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Youtubing Theory

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Theory is usually associated with a one-to-one indirect relationship based on reading and absence. One person reads a book by another person, a person who is not present. The question of how to develop this into a different, more dynamic type of relationship is a valid and difficult question. The usual answer, and not only in the art field, is to stage a conference and hope for the best. A conference is usually marked by an impossible promise of open discussion and participation, so it's very easy to dismiss conferences but very difficult to find better solutions.

At the risk of simplifying, the promise in question pertains to participation, public discourse, and so forth, while the outcome is usually something rather different. If you go through the different attempts at staging, or packaging, or representing theory, you will see why it's so difficult to find better ideas.

It bears mentioning that most of my examples are derived from YouTube. I am not saying the contents of YouTube are necessarily interesting—in fact they usually aren't. But with YouTube we are faced with a new form of post-public sphere, one that is entirely ambivalent but extremely engaging. It is one of those places where key social conflicts are played out—at least until very recently. YouTube could originally be considered as an unorganized mass protest of users against copyright, which needed to be upheld by unprecedented measures on behalf of corporate media. What was initially created, in the shape of YouTube, was a legal space for violating copyright laws. By now, of course, the popular criminal energy has been largely domesticated by a mixture of repressive measures and corporate cooptation, and coerced into crowd-sourced attention economies. It's rather dull, and I rarely use it anymore. But for several years, YouTube was nothing less than the social imagination of our times, a huge semiconscious mess of imagery. It really had to emerge sooner or later, since people were being sold camcorders for 20 years, and a huge amount of visual dark matter accumulated during this time.

This dark matter also contains theory, and most of the examples I give here wouldn't have been known to me if it weren't for YouTube.

Let's now proceed with the genre of the conference video. How were conference videos created as a genre? They're part of the promise of "conferencism" as such, the promise that the contemporary art worlds can go public and immerse themselves in the larger world. There is no conference without a video camera, and one usually has the impression that the video cameras are listening instead of the audience. The pretense, or the underlying fiction, of the conference video is one of openness, public education, accessibility for everybody, and so on. But I don't know anyone who would actually watch these video conferences. There are many reasons for that, one of which is that they're usually impossible to watch.

[YouTube Video](#)

Interestingly, this director thinks that one can bear to look at Derrida—let alone listen to him—only if there are cutaways to the face of the young lady sitting in awe. By means of this we are implicitly directed to be in awe ourselves, which doesn't really work, since the setting is just too weird. But then you have the conversation on the phone. You can see that Derrida's mind is racing. How can he pretend to be a ghost, let alone a public intellectual, if he has to go about his petty bureaucratic business at the same time. But the genuinely eerie thing here is that Derrida is perfectly able to reintegrate this moment of disruption into his discourse. The ease is supernatural. At this moment my unease with Derrida's narcissism turns into an admiration for his acting craft, which is really supreme. He'd be wasted on a film like Pasolini's, because he's all too able to speak his lines, in fact he's even dubbing himself, like an actor in a porn film. Or like an artist engaging in institutional critique, with the critique already dubbed by the institution preempting it.

All attempts to stage or package theory fail, in one way or another, to live up to their inherent promise of creating an even, public space, except, of course, when the cameraman falls on his neighbor and thereby incidentally creates community. This goes back to what I would call the paradox of the public sphere. Anybody who has ever tried to organize a less ritualistic, hierarchical way of creating a mutual discourse, a more democratic or participatory one, has been faced with this paradox: In order to enable this type of democratic discourse without hierarchies (everybody gets to say something, and so on), you have to be undemocratic. You have to limit access and hand pick the participants, limit the numbers, create the rules of engagement. If you try to control the situation in advance, then the miracle may happen and you will actually get a discussion. If you don't, what unfolds is what Hobbes called the state of nature. The survival of the loudest. Those who always talk will also talk here. The discourse will be hierarchical, mean, and market-oriented. It will eventually materialize as insults in a YouTube talkback, a blog sneer, or an anonymous mobbing shitstorm.

Such is the paradox of the public sphere: a fair discussion is possible only under conditions of substantial control and accountability.

What we see, in the attempts at mass circulating theory made in the hope of creating an egalitarian public discussion, is a neurotic ritual of repetition of this very deadlock. The inherent paradox is repeated over and over again, in ever so many theatrical forms—whether as stand-up comedy, lecture performance, interactive game show, confessional peep show, screen test, telenovela, or TED talk.

But there's no way this ritual can be challenged by writing different scripts for one and the same performance. The failure has to do with a deadlock within public spheres as such, and it's pointless to expect art theory conferences to fix the problem. By now—given both the massive domestication of digital platforms and the financialization of built environments—we can do little but keep on failing; that said, insisting, nevertheless, on a common space, a space in which that contradiction can continue to manifest itself, again and again, is already an achievement. It is not enough, certainly. But if you have a neighbor to fall (back) on, at least you won't be lying face down on the floor.

Hito Steyerl is a filmmaker and writer based in Berlin. She teaches artistic media practice at the University of Arts Berlin. Her latest works include: *The Kiss* (2012), *Adorno's Grey* (2012), *The Body of the Image* (2012, performance), *Abstract* (2012), *Guards* (2012) as well as the lectures *Probable Title: Zero Probability* (2012) with Rabih Mroué and *I dreamed a dream* (2012). Her newest publication is: *The Wretched of the Screen, a collection of essays* (2012).

Notes:

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1. Editor's note: we apologize to our international readers in the event they are unable to view this clip due to YouTube's country restrictions. The scene in reference begins at 01:46:51 in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1964). [return to text](#)
 2. <http://trendland.com/state-of-emergency-by-steven-meisel>. [return to text](#)

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