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Theatre and the public

Badiou, Rancière, Virno

Simon Bayly

The theatre has always carried a special and contested significance for thinking about ways in which the polis, collective or community might symbolically grasp its elusive self-actualization. Yet, in the late twentieth century, considerations of the theatre as the place where something like ‘the public’ is made present – or fails to be made present – were eclipsed by the imperatives of performance and performativity, in which ‘theatre’ was often occluded as both philosophically and politically retrograde. Nonetheless, the theatre is still perhaps one of the cultural venues to which the philosophically inclined might turn for a thought-provoking encounter, echoing Roland Barthes (an ardent supporter of the theatre in his early career) when he remarked that ‘I’ve always liked the theatre, yet I hardly go there any more.’¹ Moreover, the theatrical – rather than increasingly banal conceptions of performance – has resurfaced in some of the most influential contemporary philosophy (the writings of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière are the examples considered here) not simply as a specific object of attention but as the source of both a conceptual apparatus and a series of metaphors that are once again deployed to think not just about the politics and aesthetics of collective activity, but about the advent of political subjectivization *tout court*.

In selecting the problematic term ‘public’ to denote a form of the collective, my intention is to refer not to the diverse set of partial publics that might make up any particular occasion of assembly, but to the fact that the theatre constitutes a collective as a public and, more specifically, as an audience. This fact – that the very notion of the public is dependent on a theatrical division of actor and spectator – would still seem to be profoundly and problematically connected with the etiolated political conceptions of the public currently in circulation. Throughout political, philosophical and artistic history, the production of spectators – the theatre’s constitutive function – has been regularly condemned, from Rousseau to Situationism to the current

and ‘relational’ turn in contemporary art practice. The claim restaged here is that the theatrical is still what makes a political problem of something like ‘the public’, which in many contemporary philosophical understandings no longer appears at all.

Making public

The lack of the appearance of a collective political subject is embraced by contemporary philosophies of multitude, which refuse any sense of the necessity for the specularization that underpins the concept of the public. In its Hobbesian origins, the self-destructive and dangerously indeterminate multitude had to be transformed into ‘the people’ by being bound into singular subjection to the state, its laws and ultimate monarchical authority. This subjection takes place through myriad forms of visibility, initially enforced and subsequently self-administered, in which the spectatorial relationship is central. In the contemporary re-evaluation of multitude, its Hobbesian disavowal is entirely inverted.² In this understanding, peoples and citizens become reactionary formations allied with an anachronistic statism in rapid retreat in the face of ‘empire’, a world structured primarily by global flows of capital and economic migration. Under the regime of empire, those collections of individuals previously named as the masses, the proletariat or the working class come to constitute the multitude, a term which acquires an almost incantatory, prophetic status as the name of an ever-emergent collective social subject that is unmediated, revolutionary, immanent and affirmative, refusing any form of historically established organization or mode of specularization. Given the already copious commentary, here is not the place to examine in detail the many invocations of multitude, other than to affirm that the very possibility of a human future is often predicated on the emergence of multitude in a manner that has to remain axiomatically unpredictable yet entirely necessary. However, it is not at all clear

how multitude as either political (non-)formation or philosophical concept can do without specularization. It is perhaps equally questionable whether its declared survival strategies of imperceptibility, exit and escape within the organizing logic of the powers-that-be do not in fact manifest themselves through an aesthetic that uses at least some theatrical means.

In fact, it is precisely towards the theatricalized appearance of different constituencies of multitude that so-called 'relational' or 'socially engaged' art practices have orientated themselves. Recent publications that gather up the eclectic array of artistic practice in this field include Nicolas Bourriaud's much-cited and derided *Relational Aesthetics*, Bruno Latour's exhibition and catalogue *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* and Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*.³ These texts explore a wide range of contemporary art (and non-art) practices which share an interest in diverse forms of audience participation and engagement in which the remaking of social relations is central. They include: Rirkrit Tiravanja's genial invitations to gallery-goers to join him in cooking and eating Thai food in re-creations of his own apartment, Suzanne Lacy's stagings of a series of non-fictional large-scale interactions between Californian police and youth gangs in a parking lot or basketball court, as well as a range of more antagonistic or interventionist works by individual artists and collectives. These often take place in locations and with people identified as either the post-colonial victims of global capital (economic migrants, criminalized sectors of the populace such as prostitutes or drug users, the inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification) or, at the other extreme, in antagonistic or playful confrontations with its chief orchestrators (multinational corporations, free-market trade organizations, civic authorities).

One example here would be the ongoing project *Je et Nous* by the collective Campement Urbain. This consists of an orchestrated and documented process of 'community' consultation in an economically depressed, ethnically diverse, Parisian suburb, otherwise notorious only as a centre for the violence of the riots of 2000. The central proposal of the project is the collective construction and upkeep of a 'useless, fragile and non-productive' contemplative space for single persons – a kind of anti-panopticon – situated in a local open space. Its main function is to offer 'a place open to everyone, where people can step away from the community under the protection of the community ... a place for hanging out and getting together but a "one-seater"', as it were, where people can sample

the attractions of solitude.⁴ The political significations here are fairly clear; this is a place that suffers not so much from a deficiency of the social bond but from its dysfunctional excess, in which a solitary place for thinking and reflection is almost unimaginable. Other aspects of the project include the creation of a series of videos and photographs of residents wearing black T-shirts emblazoned with texts of their own improvisation, such as 'I often like to be alone, it helps me to concentrate', 'I want an empty word that I could fill' and 'Here is how others see me'. Like many works of its kind, *Je et Nous* does not offer itself up as an aesthetic experience for the casual viewer in the typical art contexts in which its documentary traces are disseminated. Indeed, its inimicality to such contexts is part of the politics of its aesthetic. This paradoxically gives it an inaccessible exclusivity more familiar from the you-had-to-be-there of the theatre performance, but with the added qualification that simply being there might itself be inadequate in comparison to being a participant in the extended temporality of the work itself.

From a critical perspective that broadly commends this type of work (as well as articulating its often problematic status as art), the task for art in the 'post-democratic' era is to *make things public*, in all the connotations of that phrase, including a preference for a certain kind of transparency and the rejection of tricky mimetic or fictionalizing strategies, which often do not translate well to the transnational spaces of display in the art world. In practical terms, art's paradoxically perverse task then becomes the modelling of localized forms and places of collective subjectivity – association, gathering, meeting, encounter, congregation – that use theatrical means to overcome theatre as a separating power, one that is essentially allied to encysted and reactionary forms of social organization. This task is not pursued solely through a Brechtian-style representational critique but in the transformation of the terms of the encounter itself. At the heart of this process is the thorough reorganization of the 'address' of the artwork, in terms of both its location and the temporal and spatial configuration of its stagings of audience, actor and event, which, like *Je et Nous*, refuse unitary conceptions of artwork and authorship.

In its solicitation of the desire for individuality, solitude and contemplation in the midst of multitude, *Je et Nous* draws on another thinking of the public (via its related term, 'community') that we can provisionally mark as recommencing in earnest with Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* and Nancy's *The Inoperative*

Community.⁵ This line of thought evidences a profound suspicion of the communitarian, the collective and any other notion that seeks to displace the primacy of the self-emancipated individual-as-singularity or other non-Cartesian forms of the subject. For these thinkers, literally nothing good can come from attempting to think the public as such, let alone make the public happen or appear as such, because it is precisely this sort of totalizing gesture that annihilates the fundamental equality and heterogeneity of an axiomatically indefinable social formation that is always ‘to come’. (It is precisely such perpetually deferred formation that the philosophy of multitude so insistently revalues as already here.) Put in theatrical terms, what emerges from this perspective is the necessity of a space of distance and difference in which the right to silence, non-participation and the possibility of unprescribed individual acts of critical imagination are paramount.

The two French thinkers whose work is currently particularly influential on European and anglophone thinking on art, aesthetics and politics – Badiou and Rancière – are clearly aligned with this tradition. In broad terms, while there are obvious differences and disagreements, there are also a number of significant points of convergence in their sense of the conjunctions between politics and aesthetics. First, politics is a fundamentally rare occurrence that interrupts the going-on-being of the existing state/situation (Badiou) or ‘police order’ (Rancière) via a disjunction manifested from within a localized destabilization of the ‘space of placements’ or ‘distribution of the sensible’ of that same state or order. Second, this emergent event of politics and its subsequent trajectory can neither be anticipated nor calculated. Third, the process of subjectivization that occurs during these moments of politics is the antithesis of any form of social body caught up with its own process of unification or belonging, whether organized around class, ethnicity, nation, language or any other form of politics based on identity. In fact, there is marked resistance to any developed sense of an organized, collective political subject in favour of, in Badiou, a purely formal process of generic and possibly temporary subject-formation in the process of fidelity to a truth. Rancière’s formulation is more or less content with the category of the workers or proletariat, figured from within specific historical contexts (mostly in nineteenth-century France), as ‘the part who have no part’. The latter stage their own disaggregation at the same time as they make tactical use of the means of articulation and visibility that are otherwise refused them by the police order, by acting as if they were indeed already in their rightful posses-

sion. Fourth, and most significantly for my purposes here, both Badiou and Rancière are philosophers of politics who both literally and metaphorically deploy the aesthetics of the theatre in different ways to articulate the scene in which the necessarily abbreviated occasions of politics take place. In doing so, they declare that politics as such does indeed require a scene, a stage, some actors, some spectators, a text and, in effect, the entire aesthetic paraphernalia of the theatrical assemblage.

The two theatres

In Badiou’s work, art is one of the four conditions which permit philosophy to think the truth procedures that it cannot produce out of itself. According to a similar logic, Badiou’s division of art via a so-called ‘inaesthetics’ is remarkable for the almost classical distinction made between various art forms; the poem, the painting, the novel, the cinema, dance and the theatre all ‘think’ in their own particular fashion and must themselves be thought separately and counterposed. So the task for ‘Theses on Theatre’ is

To establish – as we must for every art – that theatre thinks. What should we understand here by ‘theatre’? Contrary to dance, whose sole rule is that a body be capable of exchanging the earth with the air (and for which even music is not essential), theatre is an assemblage ... of extremely disparate components, both material and ideal whose only existence lies in the performance, the act of theatrical representation.⁶

Beyond the scant five pages of the ‘Theses’, Badiou’s explicit consideration of the theatre receives a more extended treatment in his earlier *Rhapsody for the Theatre*.⁷ In that text, the theatre is predicated on an understanding of performance as the collision of the contingent and the necessary, in which an event – Theatre with a capital T – might or might not emerge out of a featureless expanse of theatre – small ‘t’. As the ‘Theses’ continue:

these components (a text, a place, some bodies, voices, costumes, lights, a public...) are gathered together in an event, the performance, whose repetition, night after night, does not in any sense hinder the fact that, each and every time, the performance is evental, that is singular.⁸

Even from this short extract, it should be apparent that Badiou’s conception of theatre is, as he suggests, ‘isomorphic with that singular activity we call “politics”’ (RT 190) and with the theory of the event and the state or situation that it traverses. Here, the state is conceived both as a political entity and as the network of relations

which structure what Badiou calls the ‘situation’, the latter being something akin to the set of discrete elements counted in a ‘pure’, numerical fashion as a multiplicity. Badiou opposes ‘the theatre’ to ‘Theatre’, echoing his philosophical distinction between the state and the situation. The former denotes the art of the state of things as a closed set of relations, a status quo governed by power grounded in a specific set of knowledges (the ‘encyclopedia’). Representing representations, it states the state, so to speak, as the set of organized opinions that form the necessary basis of all sociality – even if it purports to represent revolution – but without saying anything about it. ‘Theatre’, on the other hand, says the state as a situation, not as a form of description or analysis at the level of content, but rather as what delimits the ‘stateliness’ of theatre. In such a saying, Theatre exposes ‘the theatre’ to the militancy of the event; Theatre will have been that which interrupted ‘the theatre’ and is thus a rare and anomalous phenomena which can be encompassed by neither a political programme nor a theatrical style. As such, Theatre is a momentary but momentous event for the spectator equipped with a sensibility that is primed for such occurrences. The act of witnessing and subsequent public declaration for the event (did you see that?) inaugurates both the actualization of the event itself and the becoming-subject of whoever engaged in such an act of fidelity.

Badiou remarks that, contra the typical discourses surrounding the arts, theatre does not in fact address a public; rather, it addresses a spectator (RT 188). Only the cinema, the art of capital, requires a public: anonymous, general, a whole whose parts are infinitely replaceable. A National Theatre can be imagined and indeed effectuated, but a National Cinema? Cinema is international, global, but private, Badiou continues; it bears no relation to the state. However, if there have been times when theatre has literally been summoned in and out of existence by royal command, every theatre performance today still carries a sense of being a ‘command performance’. According to Badiou, the theatre (small ‘t’) is the art of the state, isomorphic with politics and so, even today, all theatre is official in an obscure sense, with or without the ‘royal’ or ‘national’ epithets.

Whilst some might want to resist such a hard and fast distinction between theatre and cinema in terms of the politics of spectatorship, there is nevertheless a strong resonance to the remark that ‘what is said in the theatre, even in a school hall with two small lanterns, is said *en majesté*’ (RT 203, translation modified). It demands a spectator whom it can address as a citizen-subject, someone who, in some obscure way, consents to being put in his or her place. For Badiou, Theatre will thus be an event – something that happens, something particular, localized and situated – that upsets this address, emerging from within theatre itself, out of a certain ‘void’ within it. But in what ways does this upset appear? What kind of subjectivity does it generate? Or is the truth of this event only properly available, as with Kant’s detached observers of the French Revolution, to the disinterested onlooker, spectating upon the actions of those whose generic



humanity appears upon a political stage of their own construction?⁹

Yet, in much the same way as Badiou’s examples of political events and accompanying manifestations of a generic humanity are restricted to a wholly orthodox set of historical examples drawn from French history (mostly simply marked by years such as 1789, 1871 and 1968), reading Badiou himself on theatre, we find ourselves not straying very far from the main playhouses of Paris or from a canonical set of dramatic references. In his *Rhapsody*, Badiou adopts the Platonic dialogue form to stage an interlocutor called the Empiricist. The Empiricist forces the philosopher to provide actual examples of theatrical practice that might constitute an event; left to his own devices, it is clear that the philosopher, like Melville’s Bartleby, ‘would prefer not

to'. He does finally succumb to the provision of lists of playwrights, directors and performers – but they are entirely unexceptional in their canonical, high-cultural affiliations. As Badiou ventriloquizes through the accusation of his Empiricist: 'and all these spectacles in the great official temples ... not one small place ... none of the provinces.... Your "diagonal" is that of the opulent and of big business' (*RT* 201, translation modified). Being generous, we might be content with the reply that theatre is always and only a matter of national culture, wherever and whenever it takes place, redeemable only by the Theatre-event, individual performances of particular texts figured through particular names of playwrights, directors (all male) and performers (axiomatically only female, according to a curious Lacanian logic deployed by Badiou) that may or may not be grasped by individual spectators. Taking a less benevolent attitude to the somewhat awkward humour of this text, the radical break announced by Badiou's thinking of being and event appears, in its theatrical incarnation, curiously cauterized by a desire for continuity with the familiarity of an institutionalized Parisian theatrical tradition and an orthodox notion of aesthetic subjectivization.

What is entirely absent in Badiou's inaesthetics are the kinds of hybrid collective artistic practices, alluded to earlier, that have profoundly expanded and traduced the traditional boundaries between the live and visual arts and between art and progressive practices of social, political and ecological transformation since the early twentieth century. Many of these practices may not only be read as performance, but as assemblages that – contra a Debordian refusal of spectacle – explicitly make self-conscious uses of spectacular tactics. Before following through the implications of this omission – which might, albeit problematically, be put down to questions of age, taste and aesthetic sensibility – however, let us briefly explore Jacques Rancière's understanding of spectatorship, theatricality and equality, given that he has paid considerable attention to the kinds of artistic practice that appear to have left little mark on Badiou's inaesthetics.

Separation and the sensible

Rancière's interventions into the politics of aesthetics seem to share Badiou's more positive regard for theatre and some version of generic humanity. Detecting an emergent 'theatrocracy' across Rancière's work, Peter Hallward writes: 'perhaps the most fundamental, and illuminating, dimension of Rancière's anarchic conception of equality is that which relates to theatre – in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the

term'.¹⁰ Hallward provides no fewer than seven ways in which this conception of equality (the axiomatic assumption of which is for Rancière the primary agent of any political sequence) might be considered as 'theatrocratic': in its constitution as spectacle via the separation of stage and audience, its artificiality, its privileging of multiplicity over unity, its disruptive capacity, its contingency, its improvisatory character and, finally, its liminality – a propensity to blur the difference between art and non-art.

Rancière himself states unequivocally: 'this aesthetic regime of politics [understood as the contemporary regime from which we may or may not be emerging] is strictly identical with the regime of democracy, the regime based on the assembly of artisans, inviolable written laws, and the theatre as institution'.¹¹ Furthermore, writing in *Disagreement*, he defines politics as:

Performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the *demos* exists and a place where it does not ... Politics consists in playing or acting out this relationship, which means first setting it up as a theatre, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected.¹²

This is political subjectivity figured in terms that theatre practitioners and thinkers are familiar with, from Brecht to Augusto Boal. The figure is that of the 'spect-actor', who exercises active powers of critical interpretation as well as the powers of participation evoked earlier – taking up his or her rightful place in the scene itself or, rather, literally creating a stage and establishing a theatre where none was supposed to exist according to the logic of the established order. In short, Rancière's version of the spect-actor takes up the mimetic function that Plato found so problematic in his conception of the *polis*. The spect-actor supposedly confounds the Platonic order of function and place – everyone in his place and a place for everyone – on which the *polis* as such is founded.

Rancière is more interested than Badiou in taking seriously some of the critical issues facing contemporary art practices, especially those which explicitly focus on remaking the social bond or staging forms of political antagonism and dissensus through renegotiations of the experience of spectatorship. However, he is consistently critical of most of these practices, including that of the *Je et Nous* project outlined earlier, which are construed as so many mistaken variations on a theme that is as old as modernity itself: the aesthetic break that proposes the dissolution between life and art. Thus, they can effectively be figured as minor

cultural by-products in some much larger aesthetic regime within which they merely amplify a series of ill-fated breaks staged by previous incarnations of the avant-garde. In fact, Rancière is unequivocal; it is precisely the theatre as allegory of inequality that must be refused. The only good way to approach a so-called 'confusion of genres' that characterizes the space of contemporary art is to develop a practice that

invalidates the opposition between activity and passivity [between performers and spectators] as well as the scheme of 'equal transmission' and the communitarian idea of the theatre that makes it in fact an allegory of inequality. The crossing of the borders and the confusion of the roles should not lead to some sort of 'hypertheatre' turning spectatorship into activity, by turning representation to presence. On the contrary, it should question the theatrical privilege of living presence and bring the stage back to a level of equality with the telling of a story or the writing and the reading of a book. ... It calls for spectators who are active as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.¹³

The deconstructive logic of the observation that the suppression of the distance between actor and spectator might actually be constitutive of that same distance is obviously worth noting. But despite its overtly theatrocratic orientation, Rancière's thinking nevertheless appears to engage in a kind of disappearance of the theatrical the closer it approaches some of its actual instances in contemporary art, which seem just too – how to say it? – too theatrical, too sutured to the delusions of belonging or over-earnest identification. Amidst the proliferating language of stage, actors and scene in his writing – and in an opposite move to Badiou's preference for dramatic formalism – Rancière's preferred examples of successful contemporary artistic work are photographic works or video documentaries with overt political significations which, largely due to the economics of artistic presentation and distribution, are typically shown at large-scale art shows and biennales. Their formal organization of spectatorship (the no-nonsense contemplation of an image or screen) endows them with an appropriately out-of-place aura when surrounded by the 'confusion of genres' manifest in so much relational or socially engaged art practice that has found significant curatorial support.¹⁴ While an effective *aesthetics* of politics would seem to be one that both proposes and undoes the terms of its theatrical self-presentation, the *politics* of an aesthetic practice that attempts the same thing

are seen as deluded. With echoes of Michael Fried's infamous denunciation of theatricality in 'Art and Objecthood', it seems that, for Rancière, artistic *practice* infected by a 'postmodern' theatricalized aesthetic is congenitally unable to keep separate what should remain apart according to the *theory* of a progressive distribution of the sensible. What matters is that right-thinking spectators and performers become both narrators and readers of their own stories and do not succumb to the incoherent temptations of pseudo-activity, pseudo-collectivity or pseudo-community.

The main problem here is that Rancière's conception of what might be involved in the 'setting up of a theatre' appears magically inoculated against the effects of the police order, preserving its militant challenge to the distribution of the sensible in a way that seems entirely implausible under contemporary cultural conditions. Badiou is surely correct in asserting that the theatre today is indeed 'more solidly state-like than the State itself ... essentially under surveillance' and only ever 'the possible place of political effects: *an official conspiracy*' (RT 202). The entirely diminished status of the theatre as a site of such effects cannot be wished away by a simple reevaluation of the transgressive vices attributed to mimesis and poesis by Plato or the city authorities in nineteenth-century European cities. After all, the characteristics of Rancière's theatrocracy as delineated by Hallward – spectacular, artificial, multiple, disruptive, contingent, improvisatory and liminal – are precisely those used to describe the aesthetics of capital. While this is in itself hardly a decisive challenge – every critical practice has to work from the inside of the police order or situation – it is hard to square Rancière's conceptions of politics and aesthetics with the suggestion that a so-called 'confusion of genres' must literally be brought to book, back within a clear-headed and egalitarian regime of the literary-critical, the writerly and the readerly. In this understanding, the theatrical can only become emancipatory through an act of self-evisceration in which its histrionic qualities are once again excised, an act that has long characterized philosophy's persistently uneasy relationship with the theatre.

There is something troubling in this militant theatrical archaism (consistently setting itself up against anything and everything 'postmodern'), which is perhaps the absence of the trouble provided by the histrionic sensibility itself.¹⁵ One aspect of such a sensibility is perhaps a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the messy affects and effects generated by the forms of being-together-apart offered by the 'confusion of genres' that is perhaps more characteristic

of the theatrical in its multifarious historical and contemporary manifestations than any hygienic regime of distance and separation. To attempt to realize that ambivalence productively (i.e. for the realm of artistic or political appearances), without seeking to overcome it in the name of thought, is a continuing difficulty. In fact, for Rancière, it is simply neither possible nor desirable:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not a rhetorical persuasion about what has to be done ... It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. Now this political effect operates under the condition of an original disjunction, of an original effect, which is the suspension of any straight cause–effect relationship. The aesthetic effect first is an effect of dis-identification. ... Now there is no measure of the dis-identifying effect.¹⁶

Rancière's insistence on an 'original disjunction' between political ends and aesthetic means implicitly and explicitly informs much recent critical writing on theatre and performance from within their own disciplinary perspectives.¹⁷ These perspectives suspend a belief in the earlier promise of performance from the 1960s and 1970s as a means of direct political transformation, but acknowledge in different ways that the politics of theatre can now only be entrusted to the *possibility* of heterogeneous and incalculable imaginings by individual spectators of the *possibilities* of a new 'cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible'. In other words, art is political, ethical or simply educational to the extent that it gives up the 'passion for the real' and refuses to 'do' politics, ethics or pedagogy in ways that they might be recognized as such in any particular politico-aesthetic configuration. This is achieved through the way in which the distance of aesthetic separation (taken as the integral to the theatrical) contingently permits the spectator an awareness of the inconsistencies in the seemingly ruthless machinery of representation and in his or her collective subsumption within it as a spectator. But there can be no expectation that this will be directly translated into action in any specific milieu, either in or outside of the immediate context of spectatorship itself.

With respect to the constitutive constraints and limitations of a subjectivity figured through spectatorship,

the argument here has little to contest with the cautious politics of the post-Brechtian perspectives of these approaches. However, the implicit assumption that theatrical spectatorship is the only (or at least the hegemonic) mode of contemporary subjectification is surely open to question. That question would be directed by a sense that a *theatrocractic* thinking of politics might occlude the very 'new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation' that it suggests might be made possible. In this respect, the philosophical diminishment that Badiou stages in his imaginary interlocutions with 'the empiricist', who demands examples of exemplary theatrical praxis, testifies to an all-too-familiar sense of their rarity in both theatrical and political experience. Of course, there is a much wider question at work here about the transitivity between the practice of philosophy and the world it attempts to articulate and address, as well as the limitations of too concrete or specific an analysis. However, while Rancière is brilliantly insightful about the pitfalls and paradoxes of the aesthetic regime in both politics and art, it seems that the *idea* of theatre as the public scene of a dis-identified community is infinitely more preferable to him in both metaphorical and literal terms to any of its actual attempted manifestations.

It would seem that the theatre-as-ideal, untainted by a 'confusion of genres', functions in both these philosophies (Badiou's and Rancière's) as an archaeological figure of the visible materialization of being-together-apart that is otherwise so conspicuously absent or problematic in contemporary thought. Such an appearance is invoked everywhere but exists nowhere, except in an unspecified future 'to come', in isolated episodes of urban revolution or in the archives of working-class history. For both Badiou and Rancière, it seems that it is only by paradoxically adhering to its 'proper' function as the production of the public as citizen-spectators that the thankfully creaky machinery of theatrical representation might work its dis-identifying political effects. While for Rancière the separation provided by spectatorship permits the worker to abandon the place of labour and activity prescribed for him or her by the police order, for Badiou it is the possibility that this state-sanctioned organization of bodies might be rendered eventful through its rare and unwitting perforation by uncanny Theatre-events that makes it isomorphic with a properly political process. Taken together, these determinations imply that the theatrical function – both inside and outside the theatre itself – is simply to remind the spectator of what it feels like to be put in one's place by taking one's allotted seat and

then to re-imagine, though entirely individual acts of ostensibly emancipatory interpretation or fidelity, alternatives to its space of placements in other times and in other places.

The basic conceit of the 1980s' BBC television cult children's programme, *Why Don't You Just Switch Off Your Television Set and Go and Do Something Less Boring Instead?* made it possible to think of oneself as an energetic and civic-minded variety of couch potato without actually having to leave the couch. Is the theatre's public purpose to convoke the possibly eventful assembly of a generic multiplicity of spectators – while at the same time symbolizing their moribund constitution as an audience – before continuing with business as usual and getting on with the show?¹⁸ The flipside of this argument would be to suggest, as Rancière implies, that artists might be better off using their skills towards the representation of proletarian life (and death) within the confines of the public places traditionally set out by the state for such things: theatres, museums, galleries and festivals. In turn, this work would then be kept separate from aesthetic support – the making of posters is a historical example suggested by Rancière – provided to other kinds of activities of resistance which might use different methods of public engagement as the means to work towards the possible, but entirely contingent, emergence of politics.¹⁹ However, this would seem to reinstate the logic of 'a place for everything and everything in its place' and a division of aesthetic labour that, while it might have characterized the imaginary Platonic republic, corresponds neither to any of the actual modes of aesthetic organization of capital nor to the experience of many living within its ambit.

Virtuosity and the appearance of the people

The mode of the aesthetic organization of capital that might, albeit unevenly and unequally, characterize the experience of multitude today is described in another recent attempt to think the contemporary collective, Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*.²⁰ Virno's text is also notable for the centrality of theatricality (figured as 'virtuosity' in the English translation) to contemporary social life, in a way that clearly connects with earlier discourses on the normative aspects of performativity. For Virno, the cardinal feature of contemporary labour is its transformation into an activity in which the generation of a separate end-product gives way to the figure of the worker as embodying his or her labour through virtuosic, contingent acts

of human communication that require the presence (actual or virtual) of others. This happens in many, but by no means all, contexts that constitute work under capitalism, whether answering the phone in a call centre, nursing a sick hospital patient, addressing an executive meeting, serving coffee in a branch of a multinational chain, teaching schoolchildren or writing papers for academic journals. Virtuosic acts of communication are not restricted to sets of professionals or experts; they are the characteristic behaviour of almost anyone in the post-Fordist era because 'the fundamental model of virtuosity, the experience which is the base of the concept, is the activity of the speaker.' As Virno continues, this is not to say that 'car dashboards are no longer produced' but that 'the communication industry (or rather, the spectacle, or even yet, the culture industry) is an industry among others, with its specific techniques, its particular procedures, its peculiar profits, etc.; on the other hand, it also plays the role of *industry of the means of production*' (GM 61).

While, as Virno acknowledges, such an analysis has multiple precedents, the most significant contemporary aspect of this arrival of the multitude of virtuosos is the collapse of the preceding era's differentiation, based upon the Aristotelian categories of labour, politics and thought. Whereas politics was historically the discrete social activity that was 'without end product' and that required the presence of others, speakers and audiences and publicly organized space, now these elements saturate the politico-aesthetic world of work. The upshot of this is that real 'public space' is now the reconfigured space-time of perpetual labour, which no longer conforms to Fordist patterns of clear divisions between work time and 'free' or leisure time. Except that now work is not only increasingly figured as an opportunity for participatory conviviality and generalized sociability geared towards the production of communication, but also, more invisibly, *as* politics. In Virno's grammar, what cements this analogy between virtuosity and politics is the organization of this generalized form of public space through the creation of performances and audiences; in effect, through the setting up of a series of pseudo-theatres, asymmetric scenes of communication, display and self-presentation 'in role'.

It is this theatrical redoubling that Virno examines in the culture of life reduced to forms of work structured by the industry of communicative action. But the success of this redoubling has occurred not through strict delimitation of theatrical activity that would avoid any 'confusion of genres', but through the *informal generalization of such confusion*. What

characterizes the contemporary multitude is a complete adjustment to – but not necessarily a reconciliation with – life as an omnilateral exposure to a world lacking consistency, security and stability, experienced as a dialectic between an underlying dread and a seeking after refuge. This is adjustment achieved through a permanently instantiated series of stagings of extimacy, performances that render redundant notions of public versus private, functioning as incommensurate and often conflictual ‘strategies of reassurance’ through which ‘the many’ cope with the fundamental disquiet of ‘not feeling at home’ (*GM* 34). This ambiguous thinking of the multitude can go two ways. From it can spring ‘ghastly forms of protection or forms of protection capable of achieving a real sense of comfort’ (in other words, some forms of the police order are simply not as unequal as others) or ‘it can even give way to a non-public public sphere, to a *non-governmental* public sphere’. Virno sums up:

[I]f the publicness of the intellect does not yield to the realm of a public sphere, of a political space in which the many can tend to common affairs, then it produces terrifying effects. *A publicness without a public sphere*: here is the negative side – the evil, if you wish – of the experience of the multitude (*GM* 40).

But Virno’s text is silent about what forms this ‘non-public, public sphere’ might take. Given that he has been careful to provide a grammar of terms such as ‘people’, ‘citizen’, ‘state’ and ‘multitude’, the absence from his analysis of as central a term as ‘public’ itself is surprising. While it is tempting to align a refusal to exemplify the public sphere with the subtractive understandings of multitude, might it also be more directly attributable to the return to the strangely unproblematic use of the term ‘the public’?

The preceding discussion has attempted to indicate the way in which the concept of the public may still be conditioned by a particular form of theatre, as idea and ideal. What is ‘evil’ for Virno (and equally problematic for Rancière and Badiou in different but commensurable ways) appears to be the generalization of this situation and its dislocation from any particular scene. The dis-ease of a generalized theatricality is thus diagnosed via the very lack of *a* theatre, the absence of tangible embodiments of the public sphere that might catalyse the eventual formation of politics. Hence the obvious importance of the theatre and its metaphors in the attempt to address this deficiency. But if the notion of the public is indeed conceptually linked to a type of theatrical apparatus that no longer

structures social or political relations, then the question of politics today centres on the ways in which the aesthetic (re)organization of the situation of a space of placements actually occurs. How *do* the people appear? Put more concretely, in the terms that Virno and others offer as possible alternatives to ‘publicness without a public sphere’: what are the aesthetic forms of the politics of civil disobedience, exit or escape beyond the predictable (and predictably policed) tropes of protest or the clandestine tactics of imperceptibility? If, as Hallward and many others suggest, philosophy ought to be able to account for processes such as ‘organization, simplification, mobilization, decision, polarization’,²¹ then it might have to engage with (non-)events as banal as the meeting, a serial form of collective activity whose centrality to almost any kind of political sequence is outweighed only by the almost complete neglect of its formal and aesthetic characteristics, except in isolated examples of cultural anthropology or the dreary formulas of management texts on their ‘effective’ control.

In some more recent analyses, the improvised aesthetics and pedagogical self-organization of anti-capitalist protest events are articulated as spaces of radical learning. These scenes are described as evidencing a range of expressive and intellectual capacities beyond taking to the streets (from chanting to speech-making to the meeting forms for decision-making) that are mobilized in an assemblage that both requires and generates very particular knowledges and skills – to use terms that themselves are otherwise taken as axiomatically anti-democratic for Badiou and Rancière.²² The ‘encampment’, in its overlapping characteristics of autonomy, control and necessity might be another such zone, not totally circumscribed by its historical binding of ‘the camp’ to the Holocaust or to current instances of the ‘state of exception’ for parallel incarceration. An encampment is a constructed environment or situation made out of a specific set of architectural, choreographic and theatrical techniques in which control and autonomy are not necessarily mutually exclusive operations.²³ Recent analyses of the experience of economic migrants to the EU show that the transit camps in countries such as Greece are not simply places of confinement and exclusion. Rather, they are ‘used’ in complex and often unanticipated ways as nodes or knots in the flow of migration to facilitate the speeding up or slowing down of the temporality of population movement and mobility, which paradoxically make visible what would otherwise remain largely imperceptible, if no less significant, in the unevenly globalized lifeworld.²⁴

These analyses also return us to the familiar notion that the concept of appearance itself (and the primacy it gives to the visual) may be problematically structured via a kind of rudimentary theatricality in which one is *either* actor or spectator, onstage or offstage, visible or invisible, in the streets en masse or sequestered in private. But they also suggest the limits to an aesthetics of emancipation figured as an incalculable potential for individualized acts of critical spectatorship that may or may not grasp this very problem. If the examples outlined above seem like less than ideal places for the ‘setting up as a theatre of ... the gap between a place where the *demos* exists and a place where it does not’, then this perhaps indicates the advantages of abandoning the literal and critical comforts of idealized theatrical separation for encounters of a different kind, in which other configurations of specularization – with different temporal and spatial dimensions – are at work.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, ‘Témoignage sur le théâtre’ (1965), in *Œuvres complètes*, Vol 1, ed. Eric Marty, Paris: Seuil, 1993, p. 1530.
2. The obvious landmarks here are Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2000; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Putnam, London, 2004.
3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel, Paris, 1996; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2004; Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT Press, London and Cambridge MA, 2004.
4. An English introduction to the project can be found at [www.evensfoundation.be/downloads/campement_urbain\(anglais\).pdf](http://www.evensfoundation.be/downloads/campement_urbain(anglais).pdf). I use this example because it is one also used by Jacques Rancière, whose ‘theatrocracy’ is discussed later, in a recent consideration of aesthetic separation. See Jacques Rancière, ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art’, *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, no. 1, Summer 2008, available at www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html.
5. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (1983), Station Hill Press, Barrytown NY, 1989; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (1986), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989.
6. Alain Badiou, ‘Theses on Theater’, in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004, p. 113.
7. Alain Badiou, *Rhapsodie pour le Théâtre*, Imprimeries Nationales, Paris, 1990; translated by Bruno Bosteels as *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, *Theatre Survey*, vol. 49, no. 2, November 2008, pp. 187–238. English version hereafter cited as *RT*.
8. Badiou, ‘Theses on Theater’, p. 113.
9. The philosophical anthropology implicit in Badiou’s work is explored in Nina Power, ‘Towards an Anthropology of Infinitude: Badiou and the Political Subject’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 186–209; available at www.cosmosandhistory.org.
10. Peter Hallward, ‘Staging Equality’, *New Left Review* 37, January–February 2006, pp. 109–29.
11. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London, 2006, p. 14.
12. Rancière quoted in Hallward, ‘Staging Equality’, p. 111.
13. Jacques Rancière, ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, *Art-Forum International*, vol. 45, no. 7, 2007, p. 275.
14. The specific examples mentioned in ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community’ are Ritty Pahn’s 2004 film *S-21, The Death Machine of the Khymer Rouge* and Pedro Costa’s 2001 film *Vanda’s Room*.
15. There are obvious gendered aspects to such a ‘sensitivity’ that have been extensively explored in both feminist philosophies and theatre histories.
16. Rancière, ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community’, p.13.
17. Rancière’s approach to the politics of spectatorship is broadly consonant with that of several of the texts in a recent series of short books on theatre and its various supplements, including Joe Kelleher’s *Theatre and Politics*, Nick Ridout’s *Theatre and Ethics* and Helen Freshwater’s *Theatre and Audience*, all Palgrave, London, 2009; Alan Read’s *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*, London, Palgrave, 2008; as well as Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, which explicitly delimits theatre in particular (and implicitly art in general) to a politics of perception.
18. This contradiction is the subject of Peter Handke’s 1966 play *Offending the Audience*.
19. ‘An Exchange with Jacques Rancière’, *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, no. 1, Summer 2008, p. 7; available at www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrexchange.html.
20. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, Semiotext(e), New York, 2004. Hereafter cited as *GM*.
21. Hallward, ‘Staging Equality’, p. 126.
22. Despite its hostility towards traditional forms of sustained political organization and trade unionism, Masteneh Shah-Shuja’s *Zones of Proletarian Development* (Openmute, London, 2008), reviewed in *RP* 153, offers an excellent contribution in this respect, especially in uncoupling events of protest from their popular dramatization in the mass media as more or less articulate demands by citizens for redress that might be granted from within the political order that are somehow always infiltrated by a faceless minority dedicated to ‘mindless’ violence.
23. As catalogued in Charlie Hailey’s possibly overly comprehensive *Camps: A Guide to 21st-Century Space*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2009.
24. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vasilis Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century*, Pluto Press, London and Ann Arbor MI, 2008; reviewed below in this issue of *RP*.