

ASSEMBLIES ACTS OF SUCH A NATURE AND

NAKED PUNCH

HOW Assemblies Matter?

SUPPLEMENT TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORGANIZING FROM BELOW No 19

The ART of Politics vs Politics as ART

Art is both blessed and cursed by its ability to go beyond discourse and ideology, an outside that enables and constrains its capacity to transform social sensibilities outside the space of artistic practice.

My participation to the second of *How Assemblies Matter?* felt like a success – at least I had a good feeling about it when my part of being responsible of the Assembly was over. Nonetheless, such an outcome was unlikely considering my conflicted and contradictory attitude towards the hosts of the event, namely the Athens Biennial, the Athens School of Fine Arts, Outset and especially what I perceive as their support of austerity policies in the most aggressive manifestations with their adverse impact on the very conditions of artistic production in Athens. In this context, I experience fatigue, even resignation, a feeling that I think I share with many artists including myself, who find it often difficult to see the how their work makes a real impact both to their immediate environment and to themselves. Participating in art events, both as audience and as performer, is just going through the motions.

The ability to go beyond this feeling of defeatism relates to the

question – *How Assemblies Matter?* which is an important and interesting one and it is also relevant for the situation of the arts in Athens. Art is (obviously) a social practice, involving groups of people, audience, artists, technicians, invigilators, accountants – it is also a form of assembling.

Especially in situations of political urgency, as the ones we face in Greece the last ten years or so, artistic practice has its own political significance and it has de facto a stronger social relevance. So *How Assemblies Matter?* also raises the question of *How Art Matters?* especially in times of intense political antagonism. So, looking back at the event I would like to revisit the fundamental question of *How Assemblies Matter?* looking less at the form and focusing more at collective artistic interventions that have a political targeting. Maybe rephrasing the question as What is the relevance of artistic interventions that aim to rethink the position of artists and art in the

society by using an artistic, experimental methodology? Or, more briefly, *How 'Political' Art Matters?*

In this short intervention, I will to indicate different ways in which artistic practice provides useful ways to collectively and individually engage with politics and offer some thoughts about the criteria of evaluating such interventions. More importantly, I would like to offer also some warning about the limitations of artistic interventions, when they attempt to leave the confines of the art world and aim to become political praxis. Artists often attempt to construct alternative iconographies of the social shaping the aesthetic of their audience about the significance of the instances where they intervene, and these new formations can escape or even undermine the dominant ideological narratives.

The capacity or artistic critique to challenge the relations of power, and even more to short-circuit the hegemonic narratives that inform the views of the public is limited outside the artistic context, because such interventions are understood primarily as artistic and their appeal as genuine political acts gets easily neutralized. Art is both blessed and cursed by its ability to go beyond discourse and ideology, an outside that enables and constrains its capacity to transform social sensibilities outside the space of artistic practice. The effects remain aesthetic and interventionist artistic practices seem condemned to remain inconsequential outside their habitat. Here I am referring to the opposite of the problem of “aestheticization” and “spectacularity” as it was raised in the writings of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1968) about the relation between art and politics. Artistic strategies with a politic aim, are misunderstood as just spectacle without any currency outside the domain of art, because of their origin.

The ontological specificity of artistic practice is not the only or the main concern, when artists voice

their criticism against the status quo and its ideology. The fact that art relies to the same institutions that it aims to challenge, raises some concerns about the radical rhetoric of contemporary art. Such a critique may seem also pertinent against the idea of the autonomy of the arts or the artists, but I think it is especially troubling in the case of artistic interventions that target the control of the market economy on social relations. The distance between theory and practice, or in our case, between the critique against the economic system and the dependence to its logic and some of the most aggressive agents of neoliberalism (developed countries, Oil and Arms concerns, Banks are the main sponsors of ad hoc art events), is even more striking if one looks at the conditions of employment in the cultural sector, one of the most exploitative and badly paid fields, the competitive attitudes that inform the relations of cultural production, supported by the myth of a solitary artistic creator, and the uneven distribution of income among workers in the arts.

Considering the state of affairs in the cultural sector and the inability of artists to bring about change in the conditions of their own employment, one should be very modest about the ability of art to challenge the neoliberal ideology that inspires exploitation.

In a very contradictory, almost perverse, fashion the critical stance of artists against the economic system and its logic is, at least partly, responsible for their own exploitation by it. Such an obvious paradox is very illuminating not only for the precarious position of the artists but also about the obstacles that artists face when they are engaged with social issues. The belief that art is special, and therefore the boundary between art and the economy should be maintained, makes any attempt to raise questions about remuneration, social security benefits, division of revenues among the different stake-holders in the cultural sector, or rationalization of the system of subsidies, difficult

(Abbing 2015, 93). Many artists prefer to raise general challenges about the economic system, rather than raising the more specific, but also more concrete instances of their own exploitation and that of their colleagues, questions that they encounter in their everyday artistic practice.

Going back to starting question of *How Assemblies Matter?* or *How 'Political' Art Matters?* I would like to conclude with a positive note. The impossibility of accessing "things in themselves", and the consequent lack of an objective articulation of social relations is the cause of conflict at the level of representation, where the different articulations of the social

an all-encompassing system of meaning is the guarantee that artistic practice will always be able to find a space of intervention in the gaps between the ideological representations and their unaccounted-for remainder. The abandonment of language can uncover the outer limits of the dominant ideology. Only a non-linguistic, non-articulated and therefore radical critique can transcend the dominant discourse of social existence and the socio-symbolic system that supports its reproduction. Artistic practice can achieve this radical break; not to suspend momentarily the dominant ideology, but to overthrow it by producing different representations of sociality that go beyond the

fate of re-territorialization by the system of semiotic reproduction. The video *The Assembly in no Particular Order* that lead to the project *How Assemblies Matter?* is a very inspiring example of a successful act of this de-territorialization.

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**THE USUAL WAY TO PRESERVE
CONFORMISM IS THROUGH
PSEUDO-CRITICISM AGAINST IT.**

are negotiated and synthesized, using simultaneously argument and force. If we no discursive formation can provide an objective and full representation of reality in its totality, the negotiation of social constitutions cannot be conclusive. The impossibility of

constitutive ideology and that can transcend even language. The radical critique of social reality should aim to an affective reinvestment that can resist the pre-existing representations; an absolute de-territorialization of theoretical critique that can momentarily resist the

Poetic Speech and Public Space

**From the unpublished
work Chimaera.**

Translated by

Brian Sneed

This intervention is about the political importance of speech utterance in the public space. I collected fragments and myths that speak about the poet's position in ancient Greece. I brought them together with philosophical excerpts about the political nature of speech and the importance of public space. Public space for Hanna Arendt and Aristotle exists only by the presence of this main activity, public utterance.

The poems have been presented first in a poetic performance of covering and uncovering my face. They are relative to questions surrounding the hierarchy of genders and species through issues such as freedom, power and music. They originate from a poetic project about goats, stock raising and transhumance, and should be viewed as a key of what is commented later by the texts.

I. Cyclops

I am locked inside the cave of the Cyclops
with his solitary eye guarding me.

I stay awake.

- Cyclops open the door for me!

- Cyclops let me leave!

the Cyclops caresses the fuzz on my back.

lights a fire

rubs his hands

eats my meat my cheese my wine

sleeps happily

still guarding me

burps

with his solitary eye open.

II. (Works and Days)

in a time of ease

when the gentle breeze Zephyr

blows and caresses their cheeks

as they sat in the thick shade

of a rock

drinking milk or wine

lulled from the rustle

of leaves

and the tiny song of the cicada

scratching wood

or blowing.

but the best flute

isn't made of wood.

it's from the bones of an eagle.

to blow this music

you first need

to know how to fly

2. Aristotle, Politics

[1253a] And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and human alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another),

but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.

Photo courtesy of Phoebe Giannisi

3. Cerambus Myth

“Cerambus, son of Eusirus, who was the son of Poseidon and of Eidothea, the nymph of Othreis, lived in the land of the Melians on the spurs of Mount Othrys. He had numerous flocks and herded them himself.

Nymphs would help him since he delighted them as he sang among the mountains. He is said to have been the best singer of those days and was famous for his rural songs.

It is said that because of this the nymphs one day became visible to Cerambus as they danced to the strumming of his lyre. Pan, in good will, gave him this advice: to leave Others and pasture his flocks on the plain, for the coming winter was going to be exceptionally and unbelievably severe.

Cerambus, with the arrogance of your, decided - as though smitten by some god- not to drive his beasts from Others to the plain. He also uttered graceless and

mindless things to the nymphs ... After a short while there came a sudden frost and the streams froze. Much snow fell on the flocks of Cerambus and they were lost to sight as well as were the trees and paths. The nymphs, in anger against Cerambus because of his slanders, changed him into a wood-gnawing Cerambyx beetle.

He can be seen on trunks and has hook-teeth, ever moving his jaws together. He is black, long and has hard wings like a great dung beetle. He is called the ox that eats wood and, among the Thessalinas, Cerambyx. Boys use him as a toy, cutting off his head, to wear as a pendant. The head looks like the horns of a lyre made from a tortoiseshell.”

(The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis. A translation with a commentary, Francis Celoria, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, 80-81)



The Making of OneLoveKitchen

Commoning
the
Assembly

The paper looks at an African collective kitchen, the OneLove-Kitchen which run for four months in 2015 between a number of different people and collectives. In an on-going collaborative experiment, these groups fabricated situations that bond residents and newcomers together through the notion of 'food' as a common good, shared within/across the city, OneLove-Kitchen of African refugees, nomad citizens of the Global North, members of the local anti-authoritarian movement and African women activists.

The principles of the collective kitchen focused on solidarity economy models including participatory budgeting, heterarchical power structures, horizontal decision-making, collective self-organization, together with peer learning practices. Those principles were explored, discussed and strengthened during weekly assemblies to allow the group members to fully participate in the decision-making processes of the collective kitchen. Then, through a series of pop-up events across the city of Athens, the group created a network of shared common spaces where newcomers and existing commoners negotiated, communicated and connected rather than separated. The refugee/migrant were seen as the newcomer/stranger who occupies space in a non-sedentary manner and, consequently, challenges bounded territory of nation-states. Space, here, becomes a commons while

active members become commoners, gaining part of their political subjectivity via their presence in assemblies and collective action.

Following Amanda Huron's argument that commoning is a social process, a way of collectively manage resources needed to sustain life, urban commons is marked by two distinct traits: it emerges in space that is saturated with people, competing uses, and financial investment; and it is constituted by the collective work of strangers. But who is the 'stranger' in this case? According to Georg Simmel, the stranger is defined as 'somebody who comes today and stays tomorrow', as opposed to the wanderer, 'who comes today and goes tomorrow'. In the case of the urban commons, there is a more general, more challenging space, the emerging commons, where strangers look into the mist and try to locate others, an unintended potential for communities to be formed through the constantly changing perception of people in public space. Everyone is a potential stranger, and because of this, everyone is a potential new ally. Likewise, urban spaces can be considered as places that bring strangers together to work on a common project. The experience of working together with strangers

is the second defining trait of the urban commons.

Focusing on the latter trait of the commons, the collective kitchen contested the very concept of what it means to be a 'stranger' by creating a collective work with others and making a shared space. The African collective kitchen, OneLove-Kitchen, was created by a group of different collectives, initiatives and individuals who shared a common goal: to share knowledge and learn from each other through collaboration, active participation, horizontal decision-making and peer learning.

OneLoveKitchen mingled together illegal (sans papiers) migrants, refugees, established migrants, precarious nomad workers from Northern European countries with local anarchists and members of the anti-authoritarian movement. Members of the kitchen belonged in one or more groups/collectives: *Nosotros*[], *unMonastery*[], *African United Women Organization* [III]. They were from Senegambia,

Nigeria, Ethiopia, Eritrea, England, Hungary, Italy and Greece of different age, gender, sexuality, race, religion, education, employment and economic status. Languages within the group varied too: they spoke English, Greek, French, Wolof and Amharic and when necessary they were translating between languages to ensure that all have a good understanding of the issues discussed in the assemblies. The goal of the kitchen was to create a safe (common) space where each would care for the other and all together would cook and organize pop-events across the city. Some were professional chefs, others were learning to cook and few others were responsible for organizing and promoting the events. From May to September 2015,

The Making of OneLoveKitchen

Commoning the Assembly

OneLoveKitchen organized regular pop-up events in various locations in Athens: from Nosotros rooftop to an anti-racist festival in an occupied botanic garden and academic conferences in two squatted art spaces. The collective kitchen was self-funded directly through payment for catering services or in the form of individual donations.

Each of member of the collective kitchen had a distinct role according to their skills. Some were responsible for the online and social media communication, the organization of the events, and others for assisting the chefs.

All decisions for each event were collectively made in weekly assemblies. Some members had long experience on being in assemblies whereas others did not. Speaking publically in the group was not easy for some, particularly in the beginning when most did not know each other well. One member of the group initiated the Art of

Hosting[IV] to empower communication and allow voice to all. The assembly started in a circle where the 'host' addressed a generic question to the group where each member answered accordingly. In one such occasion, the host asked: "are you in love today?" Surprisingly, all members of the assembly responded and by the end for the circle that morning, some said that they felt a stronger bond with the rest of the team. This is also how the group decided to name the project: OneLoveKitchen. The assembly was not only a space to discuss organizational matters, but also for exchange and sharing of personal stories, struggles and reflections on everyday life in the city. In the assemblies and particularly during the Art of Hosting, it was evident that the members cared for each other trying to ensure that they were all in good health and happy.

Most importantly, the role of the weekly assemblies was to build trust among the members. Indeed

that was not a very easy task to maintain; there were failures in the process: conflict was unavoidable in various occasions during the project and apparent in the assemblies. How could you bring together people of so many different cultures, political ideologies and religious beliefs? Conflict was expected, even welcomed in the group, recognizing its value: understanding people's differences and positionalities. At the end, what made this project to continue was 'trust' for each other: the feeling that all are equal and share a common space.

Notes

[I] Nosotros is the free social space of the anti-authoritarian movement in Athens and located in Exarchia. <http://nosotros.gr/>

[II] "Interweaving the history of monasticism and design patterns of a hackerspace, the unMonastery is in the process of building a network of outward facing, long-term, and harmonious co-living communities. Extrapolating from the framework of genuine monastic practice, the unMonastery enterprise seeks to channel the efforts of a generation that is over-educated and underemployed into meaningful hard work. We do this by rekindling service-oriented

co-operative living as a way of both personal and species survival." <https://www.stirtoaction.com/article/unmonastery>

[III] The United African Women Organization – Greece is a non-profit organization of women from all countries of Africa who live and work in Greece. <http://www.africanwomen.gr/en>.

[IV] Art of Hosting is a "highly effective way of harnessing the collective wisdom and self-organizing capacity of groups of any size. Based on the assumption that people give their energy and lend their resources to what matters most to them – in work as in life – the Art of Hosting blends a suite of powerful conversation processes to invite people to step in and take charge of the challenges facing them."





The Assembly of Abundance, photo by Caterina Costi

TRAFFIC in CHINA

In the middle of the 90's there was a lot of bicycles on the streets of Beijing. Society then got heavily capitalized, and a lot of cars suddenly competed with the bikes. It was a fight for supremacy, and there still was no infrastructure (like traffic lights) or legislation. People had to make up new traffic rules and procedures and tactics on the spot.

In particular, it became very interesting to take a left turn on a junction on a bike. Cars would pour onto the junction, and would stop at nothing. There you were, on your bike, waiting for a gap in between cars that ~~was~~ ^{was} happening.

You wait for a second bike. The two of you take one step forward. Cars drive by, evading you narrowly. More bikes, another step. Cars making curves in front of you. You are becoming more and more, becoming an assembly. One more step, one more bike. All of a sudden, you are too much, too many for the cars to pass in front of you, so they pass behind and you are clear to make on. You move, and the assembly immediately disperses. United by a tactical goal, you don't have to agree on a strategic constraint. Assemblies come and go, they are transient. Assemblies are not buildings, but barricades.

The Assembly on a One to One Scale

Such undertakings as the assembly on assemblies *How Assemblies Matter?* provoke questions. Even if some of them are quite futile—like the perennial ‘is it art?’—these can provoke interesting inquiries, only if framed sensibly. At first glance, one deals with such silly inquiries relatively easily, either by shrugging them off or reiterating the common sense that whatever art world denizens consider art, is art. It might be so. However, it is also known that the institutional definition of art, especially in this simplified version, is not only theoretically shallow but also leads to rather boring artistic and curatorial practices.

Therefore, it is better to think about what it actually means when a distributed assembly of assemblies, like the one organized by Jenny Marketou, is called ‘art’. What are the consequences, advantages and disadvantages of such a framing? Calling it ‘just’ art is quite diminishing, and does not really fit, because

this kind of expanded artistic practice differs substantially from a ‘mere’ art. The question is how.

While mapping distributed realms of expanded artistic practice together with Sebastian Cichocki (during the exhibition *Making Use. Life in Postartistic Times*, Warsaw 2016), one of the most useful navigational instruments we found was a theoretical toolkit honed by Stephen Wright, presented in his succinct yet influential *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*. When discussing art that moves beyond conceptual edifices (and institutional confines) of the contemporary art world, Wright points towards a double ontology of such undertakings. He claims that they happen on a one to one scale: that is, ‘Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship are characterised more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale.’^[1] They are both conceptual propositions and tangible realizations. (‘1:1 practices

are both what they are, and propositions of what they are.’^[1]) They can be compared to maps, which are as large as the territories covered. They are both this and that, art and life, an artistic event and an assembly of assemblies. In other words, they hybridize artistic practices (competences, resources, sensibilities) with the ones embedded in other social worlds, like the realm of politics, science or sport.

Hybridization with other fields makes it harder to lean on the stupefying rituals of contemporary art and its edifices and claims. When working outside of the art world’s institutional confines, one is forced to take risks and prove oneself, because one simply cannot assume the claim that ‘this is art’ will be shared by other potential allies (or enemies). On the contrary, it might prove to be a major hindrance in building trust and generating willingness to partake and support (art does not cherish a good reputation among activists, for instance, frequently for good reasons). The claims for artistic authorship are undermined. Why should anyone be willing to partake in a spectacle directed and authored by a singular artist, if s/he is unwilling to distribute agency and responsibilities? Why should anyone be willing to yet again work for free or be underpaid for the sake of yet another ‘just’ artistic event? But to assemble when one is called by a peer, friend,

or trustworthy operator who asks serious questions while proposing to play with them freely—that’s an entirely different matter. Such an assembly of assemblies is intriguing, and responds to a shared, not to say common, urgency.

Summarizing, a double ontology implies making use of competences, provisions or organizational capacities embedded in the art world, while undermining its dominant rituals, justifications or edifices. Operating on a one to one scale does not imply a static cohabitation of differing idioms (art, politics, research, etc.), but rather their dynamic montage. Nor does operating on a one to one scale mean that one leaves the art world entirely. Drawing a map as large as a country itself does not imply a migration from it, but rather a drifting at its edges, and a mapping of uncharted territories. In the same stroke, the practices unfolding on a one to one scale undermine the commonsensical justifications of various fields in question (exemplified by a statement ‘this is (just) art’) while activating their universalizing potentials (by making use of artistic competences in order to rearticulate the truths of assembly or reinvigorate the notion of their political efficacy).

But are such gatherings as *How Assemblies Matter* ‘real’ assemblies, or are they maybe just playful inventions? Is it a piece of proper research or maybe a result of misguided imaginations? Is it too serious or not serious enough? In fact, all of these questions assume the need for justifications and criteria of judgment embedded in the field of politics, science or art. And I think that such tests are totally valid, even more than ever in these times of post-truth, usurpations of power, and widespread deflation of both scientific and artistic qualities. But one should not rely on ritualized claims for academic, artistic or activist authority, and their implicit assumptions.

A practice on a one to one scale activates a terrain of serious play,

temporarily suspending disciplinary certainties. It is a concrete abstraction, not a mere speculation. On the one hand, it involves bodily contact, prompts affects, engages people who act in public, exchange and quarrel, spelling out their differences and realizing what they have in common. On the other hand, it is an abstraction of a 'real' assembly, a zone where people can test, draw out and formulate new ideas, without fear of being ridiculed. It suspends a drive to ideologically dominate the playground. (One does not want to be called a spoilsport, does s/he?)

The assembly on a one to one scale is an abstraction from what accelerationists rightly criticize

of this uselessness to abstract from concrete pressures. But such operations work only if artistic autonomy is considered as one of triangulating coordinates and not an aim in itself.

Maybe a seriously playful assembly contributes to opening up horizons for the left, currently lost in the phase of soul searching, after all those failed occupations, referendums, and political struggles. Opening up a field of playful reflection might help to recollect moments of collective clarity and redeem hopes seemingly lost. This kind of active suspension might prove to be a real value of organizing events with question marks in their titles. The assembly on a

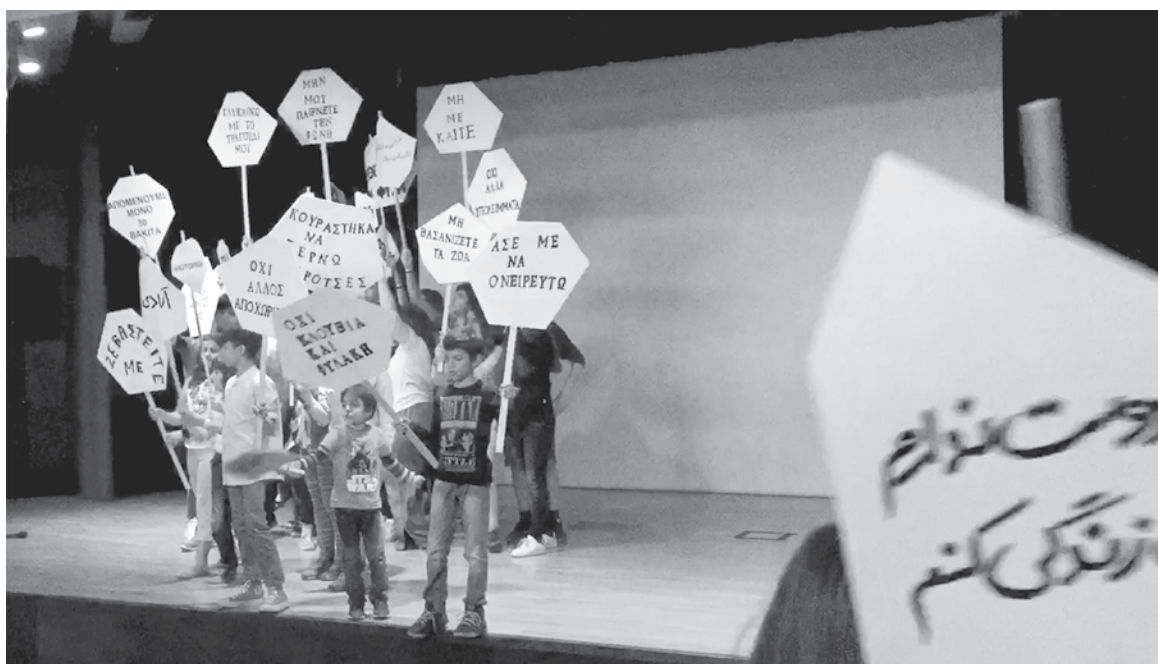
In this way, the assembly on a one to one scale recalls a research process. But the format of an assembly of assemblies diverges from regular academic conferences about assembling. Even if during an artistic event and an academic conference people do assemble, in the second instance, their assemblages are highly formalized and ritualized, enclosing imagination to stabilize research procedures. In contrast, an assembly on a one to one scale puts into motion a logical procedure of abduction, conceptualized by Charles Peirce as 'the process of forming explanatory hypotheses'—a 'logical operation which introduces any new idea'. [III] In this case, the event opens up an array of hypotheses about

and expertise), escaping the terror of formlessness. However, the organizers made use of artistic license to play with the format of assembly and modes of address (what reminds me of experiments conducted with Critical Practice from London since 2008), placing participants in shifting configurations in order to repose the central question: how do assemblies matter? Collectively, the assembled peers abducted the hypothesis that assemblies matter at all, prompting them to assemble again, and to fail better.

[I] Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (2013), p. 3 <<http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf>>

[II] Ibid.

[III] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture VI* (1903), in: *Commens: Digital Companion to C.S. Peirce*. <www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/terms/abduction.html>



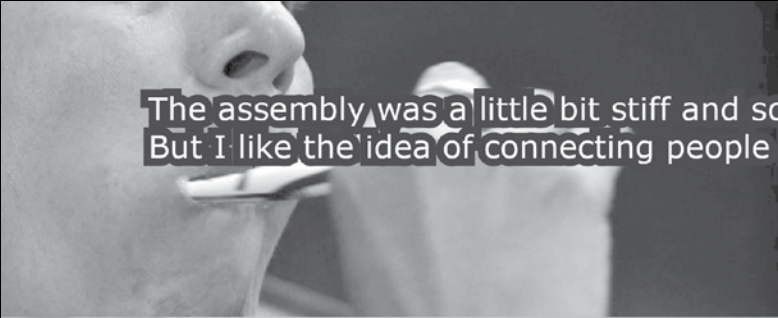
Jenny Marketou, **Rehearsing An Improbable Assembly**, 2017, Night of Aesthetics and Philosophy, Goethe Institut, Athens, Greece, Photos courtesy of the artist

as folk politics of cozy immediacy and irrepressible actionism. When playing seriously one is freed from such requirements; without fear of being called a traitor, one can also speculate about future assemblies, and revisit hopes and potentials, without fear of being called naive. Serious play does not need to claim political efficacy, nor does it have to present itself as a prefiguration of utopian society in order to find its own justifications. One can make use of the generalized, social allowance for art not to have immediate effects, and to make use

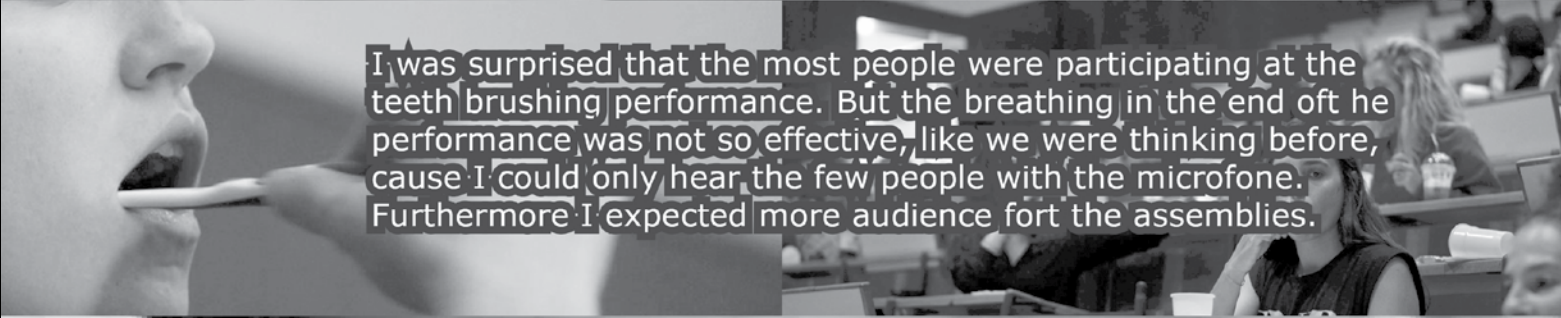
one to one scale does not aim to replace politics. This kind of assembly is an open form, reaching out to other situations, places, peoples and futures, in which politics can and should be enacted. But these politics do not have to happen here and now. One is not obliged to claim that here and now is some sort of micro-utopia, or a model of a society to come. There is time for serious play, time for reflection, and time for implementation. Sometimes they might overlap, but not always and not today.

the sense and truth of assembling. Some parts of an assembly (immediacy of an occupation, a claim for political efficiency or a discipline of academic research) are suspended and replaced by other claims (value of serious play and concrete abstraction). Freed from direct pressures, one is able to strategize and speculate.

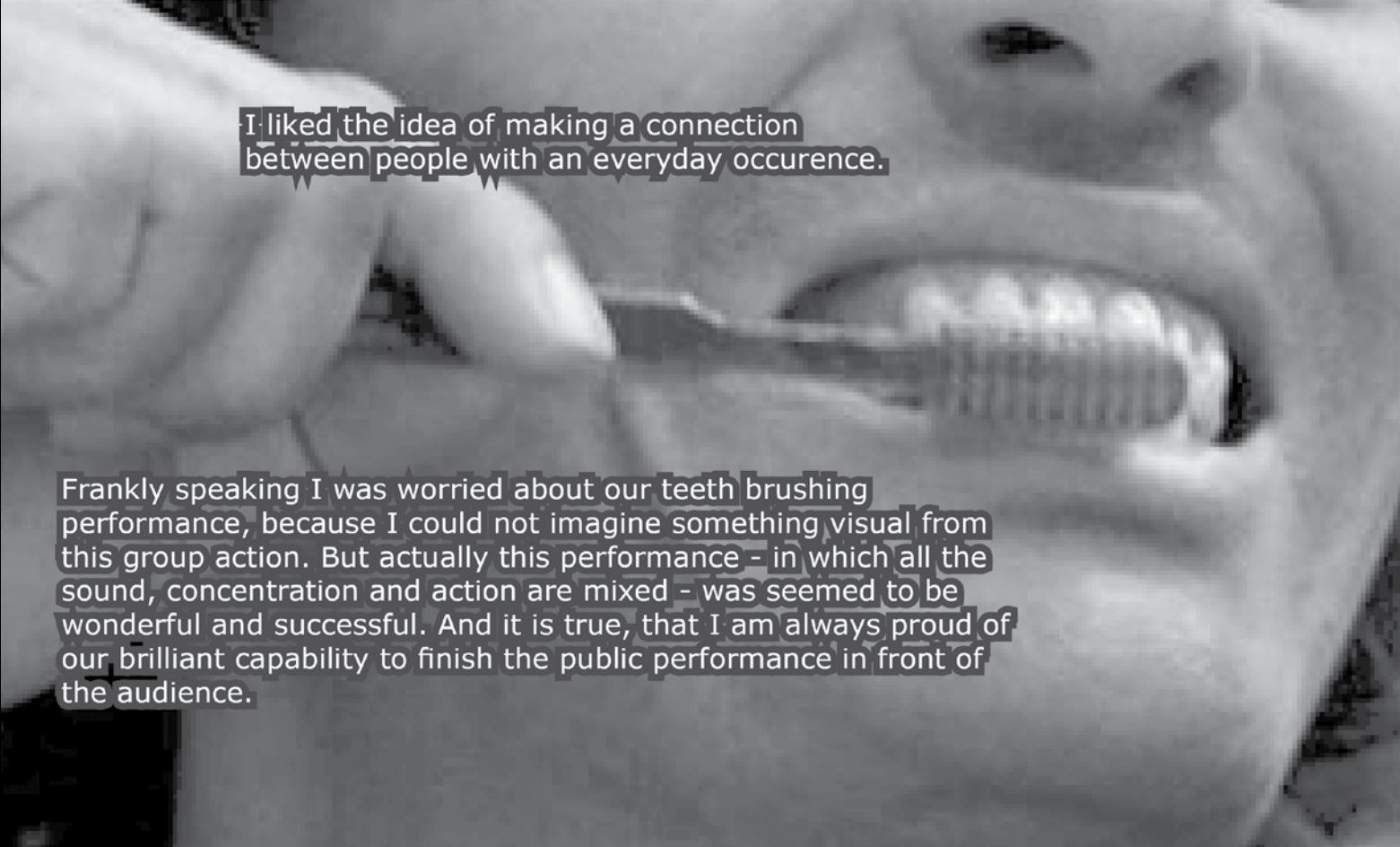
The Athens assembly did borrow some aspects of academic research (like distribution of authority among peers, or careful selection of speakers based on their experience



The assembly was a little bit stiff and some kind of empty. But I like the idea of connecting people by brushing teeth.

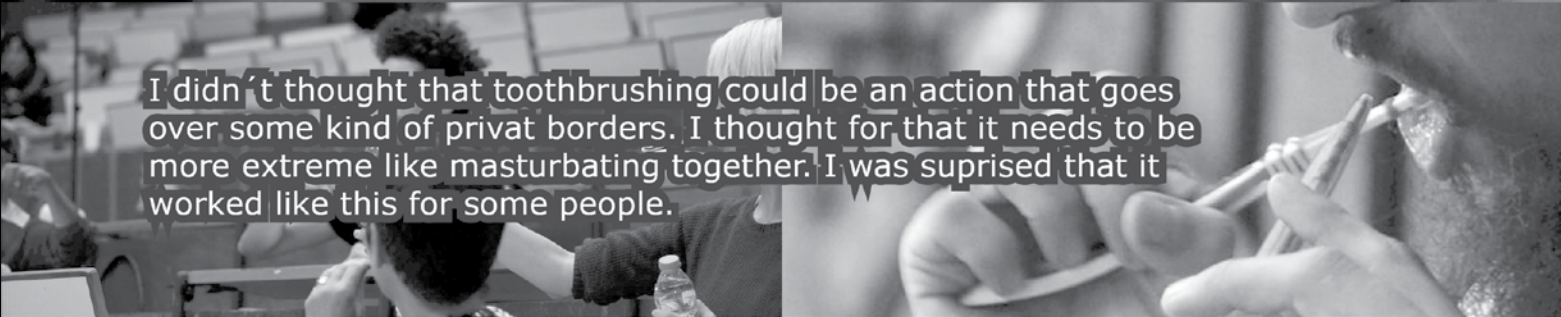


I was surprised that the most people were participating at the teeth brushing performance. But the breathing in the end of the performance was not so effective, like we were thinking before, cause I could only hear the few people with the microphone. Furthermore I expected more audience for the assemblies.




I liked the idea of making a connection between people with an everyday occurrence.

Frankly speaking I was worried about our teeth brushing performance, because I could not imagine something visual from this group action. But actually this performance - in which all the sound, concentration and action are mixed - was seemed to be wonderful and successful. And it is true, that I am always proud of our brilliant capability to finish the public performance in front of the audience.



I didn't think that toothbrushing could be an action that goes over some kind of private borders. I thought for that it needs to be more extreme like masturbating together. I was surprised that it worked like this for some people.



Funny everyday actions in public space. It's odd to brush teeth in this room and in a collective. In this project I found it unpleasant. It was some kind of indecent and disgusting to carry the spit in a cup.

SEXUAL RELATIONS and CLASS STRUGGLE

THE NEXT CEN- TURY

An Introduction to 'Sexual Relations and Class Struggle'

Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) was a leading socialist in revolutionary Russia. Her unconventional life matched the extraordinariness of her thinking. Her articles and speeches – an integral part of her activism as a revolutionary C influenced the course of history and, crucially, women's participation in history making. Kollontai's work included

committees that trained women to speak confidently in public and, in particular, address assemblies – during which they were often mocked and put in their place as 'women'. The position presented by Angela Dimitrakaki at Assemblies is a re-scripted Kollontai article titled 'Sexual Relations and Class Struggle', originally published in 1921.

The process of re-scripting constitutes for Dimitrakaki a historical exercise intended to mark the distance crossed (or not) over a century in women's emancipation as part of undoing oppression for humanity at large. Kollontai's original article, in English translation, can be found at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/index.htm>. The contemporary re-scripted version which follows is shorter than the original but the essential aspects of her argument can still be hopefully tested against the promises and failures of revolutionary subjectivity.

Among the many problems that demand the consideration and attention of contemporary mankind, sexual problems are undoubtedly some of

the most crucial. There isn't a country or a nation, where the question of sexual relationships isn't becoming an urgent and burning issue – from the United States where a presidential candidate boasts for 'grabbing women by the pussy', to the protests against raped women in India, to Greece where women selling sex (as dictated by the conditions of their lives) are shamed publicly for bringing 'disease' to the healthy 'family'. Humanity today is living through an acute sexual crisis – and the extreme violence against women is one aspect and symptom of this crisis.

Throughout the long journey of human history, you probably won't find a time when the problems of sex have occupied such a central place in the life of society, attracting the attention of millions of troubled people, when also sexual dramas have served as such a never-ending source of inspiration for every sort of art.

As the crisis continues and grows more serious, people are getting themselves into an increasingly hopeless situation and are trying desperately by every available means to settle the 'insoluble question'. Especially now, after years

of feminist struggles and arguments and theorisations of what unequal, exploitative sexual relations would be; after claiming the right for people to love people of the same sex and to also change sex to become who they understand themselves to be as sexual beings. None of these claims and rights is universally accepted, and in fact these rights are very limited. Sexual liberation has not been achieved.

On the contrary: the conservatively inclined part of mankind argue that we should return to the happy times of the past, we should re-establish the old foundations of the family and strengthen the well-tried norms of sexual morality. The champions of bourgeois individualism say that we ought to destroy all the hypocritical restrictions of the obsolete code of sexual behaviour. These unnecessary and repressive 'rags' ought to be relegated to the archives – only the individual conscience, the individual will of each person can decide such intimate questions. Socialists, finally, assure us that sexual problems will only be settled when the basic re-organisation of the social and economic structure of society has been tackled. These three positions we have had for a hundred years! We are

stuck with them, and we know now, a hundred years later, that women continue to be oppressed in the conservatives' plans as much as in the individualists' practices, since women and men are taken to be different and unequal 'individuals'. A society where girls are forced via marriage to rape and servitude to older men, to what degree is it different to a society where older professors have the power to claim the bodies of young female students, where older women seeing younger men are ridiculed, described as an entertaining novelty of 'kugars' and 'milfs'?

There is a reason why we call society a patriarchy and not merely an androcracy – when no one bats an eyelid when the presidential candidate of the leading state on earth is 70 years old and his wife is 46. And it is the bourgeois ideology of abstract individualism that stands behind this: individuals over 18 come to free consent, allegedly functioning as 'abstract individuals' – apparently without gender, without class, without being subject to power- exactly as 'abstract individuals' are supposed to enter the market to sell their labour. Though we know fully well that women and men do not enter the market as equals to sell the labour, and we have a century of data that tell us the opposite. The labour of women is still paid less than that of men.

As for the third position, that of the socialists, this is the futurological position: the 'when' that never comes. In the meantime, socialist men continue to benefit, as much as nonsocialist men, from the subordination of women, and even from the individualistic approach

to sexual relations that bourgeois men have given them as a gift. It is a great gift: it guarantees the collusion of socialist men to maintaining their patriarchal privilege – well, in circumstances not of their choosing, so why should they be blamed? Yet, by accepting this gift, the socialist men undermine their own struggle, and the objective of bringing forth socialism. Not that there are that many socialist men in this world, but even those that exist should take a long, hard look in the mirror and stop hiding behind the promises about the future. Their future won't come if they subvert it, wittingly or not, in the present. The present is the terrain of all struggles and the only time that can indeed change.

The 'sexual crisis' was particularly acute at the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, when a great social advance pushed the proud and patriarchal feudal nobility who were used to absolute command into the background, and cleared the way for the development and establishment of a new social force – the bourgeoisie. The sexual morality of the feudal world had developed out of the tribal way of life – the collective economy and the tribal authoritarian leadership that stifles the individual will of the individual member. This clashed with the new and 'strange' moral code of the rising bourgeoisie. The sexual morality of the bourgeoisie is founded on principles that are in sharp contradiction to the basic morality of feudalism. Strict individualism and the exclusiveness and isolation of the 'nuclear family' replace the emphasis on collective work that was characteristic of both the local and regional economic structure of patrimonial life. Under capitalism the ethic of competition, the triumphant principles of individualism and exclusive private property, grew and destroyed whatever remained of the idea of the community, which was to some extent common to all types of tribal life.

For a whole century (when these lines were originally written) and

now for two centuries, while the complex laboratory of life was turning the old norms into a new formula of sexual morals, men wandered confusedly between two very different sexual codes and attempted to accommodate themselves to both. And this is what creates the subordination of women today: the compatibility of the two sexual codes, for we can no longer call it a 'confusion'. At the top of the social ladder a bitter battle between two opposing social worlds was fought out. This involved also a struggle between their different ideals and values and ways of looking at things. The peasants, wary of new things, continued to cling firmly to the well tried tribal tradition handed down from their forefathers. And only under the pressure of extreme necessity they modified and adapted this tradition to the changing conditions of their economic environment. As the upper strata of society went about breaking up the old ways, the peasants in fact seemed to be more intent on clinging firmly to their traditions. In spite of the continuous whirlwinds that threatened overhead and shook the very soil under their feet, the peasants – and now we know it wasn't just the Russian peasantry – managed to preserve the basis of their sexual code untouched and unshaken for many centuries. Many women live out this fate today – possibly most women in the world of global capital. But since already 100 years ago there has been 'no defence, no bolt' against sexual conflict. No one can say that only the members of the well-off sections of society experience these problems. The waves of the sexual crisis are sweeping over the threshold of workers' homes, and creating situations of conflict that are as acute and heartfelt as the psychological sufferings of the 'refined bourgeois world'. In 1921, it was said: 'The sexual crisis no longer interests only the "propertied", but also the dispossessed'.

The problems of sex concern all society – including the working class in its daily life and everyone that cannot even be seen to belong

to that class: the redundant bearers of labour power, the 'surplus population', the social waste and abject of capital. When it comes to sex and the position of woman, we have a cross-class culture of consumption: What is the difference between a Wall Street man buying a female escort and a local unemployed man or an impoverished immigrant walking into a brothel in this very city where I speak? The difference is in the product specifications, and the package, and the price of goods, but the exchange performed is the same. As for class solidarity, is it not likely that the 'cheap' immigrant and local unemployed will actually accept the services of a woman as poor as them, of the same class or underclass, who was trafficked to flee poverty? The very few women that buy the services of men who need money do not challenge the vast gendered truth of the sexual exchange. And for us socialists, it wouldn't: our aim is not to make men equal to women in their bondage. Dragging more miserable people to pay for sex – to buy sex as labour power- will not generate more joy or even more revolution.

It is therefore hard to understand why this vital and urgent subject, sexual relations, is treated with

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indifference, when the surplus labour population sells its reproductive capacity to the better-off, when ovaries and wombs, sperm and eggs are drawn into the cycles of exchange-for-profit, when it is now possible (as artists even have done) to trace the trafficked rape of women to all the 'different' societies that comprise a global space ruled by capital; when rather than eliminating the sale of sex, all we have done is to accept that sex, sold predominantly by women, is also work. So, does it serve the revolutionary cause if sex can be exploited openly as work? Now that we have admitted - under pressure from bourgeois ideology - that there is no difference between bringing to the market your brain and your genitals?

Let me just say a few things about this: there is no doubt that anyone selling sex as labour power should

market is not a victory for labour in the context of class struggle. What are the roots of this unforgivable marginalisation of thinking about sex in terms that would place at the centre of this struggle? How can we explain to ourselves the hypocritical way in which 'sexual problems' are relegated to the realm of 'private matters', of the personal rather than the collective? But of course, why would we socialists be held responsible? We lost! And when we lost, the issue of sex was claimed by the capitalist institution of the media: from Playboy to Cosmopolitan capitalism set up its very own, special Sex and Sexuality Ideological Apparatus. An apparatus professing liberalism and a public sphere of sex made up by private media companies with the aim to declare sex a personal choice. And this ideology of 'choice' continues on the electronic platforms where people do product placement: they

The tragedy of our society is not just that the usual forms of behaviour and the principles regulating this behaviour are breaking down, but that a spontaneous wave of new attempts at living is developing from within the social fabric, giving humankind hopes and ideals that cannot - not yet- be realised. We live in the world of property relations, a world of sharp class contradictions and an individualistic morality. We still live and think under the heavy hand of an unavoidable loneliness of spirit. Man experiences this 'loneliness' even in towns full of shouting, noise and people, even in a crowd of close friends and work-mates, even in the interaction with machines. Because of their loneliness, people are apt to cling in a predatory and unhealthy way to illusions about finding a 'soul mate' from among the members of the opposite or even the same sex. They see Eros as the only means of charming away, if only for a time, the gloom of inescapable loneliness. People have perhaps never in any age felt spiritual loneliness as deeply and persistently as at the present time. People have probably never become so depressed and fallen so fully under the numbing influence of this loneliness. It could hardly be otherwise. It is not true that the darkness never seems so black as when there's a light shining just ahead - which was the case around 1920 in some parts of the world. Today there is no light. That is why an industry of anti-depressants thrives, providing millions with the most indispensable commodity of contemporary capitalism - the one that ensures that the workers will go to work, that labour power will reach the job market, with the compensation of living 'healthy', medication-supported, sexual lives.

is seeking the regeneration of the very essence of these relationships. The individualist moans and pines for 'great love', for a situation of warmth and creativity which alone has the power to disperse the cold spirit of loneliness from which present-day 'Individualists' suffer. Serial monogamy is a respected practice among 'free' individuals. The 'crude individualism' that adorns our era is perhaps nowhere as blatant as in the organisation of sexual relationships.

A person wants to escape from his or her loneliness and naively imagines that being "in love" gives him, or her, the right to the soul of the other person - the right to warm oneself in the rays of that rare blessing of emotional closeness and understanding. We individualists have had our emotions spoiled in the persistent cult of the 'ego'. We imagine that we can reach the happiness of being in a state of 'great love' with those near to us, without having to 'give' up anything of ourselves. We think of our relationships with the vocabulary of exchange: the product we desire and may get can prove faulty and then we seek another one. In most cases, the claims we make on our 'contracted partner' are absolute and undivided.

The sexual crisis cannot be solved unless there is a radical reform of the human psyche, and unless the human potential for loving is increased. And a basic transformation of the socio-economic relationships along communist lines is essential if the psyche is to be reformed. This is an old truth', but we are directed away from it: the discrediting of communism



have exactly the same rights and protection as all workers who sell their labour power. This right must be claimed and fought for by the unions. All workers should be equal in the eyes of the market. No discrimination, no stigmatisation. But this admittance is not a joyous moment of liberation: bringing all capacities for human pleasure and fulfilment to the savagery of the

place themselves as products and choose sexual partners according to the appeal of this person's self-display. It is fast, easy, convenient: it does not involve money and profit directly, but it involves the new ground for money: data. The data of sex will influence greatly the outcome of class struggle in our immediate future.

The 'individualists' now, like a hundred years ago, maintain sexual relationships based on the creative principle of friendship and togetherness rather than on something blindly physiological. And yet the individualistic property morality of the present day is beginning to seem paralysing and oppressive. The lonely soul of the individualist

There is a reason why we call society a patriarchy and not merely an androcracy – when no one bats an eyelid when the presidential candidate of the leading state on earth is 70 years old and his wife is 46.

for most people means the discrediting of sexual transformation. The sexual crisis will in no way be reduced, whatever kind of marriage or personal relationships people care to try. History has never seen such a variety of personal relationships – indissoluble marriage with its ‘stable family’, ‘free unions’, secret adultery; lovers living openly together; relationships in threes and even the complicated marriage of four people – not to talk of the various forms of commercial prostitution. But despite all this, egoism has become a cult. And also, capitalism, forcing people to prioritise survival and the pursuit of the wage, takes lovers apart. It breaks marriages but not to bring forth anything better than serial monogamy based on convenience. Or, it forces some groups to attach themselves strongly to the old family way and defend its morals as ‘culture’.

What sexual relationships does labour mobility dictate? Besides this, the idea of ‘property’ goes far beyond the boundaries of ‘lawful marriage’. It makes itself felt as an inevitable ingredient of the most ‘free’ union of love. Contemporary lovers, heterosexual or homosexual, with all their respect for freedom are not satisfied by the knowledge of the physical faithfulness alone of the person they love. To be rid of the eternally present threat of loneliness, we ‘launch an attack’ on the emotions of the person we love with cruelty. We demand the right to know every secret of this person’s

being. The modern lover would forgive physical unfaithfulness sooner than ‘spiritual’ unfaithfulness. He or she sees any emotion experienced outside the boundaries of the ‘free’ relationship as the loss of her/his own personal treasure. Oh – and what I described just now is the progressive, liberal part of society. It constitutes an achievement! But the truth is that we have no new model for love – and those who dare experiment with and practice such a new model in their youth are eventually defeated because the ideology of possession rules society. For, in reality, the psychology of sexual relations is based on two main characteristics:

- Possession: if a contract is not desired, that’s fine. But still there must be a public declaration that ‘he’ or ‘she’ belongs to ‘me’. All that has been achieved is the extension of possession rights to women, in some parts of the world.

- The inequality of the sexes: expressed in every sphere, and also in the sexual sphere. You should not expect Angela Merkel and Christine Lagarde to be caught in a sexual scandal involving their power; but was anyone surprised about Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Bill Clinton? Is it not normal to have the display of sexual aggression as part of male leadership? And don’t women make up the stupid audiences of bad literature and bad cinema, fuelling the production of sentimental and melodramatic and eroticism-driven garbage? Yes, they do. Because the sexes are unequal even in the sphere of emotional experience. The personality of the woman is still judged almost exclusively in terms of her sexual life. Women are made to feel worthless if they have not succeeded in ‘relationships’, even if they are not called ‘spinsters’ any more. And irrespective of the existence of a partner, possession of a child is, above all, proof that a woman ‘has been loved’ or that a woman is ‘not alone’. She is not alone, look, she has a child, she is in a ‘family’. But what are we then to do? Is the radical re-education of our psyche and our approach

to sexual relations something so unlikely, so removed from reality? Couldn’t one say that, on the contrary, while great social and economic changes are in progress, the conditions are being created that demand and give rise to a new basis for a psychological experience that is in line with what we have been talking about?

We can say, like it was said 100 years ago, that the progressive class, as it develops in strength, cannot fail to reveal new ideas about relationships between the sexes that form in close connection with the problems of its social class. But in the century that passed since when this was said, we lost sight of which the ‘progressive class’ is. The collective subject of history that would make history – the working class – was defeated, and now we speak of multitudes and singularities. And it is a complex defeat, one that we have yet to unfathom, but one crucial for understanding why we are no longer making progress in the relations of the sexes – no matter if we say that there is a plurality of sexes, and not just two. On the global plane, ruled by the material conditions, this is of little consequence. On the global plane, we see a world divided very clearly into ‘men’ and ‘women’, where women are the losers and men the winners, and where the still contested exodus of women from home leads them straight to wage slavery – slavery in the factories that make all the objects offered as status symbols, in the factories that require small women’s fingers but also women’s obedience, and in the offices where women were lured en masse to work ‘as needed’ so that they would carry on with their ‘proper’ burden, the hidden and unpaid work of raising a family and reproducing the current workers (the parents) and the future workers, (the children).

Also 100 years ago, when the defeat had not taken place, we were able to say: The ‘captivity’ of women in the home, the way family interests are placed before all else, the widespread exercise of absolute

property rights by the husband over the wife – all these things are being broken down by the basic principle of the working-class ideology of ‘comradely solidarity’. But 100 years later the competition for jobs, within the artificial scarcity of jobs, has broken down any notion of comradely solidarity, and many times in these 100 years women were seen as the enemies of men and were accused of taking men’s jobs. How many times has capitalism pushed women back to the home after it used them when men were at war? How many times has fascism returned to re-assert the subject of history as the local man from whom women and immigrants ‘steal’ the jobs that apparently belong to him? How many times has religion been called to play its nasty role by telling women that a super-human power wants them to slave in kitchens and beds?

And who can argue that today it’s not religion that gives hope rather than the prospect of revolution and sexual freedom for most of the world’s workers? We see then that it is not possible to progress to new values and a new ethos of sexual relationships when antagonism is the reality that organises the society of capitalism. The categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ continue to exist because on the global plane they serve to effect a differentiation among workers, and to justify the exorbitant volume of unpaid labour that capital relies on, much more than it relies on waged labour. But at the same time, it is unthinkable to defer the struggle for sexual revolution, or at least reform, to a future when the bridges to that future are burned. Could it be the case that if we started from another point, from the struggle to address sexual relations, relations that underpin the division of labour and the differentiation of workers, relations that generate the depth of our existential loneliness, another world might begin to emerge?

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...BRINGING A LOT OF SOCIAL IDLENESS AND IMAGINATION