

## 12 Assembling the Audience

### The Spread of the Parliamentary Form in Contemporary Arts

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In 2017, artist Jonas Staal, whose works have been exhibited in various European institutions and biennials over the last decade, published a text entitled “Assemblism.” The neologism allowed him to cast his practice as an artistic and political programme, making the difference between the two domains appear obsolete. Since Staal founded the international organisation New World Summit for the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), his artistic work has stood out due to its political persistence. Particularly alert to political crises occurring throughout the European continent, the Dutch artist has been bringing together a variety of artists, activists, and actors of civil society in art institutions to take issue over the challenges and flaws of contemporary Western democracies. His installations and events have intervened in various venues such as museums and theatres, constantly repurposing them as sites of political gatherings where experiences of resistance against authoritative state power, self-determination, and statelessness could be discussed.

New World Summit has taken place in Berlin (2012), Brussels (2014), Utrecht (2016), as well as in the public space of Dêrik (2015), the autonomous northern Syrian region of Rojava, and has gathered, for instance, representatives of various stateless states and independence movements often classified as terrorists by official states (Staal, n.d.). In a 2018 series of works, Staal developed visual models of parliaments in theatres and museums for actors from political parties, social movements, and civil platforms, calling upon them to join forces against the rise of ultranationalism and the crisis of the European Union. Most emblematic of this series is certainly the *People’s Parliament of Rojava*, a circular building first erected together with locals in the city of Dêrik, in which one of the New World Summit sessions took place. The installation served as a “spatial manifesto” for Rojava’s model of radical democracy established after the 2011 revolution according to the principles of confederalism, gender equality, ethnic inclusion, and social ecology. The *People’s Parliament of Rojava* was then reconstructed in the Van Abbemuseum of Eindhoven as part of the programme *Museum as Parliament*, where it intended “to introduce the ideals of the Rojava revolution to a wider public” (Staal 2018) and, again, to build “new unions” between politicians, activists, and artists from Kurdistan to the Netherlands (Staal 2016, 2017a). The tasks

of bringing a variety of actors together, building alliances, and designing new parliamentary platforms are indeed gathered in the concept of *assemblism*, which confers them as much consistency as intentionality.

The manifest recurrence of forms and concepts throughout Staal's work turn his artistic projects into long-term programmes that relentlessly stick to their political aims. Yet, bestowing the name of assemblism on this programme does not perfect it. It first and foremost points towards a wider tendency in the contemporary art world that Staal's overall work perhaps best epitomises. Staal's attitude, now definable as of an "assemblist" type, illustrates how diverse forms of gatherings have entered the art world on behalf of democratic claims and made it a possible terrain for political demands and participation. The text "Assemblism," thus allows him to chart assemblies and parliaments as ubiquitous gatherings that escape boundaries between art and activism or aesthetics and politics. As a proliferating practice and neologism alike, assemblism can be read as a far-reaching response to ongoing crises of Western representative democracy, a broader urge for collective power, and one that makes Staal's text particularly iconic and worth dwelling on in the context of this volume. However, this urge compels us to interrogate the conditions under which such a power can take shape from within the structures of the art world. As I would like to draw critical attention to, assemblism, by engaging bodies in time and space, inevitably affects and transforms the traditional concept of audience and thus calls for reconsidering it as a primary subject. The projects I will outline in this text all allow for cultural repercussions that the spread of assemblism and its accompanying parliamentary form have on the notion of audience as a collective and plural body. In doing so, they reflect the challenges faced by European contemporary arts and their institutions in the shaping of collective subjectivities and, as Jonas Staal writes, of "new definition[s] of Us" (2017a).

### **Assembling Collective Power**

With its evocation of both political ideologies and artistic avant-gardes of modernism, the creation of an "-ism" grants Staal's text a manifesto character that suggests a ground-breaking impetus to the domains of both arts and politics. The text derives its eponymous concept from Judith Butler's 2015 seminal book *Notes Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly*, where the philosopher analysed street assemblies ranging from the Occupy movement in New York, to Arab Springs and the Gezi Park movement in Istanbul, as well as collective hunger strikes in Guantánamo prison, demonstrations by undocumented migrants and refugees, student protests, and online hacking mobilisations. The crucial contribution of Butler's *Notes* lies in the conceptualisation of these assemblies as embodied practices of radical democracy through concerted and plural action. While street assemblies do not seem to deliver a durable political programme, their "street politics" in fact consist of the new equalitarian way of life that bodies, when gathered in public space, put into

practice. In laying bare the dependence and vulnerability of bodies towards each other and bringing them to the fore of their struggles, assemblies do not solely claim a “more livable life,” but also realise the democratic principles of equality, interdependency, and dependability (Butler 2015, 168–171). In this sense, Butler argues, assemblies prefigure the social order they stand for by *enacting* it collectively in public space, which causes Butler to call them “performative enactments of radical democracy” (218), a democracy that shapes new ways of life and subjectivities. In acknowledging the performativity of assemblies, Butler describes bodies as means and ends of political demands that rise against the dismantling of common infrastructures in charge of life support. Due to their neoliberal privatisations, the spread of precarity as a life regime causes bodies to assemble in public space, reclaiming it as common good. By exposing themselves in assemblies, bodies make their conditions of precarity public and simultaneously protest against them, asserting thereby their right to a “more livable life” (Butler 2015, 193–219). In Staal’s words, “[assemblies] enact a political choreography that suggests the articulation of some form of collectivity” arising from precarity, a “potential class-in-the-making through which a variety of peoples could become aligned” (2017a). Herself involved in the Occupy movement, Butler developed a theoretical language for the political power of bodies and established the concept of performative assembly as core to the understanding of contemporary resistance movements and thus of democracy theory.

In borrowing Butler’s theoretical concept, Staal, for his part, intends to bring the impetus of assemblies to bear on his work in art institutions and to align with their collective power. Above all, the term *assemblism* allows him to define a broader urge to assemble—one that stems from street politics and that his work only strives to bolster. *Assemblism* was also the name of Staal’s 2017 project in BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, in Utrecht, that brought together bodies who had “assembled in resistance, in liberated autonomous zones, occupied buildings, city squares, prisons, and cultural spaces to collectively enact a different demand for egalitarian society” (Staal 2017b). What may at first glance appear as a domestication of street protests’ power by the art world is rather part of his agenda for an unequivocally political art, which, according to the artist, “can help formulate the new campaigns, the new symbols, and the popular poetry needed to bolster the emergence of a radical collective imaginary” (2017a). The concept of *assemblism*, thus, also redefines the role of the artist, making them a social organiser, a producer of alliances between different political formations for whom they provide public platforms and visibility in the art world. Unlike a concept such as *artivism*, the term *assemblism* leaves the notions of *art* and *activism* aside and brings to the fore the aim of building a new resistant and emancipatory collectivity, namely to “*assemble* a new definition of Us” that resists the “Us/Them dichotomy” reignited by the War on Terror since the beginning of the century (Staal 2017a; original italics).<sup>1</sup> Such a collectivity, Staal insists, does not need to rely on some commonality among its members. Rather, it is its

unchosen plurality that makes it capable of “chang[ing] the lines of divisions imposed upon us by an authoritarian world order” (2017a). As distinct from the ephemeral togetherness of *communitas*, the notion of *collectivity* here is intimately related to the capacity of resistance and denotes a political subject taking shape through the act of assembling. Also, the concept of assemblism is destined to break away with disciplinary boundaries, “link[ing] the domains of art, theater, performance, activism, and politics,” suggesting an organic *continuum* between them (2017a). In order to effectively support and collaborate with political struggles, political art and “assemblists,” Staal writes, should “translate prefigurative propositions of alternative institutionality into truly new and durable morphologies of transdemocracy” (2017a)—the latter being a term denoting political mobilisations that escape the forms of “party, state, or capital” through intersectionality and self-governance (Staal 2016). This ambition also goes along with performative redefinitions of art institutions, as Staal’s states about his project *Museum as Parliament*: “In a time of increasing democratic crises that have turned our parliaments into theaters, the project proposes to turn the theater—the museum—into an alternative people’s parliament instead” (2018). Staal’s parliamentary installations, be it in Rojava, Poland, or Scotland, probably best illustrates this act of translation: their architectures and design each reflect the political alternatives they stand for, waiting for bodies to enact them.

While Butler translated the performativity of assemblies in political concepts, Staal’s installations strive to translate it in a durable *praxis* of assemblism capable of implementing itself in different places, spreading its form and consolidating its political potential each time it is activated. The translation of assemblies to assemblism, of streets politics to Staal’s alternative parliaments and summits, resonates with what architect Eyal Weizman—pondering on the continuity of the Arab Spring—named the “twin political apparatuses” of revolutions: “The transformative power of the people in the streets and the ‘democratic assemblies’ able to take power” (2015, 62–63). This interdependency between transformation and negotiation, immanent and organisational power, is also at the core of Staal’s theory and practice of assemblism. In her *Notes*, Butler (2015, 66–98) drew particular attention to their “choreography” and “theatricality,” as well as their “morphology” and “architecture”—all terms acknowledging the very aesthetic work that underlie their collective organisation (see also Staal 2017a). Likewise, morphology and form are key notions for the practice of assemblism if it is to assemble, namely to “formaliz[e], organiz[e] and enac[t]” collective struggles and their imagination: “As artists, we are not *in power*, but through morphology we *give power*: we give *form to power*,” he states (2017a; original italics). The task of artists in the practice of assemblism first and foremost consists of unfolding the political imagination of social movements, as Staal’s project on Rojava illustrates, and channelling and spreading their emerging power—an attitude that Staal defines as “emancipatory propaganda” (Staal 2017a, 2010).

## The Parliamentary Form

As Staal's concept of assemblism strikingly illustrates, this urge for assembling has gone hand in hand with recent renewal of democracy theory reflected by the emergence of concepts such as the aforementioned *transdemocracy* (Staal 2016), *democracy in the present* (Lorey 2020), *experimentalist* (Weibel 2015), or *performative democracy* (Matynia 2009). Each of these concepts allow for the rise of a global activism ranging from square occupations to transnational queer-feminist strike movements. They acknowledge ephemeral, embodied, and at times transnationally coordinated, dimensions of collective action as paramount to the making of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the endeavour to identify and "give form to power" has taken place as much on the stage of political theory as that of art. Over the last decade, various projects of assemblist types have indeed pervaded art institutions, such as museums and theatres, as well as blockbuster exhibitions and biennials, often echoing public assemblies and pointing to the shortcomings of liberal representative democracy.<sup>3</sup> Staal's works probably best exemplify this broad phenomenon through their iconic forms and designs. Interestingly enough, "Assemblism" (2017a) was incidentally published the same year as two large-scale events that seemed to honour and extend its programme—and caused a stir in the European art world. In November 2017, theatre director and activist Milo Rau elaborated on the project *General Assembly* together with the International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM) and installed a "world parliament" for three days at the Schaubühne in Berlin. Also in 2017, the fourteenth issue of *documenta* took place, entitled "Learning from Athens," and directed by curator Adam Szymczyk, whose curatorial concept and public programme was conceived as a *Parliament of Bodies*.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the spread of assemblism, this conjuncture in the 2017 European art world seems to establish the parliament as a travelling signifier that, when appropriated by the sphere of arts, can denote manifold practices. Furthermore, its dissemination attests to the urge to rethink the notion of political assemblies as representative institutions seem to face a crisis. Staal's project *Museum as Parliament* intended to "turn the museum into an alternative people's parliament" (2018–ongoing), while official parliaments have turned into theatres, and theatre director and activist Milo Rau, who started his career by organising and re-enacting trials, nurtures similar ambitions: "We have to develop new, utopian institutions outside of the existing institutions, which will be there when the current ones collapse" (Rau and IIPM 2017, 13). Such programmes, in fact, direct the art world towards an "alternative institutionality," suggesting a certain *parliamentary turn* of contemporary political arts in the face of the crisis of representative democracy.

Claims of alternativeness and utopia gain a different complexity when taken on by artists and institutions, compared to when emerging from the collective imagination of the street and social media, as Butler described. When artistic imagination endeavours to fit in with the assemblist momentum in facilitating platforms for political gatherings, the power of assemblism,

with its boundary-breaking and democratic potential, quickly bumps against the walls of the art institution. To what extent can this power live up to its democratic claims in a theatre or museum, institutions that are symbolically and physically enclosed and privatised? Are these democratic promises compatible with the individualised and marketised figure of the artist in charge of their organisation? What kind of collectivity is capable of emerging when this organisation also includes the body of the audience, a collectivity characterised itself by its fragility (Benthien 2002)?<sup>5</sup> Is the revolutionary potential of precarious bodies assembling in the street capable of permeating the unchosen and plural body of an audience? These are the questions I will try to touch upon in examining two large-scale projects of assemblist type: Milo Rau and IIPM's *General Assembly*, and the public programme of documenta 14, *Parliament of Bodies*, curated by Paul B. Preciado and Adam Szymczyk.

### ***General Assembly***

Rau's call for inventing new institutions is perhaps most tellingly epitomised in the 2017 project *General Assembly*, which intended to install nothing less than a world parliament over three days in Berlin's Schaubühne theatre. The event brought together sixty political actors, activists, lawyers, and intellectuals from highly varied backgrounds around the world to engage them in a democratic debate on human rights violations, flaws of global economy, climate change and international relations that were considered key to 2017 global politics. The idea of a world parliament responded to a simple fact, namely the evident entanglements of German policy in the world market and the lack of legal and democratic institutions to regulate them. These entanglements were charted by the organisers on a planetary scale, measuring their impacts in terms of human labour oppression, transnational armed conflicts, their accompanying population displacements, as well as ecological catastrophes and technological revolution. Advocating thus a non-anthropocentric universalism, the assembly gathered representatives of human, non-human, and non-living actors usually devoid of a political voice within the Bundestag or, to quote Milo Rau (2017, 11), the ones "without a lobby" in the German state's decision-making, though their living conditions are affected by it. During the three days, the assembly gave the floor to trade unionists from around the world, anti-palm oil, climate, human and animal rights activists, a drag queen, a cyborg activist, a representative of anti-natalism, and an opponent of abortion rights, as well as members of authoritarian-conservative parties, just to cite a few (*General Assembly*, n.d.b.). These delegates were selected and contacted by Milo Rau and IIPM prior to the event, as were the observers of the assembly—a group of seven intellectuals, political scientists and lawyers, including, among others, philosopher of democracy Chantal Mouffe, EU-critical historian and film maker Tariq Ali, and bishop and South African mining-workers' rights activist Jo Seoka, who inaugurated the constituent session. In accordance with the model of the Bundestag, all the

sessions were led by a “Council of Elders,” namely the chairs of the *General Assembly* consisting of a president and two vice-presidents who were voted in by delegates at the constituent session on the recommendation of the assembly’s delegates and organisers of the event.

Since the beginning of his work, Milo Rau, in line with Jonas Staal, has opposed an “interrogative and critical” conception of art and advocated an utterly revolutionary and utopic attitude capable of overcoming postmodernity (Staal 2010; Rau 2013, 2018). Embodying this modernist determination, the project of *General Assembly* was accompanied by a manifesto:

War victims, labor migrants, economic and climate refugees, the victims of the dawning ecocide, children, the unborn and the victims of colonial history—they all have no right to a say in the Reichstag. But what would happen if all those whose lives are influenced by the German Bundestag were to assemble and claim their rights? The “General Assembly” and the “Storming of the Reichstag” will give their concerns a voice and offer their non-simultaneity a moment of simultaneity. A local parliament will be replaced by a global parliament. For the first time, the global Third Estate will claim its rights: one world, one parliament!

(Rau and IIPM 2017, 23–24)

The sessions of *General Assembly* were livestreamed in five European theatres: Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers in Paris, Théâtre National Wallonie in Brussels, NTGent, Thalia Theater in Hamburg, and at the SPIELART Theaterfestival in Munich. Here, the notion of *assembly* explicitly alluded to the French Revolution and the subsequent constitution of an *Assemblée nationale constituante*, which served as the official representative of the Third Estate. The entire event was indeed inscribed in the narrative of French and Russian revolutions, symbolically situating itself in their continuity through historical allusions. Consequently, the speakers were featured as delegates of the “global Third Estate” and, during the last session, requested to pass a “Charter for the 21st Century” outlined by the “observers of the assembly.” Two days later, the participants, the audience, and the population of Berlin were invited to meet in front of the Bundestag to perform the *Storming of the Reichstag*. Guided by Milo Rau’s megaphone, the crowd of 500 people surged towards the German Parliament building in reference to the mass spectacle *Storming of the Winter Palace* by Soviet director Nikolay Evreinov, which itself re-enacted the key event of the Russian revolution, staged exactly 100 years earlier in Petrograd. Thus, the assembly of the global Third Estate was staged as a historical upheaval, conflating the present of its performance with past revolutions and utopias.

Over the course of the sessions, this revolutionary narrative was nevertheless carried out with an utterly non spectacular aesthetic, following well-defined procedural parliamentary rules that had been enunciated and approved by the delegates at the opening constituent session. Each delegate



was entitled to ten minutes of speech, votes were cast by a show of hand, questions had to be quick and concise in order to guarantee an equal representation of each delegate and topic. The assembly thus combined deliberation processes and decision-making exactly like usual parliamentary sessions. Conflating parliament and theatre institution, the form of *General Assembly* did not contest the very model of representative democracy. On the contrary, it honoured the theatricality of political representation by allowing delegates to speak for social groups and communities not represented in the parliaments of European nation-states. As a result, the assembly allowed them to acquire a political function unavailable outside of the assembly. Thus, the theatricality of the whole event allowed a thorough imitation of real parliamentary assemblies that actually helped enact its utopic potential; in following the script and playing their roles, the delegates engaged in debates and confrontations with each other, creating, thus, a hitherto non-existent global public sphere, a utopic political structure susceptible of superseding the existing one. In fact, the upstream media coverage of the event, its slogan “Democracy for Everyone and Everything” or “We are the 99 percent” (Rau and IIPM 2017, 24)—alluding to the Occupy Wall Street movement—were directly addressed to the incumbent German government whose policy and decisions the assembly declared as insufficiently democratic. As a matter of fact, members of the Bundestag were invited to attend the sessions and eight of them, mostly from left-wing parties, but including a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), ultimately joined the assembly. Thus, the assembly was performative in that it created an unprecedented political collectivity by enacting it, that is, by enabling a real exchange among its members and making it visible for the audience and the public at large.

The role of the audience in the assembly nonetheless remained consistent with that of the audience in regular parliamentary sessions. Separated from the delegates by a cordon, the audience was part of the parliamentary theatre, and its presence conferred each statement and decision a public character, thus legitimising the truthfulness of the unprecedented event. By listening to the delegates and their claims, the audience of the Schaubühne was addressed as world citizens and constantly reminded of the global entanglements of their Western living conditions, in accordance with Milo Rau’s entire aesthetic-political project of a *global realism* (Rau 2018). However, the second part of the event, the *Storming of the Reichstag*, allocated the audience a more active role in inviting it to run towards the Bundestag with the delegates and a crowd who joined the event, enacting thereby the revolutionary narrative orchestrated by Milo Rau. In fact, the demonstration, by no means self-organised or exposed to any kind of state violence, completely assumed its symbolic and festive character. The model of Nikolay Evreinov’s *Storming of the Winter Palace* is of particular interest here insofar as the original show, arguably a mass spectacle including 8,000 performers and 100,000 spectators, sought to mobilise revolutionary masses and the audience in a collective identity that the performance served both to represent and bring forth (Fischer-Lichte 2005). Staged



out of historical context and devoid of its massive dimension, the *Storming of the Reichstag* was less concerned about the real collectivity it may gather under its banner than about the very symbol it performed for the public at large. When the audience and the crowd quite playfully surged together towards the Bundestag, their performance was staged by author and director Milo Rau, symbolically playing the role of an agitator. Perhaps the demonstration did empower its participants in conveying a sense of belonging to a collectivity hitherto intangible. However, one might confront Rau's dramaturgy with the slogan of the participants' poster "Democracy for Everything and Everyone" and ask whether the audience, instead of performing global citizens or revolutionary masses, was rather cast as a crowd of anonymous bodies in the service of a respected theatre director's ideas. Maintaining the framework of political representation, the overall project of *General Assembly* clearly placed greater emphasis on its symbolic and prefigurative show—the public enactment of a political utopia—than on the real conditions of its collective making. As a result, the audience was rather performing a collectivity whose banners were pre-written by the overall rhetoric of the project—humanity as a "community of fate," participants as "world citizens"—and whose mode of action was dictated by the script of the performance. As powerful the symbol of a world parliament can be, one may ask whether the participants really felt empowered in performing a collective body, or whether the pre-given framework rather deprived them of any capacity of self-determination, and thereby turned the audience into a "powerless public" instead (Argyropoulou 2018, 214–218).<sup>6</sup>

### ***Parliament of Bodies***

In 2017, the decision to extend documenta's large-scale exhibition—held in Kassel since 1955—to Athens responded to three indicators of profound global change: the migratory flows that nation-states have been massively facing since 2015, the accompanying rise of Far Right and Populist movements throughout the world, and the so-called Greek Crisis resulting from the European Union's austerity policy. Greece, and the city of Athens in particular, thus turned out to be at the core of socio-political dynamics, bearing what artistic director Adam Szymczyk has called the "stigma of 'crisis' imprinted on the communal body in a well-known, pseudo-compassionate, moralising, and in its essence neocolonial and neoliberal formula" (Szymczyk 2017, 21). Connected to the German city of Kassel, the Greek capital was thus able to interrogate Europe's democratic foundations and political community supposedly represented by the European Union, and its role as a former colonial power whose cultural imperialism and neocolonial policies continue to this day. As a result, the exhibition foregrounded anti-colonial, transfeminist, and anti-fascist discourses and practices, and fostered a radical criticism of European knowledge production and democratic institutions in view of their limits and exclusions. This endeavour was notably revealed in

the overarching concept of the exhibition, the *Parliament of Bodies*, which suggests a non-logocentric approach to political participation and thus a radical rethinking of European traditional politics. In the context of documenta 14, the *Parliament of Bodies* was both the name of the public programme, curated by biopolitics philosopher Paul B. Preciado, as well as a specific site installed in both Kassel and Athens where artists, intellectuals, activists, and visitors could gather. The programme was first launched eight months before the beginning of the exhibition in Athens' Parko Eleftherias (Freedom Park) at the Municipality Arts Center, a building that used to be the headquarters of military police during the Greek dictatorship. In Kassel, the *Parliament of Bodies* was located in the rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum. Alongside being the most iconic site of documenta, the building was also one of the first public museums in late eighteenth-century Europe, transformed into a parliament in the early nineteenth century, used as a gathering place by the Nazi Party, and wrecked by bombs during the Second World War.

The sites of the *Parliament of Bodies* were designed by architect Andreas Angelidakis in reference to the different layers of both buildings' history. Instead of the "democratic fiction of semicircular amphitheater," it consisted of 68 blocks of ruins that the participants could assemble and disassemble, constructing the parliament as a "political theater every day, interrogating location, hierarchy, visibility, scale..." (Parliament of Bodies 2016). This "soft architecture" resonated with the *open form theory* developed by architect Oskar Hansen in the 1950s. Based on flexibility, participation and the production of relationship, the open form served as another key curatorial concept of documenta 14. In Kassel, the blocks were covered by military patterns, evoking both archaeological ruins and war industry. As a "parliament in ruins," the setting referred to the aftermath of the so-called 2015 long summer of migration and the failure of democratic institutions to represent the new refugee population who had arrived in Greece. "The Parliament was in ruins. The real Parliament was on the streets, constituted by unrepresented and undocumented bodies resisting austerity measures and xenophobic policies," declared curator Paul B. Preciado at the opening of the Parliament (Parliament of Bodies 2017a, n.d.a). Thus, the image of a Parliament in ruins bore a radical political potential by suggesting the decay of the Greek Parliament as both a representative institution and apparatus of the nation-state policy. Recalling Ancient Greece's civilisation, the motif of the ruins demanded a rethinking of the pillars of Western democracy altogether.<sup>7</sup>

This call for political imagination started seven days before the beginning of the exhibition in Athens with the programme "34 Exercises of Freedom." For ten days, artists, philosophers, theorists, and activists were invited in the *Parliament of Bodies* to "write a queer anticolonial symphony of Europe from the 1960s, scripting dialogue and giving visibility to dissident, heterogeneous, and minor narratives" (Parliament of Bodies 2016). The programme thus comprised performances; collective walks and film screenings on torture and military violence during dictatorships; talks from historians on resistance

strategies; inputs by theorists on transgenderism, Black internationalism, and women's activism in Rojava; talks on the memory of Indigenous peoples along the Pacific Northwest Coast; musical interventions; workshops on war traumas and ecosex activism; and DJ sets. This broad spectrum of topics and practices favoured an intersectional and transhistorical approach towards oppression, foregrounding resistance strategies and anti-hegemonic discourse:

The Parliament of Bodies acts against the individualization of bodies but also against the transformation of bodies into a mass, against the transformation of the public into a marketing target. Against essential origins, reified borders, and identity politics, the Parliament of Bodies proposes to act as a space for cultural activism, inventing new affects and creating synthetic alliances between different world struggles for sovereignty, recognition, and survival. Inspired by micropolitical self-organization, collaborative practices, radical pedagogy, and artistic experiments, the Parliament of Bodies is a critical device to queer both the ruins of democratic institutions as well as the traditional formats of the exhibition and public programs.

(Parliament of Bodies, n.d.a)

With its particular emphasis on performance, the *Parliament of Bodies*' programme was predicated on Paul B. Preciado's biopolitical conception of the body as a primary locus of resistance. Perhaps the attempt to create "new affects" and "synthetic alliances" finds its epitome in the *Ecosexual Walking Tour* organised by porn activist and former sex worker Annie Sprinkle together with her partner Beth Stephens in the public space of Kassel. There, performers initiated participants into different ways of having sexual intercourse with nature, encouraging the audience to interact with the air, sun rays, trees, and water. The event also included a protest in the name of ecosex, and all these actions were carried out in a cheerful and festive atmosphere. Although the moment when the performers encouraged the audience to jump together with their arms raised to "let the sun rays penetrate their skin" may evocate a New Age ritual of questionable political relevance, it was meant to promote sexual desire as a ground for more-than-human relationships and new forms of collective subjectivities (Sprinkle and Stephens 2016, 2017). Thus, the concomitance of theory, practice, pedagogy, and aesthetic experiences broke with the logocentrism of the notion of *parliament* in erasing the hierarchies between speech and action, science and art, reason and affect. Accordingly, the *Parliament of Bodies* aimed to constantly question Western cultural conditioning and one's own subject position; a process of *unlearning*, informed by postcolonial theory, guided the overall concept of the exhibition (Szymczyk 2017, 33). In contrast to the world parliament of *General Assembly* that relied on a representative model, the participants of the *Parliament of Bodies* were supposed to exercise equality and freedom in a situated and

processual way, embracing a “presentist democracy” (Szymczyk 2017, 36; see also Lorey 2020, 14–15) that took shape through alliances and affects among political subjects rather than identity and conceptions of the political present as interwoven with past power relations and collective struggles.

The democratic and anti-hegemonic endeavour of the *Parliament of Bodies* can also be applied to its relation towards the documenta 14 public. While a public programme traditionally fulfils an educational function in making the content of the exhibition available to a broader audience, curator Adam Szymczyk (2017, 36) wrote that documenta 14 was “interested in the knowledge that our audience brings with them [...]. Instead of infantilizing and quantifying the audience, documenta 14 hopes to empower visitors as the true owners of documenta, each holding a share in a common undertaking.” In the framework of the *Parliament of Bodies* in Athens, the documenta team collaborated with local actors to build six Open Form Societies on the model of the French *Société des amis des Noirs* founded in 1788. Claiming the abolition of slave trade, the society aimed to create “social and friendly bonds between those who were considered citizens and those who were considered legally and politically unequal” (Parliament of Bodies, n.d.b).<sup>8</sup> The Open Form Societies fulfilled similar aims, giving rise to groups such as the Apatride Society of the Political Others who explore global migration and decolonial discourses, and the Society of Friends of Sotiria Bellou who promote queer and transfeminist politics. This local work in Athens intended to foster models of solidarity, cooperation and alliance building among the public, and to enhance the polyphony of the *Parliament of Bodies*, which certain members of these societies joined in Kassel.

Ultimately, the project *Parliament of Bodies* was oriented against the very notion of a *public programme* as specific to cultural institutions of Western democracy. Instead of considering its public as the marketing target of the blockbuster exhibition, as an undifferentiated crowd of global tourists, it valued “radical subjectivities” (Szymczyk 2017, 32) and a form of collectivity based on alliances and solidarity. Thus, it replaced a “monolithic version of the ‘public’” with “scattered, singularized and networked subject[s]” (Phillips 2013) who were encouraged to enact the parliament together with the organisers, artists, and intellectuals present. In addressing the visitors as living bodies capable of being aesthetically and politically affected, the *Parliament of Bodies* was meant to oppose power structures that underlie Western democratic models and establish resistance, that is, freedom as a primary ground for practices of democracy and thus of collective action. Yet the notion of a public programme is itself infused with power structures. Curator Andrea Phillips has described public programmes as symptomatic of a contradiction that is characteristic of the contemporary art world. This tension lies between the “regulated bodies of those that constitute art’s public (with which it could not do without constitutionally in its normative form) and those same bodies’ desire to learn about, engage with and discuss art and ideas” (Phillips 2013). While public programmes aim at opening the institution, they

“physically and semantically refranchise the basic division between makers and recipients of intellectual production” (Phillips 2013). In other words, the concept of a public programme entertains a fiction of “egalitarian discursivity” while simultaneously maintaining a body of people to “programme” (Phillips 2013). That the *Parliament of Bodies* conceived its public precisely as bodies to empower does not neutralise this power structure intrinsic to institutions of knowledge production. This was notably made manifest during one of the sessions when a visitor addressed the accessibility of documenta for Kassel’s wide population. The visitor underlined the exhibition’s failure to be understood by a broader public, including Kassel’s refugee population, whereas it overtly thematised migration and minority issues. Curator Paul B. Preciado and architect Sandi Hilal—both part of the *Parliament of Bodies*’ programme—engaged in the debate (Parliament of Bodies 2017b), and both made a point of reiterating elements of discourse specific to the exhibition such as the power of art in imagining alternatives and the misleading separation between *us* (the Parliament) and *them* (Kassel’s public at large). In such moments, one may wonder whether the *Parliament of Bodies* really lives up to its anti-hegemonic claims, that is, to what extent the institutional authority of the curator present in the *Parliament* is compatible with a programme based on knowledge de-hierarchisation and unlearning processes. This situation perhaps most tellingly exemplifies the contradiction of a public programme promoting emancipation, resistance, and minor narratives. What is more, the *Parliament*’s programme and documenta 14’s handling of the so-called Greek Crisis proved to be hardly in tune with Athens’ population. The inhabitants notably accused, firstly, the exhibition of encouraging artwashing and crisis tourism, secondly, its discourse on classical heritage of transporting a neo-colonial and neoliberal ideology, and lastly, its overall curation of silencing the invisible “Others” it claimed to give voice to (Plantzos 2019). This clash between documenta 14’s ambitions and the population, plainly illustrated by reactions of local activists, cannot but suggest the exhibition’s failure to open its form and its *Parliament of Bodies*—namely—to spread its assemblist drive outside of institutional power.

The rise of assemblism has thus caused art and its European institutions to interrogate their own participation in the contemporary making of democracy. It has not solely multiplied alliances between artists and activists, but also catalysed their political imagination towards new forms of collectivities. The spread of the parliamentary form in art institutions underpins this collective movement by providing it with arrangements and stages which feature democracy as a mode of enactment and embodiment, and political alternatives as available scenarios. Yet alongside artists’ greater search for political alternatives, the spread of the parliamentary form, as well-meant as it might have been, perhaps also indicates yet another issue alongside the crisis of democratic institutions: the subjacent reshaping of art’s public function in the context of neoliberal cultural policies (Bishop 2012). The injunction of artists, curators, and state institutions to act on behalf of “the public”

in highlighting their commitment to the “common good”—two tasks commonly attributable to parliaments as well—also arises from the erosion of established public services, with the art sphere taking over duties abandoned by political leaders. Phillips (2016, 211) has also diagnosed the emphasis of contemporary art institutions on their civic function as symptomatic of the liberal individualisation of the civic through culture, leading, in turn, to a neoliberal privatisation of the concept of the public. In such circumstances, the spread of parliamentary performances in museums and theatres may just as well standardise nothing more than a “temporary solidarity,” which hardly leads to broader and more sustainable forms of collective action—namely, effective solidarity, beyond art institutions (Phillips 2016, 212). Following this criticism, democratic practices and forms of collectivities staged by alternative parliaments may appear as no less temporary and illusory. Rather than a *performative* or *experimentalist* democracy, their mimicry of political procedures, as in *General Assembly*, or search for other forms of political subjectivation, as in the *Parliament of Bodies*, might be deemed as a generalised theatricalisation of democratic life. The theatre vocabulary is imbued here with Platonic distrust, namely with its pejorative meaning of simulacrum or illusion (Rebentisch 2012). The illusion of solidarity and political participation, staged for and with the audience, would merely maintain the latter’s powerlessness as to state policies.

Nonetheless, reducing the spread of alternative parliaments to mere neoliberal governance technics would provide little regard for artistic imagination and, in some cases—like that of Jonas Staal, Milo Rau and Paul B. Preciado—for commitment to emancipatory struggles. Accounting for the performativity of such works emerging from the art sphere can hardly be tantamount to calculating their impact on society at large. In fact, projects such as *General Assembly* or the *Parliament of Bodies* enact alternative models of political collectivities as much as public assemblies do. They also prefigure the promises of “a future that is yet to be lived out” (Butler 2015, 169) and “*assemble* new definition[s] of Us” (Staal 2017a; original italics). Yet, when not self-organised in the streets but set up in art institutions, the question of the projects’ collectivity shifts to the body of the audience as a collective of bodies that are yet to assemble. As I would like to suggest, reconsidering the notion of audience helps negotiate the challenges posed by assemblism to art practices and institutions, precisely because assemblist morphologies and forms are able to shape its unchosen and plural collectivity as a political subject. Yet, just as Staal (2017a) reminds of the relation between power and form, the notion of subject is crucial here because it links power and agency. Considering the audience as a political subject thus requires allowing for its plurality and asking about the forms of collective subjectivities and actions that art can encourage and accompany. If art and its institutions choose to ally themselves with global activism, support the dynamics of assemblism, and effectively *give form* to an emancipatory power, they may need to identify and recognise the power structures they themselves exercise over the body of

the audience—in both repressive and emancipatory terms. As it reveals issues of power and agency, the audience indeed proves to be the first subject of experiments with radical democracy and redefinitions of collectivity. And it is its very plurality that calls for more exercises of freedom.

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## Notes

- 1 “‘Us’ can be the self-proclaimed, enlightened liberal-democratic order (there’s not much liberal nor democratic about it) versus ‘Them’: the so-called terrorist, barbarian other. ‘Us’ can be the white, American upper and middle classes reinforcing their privilege against ‘Them’: people of color, immigrant communities, Muslims. ‘Us’ can be the Brexit voters claiming their country back from ‘Them’: the Eurocratic elites and the so-called tsunami of refugees” (Staal 2017a).
- 2 Isabell Lorey (2020) traces the global spread of transnational queer-feminist strikes back to the protests against feminicides initiated by the Argentinian movement NiUnaMenos in March 2015 in Buenos Aires, followed by the Black Protests of Polish women against the tightening of abortion laws in 2016. Both protests have since aroused solidarity throughout queer-feminist movements around the world.
- 3 In the context of biennials, one may think of architects Eyal Weizman and Samaneh Moafi’s spatial intervention at the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016) entitled *Roundabout Revolution Folly*, which commemorated the 1980 student protests against the then dictatorial regime of South Korea, as well as the more recent events of the Arab Spring, both initiated on roundabouts. In front of Gwangju’s train station, the architects constructed a pavilion equipped with a large round table and a film studio, inviting the population to assemble: “To be translated into political power, the immanent power of the people at the roundabouts should be complemented by sustained work at round tables, the latter standing for the slow making and negotiation that politics demands” (Weizman 2015, 62). For another large-scale theatre project addressing political representation and participation, one may think of the 2015 project *Théâtre des Négociations* organised by Paris theatre Nanterre-Amandiers together with the Institute of Political Studies, theatre director Philippe Quesne, historian of literature Frédérique Ait-Touati, and philosopher Bruno Latour. For three days, the theatre invited students from around the world to re-enact the United Climate Change Conference (COP 21) and rethink the political representation of human collectivities and non-human forms of life. Three years later, with the rise of the global climate strike movement, Fridays for Future, it became clear that the assembly ultimately had to leave the conference hall and theatre to take place on the streets.
- 4 Jonas Staal also values the eponymous concept of documenta’s programme in “Assemblism” when he claims that “an architecture of collective power [cannot] exist if the collective is not literally present at that very moment. If the bodies disperse, the Parliament of Bodies ceases to exist” (Staal 2017a). What is more, Staal’s programme of assemblism keeps on expanding through the artist’s collaboration with curator and dramaturge Florian Malzacher who, in his 2020 book, *Gesellschaftsspiele. Politisches Theater heute*, commented on Staal’s



*New World Summit*, the aforementioned *Théâtre des Négociations*, and Milo Rau's *General Assembly*, presenting the notion of assembly as a core form of contemporary political theatre (Malzacher 2020, 113–134). Since then, Malzacher initiated the pluri-disciplinary project *Gesellschaftsspiele: The Art of Assembly*. Based on his book, and conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project seeks to “brin[g] together protagonists from various fields of art, politics and theory to speculate on the potential of assembly in a time of experiencing that nothing is certain—a time in which every form of physical togetherness has become precarious” (*The Art of Assembly*, n.d.).

- 5 In his book *The Audience*, theatre scholar Herbert Blau defined the audience as a “body of thought and desire” instead of a “congregation of people,” as a “consciousness constructed” instead of an “entity to begin with” (Blau 1990, 28).
- 6 Returning to Butler's *Notes* (2015) to interrogate the category of the public, Argyropoulou (2018, 215) asks: “How then may performance practices, publics, institutions and machines resist performing powerless publics and initiate instead functional and imaginative (micro) forms of a liveable life as ongoing processes of social improvisation?”
- 7 For another *assemblist*-type project, based on the ruins of a parliament and claiming an immanent democracy, see the work *Common Assembly* by architect collective DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency) in Sandi et al. (2013, 150–177).
- 8 For the complete list of the Open Form Societies, see *Parliament of Bodies* (n.d.a).

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