

## *Introduction*

On 14 October 2012, on a warm autumn Sunday morning, several hundred people gathered on the Maximilianstraße, Munich's most exclusive shopping street in front of the municipal theatre, the Munich Kammerspiele. They had been invited on the occasion of the hundredth birthday celebrations of the theatre to take part in a citizens' meeting to be conducted at a hundred tables set up on the street outside the theatre. Each table was assigned a topic, for which one could register online. Each table also had a moderator whose job it was to gather ideas and focus discussion. In front of the theatre a brass band provided occasional musical accompaniment. Actors from the theatre moved around the tables clad in costumes representing various protest movements of the past century: suffragettes, anti-nuclear protesters and so on. The actors made notes of the discussions and after one hour a sentence or two from each table was recited via loudspeakers to the assembled multitude. The tables were provided with coffee, water and pretzels, but in most cases picnic hampers appeared and very quickly a party atmosphere developed. The table I had been assigned as moderator had the topic 'slow city' and referred to Munich's rapid development and its runaway rental and real estate prices. It also encompassed questions of mobility, public transport, carbon emissions and local infrastructure. The participants at the table came from a wide variety of professions and included a former city councillor. They were middle-aged, well informed about the issues and united in their broadly speaking ecological world-view. Some frequented the theatre, some did not.

This unusual event was organized by a theatre which calls itself the 'Theatre of the City', which it institutionally certainly is, because it is funded by the city of Munich (to the tune of about €20 million per annum) but beyond this institutional definition it likes to see itself as a theatre reaching out to the city. The invitation read:

The Munich Kammerspiele is 'the theatre of the city'. It should and wants to be a place of art and debate, a public sphere. Only a part of the city population

makes use of this offer. Ticket prices, language or cultural codes can be barriers to attending the theatre . . . For a day street and theatre are to become one big town hall meeting, a centre for public debate, which asks: what does it mean to be poor and rich in Munich? How and at whose expense are wealth and resources allocated in education, politics and culture? What other possibilities exist for public participation and influence for a more just future?

It was the stated aim of the theatre to include a broad range of the population from different regions, age groups, religions and social backgrounds. These community tables were designed for the participants to tell each other about the state of the city from their own, quite personal perspective. Each table had in addition an expert from different areas such as education, politics, culture, media or sport. One could participate as an individual, part of the family or as a representative of a club or institution. At the end of the two hours' traffic of this improvised and literal street theatre it was hard to ascertain whether the participants at the tables or indeed in the larger community of bystanders were any wiser but it was certain that a good time had been had by all. The theatre's actors moved among the tables clad in their often bizarre costumes and could be addressed and chatted with. There was no aura of performance but rather a moment of genuine community.

'Theatre for all' was one of the topics to be discussed, an old question that has accompanied the modern theatre since the late nineteenth century under various guises and names: popular theatre, theatre for the people, *Volkstheater*, *théâtre populaire* to name just a few epithets. The decisive difference between these various models and concepts and the hundred tables set up outside the Munich Kammerspiele was spatial. Previous models had been predicated on the expectation that theatre consisted of a performance enacted before spectators, whatever its content and aesthetic demands might be. The theatre in the Maximilianstraße, if indeed it was theatre, was enacted offstage and outside a purpose-built building. There was no performative feedback loop between spectators and performers, there was no darkened auditorium to assist the transformation into concentrated absorption: there was, to put it bluntly, no art. There were instead structured discussions on questions of public interest with the participation by individuals irrespective of class, gender, religion or educational status. The only gatekeeping that took place was on a curatorial level by the dramaturges of the theatre.

'Structured discussion on questions of public interest with the participation by individuals irrespective of class, gender, religion or educational status' is a textbook definition of the public sphere in its current use and understanding by scholars, critics and activists. Much has been written

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recently on repoliticizing theatre and community (Nancy), art and dissensus (Rancière), or rethinking a new 'theatre of ideas' (Badiou). All presume, however, that the theatrical event will take place on a stage, purpose-built or not, and before an audience gathered to watch a performance. The hundred tables suggest that a more radical step may be required in order to speak properly of a theatrical public sphere. A town hall meeting curated by a theatre is on the one hand an idea that challenges central preconceptions of what a theatre can and should be. On the other, it harks back to times when the town hall and the theatre were one and the same building.

Six weeks later, on 25 November 2012 another public discussion was enacted, this time inside, in the cosy atmosphere of the Kammerspiele's famous art nouveau auditorium, an architectural testimony to the intimate theatre movement and its dedication to creating congenial conditions for aesthetic absorption. On this occasion the discussion took place on the stage in a familiar talk-show format. The discussants onstage were a theatre artist, Stefan Kaegi of the performance collective Rimini Protokoll, and a sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, with moderation by political adviser and new media consultant Geraldine de Bastion. The topic was 'Mapping Democracy' and the participants in Munich were joined via live video by further discussants in Madrid and Cairo, where outside on the streets tear gas was in the air, as protesters took to the streets after Egypt's then new president Mursi had just abrogated to himself almost dictatorial constitutional powers. Spectators witnessed an unusual theatrical situation where the formal conditions of a public sphere were now enacted within the confines of the black box but aided by the latest media and a rapidly unfolding political situation that made the topic of deliberation uncannily present. After the two hours' traffic of this stage, one left the theatre wondering what one had just experienced and witnessed: a performance, a discussion, the public sphere theatricalized? (See Figure 1.)

These unconventional if not entirely original formats focus a central question: if the 100 Tables or Mapping Democracy are framed explicitly as a 'public sphere', then the creators imply that the normal performances they offer are not. The central thesis to be advanced in this book argues that the dramaturges of the Munich Kammerspiele were probably right. Today, the normal performance fare, no matter how innovative, taboo-breaking or transgressive, has little engagement with the public sphere. The very artistic achievements of the past century that have successfully transformed the theatre from a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption have been obtained at the cost of theatre's very publicness. The darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space.



1 Mapping Democracy. Munich Kammerspiele, November 2012. Onstage (from left) Stefan Kaegi, Geraldine de Bastion and Hartmut Rosa (above left) Hala Galal in Cairo (on right) Amador Fernández-Savater in Madrid

### Where or what is the public sphere?

That a generously subsidized public theatre tries to reconnect with the ‘public sphere’ is a symptom of a much wider resurgence of interest across the social sciences and the humanities in this topic.<sup>1</sup> Academic and artistic curiosity is usually a sure sign that matters are unclear, conceptual boundaries are blurred and that old certainties are anything but that. There is also little doubt that the major challenges we face: the information revolution, globalization and migration, climate change, the erosion of public finances and services (to name just a few) – have all in some way a bearing on the public sphere, the realm where issues are debated and where citizens are, ideally, free to enter and engage in discourse. As this incomplete list suggests, any discussion of the public sphere within the context of theatre and performance immediately locates us in the field of politics in a conventional sense of the word. As the public sphere is primarily a discursive arena

<sup>1</sup> See for example <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org>; the Public Sphere Project ([www.publicsphereproject.org](http://www.publicsphereproject.org)); and the historically focused Making Publics: [www.makingpublics.org](http://www.makingpublics.org)

located between private individuals on the one hand and state bureaucracy and business on the other, it occupies a crucial role in the functioning of so-called free or open societies. This book explores what role theatre and performance play in this realm, how a specific theatrical public sphere can be defined and in what way performance and theatre theory can contribute to the debates.

But what public sphere are we talking about? Any discussion of the term must begin (but not end) with the seminal book by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in German in 1962, but not translated into English until 1989. Habermas divides the public sphere into two historical iterations: a *representative* form typical of feudal and absolutist political regimes, where most political action was ruled by the dictates of secrecy, *arcana imperii*, on the one hand, and carefully staged forms of public display and ceremony on the other. The second form that challenged and ultimately came to replace the representative one he terms *bourgeois*. The bourgeois public sphere emerged from a moribund feudal society in the ‘nonpolitical’ arenas of theatre, literature and the arts, where the discursive patterns and practices were trained before they were applied to the political arena proper. The defining feature of the bourgeois public sphere is reasoned discourse by private persons on questions of public interest with the aim of achieving rational consensus. It is characterized by almost universal access, autonomy (participants are free of coercion), equality of status (social rank is subordinated to quality of argument) and exchange of arguments through rational–critical debate. Habermas’s historical argument hinges on two transformations: from the feudal ‘representative’ public sphere to a bourgeois rational–critical one during the eighteenth century, and then to the degeneration of the latter in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the influence of mass media, the commodification of culture and the political manipulation of public opinion: ‘a public sphere manufactured for show’.<sup>2</sup> The commercialization and commodification of media as well as changes in political organization, especially the emergence of pressure groups and lobbyists, have largely taken over the processes of opinion making from private citizens and relocated and professionalized them.

Since its original definition, the semantic field of the term public sphere has been extended considerably, especially in the wake of the English translation of Habermas’s study.<sup>3</sup> It has often been noted that the English

<sup>2</sup> Habermas (1989), 221.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘public sphere’ probably enters the English language in 1974 with a translation of a 1964 article by Habermas including explanatory notes by Peter Hohendahl (Habermas 1974).

rendering of the German term *Öffentlichkeit* as ‘public sphere’ is somewhat problematic because it does not adequately cover the semantic stability and flexibility of the original. *Öffentlichkeit* connotes in the first instance, depending on the context, persons, not a space, albeit in a collectivized and abstract sense. In this rendering it is closer to the term ‘public’ in a conceptual sense of the ‘British public’. It can also connote being ‘in public view’ and is thus implicitly spatial.<sup>4</sup> In Habermas’s definition of the concept and particularly in the context of its historical emergence, it should be understood neither as a collectivity nor a space but as an *institution* embodied by people.<sup>5</sup> The public sphere theorized by Habermas is thus primarily a discursive and not a physical space. Its constituent elements – freedom of access, freedom of speech, autonomy and equal status of participants – form in the best of all possible worlds a central precondition for democracy.

Habermas’s theory has been intensively critiqued, especially since the publication of an English translation in 1989, which coincided with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the information revolution.<sup>6</sup> The main charge brought against it concerns the ‘normative’ or idealized version of the public sphere predicated on one particular iteration, the liberal bourgeois version that emerged in the eighteenth century. Yet, despite the almost ritualized critiques levelled at Habermas’s book, the term has today even more currency than it had in 1989. This has to do with the above-mentioned information revolution and in particular the evolving potential of web democracy with its plethora of private voices. It is also quite evidently related to political changes that have seen an upsurge in democratic movements, first in Eastern Europe and more recently in the Middle East. Equally important and more directly pertinent to the subject of this book are changing notions of spectatorship and publics in the artistic sphere which have coalesced in a sustained critique of the modernist black box or white cube notion of distribution and reception. The public sphere, whether normative, idealist or radical, remains a crucial component of both

<sup>4</sup> In the German original Habermas refers continually to *Öffentlichkeit* as a *Sphäre* so that the English rendering of the term as ‘public sphere’, while emphasizing spatiality more than the German, is very close to Habermas’s elaboration in some respects.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hohendahl stresses this point in his commentary in Habermas (1974). ‘Habermas’ concept of the public sphere is not to be equated with that of “the public,” i.e. of the individuals who assemble. His concept is directed instead at the institution, which to be sure only assumes concrete form through the participation of people’ (*ibid.*, 44, n. 1).

<sup>6</sup> The reception of Habermas’s book in the English-speaking world only really begins in the 1990s in the wake of its translation in 1989. The first critical stocktaking can be found in Callhoun (1992); see especially his ‘Introduction’. A review of post-1992 research and criticism of the concept within historical studies is provided by Gestrich (2006).

democratic and artistic institutions. The task is to specify how the public sphere functions, how it has been transformed, and what forms it now takes in relation to theatre.

Following the Public Sphere Guide, an Internet resource that collates literature on the topic, one can differentiate three ‘dimensions’: (1) production structures of public communication; (2) social segmentation and stratification inherent in all forms of public communication; and finally (3) counterpublics, those groups excluded from the dominant public sphere.<sup>7</sup> These categories represent important modifications to the Habermasian concept. Production structures study the concrete places and sites where public communication is enacted. These are primarily media of some kind, usually the mass media, but face-to-face communication such as town hall meetings, protests and demonstrations would also fall into this category. The explosion of Internet communication and in particular the use of social media during the Arab Spring have ignited renewed interest in such production structures.<sup>8</sup> Who owns them? Can they be controlled or manipulated? Historically the theatre has been such a site for public communication but its efficacy and importance have atrophied, as it diversified into an entertainment medium on the one hand and an art form on the other. The potential mass appeal of the former was counteracted by its complicity with the economic structures of commodity capitalism.<sup>9</sup> The cultivated absorption of the latter compromised theatre’s ability to function as a place of public communication.

The social segmentation of the public sphere is already implicit in the Habermasian theory of its historical transformation from a feudal to a bourgeois form. Political theorist Charles Taylor defines the public sphere as one of the three ‘social imaginaries’ crucial to Western modernity along with the citizen-state and the market. The public sphere of public opinion represents a common, intercommunicative ‘space’ in which different forms of communication, face to face as well as mediatized, are potentially interconnected: ‘The discussion we’re having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio debate yesterday, and so on. That’s why we usually speak of the public sphere in the singular.’<sup>10</sup> This interconnectedness of the public sphere highlights its double nature as both unitary and fragmented. The former is predicated on institutional preconditions, usually in the form of constitutional safeguards regarding freedom of expression. The unitary public sphere

<sup>7</sup> See <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org>. This subdivision is no longer maintained by the site. Last visited 4 December 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See Benhabib (2011) and Lynch (2012). <sup>9</sup> See Rebellato (2009). <sup>10</sup> Taylor (2002), 112.

ensures that the separate public spheres of the theatre, the art world or music can exist. Each has its own particular rules of engagement. They regulate questions such as space, participation and degree of imbrication with other public spheres.

Although it may be usual to speak of the public sphere in the singular, as noted, much recent research has focused on the pluralization, even fragmentation of the concept, in particular on the idea of counterpublics (*Gegenöffentlichkeiten*). This discussion begins already in the 1970s with a critique of the notion of a dominant bourgeois public sphere, which excluded proletarian formations, although these had already emerged as early as the French Revolution.<sup>11</sup> While the diachronic dimension lies at the heart of Habermas's argument – the structural transformation and ultimately degeneration of the public sphere in its ideal–typical form – its social and functional differentiation is less apparent in the original formulation. A focus on differentiation is however one of the major contributions of recent studies of the idea of the public sphere, and one that Habermas himself now shares.<sup>12</sup> Recent research has identified the formation of public spheres along class, racial and gender lines, to name only some of the possibilities. Today it is, therefore, more usual to speak of public spheres in the plural rather than as one single entity.

In his study *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), American cultural theorist and gay activist Michael Warner has provided an influential addition to the discussion. Warner speaks of 'poetic world making' as a constituent element of public discourse, especially of the issue-driven or identity–political kind. By stressing the poetic element Warner means that a public not only constitutes itself by the exchange of ideas in a rational–critical mode. There are also publics, in particular artistic and oppositional counterpublics, which avail themselves of the poetic–expressive and not just the propositional dimension of language:

Public discourse says not only: 'Let a public exist,' but: 'Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.' It then goes out in search of confirmation that such a public exists, with greater or lesser success – success being further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world–understanding it articulates. Run it up the flagpole, and see who salutes. Put on a show, and see who shows up.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See here Negt and Kluge (1972; Eng. 1993).

<sup>12</sup> See Habermas's revision of his theory in his essay 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere' (1992), in particular his comments on civil society, 453–5.

<sup>13</sup> Warner (2002), 82.



Flying the flag of public debate offers a point of departure with which to think about the public sphere in the theatrical context. Today, the place where participation in the ‘poetic mode’ takes place is of course the World Wide Web in its many forms and forums. Even if Warner understands by poetic world making in the first instance a creative way of dealing with language characteristic of subcultures, I would suggest that we understand and use the term more fundamentally and etymologically, as *poiésis*. Not in the sense of poetry but as a process of making and producing by corporeal as well as linguistic means, the results of which can be disseminated in all media.

The most influential recent critique of Habermas’s ‘normative’ theory of the public sphere has come from the so-called ‘agonal’ or ‘agonistic’ school of political theory. Identified mainly with the work of Chantal Mouffe, but affiliated also with radical post-Marxist philosophy of the post-operaist school, agonistic theorists question fundamentally the whole rationalistic, consensus-oriented approach of the concept. They recommend instead, in the words of John Brady, ‘scrapping the theory of the public sphere altogether in favor of a model of democratic politics that places political contestation, the reality of exclusion, and the search for the emancipatory potential of alterity at its center’.<sup>14</sup> Chantal Mouffe has proposed the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ as an alternative to the prevailing theories of ‘aggregative’ and ‘deliberative’ democracy, which, she argues, tend to downplay the conflictual nature of democratic politics. Agonistic pluralism, in contrast, acknowledges directly the antagonistic nature of politics by emphasizing rather than eliding the role of affect and passion. The aim of democratic politics must be to transform antagonism into agonism: ‘for “agonistic pluralism”, the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs’.<sup>15</sup> The integration of ‘passions’ into the democratic process, rather than their elimination in favour of rational argument, means also providing a safety valve for highly controversial standpoints that might otherwise move towards more violent forms of expression: ‘an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility’.<sup>16</sup>

Such arguments have been countered by a new school of theorists who argue that Habermas’s theory, especially in its later revisions, is more open to nonconformist and contestatory modes of communication than the overly

<sup>14</sup> Brady (2004), 332. <sup>15</sup> Mouffe (2000), 16. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

simplified labels of ‘normative’ and ‘rational–critical’ actually credit.<sup>17</sup> They emphasize that Habermas himself pays attention to and explicitly recognizes the importance of civil disobedience and political protests in order to at least articulate political issues, although it may not resolve them.<sup>18</sup> The legal theorist Amy Bartholomew even argues that resistance practices such as hunger strikes can be reconciled with a revised Habermasian conception of the public sphere:

[W]hile it is easier to justify *symbolic* bodily politics of contestation that can be viewed as *embodied* arguments, such as civil disobedience aimed at increasing debate and publicity, there is room in Habermasian theory for treating even the sacrificial, *aesthetic-expressive* acts of serious or even lethal bodily harm, such as long-term hunger strikes that turn into death fasts, as legitimate acts of resistance against fundamental injustice of oppressive regimes of state violence and legal coercion.<sup>19</sup>

Seen together this response to agonal theory argues strongly for the inclusion of aesthetic–expressive and affective modes of expression and action including physical acts in a theory of the public sphere. Such a position results ultimately in a kind of dialectic synthesis of the rational–critical and agonistic schools of thought.

Compared to other disciplines, there has been relatively little discussion of the public sphere in theatre and the art studies.<sup>20</sup> One of the difficulties of discussing the public sphere today in artistic contexts is the tendency to conflate it with artistic experiments outside institutions, in particular in public spaces. While the recent move towards ‘relational’ and ‘public’ art is doubtlessly a significant phenomenon, which can impact directly on the public sphere, it is by no means coterminous with it. This conflation can be seen in an otherwise insightful essay by the Australian activist and public sphere theorist, Simon Sheikh, who proceeds from a ‘notion of a fundamentally “fragmented” public sphere’ in order to explore ‘which potentials, problematics and politics lies behind the construction (real or imaginary) of

<sup>17</sup> These critics include Brady (2004), Dahlberg (2005), White and Farr (2011) and Bartholomew (2014).

<sup>18</sup> See here White and Farr (2011), 44–5, who draw attention to Habermas’s comments on the American anti-war protests of the 1960s, and especially on the Berrigan Brothers, who employed highly theatrical forms of protest such as pouring blood on and publicly burning draft records using homemade napalm; Habermas (1985).

<sup>19</sup> Bartholomew (2014), 2–3, emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> As Andreas Koller points out in a recent review of research into the public sphere, ‘Synthesizing studies with long-term historical perspectives on the relationship of the arts field (literary public sphere, poetry, architecture, performing arts, visual arts) to the public sphere are largely absent’ (2010, 273).