden inside the comments, and then magnifying them somewhat, blowing them up until they become macro- or at least midsize-aggressions. And after we have collected enough examples of your aggression, let us think together about how we can transform them into actions against me.

Or they don’t necessarily have to be against me, but since they are aggressions I suppose most of the actions will amount to some kind of punishment. I am offering myself for any kind of punishment that does not leave permanent marks or lead to injuries requiring medical treatment. Please, don’t restrain yourself. Be violent! And if possible, be collectively intelligent in your being-violent. Organize the pleasure you take in treating me violently in ways, and in collective forms, that show me you are a smart and politically-minded audience, and not a bunch of idiots.