

# Artivism and the para-institution

## The Partisan Café and Museum of Burning Questions, Bergen Assembly 2016

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**Abstract:** *This article presents a case study of the assembled events of The Partisan Café and The Museum of Burning Questions, curated by the transnational group freethought as part of their contribution to the Bergen Assembly 2016. It is argued that the assemblage forms an experiment to materialize present theories of radical democracy and the radical art institution, respectively, and take the form of a para-institutional activism. On this ground, and drawing on the concept of the assemblage, it is discussed what the outcome and learning of the experiment might be. The events played simultaneously in the city and on social platforms such as Facebook, mixlr and vimeo and together with released material on the internet from freethought these resources provide the empirical base of the case study. The authors participated in the opening week of September 2016 and the analyses are supported by on site observation.*

**Keywords:** Contemporary art, Bergen Assembly 2016, assemblage, institutional critique, artivism, para-museum, The Partisan Café, Museum of Burning Questions, radical democracy, radical art institution, antagonism, dissent, the commons.

*Note, 5 September 2016: The Partisan Café is to be found in the garage of Bergen's old, red-painted main fire station in the centre of town. On a black beam over the white painted open gate, THE PARTISAN is carved in white letters. Inside the café, yellow, red and black firefighter uniforms dominate the decor, hanging in wooden closets along the walls with the blue helmets on a shelf above. As a guest, one inevitably gets the impression that a fire alarm could start*

*any minute, were it not for the simple wooden chairs and tables in various colour, shape and size that are located around the simple, rough room. From a temporary red-painted bar in one corner, coffee and beer is served, and sometimes also bread and smaller meals. During the opening days of September 2016, it is buzzing with life and conversations, people are coming and going. Every day throughout the month, this buzz will be interrupted regularly*

by talks, performances and screenings around today's "burning questions", or by guided tours of the station by the former firefighters. After September 2016, the café will be closed again. However, the station may be reopened as part of a new city and fire museum, which the retired firefighters have been actively fighting for since the closure in 2007. [Authors' note from the opening, September 2016]

*The Partisan Café* (PC) ran through the month of September 2016 and was the core "contact zone" of *The Museum of Burning Questions* (MBQ), which was set up by freethought to address "the future of museums and of burning questions in general" as part of their contribution to *Bergen Assembly 2016* (catalogue, freethought). Freethought is an interdisciplinary platform for research, pedagogy and art production<sup>1</sup> and *Bergen Assembly* is a rather new triennial that took place for the second time in 2016.<sup>2</sup> PC was situated in Bergen city's former main fire station, which the now retired firefighters at the time fought to make a museum. Throughout the assembly, freethought co-worked with the firefighters in organizing MBQ around the café, which besides organized tours at the station featured a range of events concerned with today's "burning questions" and further displayed an exhibition in the town hall. The exhibition *Museum of Burning Questions: The Dancing Tables Archives* (DTA), then, told the story of the firefighters in the service of the public through centuries and their present struggle to make the place a permanent museum.

In this article, we put focus on the two entangled venues, PC and MBQ, and address them through the lenses of an aesthetic activism or "artivism" that is characterised by neither acting within nor against the art institution, but rather above or next to it to

form an alter- or para-institution (Lütticken 2015). As such, the assembled project refers to a context of the social turn in art (Jackson 2011) as well as so-called new institutional critique or new institutional criticism (Doherty 2004, Möntmann 2009, Raunig & Ray 2009, Gielen 2013). Within this framework, the possibility of a radical art institution is investigated or, as it is conceptualized by the radical, neo-marxist theoretician Gerald Raunig, an art institution of and for "the commons" (Raunig 2013). This concept points to such a not yet existing institution's nascent character as an endeavour to become of and for the common good. It both grows out of and is a reckoning with what we today see as the public art institution, and which notably is squeezed in a neoliberal political economy and by a neoliberal governance, notified by marketization and New Public Management.

We will in the following ask how PC and MBQ, as part of freethought's contribution to *Bergen Assembly 2016*, were assembled to form such a radical artistic and institutional experiment and with what effect. Members of freethought, including the initiator Irit Rogoff and the main curator of PC and MBQ Nora Sternfeld, have contributed substantially to the agenda (Rogoff & Schneider 2008, Rogoff 2012, Sternfeld 2013), which we as authors anchored in the field again sympathize with. Our case study thereby is an example of what the cultural theoretician Mike Bal has termed "critical intimacy" (Bal 2002). It denotes an intellectual endeavour that is sympathetic but nonetheless also analytically qualified through an outlined theory and methodology (Bal 2002:292). In this case, we make use of assemblage theory and methodology and ask how the assemblage is held together by a coding as "radical" (DeLanda 2013) and what the consequences are in terms of, on the one

hand, outreach to the public, and, on the other hand, radical insight. Empirically, we make use of the distributed e-archive of the events that featured simultaneously on social media such as Facebook and Instagram as well as on the video channel vimeo and the audio channel mixlr, as notified in the reference list. The analysis is based on selective parts hereof to be supported partly by realised material from freethought on the internet and by the authors' participative observations and notes from the opening weekend in September 2016.<sup>3</sup>

### THE PARTISAN CAFÉ AND MUSEUM OF BURNING QUESTIONS

In collaboration with the artists Jenny Moore (UK) and Isa Rosenberger (AU), Nora Sternfeld, Professor of Art and Design (AU/FI), is the conceptual originator of the two assembled venues that are in focus here: PC and MBQ. Throughout September 2016, PC served as the centre of MBQ, which materialized in the now abandoned fire station with its remaining artefacts, in addition to the newly curated exhibition DTA. During September 2016, the café was buzzing with life and conversations, people were coming and going, and every now and then this buzz would be interrupted by scheduled performances, screenings and conversations to be followed by discussions with and among the present public.

The café was first a meeting place for the changing triennial visitors who, as café guests, were invited to sit down and intermingle at the simple but none less suggestive tables. The café simply served as the announced "contact zone" with a possibility for visitor-guests to become also engaged in the scheduled program. Next, then, it was a venue for gatherings or assemblies around "burning questions", raised by *freethought* through

film screenings, musical and theatrical performances, and talks with invited guests. These assemblies formed the MBQ and were organized as intellectual and sensual "dancing tables" around the themes of *Imaginary Public*, *Shadow Citizenry and Acoustic Spectres*.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the two first brought highly actual and politicised issues such as migration and European/international refugee-policies to the fore, the latter was controversial in the way it challenged established aesthetic schemes and sensual perception with a focus on music and sound. During these assemblies, the joint café and museum also grew into a "conflict zone", where present scenes of public unrest and dissent were raised, and where critique of the actual political and economic (dis)order were counteracted by visions of a possible radical future.

The MBQ was substantiated by a range of performative exhibitions, curated by other members of freethought and located in the same building complex as the fire-station, to disclose other spectres of the aesthetic-political dynamic of dissent and radical vision: *The End of Oil*, *Archives of Substance*, *Spirit Labour and Infrastructure of Feeling*. The same dynamics characterized the exhibition DTA, which featured at the art hall nearby. It told the story of Bergen's many fires and the firefighters' struggles with fires and authorities over time, just as it presented a collection of the firefighters' present burning questions. Furthermore, it made the visitors formulate their own queries by using the offered pen and paper, spell out their affections, reflections and visions in writing, and add to the collection. These materials again were integrated in the succeeding events and have also since been used by freethought in the group's activities.

Freethought's total contribution to *Bergen Assembly 2016* took place under the heading



Fig. 1. Nora Sternfeld, Isa Rosenberger and the Retired Firemen of Bergen *THE MUSEUM OF BURNING QUESTIONS*. *The Partisan Café*, Educational and Performative Café, conceived by Nora Sternfeld in collaboration with artists Isa Rosenberger and Jenny Moore. Design: Isa Rosenberger in collaboration with Heidi Pretterhofer. Realized by artists and educators Tora Endestad Bjørkheim, Freja Bäckman, Kabir Carter, Johnny Herbert, Jenny Moore (coordinator) and Arne Skaug Olsen. Photo Thor Brødreskiift.

of “infrastructure”, which also shaped PC as well as MBQ. The intention was, as stated in the catalogue, to investigate infrastructure as the invisible force behind the current appearance of culture in a range from the “the financialization of the cultural field to the subversive possibilities of thinking and working with infrastructures as sites of affect and contradiction” (freethought, *catalogue*). The idea being, that such a wide-ranging investigation would help “wrest the term away from the language of planners and technocrats to put to creative and critical use within the cultural sphere” (freethought,

*catalogue*). Throughout the programme, there was a focus on local and global dynamics in this respect. The prospect of *The End of Oil*, in Norway as well as globally, formed the darker scenario, whereas explorations of sustainable substances, commonality, spirituality and affection evoked the history and future of a radical cultural politics.

#### **RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND THE RADICAL ART INSTITUTION**

In the wake of a neoliberal economy of depth and a global crisis of war, migration and

political populism, which notably threatens to undermine liberal democracy and its institutions, critical philosophers such as Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe have argued for a *radical democracy*. Mouffe (2013a) argues more specifically for an *agonistic* politics to be understood as an ongoing challenge to neoliberal economy and governance by means of alternate political alliances and political visions. Rancière (2011), on his side, has introduced the term *dissensus* to denote a politics that resists the given political order or “police” by claiming a radical equality on behalf of the ones who are not supposed to be included, such as the fugitive or the immigrant. Mouffe and Rancière both see the aesthetic as a space for disarticulation as well as re-articulation of the political, understood as a perceptual organisation of what applies as common sense, just as they see art and cultural institutions as possible spaces for radical interventions and experiments (Rancière 2011, Mouffe 2013b).

In the wake of the theory of a radical democracy, Irit Rogoff, the founder of freethought, suggests looking at current forms of activism that play off in the present as performative displays of commitment and collaborative subjects that again might cause “short, minute transformations” (Rogoff & Schneider 2008:348). Such a commitment owes to but also challenges critical theory and politics in that, rather than being absorbed by the long-term battle with the central institutions of power, it acts in the moment and invents new modes of being present and changing the world. In the same vein, Rogoff and Schneider propose reformulating critique or a critical position as a “productive anticipation”, which is to be understood as an opening towards the possible and which assumes the form of a social fiction. Rather than being a

theory or method, it is “a processual way of observing and explaining the politics we all are embedded in” (Rogoff & Schneider 2008:347). The authors share this agenda with other radical art and culture operators, who also discuss how the anticipating art and culture institution could look, i.e. how it can re-think what it means to have access to, agency over and ownership of society’s key resources and institutions (Raunig & Ray 2009, Raunig 2013, Rogoff 2012, Sternfeld 2013). Each their way, they propose to initiate an aesthetic and communicative mode through which new forms of experience, knowledge and social interaction can be opened other than those that signify the representative art and culture institution.

According to art historian and museologist Claire Bishop (2013), the modern, representative (art) museum, which culminated in the 20th century, is characterised by its historical mimetic endeavour. To think of the museum through representation means focusing on the museum as an object- and collection-based authoritative mediator of national cultural heritage and identity and on the assimilating contemplation of the museum visitor in this regard. Faced with such a mode and influenced by Chantal Mouffe’s notion of a radical cultural politics, Bishop puts forth the idea that the museum can and must open for agonistic debate about cultural values and promote new forms of community formation, – thus challenging itself along with the hegemonic order locally and globally. According to Bishop, art and the art institution in a broad sense is precisely the place from which alternative futures can be imagined and made tangible (Bishop 2013:62).

Raunig (2009, 2013) as a radical, neo-marxist theoretician and cultural practitioner takes this critique a step further towards what he calls, respectively, an “instituent practice”

and an “art institution of and for the commons”. While the former can be said to counter Rogoff and Schneider’s productive anticipation, the latter is determined by a prolonged and thus more continuous interaction, care and experimentation with living together in a common world (Raunig 2013:169). As an alternative to the fetishization of objects that lies in the classical-vertical approach, it targets a political-aesthetic investigation thereof or rather, what may become common in the future: “becoming-common”. According to Raunig, this becoming-common consists of the constant, self-organised and multiplying constitution of both tangible and intangible resources – it is a dynamic, continuously created and creating cultural form, never secured permanently, but in constant flux. An art institution for the becoming-common exists across the gap between political activism, art production, and a progressive art institution to also transgress the present schism between a traditional education-oriented (vertical/authoritative) and an actual experience-orientated (flat/modular) dissemination form (Raunig 2013:175).

### THE PARTISAN CAFÉ AS ARTIVISM

It is such conceptualizations of radical democracy and the radical (art) institution, respectively, we see the assembled events of PC and MBQ try to materialize. How it is done and with what effect, shall in the following be further investigated by means of Manuel DeLanda’s combined theory and methodology of the assemblage (DeLanda 2013). According to DeLanda, the assemblage is a composition of different, material as well as expressive, elements that is held together by a joint coding, – in this case to perform as leftist and radical. On the one hand, then, the fire station as a

gathering place with its special architectural space, artefacts and atmosphere; on the other hand, the many choreographed screenings, performances and talks, as well as the more spontaneous assemblies, which the entire *setup* was aimed at. The two dimensions were held together through a range of interrelated metaphors to be understood more intuitively as well as in a deepened sense by their origins in critical theory and a radical, leftist history: *dancing tables*, *burning questions* and not least *the partisan*. According to DeLanda (2013), the unique quality of metaphors is that they are open to different connotations, while a more established meaning occurs through their history and actual combination.

In this case, the metaphor *dancing tables* pointed at the specific table layout, that was seen in both the café and the art hall exhibition to invoke the dancing meetings and conversations that might occur around them. Behind this immediate message, it referred to a critical theoretical tradition from Karl Marx to Jacques Derrida, including a Derrida-reading of Marx’s commodity analysis and his comparison of Marx’s revelation of the magical value of the commodity<sup>5</sup> with a fable about the virtually dancing tables (Derrida 2000, 1994). For the dedicated guest, these references appeared in the texts from previous workshops and city seminars, held by freethought as an upstart and throughout *Bergen Assembly 2016*, and which were now at display at strategic places throughout the event. The same goes for the metaphor *burning questions*, which pointed at the actual location in the fire station and invoked the political issues of glocal infrastructures, simultaneously referring to a critical theoretical and leftist history. However, in this case the reference in the accessible freethought text archive was a text by the actor-network-theorist Bruno Latour in which



Fig. 2. Nora Sternfeld, Isa Rosenberger and the Retired Firemen of Bergen *THE MUSEUM OF BURNING QUESTIONS. The Dancing Tables Archive* (Installation at Bergen Kunsthall), Bergen Assembly 2016. Photo Thor Brødreskift.

he also presents a rather pervasive critique of critical theory and left-wing policies (Latour 2004).

The most pervasive metaphor was *the partisan*, the word being carved out at the entrance of the café, pointing at the rebellious assemblies it was meant to host as well as – through a metonymic relation – the hyped keyword in today’s cultural dissemination: the participant. The possibly wild going associations of the heavily loaded wording were disciplined by a very concrete anchoring in left-wing history in terms of the historical reference the *Partisan Coffeehouse* in Soho, London. This emblematic coffee house existed, as was shown in one of the freethought

exhibitions, from 1958 to 1962. It was initiated by Raphael Samuel and Stuart Hall, among others, both of whom were involved in the formation of the New Left in England as radical thinkers, publishers and teachers. Stuart Hall later contributed to the establishment of *cultural studies* as a British and international university discipline and became one of the main forces behind the institution of the Open University (Sørensen 2016).

Back then, *The Partisan Coffeehouse* was nicknamed *The Anti-Espresso Bar*, because it was established as a direct alternative to that time period’s new fashionable espresso bars. It was a non-commercial experiment that changed the protocols for what it means to take

part in society and address politics through culture and vice versa. Characteristics included embracing the time period's new skiffle music and new media such as cartoons, graphics and photos. In the magazine *New Left Review*, which the coffee house was launched to support, the founders put these new aesthetic forms and media into a contemporary aesthetic-political context.<sup>6</sup> In *The Partisan Coffeehouse*, there were on-going artistic events as well as political conversations ahead of the most burning trends and questions of the time, while the guests also occasionally relaxed with newspapers, books, a game of chess or just a conversation over a cup of coffee or a simple yet hearty meal. The policy was that there was room for everyone, whenever and however long they wanted, and the philosophy behind it was, in the words of Stuart Hall, that "life is equal parts jazz and politics, and both take time" (*Magasinet Kunst*, 2016, interview with Jenny Moore). According to historian Mike Berlin, who gave one of the invited talks in the café, the *Partisan Coffeehouse* was a vibrating centre of dissent, which challenged the ruling orthodoxies of the time and was centred around a unique cohort of do-it-yourself young people, their hopes and passions (Merlin 2016, mixlr).

The difference between the historic coffeehouse and the contemporary café is that *The Partisan Coffeehouse* represented an actual daily flow between life and politics, a micro or life policy in vivid interaction with the organisation of the New Left as a major macro-political operator. The context in UK in the 1950s and 60s was characterized by a mobilized trade union under the pressure of restoration policies and a high-voltage political environment: The Cold War, Suez, Cyprus and the Hungary crisis; colonial disputes in Algeria and South Africa; the nuclear threat and marches, etc. PC, on the other hand, represents

a temporary, aesthetic experiment by artists and cultural experts to re-embed art and the art institution in political sentiment in a no less high-voltage global context, but where the left wing seems to be without power and influence. In other words, and with concepts taken from, respectively, Rogoff & Schneider (2008) and Raunig (2013), *The Partisan Coffeehouse* was an actualised social fiction of the commons, while PC instead has served as a vocational intervention and preliminary common space.

Returning to DeLanda (2013) and the concept of assembling, it can be argued that the open organisation of freethought's engagement threatened to disrupt the overall assemblage. The many meetings, changing venues and participants hampered the possibility of both the kind of deep experience creation as well as systematic reflection, that Shannon Jackson (2011) in her analysis of the social turn in art talks about. Another potential disruptive dynamic existed in the relatively simple technology as is evident from the technical poor audio and video recordings on mixlr and vimeo. The technique is heard to have what DeLanda calls a de-territorialising effect in the situation although the recordings also contribute to a wider distribution and serve an archival function. However, the most obvious potential disruptive effect existed in the gap between the material and sensual coding, on the one hand, and the discursive on the other. The planned talks thus obviously required an understanding of the critical theoretical and political basis, which already the many built-in references in the various announcements as well as the persistent metaphors around them implied. This point was also spelled out in the local press and it was a theme in reviews in the national as well as international art magazines, too. We shall return to that in the end.

### HOSPITALITY, FRIENDSHIP AND COMMONING<sup>7</sup>

That given, the key coding, we would say, lay in those values, which, more due to their sensual presence in design and set-up than through verbalisation, constituted the texture of the assembly: radical hospitality, friendship, and the commons/commoning. They were performed in the single events and activities, but it was also what tied them together on an aesthetic and ethical level.

A very concrete expression of radical hospitality was the way in which PC functioned. Visitors at the PC were received by welcoming members of the group of seven volunteer art and culture operators, who were responsible for the daily performance.<sup>8</sup> Through mime, gestures and way of moving around, they took a welcoming – even if not servile – attitude to be posed at the official photos. Thereby guests were encouraged to sit down with the offered, free coffee – or a beer – and eventually soak up the atmosphere. As a visitor to the café, you were also discreetly interpellated by the coin cups on the bar counter to – depending on your own wish and opportunity – support the café and, in this way, add to the shared responsibility. Such hospitality also characterised the 2-day summit, which freethought organised during the opening in the beginning of September. Here, the artist duo TASC Studio Kitchen by Ablett & Brafield served the lunch with the words “we are the lunch break” and an invitation to enjoy sharing the feast at the long, well-set tables with organic delights. The same artist duo was responsible for “communal suppers” during the prior open lecture series *freethought invites* (starting already in 2015) and subsequent conversations about the overall theme of infrastructure at the nearby Hordaland Art Centre.<sup>9</sup>

Hospitality was further investigated in one of these open lectures and debates with the Spanish curator, etc. Laurence Rassel on “Radical hospitality” (Rassel 2016, vimeo). It is stated by Rassel, that she is inspired by previously mentioned Derrida and his two lectures from the 1990s on unconditional hospitality to be included in freethought’s text archive (cf. Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000). With Derrida, she took her outset in the everyday understanding of hospitality to rethink what happens at the border – to one’s home or one’s country – and the initial and surprising contact with another person or stranger. The context became relevant by the actual contrast to the refugee emigrant’s experience of being kept out, put in camps and behind walls, and otherwise treated in inhumane ways in Europe and elsewhere in the late summer of 2016. And it spoke to a local, in this case Norwegian, context of increasing fear of foreigners. Issues that were examined in several of freethought’s contributions, including the video-based exhibition *Shipping and the Shipped*.<sup>10</sup>

The encoded hospitality was fertilized by the friendship, that forms the basic principle of freethought, and which the 7-(wo)man group behind PC also embodied. Materials on friendship were equally included in the text archive, and contained among others, texts by Giorgio Agamben and Jean Luc Nancy. Insights into the “nature” of friendship, that these texts bring forward, were integrated in the performance of the hosts of PC as well as by freethought in terms of the way the group engaged throughout the MBQ as initiators of and participants in talks and debates. The “joint separation” of friendship, that Agamben (2004) talks about, and the sense-making and sensuality as and of commonality, that Nancy talks about (2011), was engrained as

atmosphere. That this was the ambition, at least, was spelled out through the historic reference to *The Partisan Coffeehouse*. Mike Berlin, in his talk on the coffeehouse, highlighted how it basically thrived on a close friendship between the initiators, which again contributed to and was enhanced by a dense political community in and of the New Left (Berlin 2016, vimeo). According to Berlin, the uniqueness of this historic coffeehouse grew from its engagement in life politics, and the radical heritage here from consists of a bricolage of DIY aesthetic politics, co-operation and community. He further suggested *The Partisan Coffeehouse* to form a rebuilding of the subtle search for a common pleasure, which is also a pleasure in community through working together.

#### THE MUSEUM OF BURNINGS QUESTIONS AS PARA-MUSEUM

Nora Sternfeld, the initiator of MBQ together with Isa Rosenberger, has dedicated herself to the question of the museum's possible transformation as a specific cultural institution (Sternfeld 2013, 2017). She has criticised the way in which the museum has assumed and managed the principle of participation as an institutional political agenda and further proposed a radical idea of the institution itself. Like Lütticken, she makes use of the concept of the para-museum, which describes the radical experiment with institutional practices and the self-reflexive interaction with the institutional format (Lütticken 2015). In her discussion of the institutions' management of the principle of participation, she distinguishes between a transformational agenda, in the neoliberal economy and politics' terms, and such politically transformative processes that lead to a challenging of the current built-in power relations and thus a real democratisation of the

institution. She is especially in search of what she regards as patronising tendencies in the form of efforts to include previously excluded in the representational logic, rather than letting them present themselves. According to Sternfeld, such a strategy is more about the institution's self-legitimation, and instead she proposes to establish a non-representative public space that is radically open, which again means letting go of striated curation in favour of a performative invitation that provides opportunities for new and unexpected meetings (Sternfeld 2013). She further argues that participation must give room for dissent and include the fragile and the unpredictable – unlike the institution's traditionally calculated and cool involvement (for a further elaboration on outreach policies and practices, see Sørensen and Kortbek 2018).

MBQ can be interpreted as such an attempt. It was first and foremost manifested in the established alliance with the acting firefighters as moulded by equality, coexistence and mutual solidarity. The DTA and the film *Brandstasjon* (directed by Rosenberger) was some of the very concrete results.<sup>11</sup> The firefighters, on their side, contributed to MBQ through the guided tours at the station and the archive of burning questions at DTA, organised in alphabetical order and displayed on the walls of the art hall room. Visitors to DTA were, as mentioned, invited to contribute by putting their own burning questions and examples hereof were: "Why is there nothing that burns anymore?"; "How can we make art a free voice that is not dependent on the institution or the market?" and "How can we take care of our history and culture in a changing world?" One might add: "What does it mean that the burning questions of our time and our part of the world are put in a museum and thus made a question of archival dissemination?" What these question

share is that they point out a tension between the activist opening of the institution and the provisional institutionalisation. This, then, precisely *is* the effect of getting the visitor to wonder about and reflect on the art institution, on what happens where, when and why. The questions also draw attention to the importance of remembering and history and to coming together and gathering around culture and politics. Following from this, it made sense that one of the programmed conversations in the café was about the future arts and culture policy in Bergen – with invited guests from cultural institutions, the public administration, and the political parties in addition to artists and cultural operators.<sup>12</sup>

### THE RECEPTION AND LEGACY OF PC AND MBQ

A review in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* had the title “More research than art”, and the reviewer Kjetil Roed was especially critical of freethought’s contribution in this respect (Roed 2016). He did, though, appreciate some of freethought’s activities, for instance the exhibition *Archives of Substance* and especially the one on the Shiraz-festival in Persepolis (1967–1977). The archive disclosed how various traditions in theatre and music across regions and continents could co-exist in Iran at this moment in time, and it was appreciated as a reminder that global, cultural infrastructures are not in any simple and predictable way distributed along the lines of West and East, North and South.

The reviewer from *Bergens Tidende*, Robert Nedrejord, agreed on the critique of freethought’s work for being too abstract and theoretical (Nedrejord 2016). He, on his side, balanced his review by interviewing the director Haakon Thuestad, who stated that he was very satisfied

with the overall event. He brought to the fore that *Bergen Assembly 2016* had 50 per cent more visitors compared to 2013 (approximately 30,000 as compared to 20,000), and that *The Partisan Café* and the installations at the fire station were among the most popular. However, he also pointed out that the ambition of *Bergen Assembly* was and should continue to be experimental and provide an alternative to the established biennale format even if also having the ambition to address the local public in Bergen as well as the international art scene. He reasoned that it is not an easy task and that it would take time to have the two sides of ambition better meet.

A reviewer in the Norwegian-based e-magazine *Kunstkritikk*, Stian Gabrielsen, summarized that the overall impression of *Bergen Assembly 2016* and of freethought’s part of it was, that it was not “particularly audience-friendly” (Gabrielsen 2016). He criticized the accessibility of the overall program, but also the separate arrangements for requiring not only insights into the art scene but also sympathy with the aesthetic and political agenda. Reviewers in international art and curatorial magazines were equally concerned and pointed at the exclusiveness of the set-up. However, they also pointed out that popularity most often does not go hand in hand with aesthetic and curatorial seriousness. They expressed the basic ambiguity in art in general and in radical art projects in particular: having the ambition to work in the service of the public and for the common, but in practise excluding the broad majority – appealing to the few, already trained and dedicated. In the Dutch e-journal *Metropolis M*, the reviewer and curator Laura Herman thus appreciated the curatorial ambition and underscored the importance of the theme of infrastructure and of the strive to cross-fertilize artistic, intellectual and political

132 domains – even if at cost of immediate public consent. She further hinted at the inherent schism in the whole arrangement between the artistic and the institutional ambition that tended to make the project dissolve (Herman 2016). In the chosen terminology here, we would say that Herman pointed to this inbuilt schism as a de-territorializing effect.

All the reviews, be they in the press or in art magazines, were in accordance with the part of our analysis, where we point to the gap between the performative and the discursive elements of PC and MBQ. However, the way we have seen it here, the legacy of PC and MBQ derives as much from the specific value-based way of being together and relating to each other as from the specific political and aesthetic agenda. The many smaller assemblies that the experiment provided, constituted a flow of working publics (Jackson 2011) to perform an aesthetic and political “necessity” of antagonism and dissent but also of hope and engagement. As such, it certainly was not and is not a mainstream agenda. According to assemblage theory, however, small transformations often occur at several and barely noticeable places, and from there initiate effects, which are not immediately predictable. Small transformations are in this case about the potential of art and institution to be spaces for critique as well as presence and collective action. This was very accurately stated by a local participant to the Berlin-arrangement who at the end of the subsequent discussion stated that he did not expect huge immediate changes, but already sensed a subtle change among people as to what might be possible to do and start up in Bergen (Berlin 2016, mixlr).

To be concluded is that freethought with its contribution to *Bergen Assembly 2016* showcase how art institutions might be made to work in other ways. In Raunig’s sense, the

contribution took the form of an instituent practice that points to a new type of institution of and for the commons. It might not succeed in changing the bigger picture and agenda right now and it might not reach a broader public, however it has opened a new space of imagining and talking about art, cultural institutions and cultural dissemination. In so doing, the choice of historical foundation has been crucial. The experiment gained significance by re-claiming a radical aesthetic tradition and by inscribing itself in a radical cultural heritage and ambition, and thereby also worked to illuminate the continuity, depth and creativity of a radical culture and struggle. The inherent dilemma as to reaching a broader public – and equally so the tension between the artistic and institutional endeavour – remains. But it has been reworked, reframed and pushed in and by the many different engagements, that was evoked, including the review controversy in local newspapers.

## NOTES

1. Besides Irit Rogoff (UK) and Nora Sternfeld (AU/ FI), freethought consists of Stefano Harney (UK/ Singapore), Adrian Heathfield (UK), Massimiliano Mollona (I/UK) and Louis Moreno (UK).
2. In addition to freethought, the Berlin-based, Danish curator group Praxes and the Lebanese artist Tarek Atouri were curators.
3. The case has also been the subject of an article in Danish. Charlotte Præstegaard Schwartz & Anne Scott Sørensen: ”Mellem kunst, institution og aktivisme: *Partisan Café* og *Museum of Burning Questions*”. In Erik Granly Jensen & Anne Scott Sørensen (red.): *Tilblivelser. Aktuelle kulturanalyser*. Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2018, 191–212.
4. The Partisan Café was curated in collaboration with Heidi Pretterhofer (architect) and Brandon

- LaBelle (professor and artist). Together with the conference The Infrastructure Summit (3rd–4th September) and a series of open City Seminars, it constituted freethought's performative platforms.
5. The point of Marx's commodity analysis is that a commodity's exchange value, which may seem as a "magical" result of the market, quite prosaically is based on the work that is put into it.
  6. *New Left Review* was established in 1960 by a merger of *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*. The Marxist historians group around, among others, Eric Hobsbawm and Perry Anderson contributed with contemporary analyses, and the latter became the main editor after Stuart Hall.
  7. For a more thorough discussion of the concepts of commons and commoning, see Rasmussen 2018.
  8. The café was realized by artists and educators Tora Endestad Bjørkheim, Freja Bäckman, Kabir Carter, Johnny Herbert, Jenny Moore (coordinator) and Arne Skaug Olsen.
  9. Freethought invites was based on six city seminars to be followed by open guest lectures and conversations with various members of the group. One of these, number five, were with Laurence Rassel on "Radical hospitality". Laurence Rassel is a curator, teacher and organizer based in Brussels. From 2008 to 2015 she was the Director of Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona.
  10. *Shipping and the Shipped* was curated by Stefano Harney and included collaborative work by Ranjit Kandalgaonkar, Arjuna Neuman, Denise Ferreira Da Silva, Wu Tsang and Fred Moten. As mentioned by one reviewer, it formed a poetical rendition of Harney's research into shipping as the centre of capital's infrastructural imagination asking whether "the ship is arriving or escaping, piloted or pirated, modularised or marooned" (Herman 2016).
  11. The city council in Bergen has now taken a decision of principle to establish the fire museum,

which the retired firefighters have been actively fighting for since the closure in 2007.

12. It took place on 5 September 2016 under the question: "What might a radical arts institution look like in Bergen", and is documented on *vimeo*.

### CREDENTIALS

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