



Antonia Hirsch, *Vox Pop*, 2008, production still, courtesy of the artist, photo Photo Technic



WHAT ARE WE NOW?

On *Stadium* and *Vox Pop*

BY Jeremy Todd

“The seats are arranged in tiers around the arena, so that everyone can see what is happening below. [...] There is no break in the crowd that sits like this, exhibiting itself to itself. It forms a closed ring from which nothing can escape.”

— Elias Canetti¹

Lynne Marsh’s *Stadium* (2008) and Antonia Hirsch’s *Vox Pop* (2008) revolve around solitary figures within sports arenas. Grid-like formations of fixed, empty seating serve as both backdrop environments and the presence of absent crowds. Each work adopts the seamless production values and structural familiarity of contemporary advertising and televisual entertainments. *Vox Pop* is a silent two-channel video work one minute in duration. A panoptic tracking shot moves through an empty and generically modern stadium as if it were tracing the flow of an “audience wave”. The work culminates in a lone man’s gestural efforts to be a part of the inferred mass-movement. *Stadium* is a video projection ten minutes and fifty-four seconds in duration. An empty Olympiastadion in Berlin is the site of a woman’s constant wandering. A science fiction/suspense-like soundtrack plays continuously as she does so. Her gestures seem always at odds with the work’s complex and rhythmically orchestrated camera movement. The repetitive symmetry and balance of the architectural environment (enhanced at times by 3D animation footage derived from a model of the building) is also disrupted.

While the protagonists within each piece function in divergent ways, they share a relationship to a spectral invocation of “the people” or “audience” as monolithic entity sited in the arena. Each piece hinges on a rhetorical questioning of what might constitute such collective bodies in the here and now. How is the self constructed in relation to them?

Vox Pop and *Stadium* are haunted internally by missing congregations or assemblies while inviting the external voyeurism of potential audiences. Built to posit collective experiences and identities, the arena settings within each work are rendered familiar and strange by these dynamics, incomplete and perhaps impossible, imaginary and yet still existing. I am left wondering what is held in common for us in the here and now. Who is this “us” beyond the inherited, inscribed and seemingly empty gestures these sites continue to host. Is this all somehow indicative of what constitutes a body politic in contemporary society?

It is now approximately twenty years after the advent of a so-called post-ideological age, a paradigm formed to a large extent by the collapse of the Soviet Union and entrenchment of perpetually deregulating global market capitalism. The political agency of public commons or an entity such as “the masses” can seem entirely negated by the continuing dominance of neoliberal rationalism² within this paradigm. Any pre-existing socioeconomic unities that have remained continue to erode under the force of liquid capital, rampant privatization and the exponential growth/fragmentation of markets and market systems (in lieu of any other shared frames of reference within a “global community”). Envisioning “the masses” as an idea or concept is also made difficult by the violent essentialist dynamics of historical collective identifications. Political legacies of “the people” or “masses” (particularly as they relate to failed neo-Marxist projects in the twentieth century, from those of Lenin and Mao to the Khmer Rouge and FARC) further exacerbate the difficulty of such a task.

Trying to conceive of a way out of this dilemma



while inspired by the “Battle in Seattle” and subsequent World Trade Organization protests, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri managed to articulate a new genesis for collective resistance that remains, for the most part, unrealized:

“Like the formation of habits, or performativity, or the development of languages, [a] production of the common is neither directed by some central point of command and intelligence nor is it the result of a spontaneous harmony among individuals, but rather it emerges in the space between, in the social space of communication. The multitude is created in collaborative social interactions.”³

Hirsch and Marsh address the ongoing delay of such an effective formation and the assumptions it must depend on, redirecting considerations of revolu-

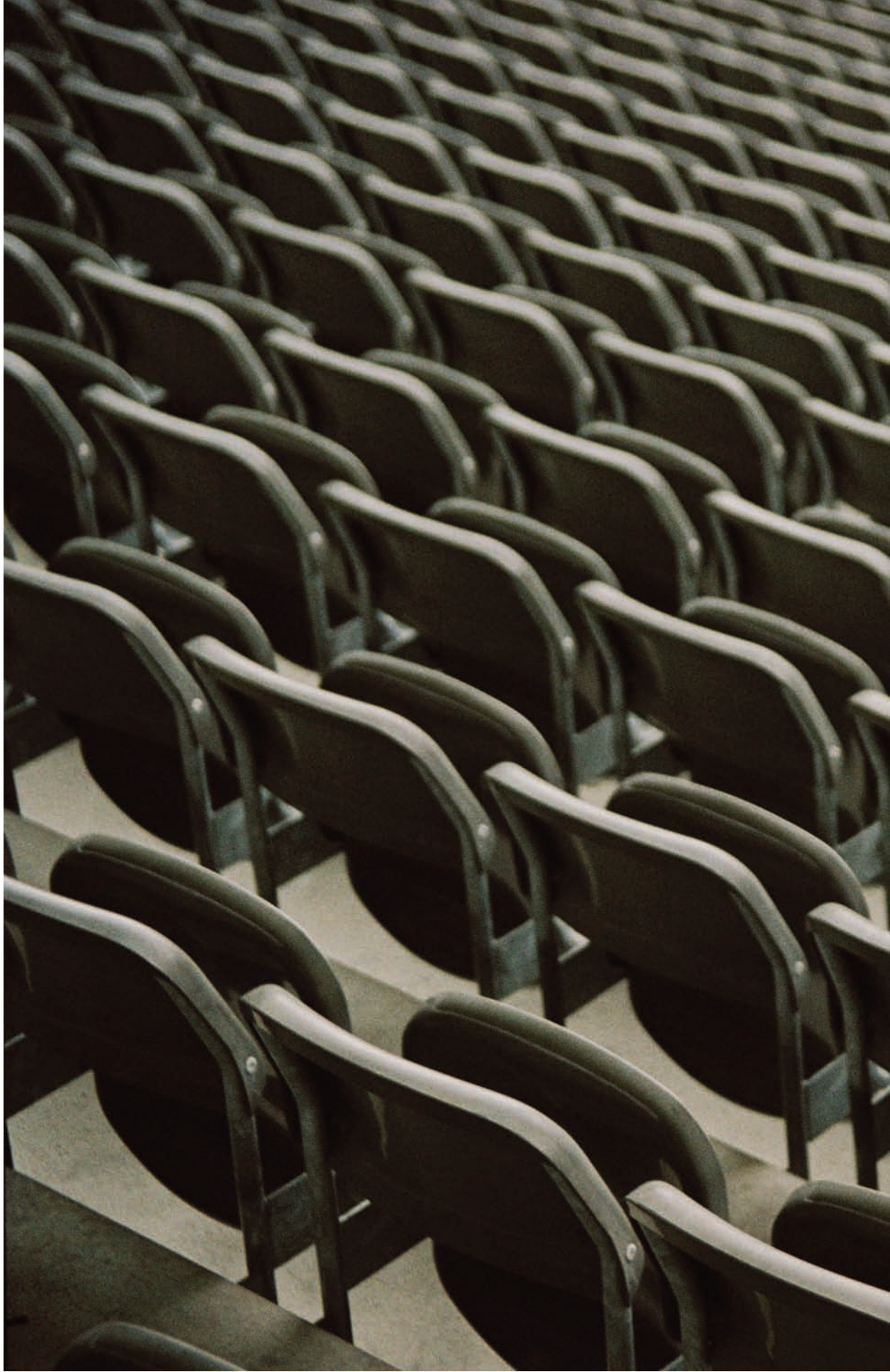


tionary praxis in the present. They examine the persistence of particular social spaces and practices constructed within modernity, revealing channels of communication and relations of power that continue to be facilitated by them. Both explore how expression and reception remain conditioned and imagined in relation to orchestrated conformities. Mass spectacle continues to animate performative constructions of self like a ghost possessing the living, effecting dynamics within public space and the intimate (and paradoxically disconnected) interactions between individuals and various internet, digital imaging, video game and virtual reality technologies. Personal relationships in real-time/space are also compromised by these conditions, along with the egalitarian promises of relational activities and interactive collaborative content gener-

ated in the arts and entertainment industries. Both works infer an ongoing internal colonization of our constructions of individuality in relation to the specter of the crowd. *Vox Pop* and *Stadium* render visible ongoing negotiations between the two. That these struggles persist despite claims of liberal inclusivity (through deregulated market systems and the “end of ideology”) suggests that each of us continues to be inscribed by interests that are not necessarily our own — that we do not as yet have alternative constellations of mutual support for individual emancipation which are effectively active.

A key focus for both artists in these pursuits lies in their evocations of gesture. The sports arenas they have chosen function as indexical groundings for recollections of collective and sometimes remarkably sponta-

Lynne Marsh,
Stadium, 2008,
production still,
HD video,
courtesy of the artist,
photo Johannes Bock





neous social practices (such as the orchestrated gesture of the “wave” examined in *Vox Pop*). Arenas are continually reanimated by such activity, serving as a means to express national and regional identities, shared values, desires, political loyalties, generational and cultural affiliations, etc, long after they have been discredited, complicated or lost. While arenas in the West can be traced back to antiquity (if not earlier) collective gestural forms conveyed in generic and seemingly mechanical ways — what Siegfried Kra-cauer described in the late 1920s as “mass ornamentation”,⁴ can be argued as establishing a kind of normative dominance (absorbing already entrenched performative roles of gender, race and class) within rapidly accelerating conditions of modernization occurring throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ Expressive autonomy and its development during these times of rapid flux threaten to break down and eventually cease to exist. In examining these dynamics at the close of the nineteenth century, Giorgio Agamben has observed:

“An era that has lost its gestures is, for that very reason, obsessed with them; for people who are bereft of all that is natural to them, every gesture becomes a fate. And the more the ease of these gestures was lost under the influence of invisible powers, the more life became indecipherable.”⁶

With general decreases in economic and material self-sufficiency, the predominance of wage labour, minimal leisure time and the loss of pre-existing forms of supportive community (geographic family bonds, agrarian lifestyles, localized economies, etc), modes of consumption and creative agency might easily be conflated. Meaningful connection to pre-existing traditions of social practice might be disrupted or forgotten. The twentieth century can be seen as afflicted with a “frantic effort to reconstitute the vanished realm of meaningful movements [...]”⁷ The nation-state, concentrated wealth and other self-interested players could encroach on resulting gaps in determining a hegemonic re-shaping of populations.

Vox Pop and Stadium are haunted internally by missing congregations or assemblies while inviting the external voyeurism of potential audiences.

Formulaic constructions of expression entering the marketplace might displace organically produced ones connected to “authentic” lived experience, or, in conventionally semiotic terms, the necessity of referents. A predictable end result is summed up nicely in the well-worn words of Guy Debord: “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”⁸ Gesture, as embodied signification, can be seen to gain central conceptual importance in the orchestration and control of these new forms of simulacral

contents, embracing nostalgia for what has been displaced, and the construction/manipulation of new desires within consumer culture. Hirsch's *Vox Pop* protagonist renders this visible as soon as he appears on screen. Without others in the arena around him to effectively dramatize the mass ornamentation of the wave gesture for the camera, his singular contribution to the inferred group movement appears dramatically less than significant or meaningful in relation to the absent whole. *Vox Pop* was initially screened as a two-part video projection interspersed with regularly programmed advertising on side-by-side video billboards above the busy shopping district intersection of Granville and Robson Streets in downtown Vancouver, conflating expected contents with oddly analogous ones. As the man within *Vox Pop* looks from the screen directly at viewers in the street and surrounding buildings, he doesn't possess a "glamour gaze" which looks through them (one that suggests you are not important enough to be acknowledged). There are no coded psychological inferences relating to contemporary advertising. It's not a desire-related gaze meant to generate envy, emulation, or ironic, deconstructive recognitions. We see a relatively non-descript Caucasian male who is entering early middle age. He is transfixed by his own reflexive participation — as if he were a somnambulist — as if he were "going through the motions". I wonder who I am and how he might identify me as I watch him.

Both works reveal a compounded reworking of panoptic space (discussed by Michel Foucault and others as a means of regulating bodies within sites of incarceration). Stadium crowds look into a singular point/event and respond in accordance to it, while being watched by others as a spectacular whole through media broadcasting. They also watch each other.⁹ The mass ornamentation they enact mimics individual panoptic subject behaviors (conforming to expectations of being surveyed at any time from both a singular point — in this case the camera lens — and the reflection of the larger collective body of the crowd) while inversely serving as a singular point of focus for others (television and film audiences etc). The specificity of site in *Stadium* serves to draw this out. The second Olympiastadion in Berlin, built by Werner March for the 1936 Summer Olympics with event broadcasting in mind, is a meticulously symmetrical sculptural whole, reducing all those who occupy it to the status of either rhythmically balanced, effectively integrated components, or isolated and disruptive blemishes/aberrations within a closed, inward facing ring formation typical of arenas. As a global platform for the display of Hitler's imagining of the German people, the stadium typifies a creation of space which functions primarily as a defining apparatus for the terms and grammar of orchestrated bodies. Those who enter are rendered subjects and objects simultaneously.



Construction began in 1934, as Leni Riefenstahl was making the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph Of The Will* (1934). The needs of her cameras were anticipated in the design of the building (their fluid, dynamic movement, distortions of perspective, telephoto-lenses and sweeping aerial viewpoints). Marsh consciously returns to the “architecture porn” dynamic Riefenstahl developed in *Triumph Of The Will* and refined in the Olympiastadion-located *Olympia* (1938), combining this with her precedent-setting use of music to direct a sustained emotional narrative devoid of plot. The building’s wholeness of form is withheld for the fetishization of parts and their trespass — a submissive body broken up and lustily ravaged by the mechanical eye. The dissection, objectification and control of physical intimacy within pornography — its reduction to mechanical repetitions for mass consumption — are reconfigured here to full effect. The movements of individuals within the Olympiastadion conform to the authorial centrality of the camera’s gaze, like the malleable elements of a painter’s composition. They are seamlessly objectified — reduced to a kind of

human architectural material. Hirsch’s *Vox Pop* reflects the imbedded automation of these dynamics in the architectural and televisual present. Her choice of stadium (an average contemporary professional sports arena devoid of any pre-shoot cosmetic primping) and elementally reductive cinematography (an “audience wave” is suggested with a singular panoptic tracking shot) reveal both their commonplace banality and continuing dominance. *Vox Pop* is silent, paradoxically distilling the sustained drama of spectacular filmic sound as a kind of suspension or acute extraction of something timeless — a coded indicator of being within the moment or immediate present.

Viewers are drawn into these works when negotiating understandings and identifications of each on-screen figure. A kind of replicating chain or feedback loop of spectatorship is triggered (imagine a primary viewer watching a subject within one of the works, then a secondary viewer watching the primary viewer and so on). *Stadium* amplifies the replication of these relationships through a movie theatre-like installation, elegantly formed by a grid of chairs arranged in

front of the projection screen. *Vox Pop* destabilizes epistemological assumptions within public space (How do we know what we know about what we are doing and looking at and why?) by intervening and rendering it strange. In both instances disorienting confluences of real time events and fixed dramatizations provoke uneasy senses of complicity and loss of control. Relationships between objects and subjects, surface and substance, viewers and viewed are confused, compounding the enigmatic behavioral tensions unfolding on-screen.

Marsh's figure never faces viewers as she moves through the Olympiastadion. She communicates directly through her gestures, maintaining an antagonistic relationship to the orchestrated movement of the camera recording her and the empty rigidity of the arena. Her white tracksuit-like outfit and hood-covered head accentuate a gracefully athletic, youthful body that continually transgresses the ordered and objectifying architectural frame containing it. Like the sci-fi suspense soundtrack that accompanies her actions, she sustains a constant tension in her ongoing disruptive movements. She does not conform. She is a strange visual doppelganger, mimicking the white jumpsuit-wearing W.T.O. protesters that helped to inspire Hardt and Negri's new conception of the "Multitude". Where is her absent alternative network of difference — of mutually supportive singularities — her world of "collaborative social interactions"?¹⁰ She is as much a specter as the presence of the absent crowd.

The protagonist within *Stadium* is a neat inversion of the somnambulist other/self within *Vox Pop*. He is asleep. She is a dream. She embodies a fantasy of free agency. He provides a reflection of contained isolation. Both are uncannily representative of what "we" are now in trying to understand our era.¹¹

View *Stadium* by Lynne Marsh: http://lyn-nemarsh.net/works/stadium_video.html

View *Vox Pop* by Antonia Hirsch: <http://antonia-hirsch.com/projects/vox-pop/7>

NOTES:

1. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Penguin, 1973) 31.
2. By this I mean a prevalent belief in the abilities of free markets and trade to pragmatically sort out and rightfully resolve all social, economic and political situations.
3. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004) 222.
4. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Levine (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
Kracauer also surmises what is indicated by such phenomena: "The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires." 79.
5. These would include mechanization, urbanization, secularization, cultural and "ethnic" miscegenation/hybridization and extreme divisions of labor.
6. Giorgio Agamben, "Notes On Gesture", *Infancy and History: On The Destruction Of Experience*, (London: Verso, 2007) 151.
7. Brian Dillon, "Inventory/Talk To The Hand" *Cabinet Magazine*, issue 26, summer 2007. 7.
8. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967). 1.
9. "Every spectator has a thousand in front of him, a thousand heads. As long as he is there, all the others are there too; whatever excites him, excites them; and he sees it." Canetti, *Ibid.* 31.
10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Ibid.*