

## From Fritz Teufel to Leo Bassi: Happening and Provocation

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In this short article I would like to examine some theatrical performances which might be placed under the umbrella of 'provocation', which is understood here as moments of political activism. First of all, I will briefly evoke some actions produced by the students' protest movement at the end of the Sixties in Berlin. Then, I will consider the problems which threaten every political provocation and which appear as challenges to the political theatrical creation; namely overbidding and inflation. Finally, I will evoke possible answers to these challenges, especially through several performances of the duo of political activists known as the *Yes Men*, and those of the Italian "clown" Leo Bassi. Their happenings or performances, at least partly, transcend the limitations which which can turn a political provocation into an ineffective, commercialized and bankable product.

### Urban performances of the *Kommune I*

At the end of the Sixties in West Germany, as in many other countries, a students' protest movement gradually rose against the political hegemony of a State which, in the eyes of the younger generation, was guilty of complicity with diverse criminal regimes, particularly the United States. In West Germany, most students referred to Marxist and pacifist ideologies. The Berlin students' protest movement was built around the well-known *Kommune I* and its leaders Fritz Teufel and Dieter Kunzelmann. They intended to reform the traditional lifestyle by a free, shared and collectivist existence. They initiated many actions which were intended to denounce the inhumanity of the West German State and of its representatives: politicians, the police, judges, etc. These actions were mainly urban performances which were based on an investment and a political use of the urban public space. Indeed, the street, but also the universities or the courts, were then used as stages for a creative profusion of theatrical political performances: ludico-symbolic coups; assassination attempts; fake funerals; the degeneration of trials into grotesque rhetorical jousts etc. For example, in 1967, members of the *Kommune I* tried to attack the vice president of the United States, Hubert Humphrey, during his visit to Berlin. Contrary to what was rapidly announced by the populist and Atlanticist press, the tool or weapon the students intended to use was not a bomb but a pudding mixture.

For their designers, these actions were directly linked to a Situationist understanding of the urban milieu transformed into a large stage of militant theatre. In fact, the young activists wanted to create situations which would reveal the "fascist", repressive and militaristic nature of the West German and American governments. In other words, one can say that the main aim of these actions was provocation; that is, following sociologist Dominique Linhardt, acts which will reveal the real identity of a State.<sup>[1]</sup> This State, according to the West German Situationists, managed to suppress the need of liberty of its citizens by discreetly imposing principles and fundamentally questionable laws: "Though the '*critiquabilité*' of things has never been so big, the criticism is powerless against a 'system' which secretes a form of perverse support imposed through the disappearance of any visible track of this imposition."<sup>[2]</sup> So, for the agitators, as Linhardt writes, the aim is "to tear away the enemy's gentle mask. Put away the veil spread over people's consciousnesses by showing his inhumanity. Force him to show his cruelty."<sup>[3]</sup>

Put simply, the provocation imagined by the West German students at the end of the Sixties was the product of three ingredients: firstly, a 'first audience', as big as possible (the efficiency of the provocation will depend on its size); secondly, an urban, or at least public, space as the stage for a symbolic and playful defying of the State's representatives (who constitute a 'second audience'); and thirdly, a repression by the second audience which is totally disproportionate, considering the harmless and symbolic character of the provocative action. Initially, these three ingredients combined to produce political performances which, generally, succeeded in their provocative aim.

At first, this dynamic of the provocation was effective. The West German State and its representatives (judges and police) did indeed answer the provocation of the students by becoming more and more violent and repressive. And the police's violence demonstrated that the State had been forced to reveal its real face, fundamentally militaristic and liberticidal. However, the provocation soon met a double obstacle which led to a progressive decline in its provocative capacity. In the face of a State which was becoming more and more violent, the agitator gradually had to become more and more provocative.<sup>[4]</sup> This evolution had its limits, for, as it is impossible always to go further in the strict framework of the public and revendedicated act, the process ends *de facto* in an institutionalization that transforms the agitator into a representative of the system that he intended to denounce. In fact, this institutionalization rapidly affects the agitators of the *Kommune I*, who quickly become stars, "selling" their performances and interviews to the press.<sup>[5]</sup> Caught in a hectic whirl which forced them always to push the limit further, they finally became acceptable, and like the King's fool, lost their political efficiency.

Obviously, this double obstacle of the overbidding and possible institutionalization can only be surmounted by leaving the theatrical and playful register. In other words, the provocative act has to become illegal to remain

effective and efficient. And this is exactly what happened in April 1968, when Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader, Thorwald Proll and Horst Söhnlein, four activists of the Berlin students' protest scene, set two Frankfurt department stores on fire.

### From ludicrous to violent

For a lot of historians, the Frankfurt fires must be considered as the beginning of the armed struggle that would reach its climax several years later in urban guerrilla groups like the Red Army Fraction (*Rote Armee Fraktion* – RAF) and the *Bewegung 2. Juni*. But, this retroactive and determinist understanding does not consider the theatrical origin of these acts. In spite of the evident break between the criminal fires and the fake attempts of the students, both can be understood as urban happenings. For Baader, Ensslin, Proll and Söhnlein, the aim of their illegal action was indeed “to move the fires which burn in Vietnam” to the German cities. They really hoped that their act would provoke the indignation of public opinion, which would implicitly reveal its total incoherence: if everybody was shocked by the destruction of some goods in a department stores, then everybody should, at least, be terribly shocked by the crimes committed by the American forces, which were – with the support of the West German State – destroying thousands of lives in Vietnam. So, the reasoning of the arsonists was simple; if the West German citizen was offended by the destruction of goods, s/he will have to be shocked even more by the inhuman Vietnam War. During the trial of the four activists, Gudrun Ensslin summarized his position thus: “I’m not talking about some burned mattresses. I’m talking about burned children in Vietnam.”[6]

Regarding the obstacles which threaten all provocative acts, the Frankfurt action is at first a success. The activists are condemned to prison sentences while the members of the *Kommune 1*, who a few months earlier published a pamphlet acclaiming the department store fires, were acquitted, the court recognizing the symbolic and poetic character of their pamphlets.[7] It is obvious; unlike the subversion practised by the students at the end of the Sixties, the first criminal act of Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader could no longer be institutionalized, nor could the further terrorist acts of radical left wing groups. According to Sarah Hakemi, this point of no return definitively cut the activists from the art sphere:

“The struggle for the supremacy of the discourse is also dependent on the fact that attacks on the discourse of the dominant society are really perceived as attacks. In so far art and satire are not efficient. And that is the reason why new methods of ‘escalation’ have been developed and used. The RAF’s declaration of war on the State constitutes a climax of these new methods”. [8]

### The progressive loss of the “second” audience

This distinction between art (performance) and action (later terrorism) is of course directly linked to the distinction between public (announced) act and clandestine act. By choosing illegality, the activists of Frankfurt make a first step towards the underground. At a pragmatic level, this difference is essential. Until then the subversion of the students was signed by its authors. The rhetorical contests between Fritz Teufel or Rainer Langhans and their judges had a stage, the West German courts. In the streets too, the fight was visible and designed as a set of public/theatrical acts. The actions were announced and could be consumed as live performances. Their effects finally depended on the co-presence of two audiences; the first audience, mainly composed of the accomplices of the provocateurs, and the second audience, constituted of the victims (or targets) of this provocation, who, by their violent reaction, would prove that the provocation was justified. The Frankfurt fires were still designed as provocations, as urban performances which were based on the opposition of two audiences; the one which is the target of the provocation and the other which will proclaim the disproportionate reaction of the population and the State. However, in the case of the Frankfurt fires it is the first time that those two audiences did not meet on the (public) battlefield.

Definitely caught in the whirl of provocation and overbidding, Baader and Ensslin nevertheless go a step further two years later, founding (with, among others, Ulrike Meinhof) the *Rote Armee Fraktion*. This time, the project of the new armed organisation definitively breaks with a larger “live” audience. From now on, all actions are totally clandestine and can only be consumed afterwards, through the ruins they leave behind.[9] The targets of their actions also change. The terrorist acts are no longer symbolic; now violence aims at people. When the Baader-Meinhof gang blows up a base of the United States Army, it is no longer a matter of symbolic targets. It is purely and simply a matter of weakening and destroying the one they consider as the enemy. This evolution has one important consequence on the provocative act as a theatrical performance. This time, the second audience, the one that will reveal its fascist face, becomes the public to be destroyed. This change is fatal to the provocation, because it also eliminates *de facto* the counterpart of the victim, the first public, the one who had to attend the reaction of the second. There will be no reaction to assist in, only the silence following destruction. Thus the first audience is also deprived of the “show” which founded the critical and political dimension of the provocation.

The infernal spiral of provocation(which always requires going further and further) was precisely the cause of the progressive loss of provocation. It looks as if any provocation was condemned to implosion, forced always to go further and to give up the co-presence and the interaction of two audiences, which were indispensable ingredients. But should we therefore consider the provocation as a past and redundant political and artistic form? Did the provocation reach its limits in the Seventies? Is every provocative act sterile, neutralized by possible institutionalization? Are political provocation and theatrical creation still compatible today? Or should we admit, without any hope of a possible interaction between art and politics, that, today, the so called "big provocateurs" become famous in big festivals or on television, but certainly no longer in the street? We won't answer this ultimate question definitively. However, one is still encouraged to push the reflection on the necessary co-presence of two audiences a bit further, by evoking some other practices that question the issues of contemporary theatrical and political provocation.

### Reusing the institutionalization: a confusion between two audiences

For some years now, the sphere of theatrical creation has been shaken regularly by provocative creations which have a political base. Often these creative actions do not take place in theatres, but in the street, on television, or in private or public places. I will evoke only two examples, which are heterogeneous and almost opposing; namely, the work of the *Yes Men* and the performances of Leo Bassi. Through these two examples, I will try to show that a possible renewal of the creative approach of provocation has to rely on a complex confusion between both audiences indispensable to the provocation.

The *Yes Men* systematically infiltrate meetings and other institutional gatherings and frameworks (internet, television, etc.). Their screenplay is often the same. First, they are believed to be authentic participants and speakers attending gatherings of famous private societies or big international organizations. Then, they gradually confuse the spirits of their spectators, up to the moment when their discourse and their physical presence (mimics, costumes, etc.) reveal that their contribution (conferences, commercial speeches, press conferences) was faked. Apparently, their actions are here again placed under the umbrella of provocation. The *Yes Men* reveal the real face of the "enemy" by provoking him. Introducing themselves as speakers of the World Trade Organization, or as spokesmen of Halliburton, the *Yes Men* base their actions on what they call a simple "identity correction."<sup>[10]</sup>

In 2004, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bhopal catastrophe, Andy Bichlbaum, one of the two *Yes Men*, appeared as a fake public relations manager of the American Society *Dow Chemical*. His speech was screened live on prime time on BBC. There he announced in front of millions of spectators that *Dow Chemical* (after having acquired *Union Carbide*) apologized for the Bhopal catastrophe, and would offer 12 billion dollars in compensation to the victims of one of the biggest pollution scandals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This information lasted two hours. Then, the BBC was obliged to deny the scoop, quoting a *communiqué* of a real *Dow Chemical* spokesman who declared that *Dow* had already done enough for the victims. Once again, the American chemicals empire revealed itself as an insensitive and unethical institution. Here the provocation succeeded in showing the enemy's real face.

In the case of Bassi, we can also consider some of his plays, sketches and TV shows as provocative acts. Drinking litres of honey on a television set; running through the streets, shaking a big red flag like a stereotypical communist revolutionary; dressing up as the Pope; playing with a petrol can and matches in the middle of his audience in a television show; Bassi aims to provoke the indignation of some spectators. He undoubtedly succeeds.

Now, selling the videos of their actions, the *Yes Men* have integrated a commercialization which threatened to undermine the provocative nature of the act. In a similar way, Leo Bassi, who began his career in the streets but really emerged in famous festivals and on television, has already accepted for a long time that his farces are broadcast by private television. In short, Leo Bassi and the *Yes Men* actually use the merchandising and institutionalization which "threatens" the political provocation. Nevertheless, and this is what I want to show in the last part of this text, their actions prove that this marketing of the provocation can also become part of the provocative act, because it allows them to produce a confusion of the two audiences. Indeed, the efficiency of their actions/shows/performances relies, unlike the "classic" provocation, on only *one* audience. No more the dichotomic opposition between accomplices and enemies which gave birth to the urban happenings of the *Kommune 1*. In Bassi's shows, as in the *Yes Men*'s happenings, you no longer have those who take advantage of the provocation, and those who undergo it. This time there is only *one* audience, which slips from one position to another, or oscillates between two positions.

In the case of the *Yes Men*, their listeners first do not know the identity of the invited fake specialist. Progressively they are amused or scandalized by a somewhat unconventional speaker (businessmen listening to fake WTO representative in 2001<sup>[11]</sup>) or by a surprising discourse (\* of Dow Chemical watching the BBC in 2004). But at this time, they still have no reason to reject his speech. Then, gradually, the audience realizes the trickery. And finally, feeling fooled, the spectator understands precisely that he is the target of the performance.<sup>[12]</sup>

With Bassi, this passage from one position to the other is more like a permanent hesitation. His spectator can appreciate the ironic criticism of the inhumanity of reality shows. For example; on the set, Bassi pours gasoline over himself while he plays with matches, thus creating an authentic adrenaline shock in his spectators' bodies. But, after a while, the spectator (physically present on the set) who was amused by the criticism, becomes the target of the provocation, as Bassi goes on with the dangerous game, but now in the middle of the audience. Then, if the spectator is shocked, he reveals the incoherence of his position. On the one hand he appreciates "trash tv"[13], like the ordinary voyeur, protected by his privileged position. On the other hand, he disavows it when he becomes the potential victim of the show. Having fun with the grotesque criticism the clown makes of television, he is suddenly disturbed in his comfortable position (as a passive and well-intentioned pseudo-critical spectator) when the game threatens to hurt him.

### A political moment

This brief evocation of the *Yes Men* and Leo Bassi can certainly not give us the conceptualized receipt of a hypothetical, "new", politically efficient provocation. But, to discover the transformation (only suggested and limited to a specific group for the *Yes Men*, really achieved in the case of Leo Bassi) of two audiences in one global witness / target group of spectators should encourage us to rethink the contemporary political provocation in terms of non-Manicheistic categories. The past has shown us that political happenings, based upon a binary division (good / accomplices vs bad / targets) have reached a limit beyond which the provocative happening turns into a non-performative violent action that remains, in the Sixties and Seventies, as today, politically ineffective. Terrorism (be it State terrorism or illegal) can be understood to some extent as a radical and perverted evolution or "excroissance" of past urban happenings; but, yesterday as well as today, its dynamic is one of absence, of mediated consummation, and of ruins.[14] Leo Bassi's performances are not based upon an absence or even a feeling motivated by a possible (but not yet performed) event. They are not based on a distance between the audience and the activist/artist. They do not rely on a dichotomic division of the population into good and bad. But his actions try to integrate their diffusion framework, be it even as problematic as a Berlusconi public or private television channel. There is no "bad" and "good" any more; only a group (including the performer) which is forced into a questioning of its position, status and discourse. This questioning probably lasts only half a second; but maybe in this very short moment - when the spectator suddenly understands (or does not want to admit) that he is, right now, gliding from one audience to the other - resides a real political moment, that can not be exceeded by any perversion of the provocative action.

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[1] Dominique Linhardt, « L'État et ses épreuves : éléments d'une sociologie des agencements étatiques », *Papiers de recherche du CSI*, n° 9 (Paris : Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, 2008).

[2] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[5] It is said that, on a wall in the entrance hall of the second residence of the *Kommune 1*, every entering visitor could read a graffiti that tends to confirm this progressive commercial (and mediatic) turn, or, at least, the possible perversion of the subversive act: "Erst blechen, dann sprechen" / "First the cash, then we talk." Ulrike Traub notes that this sentence is, as the leaders of the *Kommune 1* themselves admitted, the laconic expression of a *mise en scène* that is at the roots of all ambiguous relations between the group writes of *Kommune 1* and the media: "The life of the *Kommune 1*, as presented in the media and true to the sentence 'Erst blechen, dann sprechen', was

completely staged for the journalists.” Ulrike Traub, *Theater der Nacktheit. Zum Bedeutungswandel entblößter Körper auf der Bühne seit 1900* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010), p. 187.

[6] « Fanal in Frankfurt », *Eines Tages. Zeitgeschichten auf Spiegel Online*.

url: [http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalbumbackground/1609/fanal\\_in\\_frankfurt.html](http://einestages.spiegel.de/static/topicalbumbackground/1609/fanal_in_frankfurt.html)

[7] In their tract n° 8, published one year earlier, the *Kommune I* had already suggested that in a near future some department stores might be put on fire, closing the tract by with famous English appeal : “burn, warehouse, burn !” ; quoted in Peters Butz, *Tödlicher Irrtum. Die Geschichte der RAF* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), p.103.

[8] Sara Hakemi, “Terrorismus und Avantgarde”, in Wolfgang Kraushaar (ed.), *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, Institut für Sozialforschung, 2006), p. 610.

[9] For an analysis of the RAF kidnappings and assassinations, considered as actions that essentially left empty sets behind them, see also: Jeremy Hamers, “L’enlèvement de Hanns Martin Schleyer par la Fraction Armée Rouge: un théâtre sans acteurs”, *Cahiers Louis-Lumière*, n° 6: *Vide, vacuité, désœuvrement*, 2009, pp. 53-67.

[10] Nils Klawitter, “Achtung, Gag-Guerilla!”, *Der Spiegel*, n°7 / 2009, p. 86.

[11] In the eyes of the spectator, the jokes and little slapsticks are still funny and almost mock those who criticize the unethical production method of a rich private society, for instance, or the capitalistic and ultraliberal turn of a public institution.

[12] This dynamic of the progressive slipping of the targetted audience is particularly obvious in the fake conference held in 2006 when the *Yes Men*, posing as Halliburton representatives, presented their grotesque “survivaball” in a meeting organized by big insurance firms.

[13] Even if the purpose of those performances is political and social criticism, these actions are, of course, also good bankable products, almost as “trashy” as the programmes they intend to attack.

[14] To this extent, and if the reader allows us to compare these two moments of American contemporary history, there is no notable difference between the mediatic dynamic of the attacks on the WTC on 11<sup>th</sup> september 2001 and the night bombings, filmed by an infrared camera, during Operation *Desert Storm*. In both cases, the actions are mediatic; and their very significant impact is above all due to the mediate consummation of imprecise parts and bits of the event (amateur videos and high pixelised green images).