

Conclusion (6.1.)

When I stumbled by chance upon the silent demonstration in Gothenburg on November 23rd 2006 described in the introduction to this project, I followed the march for some time, curious and bewildered. What was going on? By intuition I chose to stay uninformed; instead I took a photo with my mobile phone and left, somehow aware that something crucial, something important, was hidden in the situation that I had just stumbled upon.

This decision – not to ask anyone what was going on, but instead taking a photo of the demonstration – became crucial in the development of this project, *Aesthetics of Resistance*, as a whole. The ~~inferior~~ intuitive decision defined the optics for the rest of the project. What I de facto decided was to see the demonstration as an image and not as a specific social event consisting of a group of specific persons with a specific purpose of doing what they were doing there.

I was lured by this image; I misunderstood the situation in front of me and thought it to be something quite different than what I much later realized it was. Still, the decision to view the demonstration as an image was more important than what it turned out to be. Or, rather: The gap between what the image told me, and what was really going on, became the central problem - the inherent drama - in the project that evolved out this small misunderstanding.

The demonstration was not a demonstration, but a police exercise. The Swedish police were training, preparing for violent riots. The demonstrators were not political activists. They were students from a nearby gymnasium asked to re-enact an especially violent demonstration that took place on the exact same route a couple of years earlier. The Swedish police used Danish instructors. They had long experience with violent riots and had developed new techniques to handle such events.

The reality beneath my mysterious image of the silent demonstration was complex and intriguing. It comprised an intricate role play between various real and acted persons. The students acted as activists, the Swedish police acted as pupils, while the Danish police acted as instructors. In this web of changed roles, various images and preconceptions of the identities of the groups taking part were projected. The activists were portrayed as violent, but potentially open for dialogue. The police were portrayed as positive and engaged in friendly dialogue. The Danish instructors were portrayed as having constructive knowledge to share.

I realized that the reality hiding beneath my somewhat naive misconception of the silent demonstration was loaded with just such potent imagery as what I imagined it was. The layering of images, pre-conceptions and projections were a kind of constructed performative situation, where various roles and an underlying world view were acted out, performed. This performance sampled time in a highly interesting manner: In the present, an event of the past was re-enacted with the purpose of preparing for a similar event in the future. Past and future met in the present.

Taking the decision to make the incident in Gothenburg and the inherent themes the starting point for an art-research project led me to a string of questions about the nature of art-research:

Could art be used as a research tool?

What would this mean?

What kind of situation would be suitable to inquire into events such as these?

Opting for performance as my main artistic tool, I realized that my research in addition to the inquiries into 'real' events, such as the police exercise, would be a performance of art-research as well. A proposal of how art-research might work, when used to investigate a topic outside of art.

Taking the clues hiding in the silent demonstration as my first evidence, I was led back to Copenhagen, where I live. The participation of the Danish police instructors led me to the internal teaching manual 'OPERATION' from the Danish police academy. Here, the author, the well-known Danish police commissioner Kai Vittrup, set up an operational system on how to handle large crowds of rioting protesters and large-scale demonstrations. The manual can be read as a choreography of how to use public space to control and pacify crowds threatening to disturb the public order.

The manual became the main text in the first performance conducted as part of 'Aesthetics of Resistance'. Here, in 'A Short Course in Realism from the Perspective of the Police', the reading of texts from the manual was destroyed by an aggressive use of resonance in the form of various sound-effects. The discourse of the text was so to speak flooded by sensorial experience, both in the form of sound and in the form of movement by a dancer acting as the street-fighting rebel. This first performance introduces the figures of the 'artist/researcher' and the 'sense-event'. These two levels of discursive and non-discursive meaning is used to articulate the above-mentioned gap between the knowledge of the image - sensual knowledge - and rational discourse. In this performance, the contrast is stark and the two levels are completely divided.

The artist/researcher and the sense-event create the basic structure of all the 8 performances comprising 'Aesthetics of Resistance'. Their relation varies, though; in each performance the artist/researcher plays a slightly different role, and the sense-event is constructed in various ways according to the specific content and context of each performance.

Back in Copenhagen an intense drama evolved around the demolition of the so-called Youth House on Jagtvej 69. Up to the eviction of the activists who had been using the house as their cultural base for more than 20 years, and in the aftermath of the demolition on March 1st, 2007, an explosive sequence of demonstrations, street-fighting, occupations of other houses, evolved. After the first round of desperate, wild riots, lasting for several weeks and turning large parts of Copenhagen into battle scenes, a new imaginative movement, The Youth House Movement, evolved. During the weekly Thursday-demos, that lasted for 70 Thursday in a row, the movement grew large and strong, until it finally after long troublesome negotiations was granted a new house from the city administration of Copenhagen.

Watching these events evolve directly in front of me, I decided to make this sequence of events the first central part of my investigations. To what degree and in which specific situations did this movement use performative imagery as their main political tool?

Out the myriads of actions, occupations, street battles and demonstrations comprising the Youth House Movement, I selected 3 moments that would both

represent the enormous span of these events and feature elements that would fit my purpose: To see how aesthetics – performance, form and style - played a defining role in the formation of political meaning.

'Revolution By Night' deals with the militant, chaotic riots in the first weeks after the demolition of the Youth House on Jagtvej 69. Here, the focus is on the apotheosis of revolt. What happens in that ecstatic moment of rampage, where all forms of identity and reason seem to dissolve into 'an orgy of destruction', as it is called in the film 'Get Rid of Yourself'. 'Get Rid of Yourself' by the artist group, Bernadette Corporation, is here used as a central reference point, adding to the understanding of the actions of the so-called Black Bloc which also dominated this first phase of the Youth House Movement.

'G13greenredturquoiseyellow' describes a crucial large action where the Youth House Movement managed to change the image of the movement from 'spoiled violent youth' to 'creative smart-mob'. This change of image opened up for negotiations with the mayor of Copenhagen – negotiations that would later result in the New Youth House. In the performance, the focus is on the swarm-strategies used in the G13-action and the collective body constituted by such a swarm. A collective body is established by the audience to the performance, thereby making them part in a discreet re-enactment of certain aspects of the G13-action.

'On Water' compares the occupation of Refshalevej in Copenhagen in the late spring 2008 with a very similar art-project, 'The Harbour Laboratory' by the art group Parfyme, taking place in the same period at the other end of the Copenhagen harbour. The borderline of the law is used to discuss how the seemingly similar relational imagery of the two events have very different consequences and thereby very different meanings. In the performance, the aesthetics of parasitic architecture and the use of water as the symbolic site of these events are explored in a chaotic and romantic manner.

In the summer of 2009 I was invited to China to take part in the 10th Open Performance Festival in Beijing. The preparations for this project coincided with the 20th anniversary of the so-called Massacre on Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989. June 4th was the tragic end of a month-long sequence of large-scale peaceful protests, all centered around Tiananmen Square as the central symbolic representation of absolute political power in China. Given my topic of investigation, 'Aesthetics of Resistance', I thought I would use the opportunity to research into the 1989 Democratic Movement as the student activists and their millions of followers were called.

In these investigations I found out that the student activists staged their critique of the Communist Party as celebrations of certain crucial dates in the history of the exact same Communist Party. Doing this, they re-used – reclaimed – the aesthetic features of communism; the visual design of the demonstrations, the slogans and the theme songs. Their large-scale demonstrations that rapidly attracted hundreds of thousands of participants, looked like primordial communist demonstrations; the same songs, the same colors, the same slogans. This intricate appropriation of the aesthetic language of the Party they were criticizing, displayed a surprisingly post-modern play with symbols and images. The content of the critique followed a similar pattern; the students reclaimed the ideal values of communism; equality, justice and democracy.

Thereby criticizing the regime for corruption, lack of democratic standards and moral deroute.

I found this activist parallel to the artistic strategies of appropriation and re-enactment highly interesting, and I adopted the strategy – calling it cloning – as one of my central terms. Using it both to interpret the 1989 Democracy Movement and some of the events I was about to choose in the second core part of the project: The activism surrounding the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, December 2009.

With this new term, cloning, in mind, I chose to incorporate a performance dealing with the 1989 Democracy Movement in the project. 'Ghost Choir Karaoke' is set up as a commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of May 4th, 1989. In the performance, a group of ghosts from The Arts Choral Group – a choir of art students playing an important role in the first sequence of large-scale demonstrations back in 1989 – revisits two sites of symbolic character to celebrate the anniversary of one of the key dates, not only in the 1989 Democratic Movement, but also in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. On May 4th 1989, the student activists staged an immense demonstration, celebrating the 70-year anniversary of the 1919 Tiananmen Riots. This double cloning becomes the melancholic context for the strange symbolic performance by ghosts in an enormous building site and in an extravagant karaoke bar. In this performance, it is the sites that constitute a discreet symbolic critique of contemporary China, by pointing back to the now completely tabooed 1989 Democracy Movement.

Later that year 2009, the UN Climate Conference COP15 came to Copenhagen and with it an array of global activism, manifesting all sorts of activist strategies. It seemed the perfect case study for my continuous research, and I chose these events as the other main topic of my project.

COP15 was staged as a decisive moment in the global fight against climate disaster. All major world leaders came to Copenhagen, and the ambition was to negotiate a new global contract that would turn about the development in global climate politics once and for all. To promote these sky-high ambitions, the UN and the City of Copenhagen engaged a group of leading advertising companies to design a campaign that would engage populations all over the world in the struggle for a better world. This campaign, HOPENHAGEN, dominated the public space of Copenhagen, until, all of a sudden, it completely disappeared, as the negotiations at COP15 fell flat on the last day of the conference. HOPENHAGEN was designed as a fictive activist movement, complete with internet sites, a climate camp at the City Square, and color-coded activist t-shirts, stickers, banners. In a smooth mainstream design, HOPENHAGEN cloned all the aesthetic features of the movements criticizing the governments and the UN for being in the pocket of the multinational corporations, now trying to 'greenwash' the activities. HOPENHAGEN was even sponsored by an array of the same global corporations, Coca Cola, Siemens, BMW and others.

In the performance 'Clone Wars', a symbolic quest to save the world under the auspices of HOPENHAGEN is set up for the 3 mythological figures Buddha, Atlas and Helena Christensen. The performance takes place in the enormous entrance hall of Copenhagen City Hall, opening up to the City Square where HOPENHAGEN Climate Camp was situated. In an hour-long struggle, Atlas drags an island with Buddha across the immense floor while Helena is improvising a ritual dance. In this new double cloning, the activists' imagery stolen by HOPENHAGEN is re-claimed.

The performance also explores resonance as a tool for performing a sonic balance between the symbolic quest and the surrounding architecture.

The real activists staged two large scale-manifestations to confront COP15 as well as a range of smaller events.

On December 12, 2009, around 100.000 people marched from the city center to the Bella Center on the outskirts of Copenhagen where COP15 took place. This was the largest demonstration ever on Danish ground. In a spectacular operation, the police used the new law of 'preventive arrest' and arrested 905 participants in the demonstration. They handcuffed them and forced them to sit on the bare asphalt for 4-5 hours until they were finally transported to the so-called 'climate-prison' installed in a warehouse in the suburb of Valby. The mass-arrest completely 'stole the image' of the day and the 100.000 people marching almost disappeared in the media uproar created by the spectacular police action.

On December 16th the Climate Justice Action took place, organized by an array of global grass-roots organizations, all loosely connected to what could be termed Direct Action. The aim of the action was to break through the fences surrounding the Bella Center and establish an alternative People's Convent inside the perimeter of the COP15 conference. The action didn't succeed in breaking the heavily guarded barriers around COP 15 and the People's Convent was instead held directly on the street outside of the Bella Center.

These two events are the topic of the performance 'Climate/Kettle'. Here, two themes – 'staging the opponent' and 'kettle' – are explored and tested out as performative sense-events, incorporating the double audience in an internal power-play. An additional performance lecture, 'Aesthetics of Resistance?', deals with the courtcase about the December 12th event, and how the color black was discussed intensely as the marker of the Black Bloc, and thereby an indication of who to arrest preventively.

As the Arabic Spring exploded in the winter of 2010/11, a new wave of activism evolved on a global scale. Uprisings in a series of Arabic countries was followed by large-scale mass movements such as Los Indignatos in Spain, the fierce protests in Greece, Occupy in the US and worldwide. Many of these new uprisings and protest spectacles shared features with the local events I was researching. A new awareness of performative modes of action and the power of collective images seemed to be at the core of these movements. Surprised and excited at the seemingly revolutionary momentum, I decided to include the Egyptian uprising as the last topic in 'Aesthetics of Resistance'.

In 'Silent Stand' three scenes from short history of the Egyptian insurrection are re-enacted as collective images. Here the audience takes part in the creation of these images. Their bodily presence is the crucial act that constitutes the images. In the narrative connecting these images, the bodily presence is thematized as well, here as risk and martyrdom in the face of a brutal regime, ruling by torture and killing its opponents. The performance evolves around the story of Khaled Said who was brutally murdered by the police in the summer of 2010. To commemorate his death, his friends started the Facebook-group 'We are all Khaled Said' and organized the emotionally moving series of actions called 'Silent Stand'. These two imaginative platforms for protest gained a huge following, and became one of the prime elements in mobilizing the masses that finally broke out of compliance on January 25th, 2011.

The following occupation of Tahrir Square has been called the new global icon of freedom, following the icon of Che Guevera. In the performance I use 5 Danish belly-dancers to represent the revolutionary masses on Tahrir Square. This awkward representation is an attempt at formulating the distance from which I see the Egyptian uprising. The belly-dancers mark this touristic distance in a humourous gesture, like the ghosts in 'Ghost Choir Karaoke' mark a distance in time. The important aspect of 'Silent Stand', though, is the creation of collective images by the participating audience.

Discussions

At some point in the process, I realized that it would be necessary to attain some kind of direct reaction from the audience of these performances. For this purpose, I decided to organize a discussion to follow directly after each performance, either between me, the various participating performers and the audience, or between a couple of invited guests, the audience, the participants and myself. With the same purpose I decided to move the last series of performances out of the artworld into sites and locations, where there would be a chance of engaging an audience who somehow related to the content of the given performance:

'Silent Stand' was performed in a culture house on the harbourfront of Copenhagen, where the audience was asked to re-enact the original 'Silent Stand' by standing, facing the water.

'On Water' was performed at the alternative noise-music venue 'Mayhem' in a context of parasitic culture similar to the architectural theme of the performance.

'Clone Wars' was performed at the enormous entrance hall of Copenhagen City Hall by generous invitation from the City Hall which was the Danish partner in the campaign HOPENHAGEN, pinpointed in the performance as an example of cloning.

'Revolution By Night' was performed at the New Youth House at Dortheavej 61 in Copenhagen NV. in the house that was the controversial prize won by The Youth House Movement after years of struggle.

'Climate/Kettle' was performed at Det Fri Gymnasium that has a history of supplying movements like The Youth House Movement with young, dedicated participants.

The discussions following the performances developed a life of their own. Since a small group participated in more than one of them, a kind of continuous debate developed; even though these debates were often unresolved and marked by diverging interpretations of both my performances and the events they dealt with, they somehow became the highlight of the project as a whole for me. In the cases where the discussion worked well, I was met with arguments and interpretations that gave my project a response. Many of these arguments are included in the analysis and comments in the textual parts supplementing the performances. In these discussions, my research was met by groups of people that potentially could use this research as a discussion of their own activities. Here, I glimpsed a potential function of art-research that went beyond the framework of the institutionalized art-scene.

The opaque, apparently silent demonstration in Gothenburg led me into a field of riots and often dramatic confrontations between activists and authorities. Did my initial ideas of political activism as political communication, using images as the prime format, prove consistent? Are performative gestures an important part of the intricate role play between the police forces and the insurgent groups?

The recent wave of global protests seems to prove this beyond any doubt. Large parts of these new movements use symbolic spectacles as their main mode of protest. The occupation of Tahrir Square was an image that beamed out through television and computer screens all over the world and made resistance on the part of the old-fashioned regime futile. This image was so convincing that it didn't really matter how many occupied the square or who they were. On the large scale of media communication, it is obvious that images rule the agenda.

What is more interesting, even controversial, is what goes on at the microlevel of activism, inside the events, inside the often opaque confrontations with a seemingly far stronger Security State. Here, the collective performative gestures have even more drastic consequences than I imagined at the beginning of my investigations. Here, political content isn't communicated by images and in performative actions. Here, it is constituted by performative imagery. In a radical sense, the form is the message. In this kind of activism, the above-mentioned gap between what the images communicate and the way in which we can talk about them is a drama evolving at the very core of the political content. Since the content is constituted as performative images, it can only be experienced as such. It can't be explained in a discursive manner.

To understand this kind of Direct Activism, I thought it necessary to invent a similar kind of 'thinking with the senses' that would enable me to consider the aesthetic elements of this kind of activism in a form that was on a par with the topics it was to explore. Thus the structure of the artist/researcher and the sense-event which is utilized in all 8 performances. Because of the special nature of the sense-event, it is not an easy task to draw conclusions from the 8 performances; this was attempted in the discussions following the performances, and in the analytical texts trying to grasp the aesthetical message of each performance. Also, the specific questions and themes introduced in each performance make it hard to formulate an overall conclusion. Some of the questions were answered in relatively straightforward terms, others gave rise to unexpected developments in the performances, and in the assumptions of the themes they each contained.

In general, though, a résumé of this complex mesh of 'thinking with the senses', of performing questions and answers to often complicated matters, can be summarized in a conclusion close to what I wrote in the introduction: Contemporary Direct Activism is in fact developed as complex aesthetic performances, offering a radical, political imagery, grounded in collective improvisation and an inventive, contextual consciousness.

Especially two radical features of this activism seem important:

- 1: The political content is constituted as form. It is performed as image and it only exists in the temporal interstice it creates within the surrounding society.
- 2: In this performance, the individual identities of the activists merge into what

can be called a collective body. A new collective identity. This collectivity is a political statement in itself.

1+2: A collective body in a temporary autonomous zone.

This is –in an extremely condensed form –the ‘Aesthetics of Resistance’.

We Are All Khaled Said

On February 11th 2011 at 17.54, in the tumultuous moment just after president Mubarak had resigned, admin wrote on the Facebook page of ‘We Are All Khaled Said’:

“THANK GOD. THANKS TO ALL THOSE WHO DIED FOR US TO LIVE IN FREEDOM. THANKS TO ALL EGYPTIANS WHO SLEPT ROUGH IN TAHRIR, ALEXANDRIA AND EVERYWHERE. THANK YOU ALL ON THIS PAGE FOR YOUR SUPPORT & YOUR AMAZING GREATNESS & HELP. THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO CALLED HIS LEADER AND HIS REPRESENTATIVE. THANK YOU TUNISIA. WE ARE ALL EGYPTIANS. YOU ARE ALL EGYPTIANS. WE ARE ALL KHALED SAID”¹

As a much smaller, but similar act of gratitude, I would like to dedicate this work to all the unnamed and often anonymous activists who participated in the long sequence of demonstrations, occupations, direct actions and other performative gestures that make up the topic of this thesis. I have been very careful in positioning myself as an outside observer to all these events. My work here is to be understood as a humble reflection of their activities, and I hope that at some point it may be useful to these movements in one way or another. Their performance of the real events I have investigated was done at great risk and often against all odds. This fearless engagement in performing another world has been and continues to be a great inspiration. Thank you.

Notes:

¹ <http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk/posts/163270607057045>