

IMPROBABLE ASSEMBLY

WHAT IS IT?

Societies know many different forms and formats of assembling, gathering, coming together. In traditional celebrations, official conferences, institutionalised bodies, political demonstrations and (subversive) social movements societies perform, create and confirm the social collectively. The arts have been experimenting with many different forms of (improbable) assemblies during the dissolution of the artistic genres¹ since the 1960s. *Assemblies and Participation*^I was the name of the first postgraduate programme (2012-2014) that worked with and on PABR. Within this frame, as well as in the subsequent postgraduate programme *Performing Citizenship* (2015-2017)^{II}, different assemblies were not just researched on but at the same time developed as a basic format

of *Participatory Art Based Research*.

As a research format², the *Improbable Assembly* is a situation that is envisioned and set up to assemble people who would not otherwise come together. What is more, it

CORPUS

I Assemblies and Participation (2012-2014):

The postgraduate program *Assemblies and Participation* (2012-2014): *Urban Publics and Performance* was asking what role performance and media-based arts can play in the context of new urban movements of democratisation. By initiating transdisciplinary research processes between art, academia and society the postgraduate programme discussed and rehearsed from 2012-2015 new forms of assemblies and participation in an experimental conjunction of theoretical and artistic approaches. How can artistic and academic practices be combined in a way that the research process itself opens up for more social participation?

II Performing Citizenship (2015-2017): From 2015-2017 the postgraduate program *Performing Citizenship* aimed to analyse new forms of citizenship and its inherent performative turn. Since artistic practices play an important role in this context, the postgraduate program was conceived methodologically as an artistic academic cooperation. The three-year programme qualified doctoral candidates both artistically and academically per diod.

CONTEXT

1 Assemblies during the dissolution of the artistic genres:

From the 1980s on, Suzanne Lacy staged numerous performances in which she assembled citizens of different social contexts in order for them to speak and act together in different settings and to explore alternative forms of gathering as a community, such as *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind* (1984), *The Roof is on Fire* (1994), *Between the Door and the Street* (2013) and many others. She labelled these works »new genre public art« (Lacy 1995, 2010). Different hybrid forms between social, political and theatrical practice have emerged over the last two decades, such as works by Rimini Protokoll (*World climate conference*, 2014, *100 % City*, 2008-ongoing), Milo Rau/IIPM (*The Kongo Tribunal*, 2015) or geheimagentur (*The Art of Being Many*, 2014).

2 Research formats:

A single research format is realised in a specific context to configure the collaborative research of different experts in a physical way. It can structure one complete research project or become a smaller element within another format. The process starts with a desire, need, or question that brings together the participants as co-researchers, creating a collective agenda and interest in the research process. This collective interest has to be established before the participating researchers are able to perform, test materials, act, or assemble collaboratively. The co-researchers should be able to arrange, rehearse and plan details and activities for performative events. The activities and events then need to be evaluated or compared in relation to the underlying needs, questions and desires. Only after this evaluation can it be decided whether the same process should be repeated, — whether the rules and conditions should be adjusted or modified, whether the format should be changed entirely or whether researchers should proceed to another application/publication.

is a set-up intended to let different kinds of knowledge emerge and be recognized – to create a mode for the different researchers, co-researchers and participants³ to “know” (Peters 2014) within the act of assembling. Furthermore, an *Improbable Assembly* can constitute, be or become (part of) a body that claims its own knowledge – a knowledge that goes beyond established and proven forms, brought about through procedures of sharing, confirming, recording, representing, speaking for others, or speaking in the name of something. In this sense, the *Improbable Assembly* is a tool to produce and curate new and improbable publics.

WHAT IS RESEARCHED?

Assemblies are collective performances that can be analysed by employing categories of performance analysis: the space and time of the assembly, the roles, rights and rules of the assembly, the ways people can participate, communicate, mediate and take part in decision-making. Assemblies create community, conflict, plans for collective action and subject positions to be embodied and performed.

The postgraduate programme *Assemblies and Participation* was inspired by new practices of assembling in the Occupy and the Real Democracy movements. Looking at different forms of protest, Judith Butler describes assembling as a fundamental political and social action. Butler is pushing against Hannah Arendt’s conception of the “space of appearance” (Arendt 1998) as the appearance of the subject to others (Butler 2015).^a She suggests to rethink Arendt’s view, “so that the body, and its requirements, becomes part of the action and aim of the political”, which in turn would allow us to “start to approach a notion of plurality that is thought together with both performativity and interdependency” (Butler 2015: 151). This notion of plurality includes thinking of those who do not and cannot appear (as subjects) within establis-

hed forms of assembling.

Within the postgraduate programme *Assemblies and Participation*, the members’ basic assumption of research with and on assemblies was to work more explicitly on the performance of assembling in order to create different, more inclusive publics and, in consequence, different, more horizontal politics. The aim of the research was identifying ways to assemble that would counteract hierarchical forms of representation and organisation governed by unity, identity and determining common enemies. Curating alternative assemblies also means producing a counter-public that confronts the idea of a homogeneous, overarching public. How would this new public be called? Who should be addressed as this public? How to assemble ‘the many’, the most heterogeneous of groups, and find new ways of being together through new ways of gathering (Tsomou/Tsianos 2016, Tsomou 2018)? Research was done along questions such as: How do media tools format assemblies and how could new media practices format them differently? Can the performance of decision-making in public planning be devised in a way that includes voices unheard before?

The research project *Yes No Maybe*^{III} by Hannah Kowalski (2013) explored the desires

3 Researchers/co-researchers/participants:

Researchers within PABR are those who are involved in the whole research process from beginning to end and are responsible for the shape and progression of the process.

Co-researchers are invited to collaborate and join the research process for shorter or longer periods of time.

Participants are invited to join the research only at certain points, for instance during its public presentation, and are involved in different ways. In order to organise participation on equal terms, it is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the different questions, interests, responsibilities, capacities and availabilities of the different co-researchers and participants and to define their role within the process.

III Yes No Maybe (2013): The open areas of the Gängeviertel, a self-organized housing and culture project in Hamburg, were supposed to be developed and Kowalski intervened into the planning process with ideas of school children (8-9 years old) for making the public places more attractive for children. The children's suggestions were presented to the various actors of that development process – activists from the Gängeviertel project, the architects and city planners in charge – and voted upon in the *Yes No Maybe* assembly. For the voting procedure, Kowalski, together with five artists and a school class, developed five different decision-making procedures to vote on the different designs.

Hannah Kowalski, *Yes No Maybe*, 2013, Hamburg

IV Young Institute for Future Research (2013): Eva Plischke's research project *Young Institute for Future Research* asks 'what if children were involved into the practice of future research. Children and adults specialised in the development of future scenarios, explored their potentials for research and in doing so aimed to turn around the hierarchy of cultural education projects.

Eva Plischke, *Young Institute for Future Research*, 2013, Hamburg

V Class Exchange (2015): *Class Exchange* is a research project in which children from two primary school classes in two very different neighbourhoods of the city (one rich and one poor) swap places for a day and experience the everyday lives of the children of the other class in their school and their social environment (youth centres, playgrounds, families). In preparation for the exchange, each class produces a travel guide for the other class, including a site map as well as recommendations and tips for the respective school and neighbourhood. In this Improbable Assembly, primary school students, who would otherwise never meet within their city, can encounter each other in the context of theatre.

Esther Pilkington/Sibylle Peters/FUNDUS THEATER/Theatre of Research, *Class Exchange*, 2015, Hamburg

VI AMPLIFICATION! – A Collective Invocation (2013): In *AMPLIFICATION! A Collective Invocation*, Sylvi Kretzschmar initiated a hybrid of live art and political demonstration. Led by the performance of ten women with megaphones, audience, activists, residents, neighbours and passers-by formed a protest march to the site of the so-called Esso houses at Hamburg's Reeperbahn, which were soon to be demolished in an area severely

and proposals of children for planning the outdoor area of the Gängeviertel and devised an assembly that allowed for alternative performances of collective decision-making that included the children. The *Young Institute for Future Research*^{IV} by Eva Plischke (2013) assembled children, politicians, activists, and other citizens of Hamburg to explore alternative ways of future research, empowering⁴ kids to create forecast scenarios. The project *The Class Exchange*^V by Esther Pilkington and Sibylle Peters (2015) first invited students of two primary schools in very different districts of Hamburg (one poor, one rich) to switch their everyday lives for one school day and then, a few days later, to assemble in the FUNDUS THEATER/Theatre of Research to meet and share their experiences and views on the everyday of the other class in an urban context they had not previously known. The Megaphone Choir by Sylvi Kretzschmar (*AMPLIFICATION! A Collective Invocation*, 2013^{VI}) assembled inhabitants, performers and activists to mourn the Esso Houses of St. Pauli in the context of the ongoing process of gentrification in this neighbourhood and at the same time investigated how "bodily, spatial and electronic amplification of voice(s) can create an acoustic space of assembly" (Kretzschmar 2014: 165 translated by the author]; see also Kretzschmar/Wildner 2016). The *Welcome City Group*^{VII} by Paula Hildebrandt assembled new inhabitants of Hamburg with and without a legal status to explore the practice of arriving and settling in a new place (2016). *The Art of Being*

4 Empowerment: Participatory settings and strategies can empower people. Actors in education, social work, politics, and the arts aim to enlarge the autonomy and self-determination of individuals and communities, citizens and non-citizens. The concept is criticized for an underlying diagnosis of deficiencies, which is answered by an accentuation of potentials. Empowering qualities are ascribed to the arts in particular. However, the arts should not be forced into a context of promising or guaranteeing empowerment within structures of increasing powerlessness (Gunsilius 2019).



affected by gentrification. The Megaphone Choir became, in the literal sense, amplification and reinforcement of voices of residents, tenants, and neighbours of the buildings. An all-female choir 'armed' with megaphones spoke and sang their interview statements. It assembled acoustically the knowledge of the interviewees as citizen experts (Alltagsexpert*innen) of their district. Kretzschmar, Sylvi, *AMPLIFICATION! A Collective Invocation*, 2013, Hamburg

VII Welcome City Group (2015-2017): To research possibilities, conditions and ways of arriving in a new city, Paula Hildebrandt founded the *Welcome City Group*. Newcomers and inhabitants, citizens and non-citizens met and assembled for different occasions and activities at different places within the urban space in Hamburg. The Welcome City Group provided a label and at the same time the frame for an improbable assembly of different people to explore their rights and responsibilities, the current conditions of arriving and joining a group or becoming a citizen. The group has appeared, inter alia, as a hen night in St. Pauli, as shopping kings and queens on Jungfernstieg, on the outdoor fitness trail around the Alster and during the official *Night Of Knowledge*. Paula Hildebrandt, *Welcome City Group*, 2016, Hamburg

VIII The Art of Being Many (2014): In September 2014, artists, activists, researchers, and participants from all over Europe and beyond gathered in Hamburg for an assembly of assemblies. Sharing experiences from Real Democracy movements and artistic experimentation they aimed to explore new ways of coming together: collective insights into the materiality, the timing, the agenda, the desires and the catastrophes of being many. geheimagentur, *The Art of Being Many*, 2014, Hamburg

IX Tactfulness: An Experimental Evening on the Non-visual (2013): The invitation to *Tactfulness: An Experimental Evening on the Non-visual* was the starting point of Inga Reimers' series of experimental settings that researched collective eating as a site of knowledge production. Reimers was interested in the format of a research dinner: What kind of knowledge can be produced in the setting of a dinner? The feast served as a familiar performative framework in which the guests were encouraged to exchange ideas about the non-visual through toasts and food. Inga Reimers, *Tactfulness: An Experimental Evening on the Non-visual*, 2013, Hamburg

Many^{VIII} by geheimagentur (2014) assembled performers, researchers and activists to investigate the practice of assembling as a democratic act within the Real Democracy movements as well as in participatory theatre, performance and live art. Furthermore, the research project *Tactfulness*^{IX} (Reimers 2013) assembled people for devised dinners to research how different senses participate in the act of assembling. The *metroZones*^X – *School of Urban Action*^X is a further example for a curated assembly, in this case in the serial form of political education units creating debates on urban issues and activism (2016). In all these projects, the assembly is created and researched as an open process to look at the assembly's modes of exchange and collective knowledge production.⁵

ARTISTIC MEANS

Researching established and new forms of assembling means focusing on their frames, protocols, practices, authorisations and

5 Knowledge production: PABR formats and designs are governed by the pursuit of a question, a desire, a need or by the attempt to find a solution for a problem. This initial framing poses a functional background for the researchers to evaluate the outcomes of the performative events and research activities, and therefore produce specific answers to the functioning of hypotheses or working solutions. For the evaluation, several moments of presenting, analysing, reflecting and discussing results are implemented within the operational steps. Results can include solutions, knowledge, theories, practices, artefacts, feelings, etcetera. Many outcomes can be verbalised or visualised, but some manifest in a way that eludes the discursive grasp. Knowledge production within PABR means that explicit and implicit forms of knowledge are valued equally. The researchers try to choose forms of presentation and analysis that make these forms recognisable. It has to be made clear that this analysis is one of many possible research narratives. Besides, there might be diverse research narratives that can be known and recognised, but also some that remain unknown to the researcher. PABR is distributed knowledge.

their politics of representation; it also means questioning these and suggesting future forms. When, where, why and how do people come together? Which formats, structures, interactions, which practices and constellations of assembling do we know, do we reject, do we propose? All this can be asked, tested and performed in a (theatre) performance situation that is always also a public assembly. Every constellation of audiences and performers has to constitute itself anew as an assembly. Thus, the public assembly is no longer only the precondition but a possible subject of investigation of performance (Peters 2012: 131, Plischke 2020: 128)

Furthermore, assemblies are a basic format of knowledge production: Learning and researching are fundamentally based on different forms of assembling. Academia provides well-established forms and formats such as conferences, discussions or workshops. Most of these established forms are wilfully and highly exclusive and perform learning and research as privilege. If the performance of assembling is impacting the content produced by assemblies, this also applies to knowledge created by and emerging within assemblies. Therefore, *Participatory Art Based Research* aims to assemble in a way that activates, recognises, creates and brings to-

gether other forms of knowledge and expertise beyond established frames of academia. Research projects aim not only to assemble artists and scientists, but also experts of everyday life, including those whose expertise is not yet established or acknowledged by social institutions and publics: To invite and assemble people as experts within a research project means creating a frame that addresses them in a way that recognises and values their expertise. The *Improbable Assembly* offers the unique possibility of providing a public forum for different concerns and forms of expertise. In this forum, different kinds of knowledge can emerge or be produced, they can enter into a dialogue and be shared on equal terms.

Doing research within an assembly means framing it in a way that authorises its participants to know, to speak or to act and to invent roles and rules that allow the assembled to access that “specific mode in which we know” (Peters 2014: 221 [translated by the author]). Sibylle Peters points out the importance of how the public is addressed in this context. “Who is called to assemble?” (Peters 2016: 36), Peters asks. “Who assembles whom?” (Reimers 2014), Inga Reimers asks. As Michael Warner argues in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, by addressing a public we presuppose its existence at the same time as calling it into being (Warner 2010, Peters 2016: 37). Here, the artistic mode of the ‘as if’ can work as a catalyst to practice assemblies differently, to perform *Improbable Assemblies*. The mode of the ‘as if’ – as if children were experts for the future, for example – can be used to maintain “a fictional or utopian (or even legal) distance towards social reality and at the same time work within this reality temporarily” (Plischke 2020: 142). *Improbable Assemblies* that are situated on the threshold between fiction and reality can operate with “their uncertain status in a productive way” (Plischke 2020: 141) – using the resources of art to turn the fiction, the alternative, into the real. They can be set up on

X metroZones – School of Urban Action (2015):

The School of Urban Action was initiated as a co-operation between the Berlin-based group metroZones – Center for Urban Affairs and the Hamburg-based NGO dock Europe. Over a period of two years (2015-2016), a wide range of actors within the urban field, activists and other urban citizens met in Berlin und Hamburg to discuss, and put into practice, a number of conceptual ideas and methodological tools from critical urban studies for the purpose of urban explorations and interventions beyond academia. Understanding the city as a cosmopolis, made up of people arriving from very different global contexts, we asked ourselves how to negotiate spaces of acting and belonging.

metroZones – School for Urban Action, 2015-2016, Hamburg/Berlin.

the line between art and social reality to expand or cross it and thus blur their respective status (Plischke 2020: 141-142). The act of addressing a public as if it already existed, as if it was authorised and recognised, creates a “real fiction” (Peters 2016: 37).

The performing arts provide a wide range of means and procedures for calling, addressing, structuring, designing and staging an *Improbable Assembly*, to create frames and set-ups that allow the *Improbable Assembly* to function as an act of emancipative representation. This includes new forms of speaking for one another (Bernstorff, *The Last Judgement – An Extrajudicial Hearing*, 2014^{XI}) and forms of interaction that are beyond language, such as movement, ritual, music and play (Kowalski, *Yes No Maybe*, 2013; Kretzschmar, *AMPLIFICATION! A Collective Invocation*, 2013).

POTENTIALS, PROBLEMS AND OUTCOMES

An *Improbable Assembly* is setting up an alternative proposal for how to assemble, how to act, how to know together, that in itself can be enacted, and thereby tested and tried out. As a format of *Participatory Art Based Research*, an *Improbable Assembly* investigates and tests procedures and models of coming and acting together in the very moment of assembling and hence produces knowled-

ge performatively.

Many *Improbable Assemblies* are involved in the constitutive process of a civic body. The moment an assembly starts to speak for itself, the moment the assembled start to say “we, the assembled”, always refers to the constitutive moment of the political subject – the performative act of saying “we, the people”. The performance of self-empowerment can be enjoyed as easily as it can be abused and turned into exclusivity and entitlement. The role and the degree of engagement of the participants might be diverse and manifold. This has to be taken into account especially if the *Improbable Assembly* in question is the main format of a given *Participatory Art Based Research* project such as *The Art of Being Many*.

For the research, it is important to counter a simple differentiation between representation on the one hand and authenticity of direct action on the other. The assembling as if we had the authority to do so, to decide, for instance, on the future, is enacted and therefore becomes real. Research therefore will ask how representation is and can be performed in many different ways, instead of trying to avoid representational modes entirely.

As for most of the research formats, the question of documentation⁶ relates to the research questions that determine the type of assembly. It is helpful to start documenting with the call to assemble and the specific (spatial) set-up of the upcoming assembly to reflect the dynamics of the assembling process. Who actually responded to the call?

XI The Last Judgment II – An Extrajudicial Hearing (2014)

The performative research project with primary school students from Hamburg centred around the act of instituting and investigated the form and characteristics of the court in relation to court cases that were at the edges of the legal system. The cases of troublemakers, losers of lawsuits or plaintiffs who could not bring their case forward in legal courts were negotiated in an alternative court run by children.

Elise von Bernstorff, *The Last Judgment II – An Extrajudicial Hearing*, 2014, Hamburg.

6 Documentation: How processes of PABR are documented depends on each project and cannot be determined in a general way. Researchers are advised to put documentation measures in place that help to store and translate processes and outcomes for those contexts in which she wants the project to proliferate. Documentation should be intertwined with moments of presentation and of gathering research material. Each project



How did the participants interact in the assembly? What was their experience? *Participatory Art Based Research* requires the researcher to find adequate as well as, possibly, supplemental forms of documentation. For example, in order to also grasp aspects of the experience of an assembly that cannot be seen on video recordings, these could be complemented by interviews, questionnaires, images, drawings, or diaries. The research will therefore in part deal with the question how different forms of documentation can complement each other to leave as few blind spots as possible.

Within larger research projects, *Improbable Assemblies* are regularly called to mark or coincide with certain key moments of the process, such as foundation ceremonies or moments of key decisions. In these cases, assemblies are often part of other improbable entities such as *Try-Out-Institutions* or *Heterotopian Zones*. However, assemblies like these also bring heterogeneous participants together. As parts of a larger research project, assemblies are meant to structure the process, to focus on certain moments within to test and share results, to evaluate and document events and statements and to make collective decisions for future action. To manage all that, to focus on and share earlier moments of the process during the assembly, to prepare proceedings for testing, evaluating, documenting and decision-making in a way that allows a heterogeneous group of citizens and non-citizens⁷ to participate, *Improbable Assemblies* will often follow a clear structure. However, assemblies ultimately have to remain open in order to allow for spontaneous participation⁸ and unforeseen outcomes.

ENDNOTES

a Butler conceptualizes the assembly as constitutive for the public: “[...]this space of appearance is not a

should develop a documentation method appropriate to the project, which may consist of several forms of documentation. Performances can be documented by video recordings, whereas collections, archives and media artefacts may become their own documentation. However, the collective activities are fleeting and perceived differently by each participant. The same event can be evaluated differently from the outside than from the perspectives of the performing participants. For comparison and evaluation purposes, these different experiences need to be represented in some form: collective writing, questionnaires, drawings, transcriptions of discussions or interviews, formal responses, and so on.

7 Citizenship: Changing patterns of mobility and connectivity, migration and transnational cultural interconnections all challenge the legal and political boundaries of sovereign nation-states, their legitimacy and capacity to organize and provide citizenship (Benhabib 2006; Shachar 2009). At the same time, new alliances, networks and collectives of citizens emerge and assume roles and responsibilities formerly attributed to the state as an institutional body and as representation of the people. Given these developments, citizenship today is at the same time associated with old and ineffective protocols, which continue to produce exclusion, and yet is also ‘in the making’, moving beyond established concepts. Citizenship is simultaneously in withdrawal and in the process of becoming. At its best, this ambivalent performance of citizenship has the capacity to rearticulate or reinvent citizenship, to link old and new figurations of citizenship – often, if not necessarily, across given thresholds of legal and political institutions, social conventions, disciplinary competencies and discourses, ascriptions and attributions of race, class, culture and gender (Hildebrandt/Peters 2018: 3).

8 Participation: From an art perspective as well as from the perspective of political critique, certain types of participation arouse the suspicion of merely simulating participation, while at the same time promoting neoliberal concepts of governance and self-discipline. Participation can be misused as an instrument of power instead of being used to distribute knowledge, resources and control. It is precisely the artistic experimentation with new forms of assemblies and participation that opens up a field in which art and academia can differentiate between different types of participation and discuss them using concrete examples, while also proposing other forms of (political) participation (Burri/Evert/Peters/Pilkington/Ziemer 2014).



location that can be separated from the plural action that brings it about; it is not there outside of the action that invokes and constitutes it. And yet, if we are to accept this view, we have to understand how the plurality that acts is itself constituted. How does the plurality form, and what material supports are necessary for that formation? Who enters the plurality, and who does not, and how are such matters decided?" (Butler 2015: 77)

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