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# P/occupy Milieus: The Human Microphone and the Space between Protesters

Ulrike Bergermann

A political movement trying to find new modes of communication, representation, and decision-making cannot use well-known media, especially when "representation" is contested. Can one voice speak for many people? Is the parliamentary mode of speaking for others to be overcome? In 2011, the protesters of "Occupy Wall Street" looked for other medialities and tried new "soft technologies" like the so-called human microphone. This article connects its use to Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "being-with" as part of an ontology of a non-hierarchical thinking, and asks for the possibility of adopting it—even where the "co-appearing" people have not been equally "co" (given their educational,

**racialized, and gendered backgrounds) in the first place when they became part of the "media politics of being-with."**

An *intervention* is something that *comes in between*. *Digital culture* is a term vaguely denoting a culture that makes use of digital tools—or perhaps a mode of the digital tools' functioning. In any case, the title *Interventions in Digital Cultures* evokes the idea of halting fluidity, of blocking a space through which something is moving. Is any contemporary political action conceivable without the use of digital media? Are the images of resistance versus fluidity, of a rage against an ongoing machine—like in the famous story of the *sabots*, the wooden clogs thrown into sewing machines by eighteenth century factory workers to stop them taking over jobs—pervasive in all "interventions in digital cultures" thinking? If we consider the digital in terms of ubiquity, miniaturization, and connectedness, we see ourselves immersed in it with ever fewer spaces for pauses in communication and control. If we turn to the operational mode of "the digital," we might consider differential models of zeros and ones, of "on and off," and here, the concept of an intervention would not make too much sense either, as a myriad differences may offer a myriad in-between spaces to enter, and so the idea of intervention becomes intervention *ad absurdum*. At the same time, there did occur at a certain moment an intervention, a blockade that lacked digital (or any electric amplified) media in communication, which allowed for a fluidity, a being-in-motion within a radical democratic tactic.

A "social technology" called "human microphone" regained political and theoretical popularity during Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) occupation of Manhattan's Zuccotti Park in the fall of 2011.[1]

1    See Graeber 2011, 2013; Geiges 2014; Bryne 2012; Blumenkranz et al. 2011; Schwartz 2011; Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2012. For the following, see Bergermann 2016a, focusing on the category of "individual experience" by Marina Garcés. Thanks to Daniel Ladnar and Nanna Heidenreich for critical readings.

Cut off from electricity and in need of amplification for their voices to communicate, OWS protesters reactivated the 1970s tactic of the human microphone in their assemblies: a person indicated they had something to say by calling "Mic check!" and the multiple answer "Mic check!" would start the process. After a few words, the speaker would have to pause so that people standing close enough to hear could conjointly repeat what they had said. One voice amplified by many, a process that could be repeated for those standing further away. Response had to be slow and was managed through hand gestures and lists of speakers. The human microphone was seen as a tool of a "real democracy" in which everybody should have a voice, as opposed to only one voice being heard as a representative of the many. "Democracy, not representation" is the oft-quoted interpretational formula of OWS.[2] Ordinarily, protesters demand specific political actions, but in this movement there was a denial of such an all too ready set of meanings and a claim of starting to find out what the demands of all participants were.[3] It was thus characterized by the ways discussions were held, decisions were made, and new procedures were undertaken—instead of a reliance on chosen representatives to speak, there was a radical inclusion of the many.

While parts of Media Studies were fascinated by the model of the swarm, because it could picture social behavior as technoid,

2    See the discussion by Isabell Lorey 2012. She unfolds the European model of democracy as grounded on principles of the representation of the people, designates these representational principles as an enclosure of a "power of the many" and of the fear of the masses (Lorey, 16–20, 27f.), and explains the occupations as a symptom of a "desire of the many" for a non-representational democracy in search of its form.

3    Another one would be the slogan "We are the 99%," as Jens Kastner argued: you cannot assume a unity of the 99%, neither theoretically nor empirically, but a unity should be considered as one always "under construction," in constant *becoming*. Nonetheless, it is the majority that suffers from the financial crisis, so one might think of a metaphorical 99% (a metaphor for "almost everybody"). The majority, however, does not share *one* point of view, not a *single* voice (Kastner 2012, 67).

and count the traditional humanistic ideas of responsibility and self-reflection out of it, the human microphone does address the question of the source of a message. First, in sending: speakers with prominent names were not especially welcomed (and the fact that three or four can be found on YouTube is a reminder of the fact that the usual suspects cannot be found). Secondly, in self-reflection: the regulated, quasi-automatic repetition of a message challenges its critical revision. This soft technology of an intervention thrills scholars who love fuzzy problems, not clean solutions. A lot about OWS's mic can be found in sociological and political writings (see Gould-Wartofsky 2015; Geiges 2014; Graeber 2011); philosophers in various genres discussed the human mic in terms of "the singular and the many" (see Nancy [1995] 2000; Kastner et al. 2012; Marchart 2013), artistic research analyzed its sound practices (Woodruff 2014;[4] Kretzschmar 2014), and it might be related further to cultural histories and discursive figures like the chorus, interpellation, or call and response.[5] Sound technologies and their respective philosophies have been invoked. While amplification organizes participation and silencing, the new assemblies of the 2010s rely heavily on the voice in that the spoken word is part of a multi-media network of computers, smartphones, and social media, and in that the idea of "direct democracy" calls for presence and orality.

The practical use of the human microphone recalls the old concept of the figure of hearing-oneself-speak, or rather: hearing-oneself-and-the-other-speak. A set of accompanying hand gestures is supposed to indicate whether the listener/speaker agrees or objects, even while repeating what was said, so that speech never has to be disrupted. The question of how possible objections can be seen by all, how they might affect the flow of speech, etc. is left open. Kretzschmar even welcomes

4  Thanks to artist Anna Bromley for this information; see also her work "Occupy Karaoke," available at: http://www.annabromley.com/occupy-karaoke-2013.html.

5  With a focus on the questions of sound see Bergermann 2016b.

the "amplification of affect" (2014, 155) through the human mic.[6] "Authenticity," in any case, remains coupled with the voice (even though the "pathos of presence" goes hand in hand with an over-load of documentary practices, pictures, protocols, video clips, etc.). Even the gross simplification of messages transmitted by the human mic does not worry its advocates, who argue that it was in the pauses between repetitions that people would think and formulate precise wording, that the need for short messages would lead to a concentration and compression of content, and that the slowing down of communication, the conscious decel-eration, would postpone the moment of political positioning, in a step back from points of view that seem all too readily avail-able (Kim 2011). The linking, even short-circuiting, of traditional polarities—understood as a new political aesthetics—belongs, I would argue, to the human/technologies/imaginary network called human mic.

## Dissonance/Unison

Black feminist activist and theorist Angela Davis, in her use of the human mic, criticized its unifying mode of speaking and proposed producing "dissonance, not unity, a noise in the system."[7] Never-theless, more often than not, the opposite has been praised. Mattathias Schwartz, the *New Yorker's* conservative commentator, conceded that the point of OWS was its form and the slogan "We are our demands" (2011, n.p.): the medium was the message; form followed function. Some writers embraced a "suspension

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6    The crowd would be "bodily taken over by the spirit of the speech" and would "throw back this enchantment immediately" (Kretzschmar 2014, 157). In political theory, the importance of the *liveness* of speaking has been underlined since the French Revolution, as orality has been seen as an antidote to the corruption of the Ancien Régime; Mladen Dolar, on the other hand, has criticized the "political fiction" that democracy was a question of immediacy and as such a question of the voice (Dolar 2006).

7    Angela Davis at Zuccotti Park, October 30, 2011: "How Can We Be Together/ In a Unity/ That Is Not/ Simplistic/ And Oppressive..." (Woodruff 2014, 145). See Žižek's (2013) speech at Zuccotti Park: "Don't Fall in Love with Yourselves."

of difference," as if Derrida's well-known critique of phonocentrism had been overcome: extend a repetition of something spoken to many people, they argued, and regardless of the space in-between them a sort of hearing-oneself-speak, or hearing-oneself-and-the-other-speak would occur, collectively.[8] However, Derrida's reading of Husserl had brought up a differentiation between the outer and the inner perception of one's own speech act, which allows for the perception of spoken words as self-produced and thus to perceive the voice of the other as your own (Linz 2006, 58; Derrida [1967] 2000); the break (*caesura*) was fundamental here (Linz 2006, 58). While a romantic desire to merge the one and the many may be part of the imaginary of the human microphone, there are other images and readings as well: multi-voicedness, the manifold (*Mannigfaltigkeit*), as Gerald Raunig notes, promotes a multiplicity of voices, an ongoing enfolding of the utterance[9] (2012, 123f). The single voices are not in *uni-son*, but resonate in different ways: in synchronization. This is not to say that the synchronized parts need one common pulse generator (like a hidden center). Kai van Eikels finds collective forms that have no representation as a whole (as group, party or even "movement," and even without the parts being aware of being a part [Raunig 2013, 12]) to be necessary and, what is more, finds the difference between the "parts" of these collectives to be

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8   Woodruff asserts that the human mic often delivered "more lyrics than prose" (2014, 9). Kretzschmar states that the sense of the messages was often acoustically diverted into the bodies of the many "up to the suspension of the sense of the words" (2014, 157).

9   While van Eikels sees no need for a common script for the many, and Nancy sketches *com-munity* as the effect of a continuous passing, a Deleuzianian approach takes a different direction. Raunig proposes a "new schizo-competency" in making use of the "social-machinic relations out of which the enunciations of the multiple emerge" (2013, n. p.; see 2012, 124f). Whoever says "I" in speaking, listening or repeating speaks as a machinic subjectivity; this "I" does not aim at a perfect, unequivocal unison, but enunciates her own position, blurs author and audience, produces noises and multiple sounds as well, not in accordance but in consonance (2012, 125).

essential, too: without it, there would be no synchronization.[10] No intervals, it could be added, no intervention.

## The (Mediated) Condition of Being-With

Another conception of "parts and the whole" also reads like a theory of assemblies and their manifestations. A retroactive reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's *ontology of being-with* addresses the one and the many of the assembly. His notion of being-with conceives of no temporal (or logical or any other kind of) priority of one over the other; there is no "we" prior to the subject, and no "I" before the community. Existence is always already coexistence, the singular does not come before the plural and vice versa: the world is "singularly plural and plurally singular" (Nancy [1995] 2000, xiv).

Nancy's attempt to rethink community without ideal subject or subjectivity, but through "being with," where neither *I* nor *we* are prior to the *other* and where existence is coexistence, does not aim at "being within a certain group" but at a set of mutual relations. "People… can only be grasped in the paradoxical simultaneity of togetherness (anonymous, confused, and indeed massive) and disseminated singularity." What is said in the context of a philosophy of being could be a test run for a very manifest form of togetherness, perhaps during the event of an occupation—in an attempt to paraphrase Nancy: the being is singular plural. You always start within the alterity of someone. Co-appearance does not mean to come out into a light, but being in the simultaneity of being-with, where there is no being as such (*an sich*) that is not instantaneously *with*. There is not

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10   In talking about the politics of the streets, Judith Butler reminded us that "we can only be dispossessed because we are always already dispossessed." Greek philosopher Athena Athanasiou replied that it is not the same to "be" dispossessed, on the one hand, and "to become" or "be made" dispossessed, on the other. The language of philosophy here is just not *in sync* with the language of political life (see Athanasiou and Butler 2013, 5).

a presence that is not a representation, spectacular, exposed, always co-existing. Being with/togetherness is a trait of being. Needless to say, no one would join a demonstration if there was nobody else, but there is more to think of in the midst of ontology and occupation here. People do not come in natural priorities and they *are* only insofar as they are already connected (Nancy dislikes the vocabulary of modern media, and he problematizes the inherent prioritizations of verbs and their propositions, so he uses the simple formula of *being-with*). If everything that *is* "passes between us, still," "between" is not the name of a space, it does not lead from one to the other, it is not connective tissue: *between* is the distance of the singular. "There is no *mi-lieu* [between place]." Difference has no representation, no place, no extension, and no thing was that was not with, *cum*,[11] as there is no natural state of being before the being was connected.

These well-known figures of deconstructive thought are transferred into an ontology, which can be indicated through the medium of language, maybe of writing (as in the hyphen between being-with), but overall, the price for this "horizontalism" is mediation: in theorizing the "with," there seems to be little to no concern for the "through": difference is not crucial. There is no *mi-lieu*, writes Nancy, nothing in between the one and the other, no instrument, no medium: "Everything passes between us" (Nancy [1995] 2000, 5).[12] The materiality of communication falls

11   What is proper to community, then, is given to us in the following way: it has no other resource to appropriate except the "with" that constitutes it, the *cum* of "community," its interiority without an interior, and maybe even its *interior intimo sui.* As a result, this *cum* is the *cum* of a co-appearance, wherein we do nothing but appear together with one another, co-appearing before no other authority *[l'instance]* than this "with" itself, the meaning of which seems to us to instantly dissolve into insignificance, into exteriority, into the inorganic, empirical, and randomly contingent *[aléatoire]* inconsistency of the pure and simple "with" (Nancy [1995] 2000, 63).

12   "This 'between,' as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge. Perhaps it is not even fair to speak of a 'connection' to its subject; it is neither connected nor unconnected; it falls

out of focus here, although even speech acts are based on such a materiality. Seen from Nancy's perspective, the sound of the human mic would be eventful—it passes through bodies, space, resonances without any impediment whatsoever. The materiality and mediality of the bodies involved are playing different roles, though.

## Temperature Checks and P/occupiers

Some were looking for the leaders, initiators and authors of OWS, some *Adbusters* tried to situate themselves as triggers and heroes of the movement (Geiges 2014, 79; Schwartz 2011; White 2017), and others may have been projecting ideas of self-emerging multitudes, but it was a participatory observer who, in fine detail, rewrote the histories of many small and greater movements, initiatives, and their technologies, writings and postings, that had to come together (Gould-Wartofsky 2015). And they could not have worked just as a sum of the old organizations and techniques. The search for new "social technologies" needed small inventions like the "temperature check." In order to manage what might happen in crowds between chaos and a fixed program, for example, to measure/feel when it might be a good point in time to start a discussion (people might be either too exhausted, too upset, too distracted, or eager to get a dis-cussion going at times), several "facilitators" would spread across the place and exchange their impressions of the mood in what in sum would be called a "temperature check" (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 49). It was a kind of organizing of processes that was not upfront and could be removed quickly, with regard to possible

short of both; even better, it is that which is at the heart of a connection, the *interlacing* [*l'entrecroisement*] of strands whose extremities remain sep-arate even at the very center of the knot. The 'between' is the stretching out *[distension]* and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning…. there is no intermediate and mediating 'milieu'" (Nancy [1995] 2000, 5).

dynamics.[13] And there were sets of rules, too, regulating how to find out what to agree upon—rules that were always open to change, but could be referred to, nonetheless, like the "modified consensus" or the set of hand gestures [fig. 1, 2] (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 8)—so it is not simply a super majority (as opposed to the 1% of the population that owns more than half of the country's wealth[14]) that the slogan "We are the 99%" invents, but new mechanisms for communication among people, one might say: new political technologies.



[Fig. 1] Occupy Hand Signals (Source: Wikipedia 2011).

13    It was criticized as well, for example by the anarchists of Occupy Oakland: facilitators would have been unable to "reconcile Occupy's horizontal process with its hierarchical inner life" (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 105).

14    Joseph Stiglitz wrote in *Vanity Fair* ("Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%," May 2011) that 1% of US citizens earned 25% of all the income and owned 38% of the nation's wealth; in 2016, "1% of the world's population will own more wealth than the other 99%" (Elliott and Pilkington 2015).
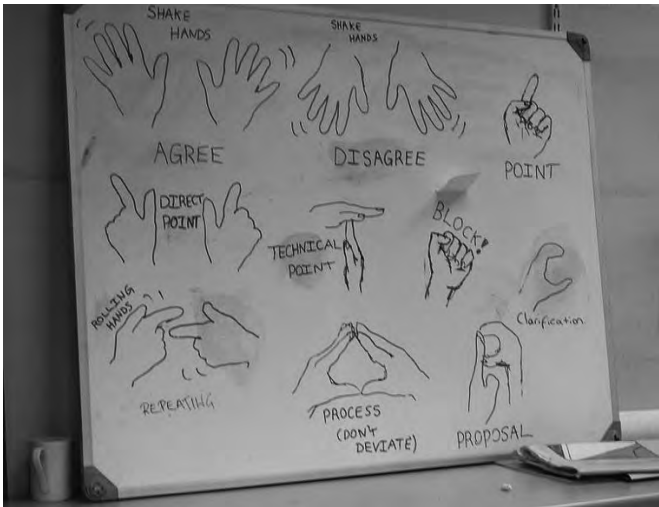
[Fig. 2] Occupy Hand Signals, Chart, London 2011 (Source: Wikipedia 2011).

Gould-Wartofsky often describes the sound of the meetings including the clicks of the camera shutters, that is: their mediated surroundings and their traces (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 64 et passim) (while also warning of a "fetishization of process over strategies," 105). If the human mic was an invention, when did it emerge? It comes back to two astonishing sources: first, an unplanned "dress rehearsal" that occurred when (on October 17, 2011) some men and women stood on benches at Liberty Park and others standing below started repeating the messages, and second—or first—an older movement.

> Initially, the technique was an adaptation of a long-standing practice in American direct action movements, from civil rights to global justice, in which participants would chant, sing, or communicate information by way of call-and-response. The innovation lay in the everyday use of call-and-response, not only as a means of communication, but also

as a mode of decision-making and community organizing (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 67).

While inventions have histories, there is the need for opportunity, for chance and coincidence, to implement them. To come together, inventions need infrastructures, privately owned public spaces (POPS),[15] hardware and software, and many people who have patience, who remember histories and take responsibilities without claiming center stage. This "many" may, nonetheless, prove not to encompass "all." Not everybody had equal access to the human mic. As Gould-Wartofsky wrote after taking part in OWS and collecting mountains of footage, writings, and photographs, and conducting 40 in-depth interviews, race and class issues often excluded the non-educated and the non-white from resources and participation. The group POCupy demanded diversification of OWS and argued that "the 99%" were not coherent at all in economic terms, as an average white US household owned 20 times as much as the average black one (Gould-Wartofsky 2015, 98); Occupy Oakland quoted a Jamaican activist who criticized the occupiers for not speaking for those who needed it most; facilitators or organizers were mostly young white people with an education that made it easier for them to handle the new modes of communication. Michelle Crentsil, member of POCupy, reported, "We could walk through the park and yell 'Mic check!' And we're like, 'People of Color Working Group!' And all of a sudden it gets all muffled and nobody's repeating you anymore. I remember that one. That one really hurt" (98). Gould-Wartofksy continues: "Operational funds flowed freely to every group but the POC. Many who had come to the occupation to speak out found their voices silenced, their views sidelined by the facilitators and the drafters of key documents— often on the pretense that they had not gone through 'the right process' or spoken to 'the right people'.… Throughout the occupation, I often witnessed white speakers seize the People's

15    For an explanation of this special arrangement, see Reynolds 2011.

Mic from people of color" (99). After philosophical theorizations and/or partisan interpretations mainly given by white men who never asked themselves about their right or capacity to join the protesters, it takes a participatory observer, describing himself as an "educated white man in a blazer" (12), to reflect on his own point of view and participatory status, including his class/race/gender situatedness. Those who had better education were better able to make use of the elaborate tools of OWS.[16] The human mic, again, is not for all of humanity. The people's mic is not always the people of color's mic. During the protests following Trump's inauguration, Micah White, so-called co-creator of Occupy Wall Street, immediately tried to jump on another bandwagon and become the leader of an already existing anti-Trump movement[17]—and it was during the Women's March of January 2017 especially where it became obvious that black and

16    "Everybody should participate, but it tended to be the college-educated and the better off who had positions of influence, coordinators, facilitators etc., in an unspoken division of labor" (Gould-Wartofksy 2015, 218).

17    White's book *The End of Protest—A New Playbook for Revolution* (2016) is promoted on Amazon as written by the "co-creator of Occupy Wall Street." Suddenly, White sees the importance of women in OWS, or at least their strategic value: "It is significant that the initial spark that brought Occupy Wall Street into mainstream consciousness—the pepper-spraying incident on September 24, 2011—was an act of violence against women. The video of this event, two women screaming in pain surrounded by police, catapulted our movement into the spotlight. Looking back, I believe the gender of these protesters was crucial in garnering widespread support for Occupy. Joining the Occupy movement was also a way of fighting against patriarchal authority. Women played a fundamental role in every aspect of Occupy Wall Street, especially the facilitation committee that organized the consensus-based assemblies in Zuccotti, and women will make the next great social movement, too." Like in the magazine *Adbuster*, these politics are grounded in a deeply gender conservative (and antiqueer, antimedia) set of beliefs and its old-fashioned calls for a nature of men and women. "I can feel that women are on the brink of rising up against a male culture that has been fatally poisoned by pornography and video games." So, White calls for "a World Party that embodies our ancient uprising for people's democracy with a maternal twist" (White 2017).

white protesters would not only be treated differently, but would also not always be aware of internal racism.[18]

## P/occupy Milieus

If there are no mediations in Nancy's thinking of the *many*, and if his figure of the *singular* seems to always stand in the same position towards the many, which cannot hold true for different (gendered, racialized…) singulars, how, then, can we make use of Nancy's reflections on, and the practical mediated handling (his intricate writing) of, the problem of posteriority, which is always associated with superiority and part of causal logistics? Interventions do need *mi-lieus*, we see now, not simply because a *sabot* needs physical space to block machines or because the spatial metaphors transport ideas of re-sistance more easily. Interventions need *mi-lieus* insofar as re-thinking any space has to take into account how to connect in an unhierarchical manner, how this would be barred through supposedly antecedent structures,

18   "On Saturday, millions of women and men—organized largely by young women of color—staged the largest one-day demonstration in political history, a show of international solidarity that let the world know that women will be heading up the opposition to Donald Trump and the white patriarchal order he represents" (Traister 2017). Other writers included a critique of white protesters ignoring the racialized vote distribution (43% of white women voted for Clinton, 53% for Trump), different police behavior towards protesters, and the outcomes of Trump's victory (Elliott 2017); even the march's symbol, the pussy hats, were criticized because they "excluded trans women, as well as women of color. The pussy hats imply that you must have specific genitalia to identify as a woman. Additionally, they excluded women of color by insinuating that pussies must be pink. I guess this is why, for the most part, the only women you saw wearing the pink pussy hats were white" (Jones 2017). Nancy wrote about the "we": "We do not have to identify ourselves as 'we', as a 'we.' Rather, we have to disidentify ourselves *from* every sort of 'we' that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this *insofar as* 'we' co-appear. Anterior to all thought— and, in fact, the very condition of thinking—the 'thought' of 'us' is not a representational thought (not an idea, or notion, or concept). It is, instead, a *praxis* and an *ethos:* the staging of co-appearance, the staging which is co-appearing" ([1995] 2000, 71).

and how to approach the task of de-learning to put oneself first in the line of perceiving and reasoning.

Philosophies of difference cannot do without taking into consideration asymmetrical architectures surrounding their differences. Interventions need *mi-lieus* to move beyond the two sides of a *lieu*.

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## Image Credits

[Fig. 1] Occupy Hand Signals. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Occupy-HandSignals.pdf

[Fig. 2] Occupy Hand Signals. Chart. London 2011. Souce: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement_hand_signals#/media/File:Occupy_movement_hand-signals_diagram_bank_of_ideas_nov_2011.jpg