

Miraculous Mass-communication

"The performance-, theatre- and radio-art group LIGNA (formed 1997) consists of the media theorists and radio artists Ole Frahm, Michael Hüners and Torsten Michaelsen, who work in the FSK (Free Broadcaster Combine), a non-commercial, local radio in Hamburg. LIGNA repeatedly design experimental situations which aim for the transgression of the conventional application of radio technology and the re-actualisation of its inherent, but forgotten or ignored potentials.

The action *Radioballet* took place in the main station of Hamburg and one year later in Leipzig. Both spaces had been recently privatised and subject to control by surveillance cameras and security guards. People who beg, sit on the floor, and express 'inadequate behaviour' are usually expelled from these spaces. The *Radioballet* brought back these excluded gestures. Several hundred people followed the invitation to spread around with small radio devices in their pockets. The participants could act where they wanted: on the platforms, stairs or escalators or in the shopping mall. The 'ballet' was synchronised by the instructions that participants received through portable radios: sit down, stand up, hold your hand in a begging motion, turn around, dance and wave good-bye to the departing train of the revolution... The *Radioballet* was not conceived as a demonstration or assembly (that could have been forbidden by the police) but rather as a 'Zerstreuung', a German term that could be translated as dispersion, distraction or distribution. Like ghostly remnants, the excluded gestures haunted and disturbed the surveyed public space during the 90 minutes of the performance and opened it up for uncanny and uncontrollable situation. If the medium of radio is sometimes blamed for the depopulation of the public sphere and keeping its listeners in their homes, LIGNA turned radio reception into a public event."

Jelena Vesic (curator and writer based in Belgrade)

The following discussion, led by Jelena, considers the impact of the networked performance Radioballet and the ethics of collective action, not least with the absence of material and reciprocal relationships limiting expressions of solidarity. It was recorded 14/07/07 with the participants Rael Artel, Anna Lazar, Karol Sienkiewicz, Margus Tamm, Airi Triisberg and Andreas Trossek, in the workshop on 'Collectives, Actions, Re-enactments' held as part of the 'Exercises in Adhocracy' camp in Parnu, Estonia.

Jelena Vesic: The *Radioballet* actions by LIGNA not only had a performative value, I think they are also interesting in relation to the question: "Why are our demonstrations so boring today?", which was posed earlier this week by Anna and Karol from *Sekcja* magazine. I would argue that this



action was definitely not "boring", but very much inventive, and not only as an aesthetic invention of, for example, collective performance, but also as an invention of a tool which makes the process of demonstrating effective in the places where demonstrations are actually not allowed. The tool was to bridge the space between gathering and scattering, and the main question was how – if the people are scattered – the action can be co-ordinated, and how collectivity can be established? The police and security people were very confused because they could not find the source of this action, the center of coordination.

Anna Lazar: What this action showed are the gaps in the law. They were assuming that this kind of behaviour would be forbidden but it wasn't. Actually, I would like to emphasise something else – it was the creation of a community that enabled the administration of individuals. What they did was act together but in a totally atomised way, without too much emotional effort to create a sense of community.

Karol Sienkiewicz: I did not like the fact instructions were transmitted from above, broadcast from above. These people were behaving without expressing their own opinions, somebody else took advantage of their bodies and they had nothing against that.

Jelena: I think you cannot say that, because they accepted it. All these people were willing to protest against the privatisation of public space. Otherwise it would not be possible to demonstrate at all, unless one invents another mechanism to interconnect the scattered groups of people.

Karol: But for what purpose was the radio? The radio is just a gadget, one could organise the same kind of performance by making an agreement that everybody will go to the public space at a certain time and perform certain gestures – make a salto in the air or lay on the floor, etc. For what purpose is the radio? Is it the kind of hope that maybe somebody is listening to the same waves at that moment and will join the action?

Jelena: No-no-no. As far as I know, there is quite a strong activist scene in Hamburg which is really well interconnected from the inside. They were the ones who wanted to do something, who wanted to express their opinion about the gentrification and privatisation of public space. *Radioballet* was

something that was not imposed but discussed and elaborated before the very action was performed. Those people listen to independent radio stations because they offer quite different programs than commercial radio. Also, these radio stations are sometimes developing really interesting participatory programs and mechanisms through which the public or the listeners can immediately contribute to the program. For example, they organise thematic evenings together with their listeners, etc. The entire action was collectively discussed beforehand. It was definitely not the case that somebody came over and said: "Hey people, I want you to produce an aesthetic action for me..." Of course, there was the person, the voice which symbolically co-ordinated the action through the radio, but this is not a crucial fact for me – I think that in this case radio was used collectively as a tool which helped the group of people to express a certain political opinion.

Karol: But these people didn't know in advance what gesture they were going to do next before they were told to.

Jelena: Maybe they didn't really know the exact order of the gestures or all the formal details, but for me it is much more important that they were all aware of the idea behind the gestures performed during *Radioballet*, and that the idea of such an action had been collectively discussed and accepted. Of course, why this aesthetisation and synchronisation is necessary is that if they would perform these 'prohibited gestures' separately, it could much more easily happen that some of them would be arrested. In this case, and with the use of radio as the tool for co-ordination and synchronisation, the police and security people were confused. They couldn't figure out where the source of this action was located.

Airi Triisberg: I think the image of homogeneity is really important here. This is how they actually experiment the extent of what is possible and what is not. Creating the image of homogeneity is what basically manifests this action as a demonstration.

Karol: I agree that these kinds of actions make demonstrations more attractive and maybe it was our mistake that we posed this question ["Why are our demonstrations so boring today?"] in the title of our workshop – actually there were two important things that we wanted to stress in our presentation. One was that our demonstrations are boring, but even more important was that our demonstrations do not provide this kind of platform for individuals to communicate and express their opinions, which can indeed be very different. In this kind of action everybody is behaving in the same way. I know that they all agree with the main aim of the demonstration. But for me, it is not something that I would like to participate in because I would have the feeling that somebody is violating my personal freedom.

We can of course say that this action shows what the limits and borders are of public space. But we can also say that this action shows how easy it is to convince people to behave in a strange way in public space.

Jelena: The *Radioballet* was more of an experiment. I disagree with the opinion that it expressed some kind of totalitarian ideological model which stands in the way of individual freedom. I think that you universalise things too much. Even on the surface of the representation, on the perceptual level, we can see that the performers did not act as a 'trained army', but that everybody moved spontaneously, or individualistically if you like, each one of them danced in a different way, moved

LIGNA, *Radioballet*, 2003, documentation of a performance at the Leipzig main station. Photos by Eiko Grimberg.



their hand in different way and so on. I mean, they had a clear goal: They managed to demonstrate in a place where demonstrations are prohibited. This is not so easy to achieve, in my opinion. I mean, they invented something like a new technique for demonstrating in public space.

Andreas Trossek: Yet they managed to organise the whole action without any security guys getting involved.

Karol: So actually it was not successful. They did not manage to demonstrate anything.

Jelena: *Radioballet* was not meant to be a demonstration which would stand for a certain goal until that goal was fulfilled. This was more of an experiment in re-inventing the process of demonstration. I see it as laboratory: Let's try something and see if it works, let's see if we can transgress the given rules, or not? So, your claim that the action would have been much more successful if the security guards had got involved demonstrates your preference to see violence in the process of demonstrating, which, in my opinion overlaps with the desires of professional news reporters from BBC, CNN and so on...

Airi: What we are actually addressing here is the question of collectivity. And, of course, every collective action needs some consensus.

Jelena: Yes. We could even say that it was an experiment in how to practice collectivity. This was an experiment. I disagree with the interpretation that something was imposed from above. Quite the opposite, it was exactly about participation, and the performers of the action could hardly be seen as passive in any sense...

Margus Tamm: But why do you think this was a political act at all? There are many different city-space games that look quite similar – treasure hunting, flash mobs or some war games. For example, midnight London is full of people running and acting in strange ways. People communicate over the internet, make up some rules and you get this very bizarre picture in the city space at night when small groups of people are hunting for some 'treasure', or gather at a certain time in the supermarket, lie down for five minutes and then just disperse again. What is the difference between those games and the *Radioballet* action?

Jelena: One of the goals in this case was to express disagreement with the policies of gentrification and privatisation of public spaces and consequently with the imposed 'politics of security' against the presumable 'war against terrorism'. The goal was also to experiment with the use of radio and the possibilities of collective action. Of course, people who participated there had different desires – some of them were probably interested in different applications of radio technology, some of them maybe came just



for fun – but I guess what I just listed here was something they all had in common.

Karol: The question is, was this demonstration readable for other people who were not listening to the radio and just happened to be in the train station because they were travelling? What are the conclusions of this action? Is it something that should be implemented on a larger scale or not?

Jelena: Well, their claim, as well as my claim, is that this action was non-representationalist. It was an experiment. Therefore, the actionists didn't mobilise classic or professional mechanisms of publicity. So, whether it was readable for the other people or not we cannot clearly diagnose. Of course, many people noticed that something strange happened there. I don't know if it is necessary to back up this statement. What the conclusions would be? Hmm ... the conclusion could be that if people are not allowed to gather in certain places then they can invent other ways of communication in order to perform collective action. Regarding the issue of effectivity ... I don't know what to say ... we can come to the point where we can clearly conclude that demonstrations today are not producing a rupture in political space and that they are more-and-more becoming accepted and well situated in the neo-liberal, democratic policy of freedom of speech ... in public space as well. *Radioballet* was not designed that way. It was an artistic action with a certain political meaning. I am sure that there were people who did not understand it, but there will always be people who do not understand.

Rael Artel: I would rather see this action as an appearance of a particular dispersed community

which only through this get-together actually gets conscious of how many they are. This reminds me of a similar type of radio action that happened in Detroit in the 1970s. It was one of the first radio stations broadcasting for the Black community. There was one part of a radio program called the *Midnight Funk Association* hosted by DJ Mojo who each night at midnight would tell his listeners to switch on their lights¹, so that people would find out how many of their neighbours were listening to the same station. Moreover, the fact that you are listening to the same radio can also mean that you are sharing a common taste for music, as well some political views, etc.

Jelena: I can also make a parallel with an action which was for me completely meaningless in comparison to the *Radioballet*, although it also had a certain aesthetic-pleasurable value comparable to *Radioballet*. During Milošević's government, the citizens of Belgrade used to go to their balconies and drum on pots at the very moment the national news started on TV. I was boycotting this action because I knew that it was supported by the democratic neo-liberal forces who wanted to come into power. As I was against this political solution, I did not play along. But somehow the action had a strong aesthetic aspect, some kind of excitement and pleasure in this newly established moment of collectivity. This aesthetic aspect also reproduced a wish of belonging and I have to say that I was tempted somehow, but still I resisted this temptation.

Karol: In the 1980s in Poland, during the *Solidarity* movement, there was an illegal *Solidarity Television*. It was not a separate TV-channel – in fact, there were only two channels in Poland at

Solidarity, Piotr Ukleński,
3,000 soldiers were deployed so as to create
the inscription 'Solidarity' at the Gdańsk
Shipyard, June 17 2007.

the time. They hacked the broadcasting system of the official channels and sometimes people would see a text appearing on their TV-screens: "This is *Solidarity TV* broadcasting..." And everybody who was against the prevailing order was asked to turn off their lights, for example. Of course, it is an action that happened in a different context, this kind of strategy would probably not be suitable for the liberal state that we live in. Back then, it was something that gave people some energy or encouragement – thanks to that they knew that they were not the only ones who were against the system. I was very young back then, of course, and I don't remember it personally.

Jelena: For me, it is very similar to the events in 1999 in Belgrade, and the drumming on the pots. In Serbia this energy and encouragement was also important, because the Milošević government had forged the results of the elections. Drumming on the pots was a symbolic act of showing that this government was not legitimate, to demonstrate how many people were against it.

Karol: Radio waves were the site of political struggle in the communist block as well. There was this radio *Free Europe* that was broadcast from Munich. Many people in Poland were listening to it.

Anna: I want to show something that is a little bit connected to the *Radioballet* and a little bit to the Polish 1980s. It is an artwork made by Piotr Ukleński a few weeks ago, titled *Solidarność*. This is the logo of the *Solidarity* movement formed by the soldiers of the Polish army. It would be impossible to organise such an action in such a short period of time with any other group of people except the army. They are used to discipline and to obeying orders. Apparently, some media figure had enough influence to convince the generals to give permission to use the soldiers. Of course, every single soldier was happy to participate, which was shown in a short feature film that accompanied this piece. What I find problematic here is the kind of soft oppression of the individual that is needed and used in an artwork in order to address the topic of solidarity.

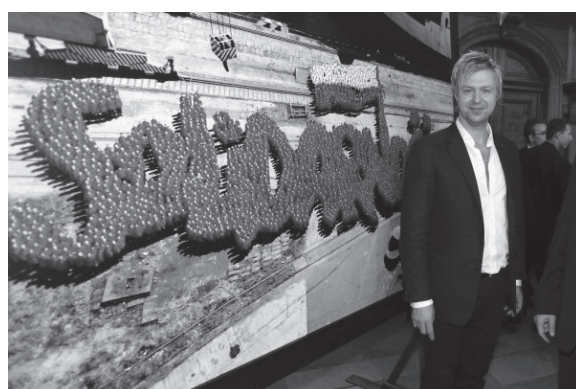
Jelena: This is an image similar to the what we call *Slet* in the Serbian language, which is a collective performance that used to be organised on special occasions in the former Yugoslavia, during the socialist era. For example, the government would organise something like that for Tito's birthday. A huge mass of people would participate forming different patterns with their bodies, performing live images... Young members of the Yugoslav Peoples Army were always the best – simply perfect and the most precise – and it was always considered to be the most virtuous element of the *Slet*, the *prime time* moment.

Anna: Yes, but it applies a very totalitarian way of using people. That was a dissonance in this *Radioballet*.

Rael: I understand what you mean. Susan Sontag explains this issue in one of her essays entitled *Fascinating Fascism* where she writes about the *Triumph des Willens* by Leni Riefenstahl.² Sontag describes the way of taking power over the masses by making them do exactly the same thing at the same time, so that the individual becomes just a small unit of the mass moved by a *führer* sitting at the top of that power structure.

Jelena: Oh, but we cannot universalise visual representation that way. It reminds me to the discourse of equalisation of Communism and Fascism on the basis of superficial aesthetic appearance that we often meet in the post-socialist artistic, art historian and theoretical discourses.

I think it is very important to be aware of what the statement is, what the political background is. Collective celebration of the birthday of the leader is quite a different political act than the interventionist critique of the neo-liberal political position which is realised through the format of collective action. We cannot observe



those things through a universalist depoliticised view. In the case of *Radioballet*, participatory collective form is quite obvious. All those people wanted to participate and their participation was voluntary and at the same time political. They are self-organised demonstrators who wanted to join a certain action and who also initiated this action. This action addressed a quite clear political statement that we already discussed.

Airi: This discussion reminds me of another I participated in at *United Nations Plaza* recently. Hito Steyerl was elaborating on the same kind of problem in the framework of the topic, why do conferences usually fail. There she emphasised the kind of paradox that in order to create a really democratic discussion you actually have to behave in a very authoritarian way. You have to limit the access in a way, to establish some rules, to set the discourse so that a fruitful discussion could emerge at all. Because public discussions that are really open for everybody tend to be rather unproductive.

Jelena: Yes, that's interesting, but that's another thing. Here, in this discussion, I'm afraid we are faced with the consequences of post-socialist discourse in Eastern Europe and its stereotypical fear of so-called 'totalitarianism'. For me, this political subjectivation is very symptomatic, and I am sad it is happening here and now among the people who live under obviously predominant capitalist circumstances. I consider the idea of 'natural' democracy to be very naïve as well, as the simple opposition to democracy and totalitarianism. I would describe this discourse as ideological, and for me its source is clearly neo-liberal.

Translocal Express: Jubilee Edition, Tallinn, Feb 21–23 2008, is a three-day workshop-seminar addressing the growing tendencies of nationalism on the Eastern borders of 'new Europe'. Taking place in the close proximity of the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, it will gather a number of artists, writers and curators in order to search for alternative ways to think about society in the 'era of global democracy'. The seminar is organised in collaboration with Van Abbemuseum as a parallel project to *Be(com)ing Dutch*.
www.publicpreparation.org
<http://becomingdutch.com>

Notes

1. According to Wikipedia, the words of DJ Mojo are best remembered as: "Will the members of the Midnight Funk Association please rise. Please go to your porch light and turn it on for the next hour to show us your solidarity. If you're in your car please honk your horn and flash your lights, wherever you are. If you're in bed, get ready to dance on your back, in Technicolor..."
2. 'Fascinating Fascism', *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York, 1980), 73-105, Susan Sontag

