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# Irritational Aesthetics: Reality Friction and Indecidable Theatre

Tony Perucci

No one was quite sure if they were supposed to take the electoral campaign seriously or not. Was it a genuine run at political power or was it all a put-on? One political commentator declared that “nobody” knew if it was for real, while another angrily confessed, “I don’t understand what this is at all. . . . It’s like ringing an alarm bell. Why ring bells for the heck of it?”<sup>1</sup> The subject of these television news pundits was not an American reality television show star’s presidential campaign, but the Estonian theatre company Teater NO99 and their “megaproject,” *NO75 Unified Estonia* (2010). For forty-four days, NO99 tantalized Estonians with the possibility that they would form an actual new political party at their party assembly on May 7, 2010 at Saku Suurhall stadium in the capital of Tallinn. In front of a capacity crowd of 7,200, their massive theatrical spectacle appeared to teeter on the brink of becoming an actual “political force”—a registered political party that would run parliamentary candidates in the upcoming national election. However, in the final moments of their performance, NO99 stepped back from the precipice of the theatrical frame. Upon his (rigged) election as party leader, NO99 co-director Tiit Ojasoo dissolved the party before it had even been formed by speaking his final line to the audience, “You are free” (fig. 1).

In this essay, I consider what I term “Reality Frictions”: political and aesthetic interventions that do not simply blur the boundary of theatre and “the real,” but rather alternatively mark themselves as specifically being either “theatre” or “real,” keying spectators to understand these political interventions at times as actually being “actual” and at other times as actually being “fictional.” They operate on shaky ethical and political terrain, as they intentionally manipulate spectators’ perceptions about “what is really going on.”

While Reality Frictions explicitly engage with, and identify as, forms of political engagement, they do not fit within the comfortable confines of “political theatre.”

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<sup>1</sup>NO55 *Ash and Money*, film directed by Ene-Liis Semper and Tiit Ojasoo (Tallinn, Estonia: ALLfilm NO99, 2013). All descriptions from the party convention performance are taken from video documentation provided to me by the company, which they had allowed to go out of print since, Ojasoo told me, because the convention itself was “quite boring actually.”



Figure 1. An audience of 7,200 fills Saku Suurhall in Tallinn, Estonia, to participate in Teater NO99's *Unified Estonia Party Assembly*. (Source: Film still, *NO75 Unified Estonia Party Assembly* [2010].)

Rather, theirs is a politics that irritates the “ontological queasiness” of theatre’s duality of artifice and actuality, such that what we perceive as theatrical fiction creates a friction with that which we perceive to be reality.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental indecidability of their fictionality need not create another instance for cynicism and ironic detachment; rather, by repeatedly calling their own “reality” into question, Reality Frictions challenge resignation by implicating the spectator both in the action of producing reality, and in the material social and political effects of that production. Reality Frictions do not presume a stable “real” against which a theatrical fiction might be set. These Reality Frictions are also Reality Fictions, irritating the points where what we perceive to be “reality” and “fiction” touch and rub against each other. As a means of political engagement, they both proclaim and disavow their theatrical fictionality.

As I will discuss, Reality Frictions share common characteristics with other recent formulations of politics and aesthetics, such as Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s concept of “parafiction” and Hans-Thies Lehmann’s articulation of the political potential of post-dramatic theatre. Reality Frictions’ politics emerges through the affective and perverse pleasure of an irritation of the “queasy” feeling that arises from the indecidability of their theatrical fictionality. It is this “irritant gene” that writers such as Joe Kelleher, Alan Read, and Nicholas Ridout have identified to be not only the ontological condition of theatre, but also its political potential.<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Schneider terms such moments

<sup>2</sup> Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3. I discuss the politics of this enjoyment in relation to Trump in Tony Perucci, “The Trump Is Present,” *Performance Research* 22, no. 3 (2017): 127–35, and “Sordid Ironies and the Short-Fingered Vulgarian: Alison Jackson’s *Mental Images*,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (2018): 191–200.

of queasiness when theatre “touches” upon the real to be “the quease.”<sup>4</sup> But Reality Frictions do not just “touch,” they irritate, pushing the quease toward a politics of theatre’s “mutual perversion” of fictionality and actuality.<sup>5</sup>

European and American political theatre since the 1960s has engaged with the instability of the theatrical frame as a nexus of politico-aesthetic intervention, as in the work the Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Peter Handke, and Frank Castorf, to name only a few. Since the 1990s the work of performance artists such as Adrian Piper, Coco Fusco, and Guillermo Gomez-Peña as well as the rise of the semiotic and performative play of “culture jamming” have incorporated the play of fact and fiction as central to their political aesthetics. Such tactics currently play a central part in both “activist art” and “creative activism,” accompanied by an avalanche of terms to articulate their approaches: guerilla theatre, environmental theatre, zaps, subversive pranks and hoaxes, ethical spectacles, performance interventions, reality bending, tactical performance, radical play, invisible theatre, ruptural performance, viral performance, subversive parody, camouflage acts, and performance activism.<sup>6</sup> What distinguishes Reality Frictions, however, is that they do not simply blur “the boundary” between art and life or theatre and reality, nor do they “blend” these two conditions. Instead, they press on the “indecidability” of the art/life and theatre/reality binaries—irritatingly and insistently—in what Lehmann terms an “afformance art” of critical engagement and perverse pleasure without the comfort of closure, resolution, synthesis, or integration.<sup>7</sup>

Although Reality Frictions can be found within many national and transnational contexts, my three case studies are works by contemporary European artists, all working under the sign of “theatre” and “politics”: NO99’s *Unified Estonia*; German artist Christoph Schlingensiefel’s electoral campaign, *Chance 2000* (1998); and *The New Forest* (2013–16), the Dutch theatre collective Wunderbaum’s “fictional platform” for socially engaged art. They each emerge from and articulate distinctive national relationships to post-communist Europe: German reunification; Estonian independence from the Soviet Union; and the impact of both the global financial crisis and the rise of xenophobic nationalism. Each of these contexts is one in which national social and political “reality” is in a period of transformation, if not outright crisis. Considering these works in this historical moment, when the political power of the xenophobic far right is ascendant, raises the stakes of this analysis considerably. Now, more than ever, efficacy is demanded of politically engaged theatre. However, Reality Frictions not only exist indecidably as theatrical fictions or real political engagement, but they also *stage* that indecidability as their primary aesthetic practice. In so doing, their aesthetics of indecidability also bespeaks a political one. They stage their countries’

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., “Introduction: Performativity and Performance,” in *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Recent examples of this work can be found in L. M. Bogad, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016); Miriam Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Tony Perucci, “The Poetics of Ruptural Performance,” in Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink, eds., *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Arts of Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); and Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 179–80.



mainstream politics as being only a theatrical illusion of political participation—what Jacques Rancière terms “parapolitics.”<sup>8</sup> They do this not by reclaiming an unambiguous mantle of “the real,” but instead by reclaiming *theatre* and its specific capacity for a fictionality irritated by the reality of performance.

### The (Para)fictional (Para)theatre of the Irritably Indecidable

Reality Frictions operate through the double gesture of an explicit identification and disidentification as theatrical fictions. Largely taking place outside of designated theatre spaces, they position themselves *as theatre*, but also and equally *as not theatre*, operating within and without the theatrical frame. They employ the tools of theatricality: aesthetic intention, mimesis, and even the institutionality of a theatrical “troupe.” But Reality Frictions also position themselves in the sphere of “real” political action *as if* they were not theatrical constructions. They share some characteristics of what art historian Lambert-Beatty terms “parafictions”: artistic works that place the fictional within the fabric of “real life”—the “post-simulacral” mimesis of reality wherein “the fictional hangs on the factual” so completely that their artifice is not recognized as such by spectators.<sup>9</sup>

Lambert-Beatty describes parafictional artwork as a quintessential “para-” form, because it is “related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains outside.”<sup>10</sup> She avoids any strong claim for the political efficacy of such tactical “deception,” where “fictions are experienced as fact.” Instead, she more modestly contends that parafiction “trains us in skepticism and doubt but also, *oddly*, in belief.”<sup>11</sup> While the oddity of this belief-training is “ethically risky,” Lambert-Beatty argues that parafictions’ “queasy-making” oddity is also their essential characteristic and function.<sup>12</sup>

Oddly, while Lambert-Beatty notes that she derives the term “parafiction” from Bruce Wilshire’s 1990 essay “The Concept of the Paratheatrical,” neither theatre practice nor even Grotowski’s coinage of “paratheater” appears in her essay.<sup>13</sup> However, by returning theatre to her formulation, we find that theatre’s own perverse drive to queasiness irritates further the very dyspepsia that Lambert-Beatty identifies. As Ridout notes, “[t]here is something wrong with the theatre,” in that it produces a “queasiness and disquiet,” because of the ways in which failure—particularly the failure to maintain the solidity of the theatrical frame—is one of (if not, *the*) constitutive elements of theatre, as well as our affective experience of that failure as such.<sup>14</sup>

Wilshire’s essay also does not credit or discuss Grotowski’s use of “paratheater,” but rather is a jeremiad *against* not just paratheatrical performance, but even the “concept of the paratheatrical.” He rails against this “disquieting” concept, whether utilized as an aesthetic practice or in sociological and performance studies’ analyses of non-

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” in *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2012), 118, 138.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 138 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 128–29.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Wilshire, “The Concept of the Paratheatrical,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 34, no. 4 (1990): 169–78.

<sup>14</sup> Ridout, *Stage Fright*, 29.

theatre behavior.<sup>15</sup> Wilshire contends that by deviating from the “traditional confines of artistic performance,” (the concept of) paratheater endangers the very fabric of society by “crossing the line which divides fiction from fact.”<sup>16</sup> He argues that theatre’s essential aesthetic is its production of the spatial, temporal, and conceptual “seal” that irrevocably divides “artistic fictions and the larger world of fact.”<sup>17</sup> Wilshire does admit that there is a “*particle* of fictionality within the very actuality of human life,” and that in theatrical works that seal is “porous.”<sup>18</sup> However, he calls for the seal to be “put in its place” in the face of both artists and scholars who would “deliberately produce confusion and consternation.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the need to “bound and limit the activities which count as paratheatrical” is to maintain a distinction between the world of ethical facts and the world of theatrical artifice: “Sanity itself requires it, I believe.”<sup>20</sup>

For Wilshire, the incremental dissolution of the theatrical seal leads inexorably down the slippery ethical slope to the moment when “a human being is killed as a part of an alleged paratheatrical production.”<sup>21</sup> However, when faced with theatre’s ontological queasiness, even he is unable to maintain the seal’s solidity:

[T]heatre tends to push into the paratheatrical, and other human activities—because they involve performance—tend to push into their “para” forms with momentous and perhaps deadly impact in the actual world. The paratheatrical is paradigmatic, at least with respect to the parameter of performance. We cannot attribute this to simple human perversity. Unless, of course, we think there is something perverse about human life as such. That may be!<sup>22</sup>

This “need to be actual” and its “perversity” in both theatre and (maybe) human life operate in fundamental tension with the “ineliminable particle of fictionality . . . essential to the *actuality* of ourselves,” which produces theatre’s “unfinishable” dialectic of the (f)actual and fictional.<sup>23</sup>

But what if theatre’s perversity is not (only) in its “need to be actual,” but in the essential indecidability of its (f)actuality? Theatre’s push into the paratheatrical and the paratheatrical’s push into theatre could be seen as the perverse pleasure of the-

<sup>15</sup> Although never named specifically, particularly given the essay’s publication in *TDR*, NYU’s performance studies is clearly the implicit target of ire.

<sup>16</sup> Wilshire, “The Concept of the Paratheatrical,” 169. “Paratheater” was also frequently used interchangeably with “performance” in the early days of the NYU Department of Performance Studies; see Sally Banes *Subversive Expectations: Performance Art and Paratheater in New York, 1976–85* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 13. For a detailed discussion of Grotowski’s “paratheatrical” work, see Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford, eds., *The Grotowski Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Dominika Laster, *Grotowski’s Bridge Made of Memory: Embodied Memory, Witnessing and Transmission in the Grotowski Work* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Wilshire, “The Concept of the Paratheatrical,” 170.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 174, 170 (emphasis in original).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 170, 172, 175. One must presume that the “seal” in question does not refer to the animal. However, we would do well to point out that the presence of a seal onstage does the work of revealing theatre’s paratheatricality. One need not, as Wilshire proposes us to imagine, club the seal to prove this point. Richard Schechner also stakes out this ethical high ground against killing animals onstage, declaring it “monstrous, I condemn it without exception”; see Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 170.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–75 (emphasis in original).

atre's necessary work of undoing itself. In theatre's perversity of indecidability—its “unreliability, its seemingly fragility and tendency to *untruth*,” we might find, following Kelleher, “its greatest political potential.”<sup>24</sup> In both “human life as such” and theatre, Reality Frictions operate in the space where the need to be actual is irritated by the ineliminable particle of fictionality, and vice versa. And to go one step further, Reality Frictions operate at the locus where “human life as such” irritates “theatre as such,” and vice versa. Reality Frictions' aesthetics of irritation produce a “theatre that invites us perversely to enjoy our ethical discomfort and to think politically about the sources of such enjoyment” by enacting both (para)fictional paratheater and (para)-theatrical parafiction.<sup>25</sup>

Postdramatic theatre and its theorization by Lehmann is useful here in understanding the ways in which this instability has been employed as an artistic response to simulation and spectacle—late capitalism's erosion of the theatrical seal. Many critiques of Lehmann's formulation are aimed at his claim that postdramatic theatre breaks from dramatic theatre by disrupting theatrical illusion's “closed fictive cosmos.”<sup>26</sup> Elinor Fuchs, for instance, rightly notes that the instability of theatre's fictionality is a common element of modern drama.<sup>27</sup> However, this critique does not fully account for the ways in which, in postdramatic theatre, this instability does not simply *exist* (as it does in all theatre), nor is it only *thematized* (as it is in modernist drama). Rather, it is *produced as an interruptive crisis* to be presented to the audience for response;<sup>28</sup> it does so through what Lehmann terms the “irruption of the real” (*Einbruch des Realen*)—the perverse paratheatrical drive to the actual—can never appear onstage except by appearing *as if* it were itself.<sup>29</sup> That is, the real's *irruption* (*Einbruch*) can never be an *eruption* (*Ausbruch*), such that the real cannot make a jailbreak (*Ausbruch*) from theatre, but may only commit a burglary (*Einbruch*) of it.<sup>30</sup>

By staging the real *as the real* (and *as if* it were real), such theatre sets itself an impossible task and thus perpetually fails.<sup>31</sup> This irresolvable paradox of *actually* failing to stage *actual* failure indicates that the fact/fiction condition is operationally and even ontologically “indecidable” (*unentscheidbar*). And while theatre, with its ontological queasiness, necessarily bears this condition of indecidability, Reality Frictions intentionally stage this indecidability to irritatingly amplify that queasiness.

As Derrida frequently points out, indecidability is not a matter of indeterminate free-play, but rather is the state of radical contingency where multiple determinate meanings are both equally valid and marked as either-or/neither-nor binaries. While Derrida's use of *indécidable* is nearly always translated in English as “undecidable,” the philosopher Hugh Silverman utilizes in-/un- as a means of clarifying Derrida's concept:

<sup>24</sup> Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Ridout, *Stage Fright*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Elinor Fuchs, “Postdramatic Theatre (Review),” *TDR: The Drama Review* 52, no. 2 (2008): 178–83.

<sup>28</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1999), 170–78.

<sup>30</sup> All translations from the German are mine. Thanks for translation assistance are due to Doreen Jakob (who also voted for Schlingensiefel's party in 1998) and Erik Butler.

<sup>31</sup> And also, as Bailes notes, of theatre and representation in general; see Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

"The indecidable is not itself undecidable—not passively incapable of resolution, nor fully active in not working out resolution."<sup>32</sup> Rather than a passive relinquishing of responsibility in the face of indeterminacy, the indecidable is what Derrida terms the "trial," "ordeal," and the "experiment and experience of the undecidable" that "calls for decision in the order of ethico-political responsibility," even as that decision is haunted by its double, "the ghost of the undecidable."<sup>33</sup>

For Lehmann, indecidability (*Unentscheidbarkeit*) is not only a formal aspect of post-dramatic theatre, it is also the political potential of its form(ality), as it may call upon the spectator to take on the "response-ability" of decision. That indecidability becomes the very condition for an ethico-political response: "'Interruption of the real' means that the observer, in an insecure state, must decide whether what s/he has perceived is to be considered as a matter of aesthetic intention (that is, as fictitious) or as a real event—which would entail, e.g. moral reaction."<sup>34</sup> By enacting the "theatrical praxis" of a double gesture of aesthetic and political "interruption" (*Unterbrechung*), theatre's indecidability may be mobilized to "implicate the spectator."<sup>35</sup> As Michael Shane Boyle has convincingly argued, these formal innovations of postdramatic theatre by no means serve as a guarantor for radical politics.<sup>36</sup> The interruption of and by the indecidable does not bear the transformative "force" of the performative described by Erika Fischer-Lichte.<sup>37</sup> The nature of the spectators' implications remains irritatingly undefined by Lehmann.

However, the value of this seeming deficiency can be found, perhaps surprisingly so, in encounters with the writings of Walter Benjamin. Lehmann adopts the term "a-performance art" to name postdramatic theatre's contingent politics of the indecidable, a term he draws from Werner Hamacher's reading of Benjamin's "The Critique of Violence."<sup>38</sup> Hamacher distinguishes the provisional *affirmative* from the efficacious certainty of the performative speech act. As affordances, affirmatives modestly "allow something to happen without making it happen" by means of their singularity and mediacy.<sup>39</sup> Derrida finds a similar political potential in Benjamin's essay, arguing that the absence of a guarantee of a determinative efficacy and certitude is what provides

<sup>32</sup> Hugh J. Silverman, *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67. In her translation of Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater*, Karen Jürs-Munby uses "indecidable," while Erik Butler uses "undecidable" in his translation of Lehmann's *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*. In most English translations of Derrida, *indécidable* is translated with the "in-" prefix, although there is no definitive distinction between the use of the two prefixes.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 11, nos. 5–6 (1990): 920–1045, esp. 963; and "Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 116 (emphasis in original).

<sup>34</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 441.

<sup>35</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, "Wie Politisches Ist Postdramatisches Theater?" in *Das Politische Schreiben* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Shane Boyle, "Brecht's Gale: Innovation and Postdramatic Theatre," *Performance Research* 21, no. 3 (2016): 16–26. And thus I hope to avoid what Mike Sell terms the "political fallacy" of the avant-garde and the "liminal-norm" described by Jon McKenzie.

<sup>37</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Werner Hamacher, "Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 13, no. 4 (1992): 110–38, esp. 128n15.

for the charged “moment of suspense of the undecidable.”<sup>40</sup> As opposed to the efficacy of performative force, the affordances of affirmatives’ indecidability provides a way of contrasting the obligation for efficacy in political theatre with the act of obliging spectators to respond, engage, and take action.

Reality Frictions further reconfigure postdramatic theatre’s tension of “concrete life-process” (*realer Lebensprozeß*) and “aesthetically intended fiction” (*ästhetisch vermeinte Fiktion*).<sup>41</sup> Not only do they operate without a clearly demarcated aesthetic frame into which “the real” might irrupt, but they are also doubly coded as a whole as being only either concrete life-process *or* aesthetically intended fiction. In Reality Frictions, the spectator’s perception of an event as being either an in(ter)ruption of the real into a theatrical fiction or an in(ter)ruption of theatrical fiction into the real is experienced as the ordeal of the undecidable.

Reality Frictions’ practices are forms of what Erving Goffman terms the “manufacture of negative experience,” a subset of “frame breaking” that he identifies in the “social sabotage” of Abbie Hoffman and the theatrical “frame attacks” of the Living Theatre and Richard Schechner.<sup>42</sup> They intentionally undermine the “agents of social control” and the theatrical frame that brackets “make-believe” and “real life,” leaving the spectator “engrossed both in his failure to sustain appropriate behavior and in the cause of this failure.”<sup>43</sup> Confronted with these attacks, the spectator’s “[r]eality anomically flutters,” thus challenging even their “purely cognitive sense of what it is that is going on.”<sup>44</sup> If reality flutters in Reality Frictions, it is because the activity that Goffman describes as “at the rim of the frame” is also *of* the rim of the frame.<sup>45</sup> And, Reality Frictions—both *at* and *of* the rim—seek to avoid the traps of cynical detachment and nihilistic anomie. Rather, it is in their oscillating claims to being “theatre” or “for real” that the ordeal of indecidability calls upon the spectator’s response-ability of decision. Perversely irritating the queasiness of theatrical indecidability, theatre’s ontological queasiness gives way to Reality Friction’s irritable bowel syndrome. Thus they also infect any claims to their politics in this essay, because they render irritatingly undecidable the actuality or fictiveness of their politics, as well as my claims for them.

### Failure as Chance, or Christoph Schlingensief: Irritation Artist

“Unlike all other politicians running in this election, the only promise I am going to make is that everyone will be bitterly disappointed.”  
—Christoph Schlingensief

What does it mean to situate “irritation” as a central aesthetic of a theatrical work, and what kind of affirmative work does it do? Alan Read identifies theatre’s political potential through its double-gesture of aesthetic and political interruption characterized by its “propensity to ‘undo itself.’”<sup>46</sup> Our collective “shared ability to be irritable” can be

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law,” 963.

<sup>41</sup> Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, 443.

<sup>42</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), 379.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 437, 378.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 439.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 10, 12.



mobilized by the “irritant gene” of performance to produce a potent, if indeterminate politics.<sup>47</sup> Read maps the irritant gene of performance onto Lehmann’s figuration of postdramatic theatre, wherein “the undecidability for the audience to the status of the theatre act itself” provides the means for problematizing not only aesthetically intended fictions, but also real-life processes more generally.<sup>48</sup> With his 1998 “election campaign circus,” *Chance 2000*, Christoph Schlingensiefel not only irritated through indecidability, but also staged that indecidability as both his primary aesthetic and his form of political engagement. He embraced theatre’s queasy-making double failure of aesthetic autonomy and political efficacy as a productive and active force, repeatedly interrupting its status both as an aesthetically intended fiction and as real political process.

These practices characterized what Boris Groys has called the “aesthetics of irritation” of Schlingensiefel’s films, theatre works, television shows, and public space actions from the 1980s until his death in 2010.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, he was often intentionally irritating, which director Frank Castorf described as Schlingensiefel’s sincere staging of himself as a “total asshole.”<sup>50</sup> However, he constructed this aesthetic of “*Totalirritation*” (total irritation) not just in this performance of self, but also by staging the indecidability of the theatrical fictionality of his work as such.<sup>51</sup> Throughout his work, Schlingensiefel’s practice of “cognitive irritation” (*kognitiv Irritation*) not only rendered its condition as “actual political intervention” or “aesthetic fiction” as indecidable, but also staged that indecidability as its political intervention.<sup>52</sup>

It is only in recent years that Schlingensiefel has received significant attention outside of Germany and Austria, where his incendiary work is legendary.<sup>53</sup> In his most notorious works, he disrupted the frame of aesthetically intended fiction with abrasive and politically charged elements of the real world. For instance, in *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (Please love Austria) (2000) he hosted asylum-seekers in shipping containers at the Wiener Festwochen, who were surveilled and voted out (deported) in the style of the reality television show *Big Brother*. In his version of *Hamlet* (2001), Schlingensiefel cast actual neo-Nazis to portray the actors who would catch the conscience of both the king and the Swiss audience’s latent fascism and anti-Semitism.

While artist-in-residence at Berlin’s Volksbühne Theater, he created his 1998 “homage to failure and crisis as productive elements,” *Chance 2000*—a nine-month federal election campaign.<sup>54</sup> Largely taking place outside of the context of the temporal and

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21; Alan Read, *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), xvii.

<sup>48</sup> Read, *Theatre in the Expanded Field*, 54–55.

<sup>49</sup> Thanks to Richard Langston for his recounting of Groys’s remark, which was made at the 2006 symposium “After the Digital Divide? German Aesthetic Theory in the Age of New Media.”

<sup>50</sup> Frank Castorf, “He Asked the Question of Guilt,” in *Christof Schlingensiefel: German Pavillion, 2011. 54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>51</sup> Marion Löhndorf, “Lieblingsziel Totalirritation,” *Kunstforum* 142 (October 1998): 94–101.

<sup>52</sup> Lars Koch, “Christof Schlingensiefels Bilderstörungsmaschine,” *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 44, no. 1 (2014): 116–34, esp. 120.

<sup>53</sup> See Tara Forrest, *Realism as Protest: Kluge, Schlingensiefel, Haneke* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015); Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer, eds., *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art without Borders* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books Ltd, 2010); and Scheer, *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Staging Chaos, Performing Politics and Theatrical Phantasmagoria* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Anna-Catharina Gebbers, “Me and Reality,” in *Christoph Schlingensiefel*, ed. Aino Laberenz et al. (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 57.

spatial seal of the Volksbühne building, Schlingensief repeatedly claimed the campaign to be actual, rather than a theatrical fiction. Indeed, he did file all of the appropriate paperwork to create the *Chance 2000* party as an officially recognized party, ultimately receiving 56,000 votes in that year's Bundestag elections.<sup>55</sup> However, *Chance 2000*'s affirmative politics are located not in these tangible political effects, but rather in Schlingensief's perverse irritation of that paratheatrical drive to actuality with the theatrical "particle of fictionality."

According to him, *Chance 2000* served as a "parallel election" to the 1998 German federal election, which ultimately resulted in the ouster of long-time Chancellor Helmut Kohl.<sup>56</sup> Drawing on Joseph Beuys's practice of social sculpture, *Chance 2000* included multiple events, some of which Schlingensief designated as theatre and others he termed *Aktionen* to mark their connection to the work of Viennese Actionists. It began in a circus tent at Volksbühne's Pratergarten with the decidedly amateurish *Wahlkampfzirkus* (Election campaign circus) that featured Volksbühne actors, Circus Family Sperlich, and his nonactor collaborators "playing" the roles of Heiner Müller and Beuys. *Chance 2000* culminated with the election-night cabaret performance *Wahldebakel '98* (Election debacle '98) at Volksbühne, where the final election results were announced. In the intervening nine months, *Chance 2000* included multiple events, including *Wahlkampf in Deutschland* (Election campaign in Germany) and the *Tour des Verbrechens* (Tour of crime), as well as *Aktionen* in Berlin's KaDeWe shopping center. Perhaps most dramatic and absurd was *Baden im Wolfgangsee* (Swimming in Lake Wolfgang), which followed Schlingensief's call for six million unemployed to collectively jump into the sea at the Austrian summer house of Chancellor Kohl in order to raise the sea level high enough to flood it.

Schlingensief stated at the beginning of *Chance 2000* that he intended not to actually form a party, but instead to create "an event to shift between theatre project and reality."<sup>57</sup> However, he also described it unequivocally as a sincere attempt to make "the visible invisible and the invisible visible" by creating an open political platform for marginalized groups, particularly the unemployed and those with physical and mental disabilities.<sup>58</sup> At other times, Schlingensief claimed *Chance 2000* to be a work of theatre, although one that would avoid the "lying machines" of naturalistic realism for what Alexander Kluge called Schlingensief's "tangible theatre" (*Theater der Handgreiflichkeit*) of "facts and fakes."<sup>59</sup>

All of these events were saturated by the governing aesthetic of the work, expressed by the party's slogan "Failure as Chance" (*Scheitern als Chance*). The embrace of failure was a common aesthetic of Schlingensief's work. In *Chance 2000* it marks a reclamation of visibility by those that German society had deemed to be failures or "losers," such as those with disabilities and the unemployed.<sup>60</sup> For Schlingensief, the "chance" of failure

<sup>55</sup> Carl Hegemann, "Egomania: Art and Non-Art in the Work of Christoph Schlingensief," in *Christof Schlingensief: German Pavillion, 2011*, 200.

<sup>56</sup> Solveig Gade, "Putting the Public Sphere to the Test: Of Publics and Counter-Publics in *Chance 2000*," in *Christoph Schlingensief: Art without Borders*, 89–103.

<sup>57</sup> *Chance 2000: Farewell to Germany*, film directed by Kathrin Krottenhaler and Frieder Schlaich (Berlin: Filmgalerie 451, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Christoph Schlingensief, *Ich Weiß, Ich War's* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2012), 57.

<sup>59</sup> Forrest, *Realism as Protest*, 87, 89, 85.

<sup>60</sup> On Schlingensief collaborations with performers with disabilities, see Scheer, *Christoph Schlingensief*, 31–37.

also referred to the word's meaning (in both German and English) as "opportunity." Influenced by punk rock's aesthetics of failure and B-movie trashiness, he embraced failure as a disruptive force against what he called the "false unambiguousness" of artistic practice.<sup>61</sup>

These multiple politicized valences of failure operated precisely at the location where art makes claims to effect change in the outside world. As an artwork's success or failure came to be defined by its efficacy for social change, Schlingensief saw the instrumentalized "unambiguous" art of good intentions to be failures—as art and as politics.<sup>62</sup> As Dieter Diederichson notes, the productive form of chance that Schlingensief located in "this fundamental failure of artistic action" required that such failure be "staged as such," not through theatrically representing failure, but by producing it as a beautiful and "profound dissonance" for political engagement.<sup>63</sup> Such failure need not lead to apathy and cynicism, but instead could be affirmatively and affirmatively productive when staged at "the vanishing point of (the failure to have any) effect."<sup>64</sup> The embrace of failure was not simply an acceptance of not doing well, but was also what Schlingensief described as his "self-destructive impulse" to disrupt his own work if it "goes too smoothly and too successfully."<sup>65</sup>

The drive to stage failure through its production operated particularly through his construction and then (self-)destruction of *Chance 2000* as a playful fiction or a serious political action. Schlingensief emphatically asserted that *Chance 2000* was "*kein Spaßpartei*" (not a joke party), although they did have "*viel Spaß*" (great fun).<sup>66</sup> In an interview leading up to *Baden im Wolfgangsee*, Schlingensief made explicit the need to continually self-destruct its framing: "The party was just a joke (*Spaß*) for a long time. But now it is suddenly a real party. The joke suddenly got serious (*Ernst*). Now we have to make it fun (*Spaß*) again."<sup>67</sup> Schlingensief's disavowal at various times of *Chance 2000* being either *Spaß* or *Ernst* left each condition plausible (and plausibly deniable). Thus whichever one the spectator decided it to be, that decision was necessarily haunted by its ghost of indecidability. It is not only that *Chance 2000* produced what Solveig Gade describes as "uncertainty and confusion" about Schlingensief's intentions, but also that the public knew that it was equally plausible that the party could either be *Spaß* or *Ernst*, and thus operated necessarily, and impossibly, as both<sup>68</sup> (fig. 2).

With *Baden im Wolfgangsee*, Schlingensief created an impossible action in which failure was inevitable. Of course, six million people did not jump into Wolfgangsee; only a few hundred people showed up, leaving Kohl's house unscathed. However, it was in the staging of failure as such that the impossible animated what Bojana Cvejić calls

<sup>61</sup> Dieter Diederichsen, "Combating Discursive Scarcity, Futile Intention, and the Negative *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Christoph Schlingensief and His Music," in *Christof Schlingensief: German Pavillion, 2011*, 186.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 187. This is also Claire Bishop's argument in her *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Diederichsen, "Combating Discursive Scarcity," 187.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>65</sup> Christoph Schlingensief and Carl Hegemann, *Chance 2000: Wähle Dich Selbst* (Köln: Kiepenhauer und Witsch, 1998), 41. Schlingensief identifies the absurdist singer and actor Helge Schneider as a model for his self-destructiveness.

<sup>66</sup> Schlingensief, *Ich Weiß, Ich War's*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Krottenhaler and Schlaich, directors, *Chance 2000*.

<sup>68</sup> Gade, "Putting the Public Sphere to the Test," 91.



Figure 2. Christoph Schlingensiefel (in hat) and not six million people failing to flood German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's summer house in *Baden im Wolfgangsee* (1998). (Source: Film still, *Chance 2000—Abschied von Deutschland* [*Chance 2000—Farewell to Germany*] [2017], © Filmgalerie 451.)

*Chance 2000*'s "affirmation of life against cynical resentment at being disempowered."<sup>69</sup> As she notes, this production of failure as such enacts a politics through its call for the responsibility of action—action characterized by indeterminacy and the impossible. Indecidably, affirmatively, and affirmatively either *Spaß* or *kein Spaß*, *Chance 2000*'s politics remain irritatingly inconclusive. Schlingensiefel interrupted his claims for *Chance 2000* being a sincere political gesture of making the visible invisible and the invisible visible by repeatedly making its theatrical fictionality both visible and invisible. The perversity of its recurring interruptions—both of the irruption of the real and the irruption of the fictional—staged his "failure of failure: strangely beautiful and perverse."<sup>70</sup> The investment in *brechen* (breaking) manifested in both *unterbrechen* (interrupting) and *einbrechen* (irruption), as well as the *Unterbrechung des Einbruchs* (interruption of irruption), enacting an uncertain politics and a politics of uncertainty. This *Einbruch* is both an irruption and a burglary, where Schlingensiefel "robbed the audience" of the seal of the theatrical frame—a political crime in which he also implicated the audience.<sup>71</sup>

### Politics Is Interested in You: NO99 and Theatre's War on Indifference

"Lots of people asked us, 'Why did you forego power?' That's a stupid question altogether. In what sense? We're a theatre! A theatre! We aren't con men who try to fashion a party for themselves using the support of the Ministry of Culture."  
—Tiit Ojasoo<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Bojana Cvejić, "Theocracy, or the Art of Dramatising the Public," in *The Time We Share: Reflecting on and through Performing Arts*, ed. Daniel Blanga-Gubbay and Lars Kwakkenbos (Brussels: Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 2015), 303–11.

<sup>70</sup> Diederichsen, "Combating Discursive Scarcity," 190.

<sup>71</sup> Gebbers, "Me and Reality," 56.

<sup>72</sup> NO55. Their exhibition of the "party headquarters" of Unified Estonia won the Golden Triaga, the grand prix of the Prague Quadrennial in 2015.

"I expect to see what I have been used to seeing in NO99 during the past five years: a sharp production, with top-of-the-class roles. But I also know the golden rule of the theatre: if a loaded rifle is on the stage, it should definitely be fired by the end of the show."  
—Juhan Kivirähk<sup>73</sup>

While *Chance 2000* served as a model for the creation of *Unified Estonia*, the difference between their two approaches was immediately evident in Teater NO99's press conference that began their project. Unlike *Chance 2000*'s T-shirts and informal performance aesthetics, the company appeared in tailored business suits and was flanked by glossy campaign posters. This gesture marks a significantly different approach to Reality Friction, which involves the heightening of the perverse drive to the actual through the incorporation and amplification of theatricality. Known for their experimental and politically charged work, NO99 staged the indecidability of *Unified Estonia*'s fictionality as an "ordeal" that not only implicated spectators in the indifference that permeated Estonian political culture, but also in their response-ability to participate in politics.

At their press conference, co-artistic director Tiit Ojasoo declared that the company would speak "on an important national issue." Deliberately avoiding the term *play* or *production*, Ojasoo performatively "called into being . . . an association known as the Unified Estonia Party." He teased the assembled press by presenting the project as if it might be a sincere effort to organize a political party, noting that "that if the parliament can sometimes do bad theatre, then we can do good politics." When a journalist inquired, "How far do you think it is possible to go with this project?," Ojasoo maintained the plausibility of *Unified Estonia* as both theatrical fiction and a sincere plan to create a political party. In his answer, he described the work's aesthetic intention without foreclosing the possibility of forming a party: "It is important for us to be able to show people that you can't say about politics that it doesn't interest you. If you don't deal with politics, politics deals with you. That's our main message and all paths from that point are possible."<sup>74</sup> Thus Ojasoo kept alive the possibilities that the project intended to lead down a path toward narrative closure or toward the paratheatrical perversion of the actual.

Since Estonia's "Singing Revolution" propelled its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonian politics has been comparably stable, marked by investments in the educational system, broad access to the internet, election access through e-voting, and membership in the European Union (EU), as well as the current presidency of the European Council.<sup>75</sup> However, this birthplace of Skype and e-residency has been described by what political scientists Mikko Lagerspetz and Henri Vogt describe as the country's "monotony of the party system," characterized by populist candidates and political corruption. With politics largely controlled by charismatic populists and closed party machines, a majority of Estonians have expressed not only a distrust of politics, but even "a disillusioned form of political interest."<sup>76</sup>

A vibrant if small theatre environment has emerged in the country, including an experimental scene influenced by the Estonian "theatre renewal" of the 1960s, which moved away from the primacy of text to emphasize ritual, improvisation, and scenography. Founded in 2004 by actor-director Ojasoo and visual artist and scenographer

<sup>73</sup> NO75. Kivirähk is an Estonian sociologist and political analyst.

<sup>74</sup> NO55.

<sup>75</sup> This stability did not survive the turmoil of 2016, because its government was dissolved, bringing a return of the Centre Party to power.

<sup>76</sup> Mikko Lagerspetz and Henri Vogt, "Estonia," in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sten Berglund et al. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 55, 58.



Ene-Liis Semper, NO99's ensemble of ten actors can be seen, according to Semper, as more of a "conceptual art project" than a theatre. This condition is expressed by the company's name and the descending numerical sequencing of each of their works, from ninety-nine to "zero, to oblivion," at which point they will dissolve the company, marking "the inherently finite nature of time and its finality."<sup>77</sup>

With its name as a play on Putin's Unified Russia party, Unified Estonia adopted the characteristics of contemporary populist campaigns in order to create what NO99 hoped would be the "nastiest, most populist, most fascist party ever."<sup>78</sup> Rather than embodying the utopic empowerment of *Chance 2000*, NO99 convincingly performed their object of critique, so much so that they were frequently taken to be "the real thing" by the news media and public at large. In what Semper called this "immense social experiment," NO99 increased the detail and craft of the work, such that as it approached the condition of theatre as an aesthetically intended fiction, it also produced the plausibility of *Unified Estonia* being (or becoming) an actual political party.<sup>79</sup>

NO99's approach is best understood within the context of the artistic practices that emerged in Eastern Europe since the 1960s: subversive affirmation and over-identification. According to Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, these "tactics of explicit consent" adopt the theatrical aesthetics of "imitation, simulation, mimesis and camouflage" in order to subvert that which they only appear to affirm.<sup>80</sup> As these works avoid parodic hyperbole or ironic detachment, they confront spectators with what Slavoj Žižek calls "the indecidability as to 'where they actually stand,' . . . which compels us to take up our positions and act upon our desires."<sup>81</sup> While this indecidability may serve to expose and destabilize the "obscene underside of the law," this tactic is also fundamentally risky, because "the appropriation might be misunderstood" to be the very thing it opposes.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, this precipice was the very one on which NO99 perversely teetered.

<sup>77</sup> Liisi Aibel, "Attempts at Self-Surprise: An Interview with Ene-Liis Semper, the Artistic Director of Theatre NO99." *The Theatre Times*, February 22, 2018, available at <https://thetheatretimes.com>, and "About Us," *Teater NO99*, available at <http://no99.ee/about-us>. As this essay went to press, the company unexpectedly announced that it would cease operations following performances of *NO30 Ship of Fools* in December 2018. While the company had recently been plagued by scandal and financial instability, it emphatically stated that theirs was an artistic decision: "We have decided to finish. . . . Theatre NO99 has always been an idealistic endeavor, and when one no longer reaches the due merit of the ideals, then Theatre NO99 is no more. A theatre cannot be finished off by any drama exiting the media space. No. A theatre finishes, because step by step, bit by bit, little by little something has happened that is impossible to name. This decision hurts us. The silence that takes hold in the corridors of Theatre NO99 is a silence just like any other, yet for us, this silence hurts. But this silence is also honest. This silence is just. Because we cannot go on the same way and we don't want to go on any other way." Eero Epner, Rasmus Kaljujärvi, Laur Kaunissaare, Eva Koldits, Rea Lest-Liik, Jörgen Liik, Helena Lotman, Tiit Ojasoo, Gert Raudsep, Ene-Liis Semper, Simeoni Sundja, Ragnar Uustal, Marika Vaarik, "We Finish," NO99, October 31, 2018, available at <https://no99.ee>.

<sup>78</sup> See Eero Epner, "Hacking Democracy with Theater," TEDxKyiv, YouTube, January 17, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdVTYqRzOWM>.

<sup>79</sup> NO55.

<sup>80</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance," in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (London: Afterall Books, 2006), 445.

<sup>81</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists?" in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 287.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*; Arns and Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation," 449.

As dramaturg Eero Epner explains, the strategy of *Unified Estonia* was very simple: “we had no ideas, no programs, and we promised everything.”<sup>83</sup> Drawing directly from the populist repertoire that had come to dominate Estonian politics, “taking power wasn’t so hard. . . . [w]e said that we were against established parties, and that we were a new force. And that was all that was needed.”<sup>84</sup> Governed by the populist injunction to “be pretty,” their political campaign was fundamentally an aesthetic one. The slickness of their tailored suits was matched by high production-value television advertisements, which proclaimed that unlike the existing political parties, “there is only one force that can live up to the expectations of the entire people. There is only one force, and that force is us—Unified Estonia.”<sup>85</sup> The company commissioned a rousing party anthem from composer and singer Tõnis Mägi, whose “Koit” (dawn) is remembered as one of the most celebrated songs of the Singing Revolution.<sup>86</sup> However, the group also signaled the potential fictionality of their campaign through “Election School,” their YouTube series of how-to videos, which impishly instruct viewers how to, for instance, funnel illegal contributions to a political party.

NO99 utilized the unstable fictive-real of theatre as a means for producing the plausibility of the actual throughout *Unified Estonia*’s many performance projects during the campaign. For instance, in *NO76, 8 When 200 Will Become 6500*, a playful and informal participatory theatre piece, the company experimented with many of the theatrical “manipulations” they would later employ in the convention performance. When an actual and unexpected disruption occurred during the performance, the company later theatrically shaped this event to serve the plausible actuality of *Unified Estonia*. For in attendance that evening was the Estonian Minister of Justice, Rein Lang, who refused to go onstage to participate by calling out from his seat, “What do you have to say?” The company conspired to incorporate this paratheatrical moment into the parafictional fabric of *Unified Estonia*. Ojasoo gleefully scripted how he would fictionalize the minister’s interjection through the news media as if it had been an aggressive disruption of a conventional play. In his fictionalization of the events, the actors were traumatized by Rein’s “yells and bellows” in the middle of a “mass scene.” Ojasoo rehearsed his response to Rein’s demand for what they “have to say” by performing with feigned indignation, “But in what sense? We’re actors. Actors!”

On a television news program on the following day, Ojasoo enacted his practiced outrage to the shock and dismay of the hosts. They were appalled by Rein’s purported behavior, with Ojasoo’s fictionalization now including the minister’s companions having had to restrain him from attacking the performers. That night, a half-hour after midnight, Ojasoo received a telephone call from Rein demanding a public apology for misrepresenting his actions. Calling *Unified Estonia* a “terrific project, [to culminate] in a *performance* of a party convention,” he denounced Ojasoo’s accusations as “absolute slander.”<sup>87</sup> Rein’s response to Ojasoo’s intentional misrepresentation of his irruption of the real points to the political and ethical challenges presented by Reality Frictions. On the one hand, NO99 perpetrated a hoax, if not an outright deception. However, it

<sup>83</sup> Epner, “Hacking Democracy with Theater.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> NO55.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel Vaarik, “I Protest. The Rise and Fall of United Estonia,” VU TSPMI, YouTube, September 17, 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbIB3yB1C5o>.

<sup>87</sup> NO55 (emphasis added).

was only through the production of this fake controversy that they could evade being a justice minister–approved play of social criticism. Moreover, NO99 constructed this action as another bit of over-identification: enacting the populist ploy of manipulating the news media, whose desire for scandal surpasses the need to do any reporting or fact-checking of sensational political stories.

NO99 produced this irritational interruptive experience through the irruption of theatre and the irruption of the real with “The Populist Engine,” the communication scheme developed by the project’s media consultant, Daniel Vaarik.<sup>88</sup> As Epner explains, this strategy was analogous to a water faucet that dispenses “hot information that alarms people” and “cold information [that] pacifies them. Cold information is the fact that we are in a theatre, and hot is the fact that we’re politicians.”<sup>89</sup> With the public’s actual desire to believe that “some new kind of politics is coming from here,” the temperature of the water coming from the faucet became “relatively warm.” However, when the project seemed to achieve the heat of political actuality, NO99 would reassert their status as a theatre company. Similarly, when the project approached theatrical coolness, they impishly scalded the public with the threat of the actual.

Their production of hot information led evening news broadcasts to describe the project as not only making politicians “anxious,” but also “spinning out of the theatre’s control.”<sup>90</sup> Once the project came to be seen as a theatrical production (and thus less controversial), the company vandalized their own campaign posters with spray-paint in a midnight raid. This action, as one political commentary noted on a radio broadcast, was immediately met with “conspiracy theories” that NO99 had vandalized their own posters—which of course they had. However, news media continued to cover the project as both a theatrical work and a political campaign, because “ultimately nobody knows whether they want to create a party or not. Nobody knows whether Semper and Ojasoo have already written the ending lines. Nobody knows if they themselves are having their signs defaced or not. But Unified Estonia is already playing a role.”<sup>91</sup> Thus the project’s indecidability forced an active and critical spectatorship by compelling politicians, news media, and the Estonian public to continually reassess what was really going on.

Modeled on Estonian party conventions, Hitler’s 1934 Nuremburg rally, and pop spectacle, *Unified Estonia Party Assembly* was a four-hour theatrical extravaganza that included pop-song performances of the party anthem, processions, political speeches, aerial dance, and even a live “kiss-cam” shown on the stadium Jumbotron. However, this spectacle was continually undercut by running commentary from Election School actor Jaak Prints, who deconstructed the performance’s manipulative tactics throughout. As the convention reached the apex of theatrical spectacle, with pounding kettle drums, dramatic music, and a video projection of a torch flame, Ojasoo and Semper entered the stadium with a troupe of flag-bearers. Prints announced and deconstructed their entrance with increasing histrionics, as he explicitly marked their use of Nazi aesthetics:

What is the indisputable climax of a party convention? Of course, it is the arrival of the leader of the party. The arrival of the leader and his speech form the core of every party’s

<sup>88</sup> Vaarik, “I Protest.”

<sup>89</sup> NO55.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> NO55.

congress which will be focused for the members and television. . . . When the Leader arrives, flags wave, fires blaze, lights flash, and the people applaud. . . . This is the birth of a god. The haunting grandeur of the performance has already done its work. Critical capacity is weakened, receptive capacity is strengthened, and incredible images pulsate in people's heads. We are in the temple of a new Human God, higher than any church on Earth. We only barely hear the call: "We greet You. We believe in one god in heaven who has sent you to us." And the Führer replies, "I am with you and you are with me. We have the strength to build a New Nation!" And the Führer says, "You once heard a man's voice and it touched your heart, it awakened you and you have followed that voice. You have listened to the guidance of that voice for years, without even once seeing the bearer of that voice. You have only heard that voice and followed it. And when we meet here, we all feel the wonder of this meeting. All of you cannot see me, but I see you and you know me! Now we are one!"

This emotionally charged scene gave way to a long parade of speakers, who made populist appeals that ranged the gamut of the political spectrum: from the massive exploitation of Estonian natural resources to the nationalization of excess profits of the Estonian financial-services industry. NO99's over-identification with the conventionality of these political speeches served to reassert the potential for political actuality. Playing the role of the convention chair, actor Marika Vaarik announced in a staid, even bureaucratic tone that the indecidability of Unified Estonia para/theatricality would be directly decided by audience vote:

Although Unified Estonia was supposed to be a theatre project with a social message . . . we've realized that Unified Estonia could be something much more; it could also be a party. But we won't decide this in backrooms or behind closed doors. We want to decide that today, here and now together with you. So, dear participants, you will decide if Unified Estonia is a new political force, if it will become a party. And we'll make that decision democratically.

Invoking the "essence of democracy," Vaarik explained that party leadership would be determined by random selection of audience members' ticket stubs from the "lototron . . . the lottery machine that originates from ancient Greece." This new democratic leadership, she declared, would "decide if a party will be born or not."

As was quickly revealed, this setup was a ruse—each "randomly" selected participant was identifiably an NO99 actor. However, their continuous staging of the work's indecidability demanded that spectators prepare for their own political act of decision. As one commentator noted:

I saw that many people seemed to somehow stiffen. They thought: "Now we have to do something." Then the selection of the leadership began. I fell for it completely. I wondered how those people who go onstage would manage. Would they have the courage? I took my ticket out of my pocket and thought if the lottery wheel should draw me out of it, what would I do then? Would I go there? I thought, "Yes." But what should I actually do there?<sup>92</sup>

The danger of the Unified Estonia becoming an actual political party reached new levels when NO99 announced that the "truly democratic leadership" of actors had fulfilled the legal requirements to "form a party if that really turns out to be the course of action." However, they then interrupted this actuality by formally nominating Ojasoo as party leader, thus seeming to reframe the event as theatre. But they even disrupted this theatrical frame with a staged interruption by Indrek Tarand, the Estonian representative to the EU, Green Party member, and television personality. Tarand gestured metatheatrically to his entrance's paratheatricality, calling it the "moment

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

when two young members of the Centre and Reform parties grab their cell phones, call headquarters and their message is the same: 'Now we're screwed! Things are getting out of hand!' Everyone knows that candidates are nominated in democracy. . . . And my candidate, who I warmly recommend everyone to support, is [former Estonian Chancellor of Justice] Allar Jõks."<sup>93</sup> To the audience's surprise and delight, Jõks, who was then highlighted by a spotlight, ascended the stage to read a prepared political speech condemning political corruption, the fetishization of political "stability," and the "interweaving of politics and business."

Borrowing from the conventions of reality television competitions, NO99 announced that the audience would vote via text message to elect either Ojasoo or Jõks as party leader, admonishing spectators to "[a]ct according to your conscience." The voting tabulation was projected live, showing Jõks maintaining a strong lead throughout (around 60 percent). This (para)theatrical gesture also created the true risk of the event, as the work was scripted to end with the dissolution, rather than the constitution of the party. Estonian cultural theorist Tarmo Jüristo notes the potential "horror" that the company toyed with "if you pull the rug out from under 7,000 people."<sup>94</sup> It was, he suggests, "like playing with matches in a gunpowder depot," since the act of voting for either candidate was actually a "proxy vote" for the audience's real decision, "Will we do this?"<sup>95</sup> That is, would the audience decide to kill the seal? And if they did, would NO99 allow this to occur? (fig. 3).

Ultimately, NO99 reasserted the theatrical fictionality of *Unified Estonia*, dowsing the matches of paratheatricality with the ice-cold water of theatre. With the vote tally displayed as 32.3 percent for Ojasoo and 67.7 percent for Jõks, NO99 then "stole" the election for themselves by announcing that large blocks of proxy votes would be awarded to Ojasoo, to give him a 69.9 percent to 30.1 percent win (fig. 4). Utilizing this common practice in Estonian party politics, NO99 staged their election as a theatrical fiction, in which its claims to "democracy" were also fictional. Through this two-tiered fictionality, their election similarly marked the democracy of Estonian elections as fictional, through the enactment of that very process.<sup>96</sup>

Upon his election, Ojasoo stood before a podium which rose to some twenty feet above the stage, accompanied by a rousing reprise of the party anthem by Mägi and a chorus of children costumed in traditional Estonian dress. However, rather than theatrically accepting the nomination, Ojasoo cued for the platform to be lowered. Breaking character, he interrupted the pleasure of the convention spectacle to address the beliefs, expectations, and responsibilities of the assembled audience.<sup>97</sup> Teasing the audience with pregnant pauses, he presented his (para)theatrical situation and the audience's response to it as foundational to democratic governance:

<sup>93</sup> Jõks ran for the Estonian presidency in the 2016 elections, but failed to advance past the fifth round of voting. Ojasoo was one of fourteen signatories of a letter of support submitted to the government for his candidacy.

<sup>94</sup> NO55.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> At a press conference held immediately after the performance, the company revealed all of the fictional elements of the Unified Estonia project and the project's budget, as well as the actual final vote tally. Of the 2,164 total votes received, 1,486 (68.7 percent) were for Jõks (NO75).

<sup>97</sup> Eva-Liisa Linder, "How Theatre Can Develop Democracy: The Case of NO99," *Nordic Theatre Studies* 25 (2013): 92.





Figure 3. "The birth of a god." In the "indisputable climax" of the party assembly, Unified Estonia party leader Tiit Ojasoo arrives at the assembly. (Source: Film still, *NO75 Unified Estonia Party Assembly* [2010].)

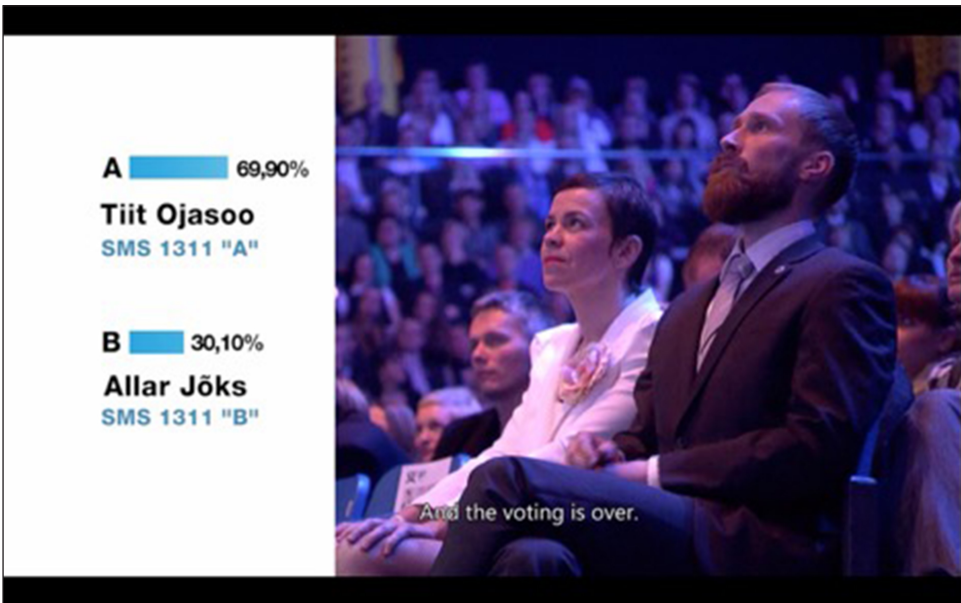


Figure 4. Ene-Liis Semper and Tiit Ojasoo look on as the live election results display his rigged victory for party leader of their fictional political party, Unified Estonia. (Source: Film still, *NO55 Ash and Money* [2013].)

We're enjoying ourselves here today. But I have to remind you, that Unified Estonia wasn't born from joy, Unified Estonia was born from concern—concern about this country and our people. And when you came here today to the Saku Hall, what were you hoping for? Were you hoping for a new party or were you hoping for a gigantic political show? If you were hoping for the latter, you were not disappointed. If you were hoping for a new party, I'd like to say the following: When we were preparing this stage production, an older generation politician came to meet with us . . . and he said that Estonians are serfs. They are taken down to a cellar, flogged, and that's where the reasoning of an Estonian ends. He didn't hope for anything anymore. Everyone ends up the same way, he said, everyone gets bought. There won't be any changes. Do you agree with him? You aren't a serf who doesn't have his own wishes. You aren't a serf who doesn't want to take responsibility into his own hands. You aren't a serf who thinks, "Better to get a beating, at least that's one sure thing in this world." You are a free human being. Allow me to now say a few words about Unified Estonia as a new political force. I'm very pleased that so many have greeted and awaited this new force. Nevertheless, please don't constantly wait for a new force. . . . Everyone's expecting the world to change in one day. But I stand here and say, the world will not change in one day. The world changes every day. If you don't want to change your world, then others will change the world for you. Who are you counting on? Please, today, here make a contract with yourself. Write down, "I will say what I want out loud. I will say what I want so that everyone hears me. I will say how I want things to be in Estonia." Take that contract. Sign it, put it in your pocket. Write the date on it, 7 May 2010. Put it in your pocket and live by it. Thank you. You are free. (See figure 5.)

This final moment was nothing if not anti-climactic, staging the failure to realize the closure of fiction or the real. To realize its theatrical promise to become paratheater—to establish a political party—would have been to undermine its potential politics of audience response-ability. Instead, it would have become one more deferral to politician performers and their fictive promises of salvation. NO99's final coup de théâtre—the revelation of the work as theatre—failed to bound the work with the theatrical seal by implicating the audience with Ojasoo's final speech and its final line, "You are free."

As Ojasoo later reflected, *Unified Estonia* was dogged before, during, and after by the need for the project itself to produce change. However, as with *Chance 2000*, the demand for political efficacy misses the very politics it enacted: "The point is not whether anything changed in a moment, the point is that this was one battle in a long war. I think it was a totally important battle."<sup>98</sup> The battle, one might say, is part of theatre's broader war against the enemy of indifference.<sup>99</sup> And it is precisely in its reassertion of itself as *theatre* through the spectacle of the assembly and the call to response-ability in "You are Free" that *Unified Estonia* enacted an affirmative politics.

In an early planning meeting, Ojasoo told company members that the success or failure of the piece hinged specifically on the activation of the audience as an assembly: "If it is full of people interested in theatre, then we've failed. But if it is full of people who've come and are reacting because they're citizens of Estonia, this project is a success."<sup>100</sup> As Ojasoo stated in the middle of the campaign, "We're in politics when we do this. That doesn't mean I have to run for a seat in parliament." The doing of theatre, then, was the *potential* for its politics, not in spite of its status as theatre but because of it. To form an actual political party as a theatre would have betrayed their identity as *a theatre*. The disavowal of the paratheatrical, the embrace of theatre became the very political work that *Unified Estonia* was intended to do: "Our goal is entirely different

<sup>98</sup> NO55.

<sup>99</sup> On the antagonism of theatre and indifference, see Read, *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*, 25–26.

<sup>100</sup> NO55.



Figure 5. Following his election, Tiit Ojasoo ascends far above the stage before asserting the assembly's status as theatre with his final line, "You are free."  
(Source: Film still, *NO99 Unified Estonia Party Assembly* [2010].)

[from taking political power], but that foregoing of power was the only possible course of action. But the thing about foregoing power that is complicated, is the fact that what remains—is reverberating—is that change is possible and you have to do something."<sup>101</sup>

With the resolution of *Unified Estonia*, NO99 called the bluff of political theatre, a bluff that they themselves had made, by reasserting the condition of the project *as theatre*. In so doing, they created the affordance of the reverberating "You are free" as a condition of response-ability for reclaiming participatory democracy. By speaking these words within a performance of their own theatricality, NO99 staged its particles of fictionality without the guarantee of the closure of representation. *Unified Estonia's* friction between theatrical fiction and real political process was not only what structured the entire forty-four-day work; it also staged that indecidability as the critical moment of decision. Theatricality, both in the ongoing performance of subversive affirmation and the spectacle of the party assembly, reasserted fictionality as a form and practice of participating as if free.

### Reality Friction: Wunderbaum's Parafictional Failure

"We wanted to do something in reality, while now I think: What do I have to offer that reality? I sometimes feel like . . . [i]s that more meagre than what I do in fiction?"  
—Marleen Scholten<sup>102</sup>

While *Unified Estonia* concluded with an implicit command to its audience to "be free," the title of Wunderbaum's film is a command to themselves: *Stop Acting Now*.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> *Stop Acting Now*, film directed by Mijke de Jong (Wunderbaum and Topaki Films, 2016).

Founded by six graduates of the Toneelacademie Maasricht in 2001, Wunderbaum is a Dutch-Flemish “actors group” that creates devised theatre without a designated artistic director. In 2013, Wunderbaum began their four-year project *The New Forest*, a response to the failure of their own politically engaged theatrical fictions to produce material effects. With *The New Forest* and in particular its concluding work *Stop Acting Now*, Wunderbaum highlighted theatre’s unstable fictionality as the very ground for its politics. Begun in the aftermath of the 2012 Dutch elections, *The New Forest* was a “fictional platform” for social and political action, which included a diverse array of artistic forms: large-scale outdoor spectacles, participatory theatre, public forums with academics and community members, and, finally, their film. While throughout *The New Forest* and even for most of their film the company staged the theatrical indecidability of the work; *Stop Acting Now*’s final claim to political action is made through their staging of theatre’s triumphant return celebrating theatre’s queasy instability as both a real-life process and an aesthetically intended fiction.

With the Netherlands having already been one of the “frontrunners in dismantling of the welfare state,” the 2012 election continued what Alex de Jong calls the country’s “unquestioned acceptance of neoliberal principles,” particularly as its centrist governing coalition Labour Party was seen as a bulwark against the ethnic nationalism of Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom.<sup>103</sup> According to the Rotterdam-based collective BAVO (architects Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels), a form of “neoliberalism with Dutch characteristics” had taken root in the Netherlands, which they term “enlightened neoliberalism.”<sup>104</sup> The bringing together of Dutch traditions of governmental *maakbaarheid* (social engineering or manufacturability) with austerity policies and market deregulation shifted the Dutch welfare state from the position of ameliorating the deprivations of capitalism to exacerbating them through such mechanisms as “socially engineered market spontaneity.”<sup>105</sup>

It is in this context, BAVO argues, that artists are not only incorporated into a neoliberal “creative class,” but are also posited as “subjects supposed to subvert” through the “humanitarian fallacy” and “pragmatic blinding” of well-intentioned “NGO art,” i.e., socially engaged art.<sup>106</sup> BAVO calls instead for artists to take up the strategy of over-identification, as it “sabotages [the] dialectic of alarm and reassurance, fear and relief” through its “structural ambiguity” and the “deliberate impurity” that is exemplified for them by Schlingensief’s *Bitte Liebt Österreich*.<sup>107</sup> While NO99 staged their over-identification with populist political aesthetics, BAVO argues that in the context of Enlightened Neoliberalism, artists should over-identify with the “accepted but subordinated politics of resistance” of socially engaged art as a political tactic of subversion.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Alex de Jong, “The Netherlands: Neoliberal Dreams in Times of Austerity,” *New Politics* 14, no. 2 (2013): 22–29, quote on 22.

<sup>104</sup> BAVO, “Enlightened Neoliberalism, or the Neoliberal City with Dutch Characteristics,” unpublished manuscript (2013).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 (emphasis in original).

<sup>106</sup> BAVO, “The Specter of the Avant-Garde: Contemporary Reassertions of the Program of Subversion of the Avant-Garde,” *Andere Sinema* 176 (2006): 27–28; and “Always Choose the Worst Option: Artistic Resistance and the Strategy of over-Identification,” in *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification*, ed. BAVO (Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2007), 28, 23.

<sup>107</sup> BAVO, “Always Choose the Worst Option,” 32, 34.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2016), 118.



Wunderbaum's *The New Forest* over-identified in just this way. Employing the language used by neoliberals to justify further Dutch privatization, *The New Forest* offered to respond to their "society-in-transition" by producing a "platform for social change," where "transition is the mission."<sup>109</sup> Describing *The New Forest* as being "neither a utopia nor a dystopia," Wunderbaum adopted sociologist William Schinkel's use of Foucault's term "heterotopias" to describe the spaces that they would performatively call into being through the kind of NGO art collaborations critiqued by BAVO: "partners from the business community, the advertising sector, politics and education, but also a large network of volunteers and critical, involved spectators. Together, we are building *The New Forest*."<sup>110</sup>

According to Wunderbaum actor Matijs Jansen, *The New Forest*'s efforts toward social engagement and civic responsibility were by no means entirely insincere. Initially, they planned for *The New Forest* to be a "very real" platform, envisioning it as even a physical place, "a real sort of village being built by artists."<sup>111</sup> However, early on the group "realized that we are of course actors" and thus found themselves to be lacking the expertise and organizational infrastructure to produce *The New Forest* for real. When Wunderbaum was faced with a request for *The New Forest* village to be used to house 150 refugees, they realized they could only offer them a fictional place.

The failure to be able to move from the fictional to the very real operated as something of a breakthrough for the project. While some members of the group initially saw the shift away from "really being activist in the purist form" as a retreat from the challenge of political and social engagement, Wunderbaum began to see the political potential of *The New Forest* emerging from its condition of being a fictional place where imaginary futures might be called into being. As actor Walter Bart explains, *The New Forest* functioned as an attempt to transition between the fictive and the nonfictive by "postulat[ing] fictitious themes that would turn into reality," while proclaiming the power of fictionality to be that it is "more real than life."<sup>112</sup>

Wunderbaum staged *The New Forest* both as a paratheatrical "real platform" and as a theatrical fiction, deliberately producing for the public what Jensen calls the "confusion" about whether it was factual or fictional.<sup>113</sup> In their qualitative analysis of the public response to the project, Kris Rutten, Laura Van Beveren, and Griet Roet characterize this double-gesture as a "friction with reality," which "occasionally causes irritation with the audience."<sup>114</sup> The irritation caused by friction (with reality), and reality's friction with fiction, is the very political mechanism that Reality Frictions offer. As the culminating project of *The New Forest*, Wunderbaum's film *Stop Acting Now* pushes this friction to stage a triumphant return of theatre's fictionality.

<sup>109</sup> Wunderbaum, "More Real Than Life," *The New Forest*, January 27, 2015, available at <http://the-newforest.nl/en/2015/01/more-real-than-life-2/>.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Matijs Jansen, personal communication with the author, March 1, 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Vincent Kouters, "Interview Wunderbaum," in *Focus: Wunderbaum* (Amsterdam: Holland Festival, 2016), 30.

<sup>113</sup> Jansen, personal communication.

<sup>114</sup> Kris Rutten, Laura Van Beveren, and Griet Roets, "The New Forest: The Relationship between Social Work and Socially Engaged Art Practice Revisited," *British Journal of Social Work* 48, no. 6 (2018): 1700–1717.



Variouly advertised as a documentary, docudrama, or mockumentary, *Stop Acting Now* tracks the members of the company following their onstage announcement that they would cease making theatrical performances.<sup>115</sup> The film's opening montage incorporates a voice-over that sets the conditions for the viewer's belief: "For fourteen years Wunderbaum has made political theatre with an activist character. Has their work had any significance? Is making fiction really enough? Maybe they should no longer pretend. Maybe they should really do something. And then Wunderbaum takes a radical decision: 'STOP ACTING NOW.'" Following the conventions of reality television's solo confessional, each actor explains their reasons for abandoning theatre, such as the exhaustion of the theatrical form, the insularity of theatre audiences, the desire for direct energy and immediate action, a yearning for some indefinable real effect, or for actress Wine Dierickx, to take care of her newborn baby. Each actor undertakes a socially engaged art project intended to have an actual impact on Dutch society. For instance, Maartje Remmers founds the Fundamental Optimists, a support group of diverse professionals with the intention of restructuring the debt of Jan and Hennie, two nonactor collaborators of the company. In stark contrast to Remmers's support group for positivity, Marleen Scholten opens a "tear bar," where through collective crying "negativity [can] be given more space" in the "Netherlands fun-park" culture. Bart creates satiric political-performance interventions in public spaces, using The Yes Men's tactics of playful anti-capitalist critiques of rapacious financial institutions, climate change, and consumer culture's dependence on sweatshop labor. But it is former child actor Jansen's response that provides the seeds of the conflict that will lead to the apparent near dissolution of the collective. While he welcomes the choice to stop acting and "propagate a society without a profit motive," he is also unwilling to offer his own initiative, preferring to go along with the other members' projects.

However, the conceit of the film—that it is documenting the post-theatre life of the collective—is a fiction. Each scene was loosely scripted and staged by the company with the film's director, Mijke de Jong. While many narrative elements of the film were drawn from Wunderbaum's history, such as the tension about whether to continue pursuing their socially engaged projects, the film was a theatricalization and fictionalization of those events. Even still, the actors did actually perform these projects in the real world. Scholten sent out invitations to her tear bar and hosted parties there; Bart performed his interventions on the streets of Rotterdam; and Jansen developed Tuinder, his Uber-style produce app.

*Stop Acting Now* heightens the experience of this actuality for the viewer through its use of reality television aesthetics to depict the seemingly imminent actual demise of the collective. It does so by constructing its apparent failure by framing their socially engaged art projects as social and political failures.<sup>116</sup> Scholten's tear bar is unable to sustain its negativity, requiring the patrons to pass around a "tear stick" to induce the requisite crying. Bart's actions are condemned as hypocritical by the group. Remmers's attempts to get Jan and Hennie into debt relief are so frustrated by bureaucracy that she is physically removed from the social welfare office. As the film progresses, it is

<sup>115</sup> The film opens with this announcement at a curtain call for their *Looking for Paul*, which won the Total Theatre Award at the 2014 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

<sup>116</sup> Jansen notes that this aspect was not intentional: "The funny thing was that we always tried to let the projects in *Stop Acting Now* succeed. We just came across so many things that made it difficult to do so that the project look [sic] kind of failed. Which I think is funny and content-wise interesting for the film, but we wanted it at first to be a positive film about 'change'" (personal communication).

the perverse attempt to be actual that fails the company, although this attempt to be actual is also itself a fiction.

As the projects fail and personal conflicts bring Wunderbaum to the brink of collapse, Bart proposes a collective action for the group to “organize a huge crawl march to Brussels,” the de facto capital of the EU. When pressed by the others to articulate the political message of the action, Bart can respond only with “[w]e’ve chosen the slowest and most painful way to make it clear to you that something must change. Look, we’re on our knees for you. Now make the change.” In the absence of a clear political agenda, Jansen asks, “So, it’s sheer form?” To which Bart responds, “Well, fine. To me form is already a lot.” The “sheer form” of the proposed action is complicated by the fact that its form would be that of a political intervention, despite the ambiguity of its political message. And yet, the sheerness of its form is the reassertion of the potentiality of fiction in a paratheatrical space.

The significance of this shift is further marked by a montage of the actors individually costuming themselves for the action, and then beginning to crawl in the rain on padded hands and knees onto a motorway to Brussels. This footage, however, no longer bears the traces of the *vérité* aesthetic that has prevailed up to that point in the film. Accompanied by Beethoven’s Symphony no. 7, this highly cinematic and visually stunning slow-motion sequence signals to the audience that even this introduction of the aesthetic into the real world is a real introduction of the aesthetic into what is already a fiction.

The company’s return to fictionality, as that which is more real than life, becomes a means of saving the collective as well as constituting a new one, all through this grand theatrical gesture. Mimicking R.E.M.’s 1992 music video “Everybody Hurts,” drivers slowly exit their cars to join the processional. Many of the nonactors who had appeared earlier in the film then join them in enacting this (para)fictional, (para)theatrical enactment act of a politics through the sheer form of theatrical indecidability (fig. 6).

Wunderbaum disrupt their over-identification with the neoliberal command to create art with social efficacy not only through a narrative about a return to theatrical fiction, but through the very realization of it through sheer form. In these final sequences, the film itself becomes a theatrical fiction, but without the closure of a theatrical frame. Not only do we not know which parts of the film are staged and which are actual, but the theatrical crawl-march operates as a fictional action in the actual world. As an enactment of the sheer form of theatrical indecidability, they affirm the collective fictional action, aesthetic, and the impossible, failing all the way to Brussels.

### The Ghost of the Parapolitical

Reality Frictions’ irritation may well inhere in the fact that they do not offer the certainty of political efficacy or even their own ethical responsibility. They raise the possibility that perhaps theirs is not a politics at all, but a “parapolitics.” The term parapolitics itself is irritatingly haunted by divergent meanings in contemporary political thought. On the one hand, it is used by some political scientists to refer to covert government actions, usually undertaken to serve the intertwined interests of capital and the state.<sup>117</sup> While for Jacques Rancière, parapolitics is an Aristotelian de-politicization

<sup>117</sup> On parapolitics as governmental criminality, see Eric Wilson, ed., *Government of the Shadows: Parapolitics and Criminal Sovereignty* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009).



Figure 6. Wunderbaum members crawl to the EU headquarters in Brussels in the final scene of their “documentary” film, *Stop Acting Now* (2016).

of politics achieved through the reduction of material (dissensual) conflicts to normative competition for political power.<sup>118</sup> Parapolitics names that which theatrically poses as politics, but which undermines organization to participatory democracy. Whether it is political actions acting as if they were not or actions acting as if they were politics, parapolitics is the specter that haunts the instability that Reality Frictions stage. However, by staging this tenuous condition, they feature it as the very ground for political contestation. Thus the question of whether any particular Reality Friction enacts politics or parapolitics not only is indecidable, but also demands a decision from its spectators. We are implicated not just in determining the status of their non/fictionality, but in the response-ability for action that Reality Friction’s afformance art of indecidability affords through its perverse irritation of the para/theatrical seal. Indecidably an irruption of the real or an irruption of theatre, they fictionally make their actual threat to the audience: “You are free.”

<sup>118</sup> Rancière, *Dis-Agreement*, 78.