Konstanze Scheidt

INFLATABLES AND ACTIVISM: AFFECTIVE POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF INFLATABLES

If something is to be done with 'creativity' today, it must first of all escape from the protocols of capitalist control. (Holmes 36)

Figure 1: "Welcome to Hell" protest during the G20 summit 2017 in Hamburg. Source: Rasande Tyskar, CC BY-NC 2.0, https://flic.kr/p/VvPGe8.

On the eve of the G20 summit that took place on the 7th and 8th July 2017 in Hamburg, the "Welcome to Hell" demonstration ended just under an hour later with a much-criticized police action. The ensuing riots quickly captured the media coverage, and although the police action was almost unanimously rejected, it was familiar pictures of hooded people and burning cars that started circulating in the web. But the protest had begun peacefully and a very different picture could have shaped the perception of the 'black block': a giant inflatable black cube that was being carried by the protesters above their heads (see figure 1). It was the same cube that had already been used a few days earlier at the peaceful demonstration "G20 Protestwelle" ("G20 Wave of Protest"), where it floated along the Elbe next to colorful boats and banners.[1]

This image captured my thoughts and I realized that the cube was not the only inflatable that was used during the protests. [2] The first question coming to my mind was: why do they use Inflatables instead of e.g. banners? The obvious answer is: it is more

interesting, it creates different images, it stays in mind. The following thoughts on the potential of inflatables for political protests then led to this essay.

The summit

During the G20 summit Hamburg was a 'zone of exception' – not only within the officially declared zone around the Hamburg Messe where the summit took place – with over 30,000 police officers out in force. But the massive security measures and concomitant restrictions on demonstrations are above all the organizational side of a problem that begins at another level. Some months before the summit the daily newspaper of Hamburg (*Hamburger Morgenpost*) published an article that stated "G20 summit in Hamburg: What's ahead of us?"[3] The cover picture showed a scene of the protests against the G20 summit 2010 in Toronto. The first obvious characteristic of this form of reporting is the use of an undifferentiated "we", which requires an identification of the reader with an unspecified group. Secondly, the image draws a direct link between 'violent' protests of the past and coming protests. So a certain course of action is assumed which in this case also includes the supposedly typical features of the autonomous/radical left (e.g. burning cars, hooded men).

Brian Massumi amongst others has differentiated the political use of images like those from statistical or predictive politics and coined the term "preemptive politics". His main assumption is that preemption is the most powerful operative logic of the present. While he mainly refers to war tactics and especially the politics of George W. Bush, we can expand this logic to other parts of politics, since the main point is that an unspecified threat or enemy that has

to be fought against is first of all created: "The most effective way to fight an unspecified threat is to actively contributing to *producing* it." (Massumi, *Ontopower* 12)

When we link that with the dynamics of image circulation through (social) media – in this case pictures of the protests against the G20 summit – this tactic leads to what Nikos Papastergiadis calls "ambient fear". This implies the perception that one is surrounded by various threats without any differentiation, its background, its dimensions, etc. The form of speculative reporting as for example in the case of the Hamburger Morgenpost, links leftist protests to the mechanisms of ambient fear within the operative logic of preemptive politics. The result is the assumption, which is at the same time reproduced and circulated, that the autonomous left and therefore their protests are always already a threat. And the reporting on the G20 summit in Hamburg showed clearly: it is a self-confirming circle. The images, which were circulated during and after the summit and the protests against it, correspond exactly to the expectation that was built in advance: burning barricades, hooded men, chaos and violence. There was all this chaos of course, but it was just a small part as the vast majority of the protests were colourful and peaceful.

The protests against the G20 summit in Hamburg are just one example among many. The problem is not location or situation specific, but is affective. The question coming to the fore is then: how can this circle be interrupted? What kind of forms of protests are needed that can deal with the danger of critique often becoming a stabilizing moment for the ruling system?[4] Where is the potential for 'new lines of alliance' which enable collective production and collective subjectivities as Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri put it (Guattari/Negri 2010)? It is not a question of a new utopian revolution, but of a form of openness in which the differences

and contradictions of a movement are not overcome, but also do not lead to that impotent, speechless passivity that the left-wing intellectuals have been so long and repeatedly accused of.[5] When it is about engaging with this kind of paradox, creativity is needed.

Aesthetic forms of resistance

Capitalism knows how to profit from every opportunity. (Stengers 11)

When it comes to connecting creative approaches to resistance and activism or arts and political action there are different strategies and discourses that arise. One example is to move beyond the field of arts, engaging with the neighbourhood, providing tools and practices for a better life as in works of 'dialogic art' or 'conversational art' and where art is supposed to express an "utopian drive to imagine a more ideal form of social life" (Kester 8). Claire Bishop amongst others has criticized this approach as it takes participation to be synonymous with collectivity and supposes those projects therefore to be inherently opposed to capitalism. She stresses on the contrary that exactly those kinds of art projects tend to go perfectly with neoliberal dynamics: "In insisting upon consensual dialogue, sensitivity to difference risks becoming a new kind of repressive norm – one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are immediately ruled out as unethical" (25), and that this consensus-based approach will rather help to find a way to deal with the existing structural conditions than to challenge them. And those approaches usually act on the assumption that there is a direct

link between representation and mobilization which risks to turn participation into an end in itself. But just because a critical artwork shows me how bad the world is, I don't start to save it tomorrow, do you?

There is a similar problem with the notion of mobilization. As Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre emphasize, mobilization is the opposite of learning. And if we take mobilization as primordial, "every failure can be explained by the failure of the masses to mobilize, or because we didn't succeed in mobilizing the masses" (20).

So perhaps we should stop looking for a solution, for a mobilizing moment in the arts and start appreciating the daring contradictions that we are confronted with. Or as Jacques Ranciére puts it: "to prevent the resistance of art from fading into its contrary, it must be upheld as the unresolved tension between two resistances." (191)

Inflatables

Inflatables do not organize, inflatables do not mobilize, inflatables do not have a political programme. The inflatable black cube that was used during the G20 protests did something else. It established an interesting connection to the expected, stereotypical images of burning barricades. The connection to the expected occurrences is the visual commentary on the black block which is, in the logic of the media coverage and political measures (as explained above), directly linked to the mentioned phenomena. In public perception the black block is therefore usually associated with chaos, danger and violence. The inflatable black cube counteracts this perception on several levels, but especially the combination of water and the inflatable creates completely different, more playful associations (for example inflatable water toys).

The use of inflatables[6] in political protests isn't limited to this example. Since its foundation in 2012 the group *Tools for Action* has implemented various projects that combine inflatables and protest.[7] The founder of the group Artúr van Balen also emphasizes the playfulness inflatables bring to demonstrations and assigns their use to what he calls "tactical frivolity".[8]

The question we have to turn to now is whether inflatables can be an adequate tool to face the problems of affective politics. What are the potentials of the protest form tactical frivolity? And finally, why are gatherings in the street (or on the water) still important, considering that firstly it is often about global phenomena and secondly that we are embedded in digital infrastructures? Some like Keller Easterling therefore claim that exactly those gatherings are ineffective: "Activists who show up at the barricade, the border crossing, or the battleground with familiar political scripts sometimes find that the real fight or the stealthier forms of violence are happening somewhere else." (213)

In the following, the history of the use of inflatables as a form of protest is briefly outlined, in order to classify them theoretically and to give an estimate of their potential as well as problems, based on a few examples.

In 1966 the group *Utopie* was founded in Paris. The members were a mix of architects, landscape architects, sociologists (the most famous member probably was Jean Baudrillard) and artists. One reason for the formation of the group was the prevailing zeitgeist of the 1960s, that art and life could no longer be regarded as separate, as was expressed in numerous avant-garde trends (Dessauce 13). Furthermore, there existed a growing dissatisfaction with alienating modern architecture and city planning, which they encountered with a radical critique in both theory and praxis, not least to connect these approaches. One of the main influences was

Henri Lefebvre who, as a critical Marxist, had been working intensively on the subjects of alienation, modernism and urbanism since the 1940s and whose concept of the"right to the city" is still today a major influence for city activists.[9] "Lefebvre's themes – the need for play, spontaneity, the realization of desires and calls to rescue utopian imagination from science fiction, to invest all of technology into daily life, to bring about 'daring gestures', 'structures of enchantment', to seek 'moments' of total consummation of possibilities – were coming to the fore in 1968." (Dessauce 21)

So it also was about not just rejecting the technologies of modernity, but finding new ways to use them, to experiment with them, to find alternative ways to use them for a better life. With this attitude, the group started to engage with inflatables. In 1968 they curated the exhibition "Structures Gonflables", where they expressed an interest "in inflatables as a challenge to the weight, permanence, expense, and immobility of traditional architecture" (Genevro 8). This also demonstrates the core of their critical approach: that the static, formalist and scientific architectural urbanism not only represented "aesthetic breakdown and boredom" for them, but also "bureaucratic control and repression in disguise" (Dessauce 20). Inflatables in many ways expressed the opposite: mobility, transience, liveliness, utopia. Art and architecture was supposed to no longer take place in one's own closed field, but to become a social practice. "Hence, beyond the fun and play, the inflatable ethos possessed a subversive constitution which recommended it to avant-garde practice, and to the discourses of urban alienation and ecology – two discourses which were the same but often irreconcilable, each caring for its own sanctuary of disobedience, in the wild or in the city." (Dessauce 14) So at last the group's approach was part of those

art movements that later influenced the so called dialogic art (previously mentioned).

But while the 1968 movement mostly happened in the streets, the group's critique, expressed with inflatables, stayed within the traditional field of arts (e.g. exhibitions) that they actually wanted to overcome.

But the use of inflatables as a medium of critique is still interesting. While being used by the Utopia group as a critical commentary on modernity, they were at the same time the product of the very consumer society that was so widely rejected at that time. Plastic had been used for mass production since the 1940s and due to that had become increasingly popular, and had an impact on the design and production of everyday articles.[10] Inflatables themselves were known in the street scene mainly from US parades, such as the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, while in the former Soviet Union, however, they were already used for protests in the 1930s.[11]

Figure 2: Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York, 1979. Source: Jon Hader, CC-BY 2.5, http://bit.ly/2oUvoCo.

Inflatable sculptures were thus both a symbol of a capitalist consumer society and communist revolutionary movements, they stood for technological progress and for an alternative utopian lifestyle.

What is most striking in this context is that the merging of the latter two aspects would some years later be the ideal of the 'Californian Ideology', which like little else

stands for the appropriation of countercultural approaches by hegemonic power. So the historical use of inflatables is part of the already stated problem of critique as a stabilizing factor for existing power structures. Finally, the question arises, whether it is possible to tackle this structural problem with inflatables themselves.

Tactical frivolity and affect

We're in Berlin, where we find an agent involved in pitched battle with the inflatable. He pokes at it, keeps on poking, but it won't deflate. The protesters take advantage of the situation to make their escape. Finally the policeman gives up, as he can't overpower it… [12]

The protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (WTO Conference) in Seattle represent a turning point for protests against a globalized policy, marked above all by the neoliberal ideal. The question of what subversive art is and what it can achieve has been discussed and put into practice in many ways since the 1960s, and yet it is no longer about resisting existing (capitalist) power structures out of a fixed identity position (be it belonging to a class, to an institution, or to a nationality), but to create with existing means new fields of action within these structures. "It's about allowing the inherited forms of solidarity and struggle to morph, hybridize or even completely dissolve in the process of encountering and appropriating the new toolkits, conceptual frames and spatial imaginaries of the present." (Holmes, "Recapturing Subversion" 273)

This form of playful appropriation, subversive practices and peaceful resistance then found a global stage in 1999 with the protests in Seattle. Tactical frivolity spread as a form of protest and attracted more internationally organized protests of this kind such as the EuroMayDay parades. And we can say the numerous forms of peaceful protests against the G20 summit in Hamburg are inheritors of this approach as well. As Stengers and Pignarre put it: The Cry of Seattle is still heard.[13]

So is there reason for hope?

We should consider Massumi's notion of hope. He connects it not to optimism, but on the contrary separates it from that, since otherwise it would imply utopian thinking. Rather, he is concerned with the thinking of the present, with a "scope of possibility" that opens up "the opportunity for experiments and trial and error" (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 26).[14] He therefore connects hope with affect, which means in this case that it is not about the question of the success or failure of an action in any future, i.e. a step forward (be it theoretical or practical), but "to stay exactly where one is – only more intense." (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 27) This link between affect and intensity is central to Massumi's affect theory and can shed light on why inflatables and, more broadly, tactical frivolity as a form of protest are important means of responding to current political problems. For it is precisely the playfulness of these actions that creates a form of intensive encounter on the street, which is not possible with mere "running along". This can be seen for example in the May Day demonstration in Berlin, when some of the protestors suddenly start to play ball with the inflatable "cobblestone",[15] which, similar to the inflatable "black block", creates a reversed image of stereotypical associations with actions of the autonomous left. Another important point in Massumi's affect theory is that affect and emotion are not

equated and affect has a bodily dimension. By referring to Spinoza, he emphasizes the ability of the body to affect and to be affected, which always converge. This means that you are in permanent transformation: "The ability of a body to affect and to be affected – its affective charge – is nothing solid" (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 27). Moreover, this affective ability is always more than subjective, that is to say, it can be realized above all in collective actions.

Affective outbursts produce interruptions, to which the reaction is affective as well. And this reaction is always dependent on the situation of the body, i.e. one's physical involvement in the situation.

Especially Donna Haraway and Judith Butler have variously stressed the importance of the body in terms of knowledge and power structures. Haraway links this in her theory of "situated knowledges" with the question of potential collective action: "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (586). The body is not a completed entity and the self does not form a fixed identity, but they manifest themselves again and again in relation to their environment: the people, the technology, the infrastructures. So within demonstrations on streets or squares, it happens more than the expression of a particular demand or rejection. The gathering itself, the coming together of different bodies, expresses a demand before any stated claim, that is, for the possibility of gathering in public at all. The action thus simultaneously demands the enabling conditions of this action. We are always embedded in situations, in relation to and dependent on others – people, things, infrastructures, power structures, etc.) – and therefore always limited in our actions, while exactly these limits are at the same time the enabling conditions for those actions. "What I am suggesting is that it is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite it's clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life possible" (Butler 16). This is why Butler uses the term 'supported action', which is very fruitful to think with. The occupation with the question of freedom or autonomy therefore always has to consider limits as well. And then freedom is not the utopia of boundlessness, but the game with just those boundaries.

And here it is worth remembering Ranciére: this game is not about dissolving or covering up the emerging paradoxes. We can rather think of it as a 'dissensual game'.

The potential of inflatables for political actions

Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it. (Bertolt Brecht)

In 2010 a small suitcase was sent from Berlin to Mexico. It contained an inflatable hammer, that grew to twelve metres in length, once filled with air. The Eclectic Electric Collective who built the hammer wanted to contribute something to the protests against the policies of the United Nations Climate Conference that was held in Cancún without flying to Mexico themselves, where the conference was held, to avoid producing even more emissions.[16]

The hammer quickly became a symbol for the protests. It was carried along the path of the demonstration by the protestors. Due to its size this was only possible by means of collaboration of the protestors. And again due to its size this collaboration couldn't really be

Figure 3: The inflatable Hammer at the protests in Cancún, Mexixo, 2010. Source: Armando Gomez, CC BY-NC-SA 3.0, https://bit.ly/2jl8929.

coordinated with instructions, but had to be a coordinated movement of bodies.[17]

With the use of the inflatable hammer the relational dependency of the bodies became actual and the collective potential for action was exercised. The action can be seen as a successful implementation of Massumi's proposition: "When you look at politics from an affective point of view, it is the art of […] sending out intermittent signs and triggering the stimuli that bring the bodies into alignment while activating their abilities differently" (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 78). It is important to note the *different* activations, because this is the big and decisive difference to the mass mobilization practiced in the right-wing spectrum. In the latter, it is always about the identification of the individual with a collective, with a larger idea – which itself is usually very simple and fed mainly by fear and rejection against an undifferentiated other – i.e. the subordination of the individual under something greater. Activation is not

equal to mobilization, it doesn't create a consensual mass. The activation that the inflatable hammer created was still open for coincidences. When we think with Massumi it becomes clear that situations are never completely determinable. "It will be while it happens" (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 78). In the case of the hammer the unexpected end of the journey occurred when the carriers tried to push it against and over the fence that surrounded the area where the conference took place. The policemen who watched the fence immediately started to attack the hammer and eventually destroyed it. With the brutality of their action against something that mainly consists of air and therefore poses a rather small threat, the police ridiculed themselves. On top of that they unwantedly gave the numerous present media the possibility to circulate images of this action. The ridiculousness of the action also comes from the fact that the police couldn't handle the paradox that was created by the protestors, so the only solution to dissolve the tension they found was violence, something usually ascribed to the protestors.

Maybe we can interpret this situation with Ranciére's notion of the artistic rupture that produces a split between the artistic production and the social destination, "between the significations that can be read on them and their possible effects" (147).

As both our bodies are constantly changing and updating and events have always more inherent potentials than the actual implementation, there is an openness that implies hope for an alternative process. "Simply changing a situation by reinforcing a previously unnoticed potential is such an alternative execution" (Massumi, *Ontomacht* 80).

The inflatables that the group Tools for Action use and provide have the ability to do that. Since the instructions for building an inflatable cobblestone are freely accessible

on the Internet,[18] they can be used for any situation. The situation is not created by the inflatable (as it usually is with dialogical artworks), but it is shaped and transformed by it. I would argue that inflatables have the potential to make use of the "emerging spatial order enabled by distributed electronic communication networks and the proliferation of wireless, mobile media in extremely 'densified' urban spaces" that Eric Kluitenberg sees being revealed by the so-called 'movement of the squares' ((Re-)Designing Affect Space).

When van Balen describes how a giant inflatable paving stone suddenly unleashes a kind of ball game between the police and the demonstrators in a demonstration in Berlin, dissolving existing tensions between these groups in a humorous situation that otherwise could have often turned into aggression, then you become the child of the event.

> *Becoming the child of an event: not being born again into innocence, but daring to inhabit the possible as such, without the adult precautions that make threats of the type 'what will people say?', 'who will they take us for?' or 'and you think that is enough?' prevail. The event creates its own 'now' to which the question of a certain 'acting as if', which is proper to children when they make things (up), responds. (Stengers and Pignarre 4)*

And that's why the inflatables are so interesting. They are totally unsuitable to mobilize a mass and quite suitable to activate a crowd.

Notes

[1] https://flic.kr/p/VaagCb. Accessed 25.04.2018.

[2] See for example: https://flic.kr/p/V8cRmk. Accessed 25.04.2018.

[3] https://www.mopo.de/hamburg/g20/g20-gipfel-in-hamburg-was-kommt-da-auf-uns-zu–26273006. Accessed 20.02.2018.

[4] In this case, the images that were produced by the riots stabilize the very image that previously existed of left-wing protests, thereby giving critics the right to criticize them. In turn the critique that was actually posed (against the G20 summit and especially autocratic rulers like Putin, Trump or Erdogan) was pushed into the background and thus became ineffective.

[5] For example just recently: https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-04/intellektuelle-linke-schriftsteller-rechtspopulismus-schweigen-d18. Accessed 30.04.2018.

[6] With the term Inflatable I describe no specific form, but inflatable things in general. It is used as a generic term.

[7] http://www.toolsforaction.net/. Accessed 28.02.2018.

[8] See for example http://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/inflatables/. Accessed 28.02.2018.

[9] In Hamburg, for example, since 2009 there has been the network "Right to the City", which promotes affordable housing, non-commercial open spaces, the socialization of land, a new democratic urban planning and the preservation of public green spaces: http://rechtaufstadt.net/pb2017.html. Accessed 26.02.2018.

[10] Probably the most well-known example is Tupperware, which gained great popularity in the household sector in the 1950s with its Tupper parties.

[11] https://bit.ly/2KvubMa. Accessed 25.02.2018.

[12] The quote comes from the spanish news, reporting on the use of inflatables in a protest: https://vimeo.com/162656944. Accessed 01.03.2018.

[13] Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre start their book *Capitalist Sorcery* with the cry that was born in Seattle: 'another world is possible'. The striking question for them is how to inherit from this cry, that is the name of an event.

[14] The quotes from the German edition are translated by the author.

[15] https://vimeo.com/51358894. Accessed 28.02.2018.

[16] You can read the full documentation of *The El Martillo Project* online: http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=357#more-357. Accessed 28.04.2018.

[17] This kind of embodied collaboration can be seen in this video: https://vimeo.com/82748623. Accessed 02.03.2018.

[18] http://www.toolsforaction.net/how-to-build/. Accessed 02.03.2018.

Works cited

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London/New York: Verso, 2012. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 12-27. Print.

Dessauce, Marc. "On Pneumatic Apparitions." *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in 68*, edited by Marc Dessauce, New York: Princeton Architectural Press/The Architectural League of New York, 1999: 13-26. Print.

Easterling, Keller. *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructuresspace*, London/New York: Verso, 2014. Print.

Guattari, Félix, and Antonio Negri. *New Lines of Alliances. New Spaces of Liberty*, London/New York: Minor Compositions, 2010. Print.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988): 575-599. Print.

Holmes, Brian. *Escape the Overcode. Activist Art in the Control Society*, Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2009. Print.

Holmes, Brian. "Recapturing Subversion: Some Twisted Rules for the Culture Game." *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation*, edited by Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrook, Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2011: pp. 272-287. Print.

Kester Grant H.. *Essays from Afterimage. Art, Activism, and Oppositionality*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1998. Print.

Kluitenberg, Eric. "(Re-)Designing Affect Space." *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, September 2017. Web. https://www.onlineopen.org/re-designing-affect-space.

Massumi, Brian. *Ontomacht: Kunst, Affekt und das Ereignis des Politischen*, Berlin: Merve, 2010. Print.

Massumi, Brian. *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015. Print.

Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. Print.

Stengers, Isabelle. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, Open Humanities Press/Meson Press, 2015. Print.

Stengers, Isabelle, and Phlippe Pignarre. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, New York/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.