

MISCOMMUNICATING PUBLICS

Barbara Alves

There is a revolution of conversation occurring, and the people who always felt there was something wrong with the system are now coming together and talking about it. And that is huge.

1
Ahmed 2011.

—Tarif Ahmed¹

One of the great rediscoveries of the past year has been the act of physically gathering on streets and squares—the transformation of the individual into a crowd, and more importantly into a ‘public’, and the collective assertion of protest creating an intense form of public visibility through the re-appropriation of public space.

2
Kluitenberg 2011, p. 7.

—Eric Kluitenberg²

A Day ‘Occupying’ St. Paul’s

On 15 October 2011, a Saturday morning, I headed to Paternoster Square in the heart of the City of London, excited about finally taking part in a chain of protests that had steadily emerged after the ‘Arab Spring’³ of December 2010. For months, the media had been collecting reports filled with strongly poetic imagery: power to the people, grassroots politics and a space to voice the opinion of those who feel excluded from the systems to which they are meant to contribute and belong. A certain nostalgia of left-wing activism informed and created a grassroots space in which to manifest frustration at the injustice of neo-liberal economic policies. The images of the time are powerful: transformed spaces, self-organized micro-communities, a lively online network of support and thousands of individual voices visible in online posts, in photos, in signs and paintings held by anonymous crowds. There were writers, academics, activists, artists, celebrities, politicians, all affected by and affecting this chain of events—participating in a wide variety of discourses surrounding the occupation of a city square. In occupying public space, a movement emerged and rapidly spread, giving visibility to ‘the 99%’.⁴

3
See for example: Howard et al. 2011.

172

4
An expression that constitutes a widespread Occupy slogan, originating from a flyer distributed at a NYC General Assembly in August 2011: ‘Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants’. <http://occupywallst.org/>.

5
For more information on the hand signals used see Batista #searchunderoccupy.

Arriving at St. Paul’s Cathedral, I realized that the police had cut off the entrance to Paternoster Square, the meeting point for the ‘occupation’. Handmade posters were spread across the ground and people were standing in small crowds, under heavy police surveillance, sipping coffee and chatting at the Cathedral steps. After a while, the chatter became more purposeful: ‘Occupy London’ would settle in front of St Paul’s Cathedral. A landing on the staircase that leads up to St. Paul’s entrance was cleared, creating a stage from which to address the crowd: ‘*Mic check, mic check!*’ was repeated from the first line of the crowd to the last—forming the human amplification that made up for the lack of electricity. *The people’s microphone* was in place, resonating to and with the crowd.

The first intervention was on communication. Someone first explained that it was better not to clap, to avoid constant interruptions; and then how to communicate by outlaying a choreography of gestures signalling (for example):⁵

- ‘agreement’: hands shaking in the air;
- ‘disagreement’: hands shaking towards the ground;
- ‘interruption due to any technical issue’: hands in a perpendicular position.

The word *consensus* started punctuating every intervention, a constant reminder that we were gathered to create an Occupy London that belonged to us all.

Sitting on the floor, amidst the crowd, I repeated what was said. It was exciting and emotional to be surrounded by other people, to shout out words and to hear the shouting next to me. Being part of the ‘people’s mic’ (as the people’s microphone was referred to at Occupy) lent physicality to listening—it gave us the feeling of strength through uniformity, a collective in the act of communicating—and it was deeply moving.

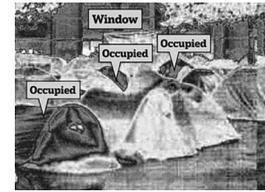
Gradually, this general assembly shaped an agenda for the day: first, we would divide into groups and propose

topics for discussion. Each group would have a spokesperson and three minutes to present their topics for the crowd to vote on. Then, all those present would work in smaller groups focused on specific topics. Each smaller group was composed of around twenty people and was given around twenty minutes to work on their topic. In the group I was part of, people were engaging and enthusiastic, but the time frame and the number of people restricted the space for discussion. Gradually, it became obvious that we had ‘assembly experts’ among us, who led ‘conversations’. Among the topics proposed: arranging for water, food and sanitation; managing a dialogue with the authorities; teaching the crowd what to do ‘when’ the police eventually charged; talking to the priest at St. Paul’s—all practical matters stressing the logistical aspects of occupation.



Protesters in front of St Paul's Cathedral, London, United Kingdom, 15 October 2011. Photo by Crispin Semmens, 2011, courtesy Crispin Semmens, Creative Commons, licensed under CC-BY-SA 2.0.

Three hours later, we were divided into groups, surrounded by hundreds of police, horses, dogs and vans. Cut off from the rest of the city, we could hear a distant sound of protest from the many that were denied entrance to the square. Each group was now responsible for implementing the topics agreed upon in the general assembly. I started moving from group to group:



Thermal image of the London Occupy camp, and part of a set of images taken by an independent thermal imaging company (commissioned by the Daily Mail). October 2011. In the original image most of the tents are depicted in magenta, while the tents marked with ‘occupied’ present a distinct colour range (blue, green, yellow, red). From: Tom Kelly and Damien Gayle ‘The thermal images that prove 90% of tents in the Occupy camp in London are left EMPTY overnight,’ published by MailOnline, 26 October 2011.

O.K. we’ve ordered public toilets. They will be arriving soon, so we can inform the police spokesperson that there is no longer an issue there.

We’ll set up a kitchen in that corner. We need protection against the rain and a place to store donated food and kitchenware.

I have just contacted the lawyer. We should ask everyone to write his phone number on their body and give no information to the police when arrested. No one talks! No names!

I was surprised by the incredible ‘practicality’ of what was happening: ordering toilets? Who’s paying for this? Lawyers? Kitchenware? Suddenly I felt disoriented. Where was the spontaneity I had imagined from such an assembling of people? The process suddenly seemed premeditated and prepared. People brought tents, but also tables and brooms, infrastructure, spokespeople, lawyers and funding. Occupy ‘experts’ from Spain were present to support setting up. It became apparent that many of these ‘consensual’ decisions had been carefully and strategically planned. I felt as if I were part of a pantomime in which, like a biddable audience, I played my role by waving hands.

6

A growing feeling of claustrophobia as well as a fear of the police made me realize that Occupy was not important enough (to me) to justify the sacrifices it might demand. I managed to cut through the police line, but stayed nearby for hours, observing.

7

We instantly became kettled by the police. For information on kettling see for example, Netpol, ‘Guide to “Kettles”’, <https://netpol.org>.

As night fell, more and more armed police arrived, tightening their circle around the protesters;⁶ Brazilian drums and dancing started echoing along with shouts of ‘Do not fight back!’, ‘We are a peaceful movement!’ The familial, playful vibe gave way to a growing tension between police and ‘occupiers’, as the police surrounded a now much smaller group of them. No more interventions or discussions, the only shouting was words of advice regarding how to behave towards the police ‘kettling’.⁷ As diplomatic efforts failed to grant an occupied space, it seemed to me that an awareness on how mediated the

acts of both occupiers and police were, held the line within each side, everyone conscious of constant uploads on Twitter, Facebook and Occupy-related blogs, as well as of the presence of many reporters from broadcast media.

Around ten o'clock at night, tired and cold, heading home I saw dozens of police vans and horses parked on the side roads to St. Paul's ready to be mobilized. This was a disproportionate display of strength, but explicit violence would not be used to clean the square, perhaps due to the strong mediatization of the events. I was sad. The poetic images in which I placed faith had been replaced by disappointment. Occupy did not create the free-flowing space for a politics of the people that I had imagined. Quite the opposite, I was surprised about the role communication played in drawing a consensus that, in fact, limited participation and seemed to equalize the plural dimensions of our being there.

Communication devices employed by Occupy—such as the general assembly and people's mic—stressed consensus in order to project a movement, but overlooked the political dimension outlined by the many miscommunications emerging from occupation. In this text, I propose a productive sense of miscommunication that layers consensus with the possibility of other political formations that draw a more diverse perspective of the publics affected by occupy and broaden what it means to participate in communicative arenas.

Introducing Miscommunication and Faithful Communication

The presumption that there is an ease of exchange between subjects—defined in generic terms—is a common practice in the field of communication design, but it prevents us from further querying the conditions, contexts and publics of an exchange. Because in counting on a general 'good sense' of how things are understood, communication design is, in fact, taking on a set of assumptions that affect the quality of participation in a communicative arena, flattened to the conditions in which communication design assumes an

agreement around the terms of an exchange.

I propose to use and adapt Stengers' term, 'faithful communication',⁸ to designate a communication process oriented toward addressing a public in a way that is seen to be unaltered by the designer, context or medium in which communication takes place. The idea of faithful communication involves processes of communication constructed upon formulations of the public that are inclusive in the sense that communication is set out in terms that might be generally understood, by working a space of common representations. But these common representations reinforce and reproduce consensual understandings of the public without misunderstanding,⁹ which frame communication as a space of rational, discursive interchange. This space of exchange and negotiation rests on common terms and is at the foundation of political models of communication constructed from representation. It accounts, for example, for the public sphere of deliberative democracy and notions of the public rooted in the idea of faithful communication. It is an idealized view of faithful communication—one ignoring misunderstanding—that allows, for example, for a prevailing metaphor of the public within representative democracy: an image of a body constituted by the sum of many bodies¹⁰ as an illustration of a public equally represented within modes of government and capable of communicating to exchange ideas over common affairs.

In this text I take a close look at Occupy's communication devices to propose miscommunication as a productive part of communication design. In exploring miscommunication, I am not looking to observe the ways in which 'good', frictionless communication unfolds, but rather to the ways in which miscommunication might be seen to be more characteristic of communicative exchanges, and allow for different political formations and a broader sense of the public in designing communication. In this way I am proposing miscommunication as a concept and practice to query the

8 Stengers 2005, p. 189.

9 As Stengers writes in *ibid.*: 'And the practical certainty of misunderstanding is something an ecology of practice has to affirm without nostalgia for what would be faithful communication'.

10 See for example: Abraham Bosses' illustration on the front cover of *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes in 1651, British Library, 'Collection Items', www.bl.uk.

position of the designer in a communicative setting.

Miscommunication is part of communication, but one that troubles, challenges faithful communication. It is not about misunderstanding emerging around shared representations, but rather about different inhabitations of a communicative situation that are not restricted to representational frames. Miscommunication is what is overlooked within the generic terms set out by 'good communication'. Because miscommunication happens in dynamic moments of transition, of a fissure in 'good communication', contingent to the particular grounds in which a communicative exchange takes place. These particular grounds challenge the position of a neutral, or distant mediator, to a view on mediation as an interfering and contributing factor in communication. In this sense, miscommunication is a way to work pass preconditioned readings of participants, situations and problems, shifting attention to what may be disruptive, puzzling, dismissed or troublesome within a communicative setting.

The 'practical certainty of misunderstanding' means faithful communication is an ideation, and in this text I move away from idealized constructs of the public by proposing the figure of the idiot as a figure of miscommunication, to explore that which takes place or emerges from outside the terms of faithful communication. 'The idiot' is proposed by Isabelle Stengers in 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal'¹¹ to slow down reasoning and allow other perspectives to help us think about a situation. I transport the figure of the idiot to the field of communication design by working the idiot as a figure of miscommunication that queries how a consensus brought by faithful communication overrides a multitude of qualities of participation. While apparently complying to the terms of faithful communication, the idiot in fact inhabits communication differently and provokes impasses to 'good communication', brought by miscommunication. These impasses may draw possibilities to rethink the terms of participation in communicative arenas—open to new partakers, connections and exchanges.

¹¹ Stengers 2005b.

The Idiot as a Figure of Miscommunication

Stengers develops the character of the idiot from Deleuze and Guattari:¹² as

¹² Deleuze and Guattari 2009.

the one who always slows the others down ... [by] resist[ing] the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action. ... because 'there is something more important'.¹³

¹³ Stengers 2005b, p. 994.

The resistance produced by the idiot stems from a different perspective that seems to paralyze any 'normal' relationship of address or common views on a subject: 'Don't ask him why; the Idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue. The Idiot is a presence or, as Whitehead would have put it, produces an interstice.' In the openness brought about by such a response, the idiot creates a space that Stengers proposes as a state of indeterminacy. As she explains:

And it happens in the mode of indeterminacy, that is, of the event from which nothing follows, no 'and so...' but that confronts everyone with the question of how they will inherit from it.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 996.

This state of indeterminacy originates from a very particular type of fissure in the terms of an exchange.¹⁵ In terms of communication, the state of indeterminacy produced by the idiot creates a productive form of miscommunication that signals to a view that is parallel, other, unaccounted for. In this sense exposing the situation to unknown perspectives because: '... the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know'.¹⁶ A state of indeterminacy produced by the idiot's miscommunication is not to be resolved; rather, one can dismiss its occurrence—reassured by the terms of faithful communication—or position oneself, affected by indeterminacy. In this sense, the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 994-95.

¹⁶ Ibid.

miscommunication produced by the idiot may generate discrepancies between general arguments and practical grounds where communication productively opens up space to witnessing and connecting potentially hidden, different qualities of participation.

A good example of the idiot producing miscommunication in a communication process working to achieve agreement and consensus can be found in the example of Occupy because those taking part in Occupy manifestly believed in participating in a set of procedures to arrive at a better situation. Nevertheless, instances of miscommunication permeate these processes, pointing to other dimensions of the political surrounding Occupy. I will look into two particular examples: the general assembly and people's mic.

The General Assembly and People's Mic

Within Occupy, modes of political resistance encouraged clear forms of communication: in occupying a pre-occupied space,¹⁷ in managing the logistics of a long-term protest,¹⁸ and in disseminating a movement.¹⁹ Communication devices assumed a double value, logistic and symbolic, reinforcing the imagery of occupation—like the crowd, the handwritten protest sign, the Guy Fawkes mask, or the tent camp.²⁰ In employing these devices, Occupy focused on establishing the ideological and strategic value of agreement of projecting a consensus. It was important to create a public capable of resisting authority, but also of organizing a movement and Occupy relied on the general assembly and the people's mic as communication devices to accomplish this.

The general assembly (GA) is a decision-making gathering, open to all. Topics are proposed, discussed and voted upon as a form of direct democracy, with the purpose of achieving consensus. At Occupy London, GAs allowed three-minute presentations, which were necessarily cut into small sentences that could be easily repeated by the

20
'... one might single out the image of the tent and the encampment, the sign that these were not temporary or transitory gatherings like the typical political rally but manifestations of a long term resolve'. Ibid., p. 14.

17
Hartcourt 2012.

18
Taussig 2012

19
Mitchell 2012.

21
Hartcourt 2012, pp. 42–43.

22
David Graeber refers to four points shared between Occupy and anarchist principles: first, the refusal to grant legitimacy to existing political institutions, thus refusal to issue demands; second, a refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing political order, thus occupying space according to a moral order and not a legal one; third, a refusal to create an internal hierarchy and deciding to take on forms of consensus based on direct democracy; finally, the 'embrace of prefigurative politics' camps as space of experiment to creating institutions to a new society. Here Graeber gives the example of general assemblies, kitchens, clinics, media centres operating on anarchist principles of mutual aid and self-organization. Graeber 2012.

people's mic. This constrain led to half of each presentation becoming an echo of itself. The response to these presentations could take three forms: signing-up to address the crowd through the GA, expressing agreement/disagreement through hand gestures or participating in smaller group discussions.

The conditions to participate in GAs were established *a priori* with the aim of generating a space of 'good' communication by consensus; a consensus that equalized all voices into one, allowing the movement to project a united front. But these conditions also restricted the staging of communication, as Bernard E. Hartcourt recalls in relation to Occupy Chicago:

... a protester began challenging one of the speakers, ... repeatedly interrupting the conversation, breaking the order of 'stack'. The other protesters started by asking him to respect the process and to put himself on stack. He continued to heckle the speaker. ... There was enforcement brought to bear on the disorderly protester. He was excluded from the gathering. The conversation resumed.²¹

Hartcourt's description illustrates how consensus can be confined to those agreeing to the rules of communication already set in place. But also how communication manifestly assumes a role in threading notions of political value—agreement or disagreement—around the formation of publics.

The stress on consensus—that nothing is done without everyone's consent—stems from a strong affinity between Occupy and the anarchist tradition²² that aims to contest political systems based on representativity with the idea of a direct democracy that opens the possibility of all being heard and involved in political action. In fact, what was being communicated within the confines of the square contrasted with what was

being communicated outside: inside there was a clear network of specialists running the occupation; from the outside, the occupation seemed to result from the pure leaderless concern of the collective.

The GA not only aimed for consensus, but also put forth the idea of direct democracy and absence of leaders as counter to representative democracy: there is no one representing the people but themselves. This outlines a strong symbol, the 'common grounds' intensely explored within the media at the time:

The park is where protesters' grievances overlap. It's literally common ground. ... The governing process they choose is itself a bedrock message of the protest. ... on the ground is where the protesters are building an architecture of consciousness.²³

²³
Kimmelman 2011, p. 7.

The fact that the Occupy movement aimed at being leaderless, and non-representable, signalled the importance of mediation and communication as both a practical tool and an ideological symbol. In transforming into a symbol of Occupy, the GA allowed for one of the main marks of the Occupy movement, the absence of claims: 'As soon as someone proposes something—one proposes vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination.'²⁴ However, the conditions of production of discourse were not questioned.

²⁴
Hartcourt 2012, p. 39.

Communication devices such as the GA and people's mic seem to have left the issue of leadership open enough for those with their own agenda to influence people gathered in protest. For the people who arrived without plans, it was a space of vulnerability. Again, participation also depended on the personality of those involved, due to how the space itself was organized. For example for those unwilling, or too shy, to step up on a stage and face the crowd and speak, participation was severely reduced to mostly a waving of hands, which relegated them to a position where they would

have apparently nothing to say. Furthermore, this waving of hands actually left little place to signal disagreement, either because one felt group pressure, or because shaking arms with hands pointing towards the ground is not visible within a crowd. This added a layer of miscommunication that did not emerge around a discursive exchange, but around performative dimensions of communication.

Miscommunications also became apparent in the people's mic. When setting up GAs, Occupy was forbidden by the authorities to use electrical amplifiers, loudspeakers or megaphones, which very much limited large-scale communication. Working around the prohibition, voices were amplified through a 'human microphone': the audience repeated the speech of a speaker, sentence by sentence, by sections of the audience—from the front to the back—in order to communicate the speech to the whole of the crowd, as in an echo.

The need to speak in heavily truncated sentences—to enable repetition—lends itself to communication that becomes generic, emotional or technical in nature, but nonetheless encourages feelings of deep engagement as each person is simultaneously listening and speaking, creating the sensation of active participation. Attention is divided, not focusing primarily on content, but on a bodily participation, which adds a strong performative dimension to communication. People do not ponder whether they *will* repeat before repeating, they do so because of the affective principle of 'united together' for a 'common cause'. The space between hearing and saying allows no time for analysis, reflection or dissent. Instead, the crowd functions as an echo chamber—even when shaping an emotional experience.

On 16 November 2011, within 'Occupy Wall Street' in New York, writer Arundhati Roy gave a speech at the 'People's University' at Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square Park.²⁵ The first part of her speech constituted a slow and emotional collective reading as each sentence was broken into small parts, repeated and amplified by

²⁵
A video of Roy's intervention is available at Roy Groupies, Arundhati Roy @ the People's University, YouTube, 17 November 2011.

the people's mic. However, in the second part, Roy addressed her audience with ease as she answered questions from the crowd with no amplification present, or necessary. The people's mic had become a formality, an identifying trace, a kind of communication ritual.²⁶

26
Recently, the people's mic is being used as a form of contestation within university campuses in the U.S. as a means to disrupt public presentations deemed as conservative. In these cases, the people's mic disrupts speeches by amplifying an intervention from a member of the audience to interrupt speakers. Other times, speeches are disrupted by being repeated by the audience, subverting both conventions: the individual speech and the human microphone. See Rey 2012. During Occupy Wall Street, it was even employed as a tactic by the police in an attempt to reason with occupiers. See Taussig 2012, p. 82.

27
Ibid., p. 83.

As a tactic used to circumscribe a technical limitation and defy the authorities, this human mode of amplification makes a strong statement. As imagery of occupation, it holds powerful symbolic value: all are speaking, united. As a ritual and performance, it keeps us active as participants—'in repetition you come to grips with trauma'.²⁷ The strength of the people's mic is not in communicating effectively, but in mobilizing affective dimensions that surpass a staging of 'good communication'. As a symbol of unity, the people's mic generates miscommunications by amplifying not only to increase volume, but adding to the performativity of communication.

Miscommunication arises within the paradox of the practical sense of repeating to amplify, now transformed into a formality, a symbol, where echoing actually disturbs faithful communication as it creates an impasse, a delay, disconnecting speaking from listening and, in this sense, opening a space to other modes of engaging in communication. I see an opportunity to rethink communication as a site where different political possibilities might emerge, by working from forms of miscommunication that remained unaddressed by Occupy.

Occupy and Miscommunication

During occupation, the weeks of occupying, and the ideological movement of Occupy, there were several instances of ambiguity, irony, contradiction, contrast, paradox, and nonsense. Much of these had as pre-condition Occupy's principle of refusal: refusal of a pre-occupation, of political models tied to neo-liberalism, refusal of leadership, refusal of representation, refusal of claims, refusal to move. It was as if all meanings could be occupied, overruled, made

personal, and at the same time multiple and part of a multitude. The point was not to seize power but to manifest the power of refusal. As Mitchell proposes, there was refusal 'to make specific demands whilst creating a space in which multiple demands can be made'.²⁸ In this sense, Occupy became a common place for innumerable contradictions: interpolating the whole world, each and every subject, but also abstract concepts, like the motto 'occupy everything'²⁹ indicates. The openness of this space seemed to work as an echo chamber of its own force and contrasted with the consensus emerging from the GA.

28
Mitchell 2012, p. 10–11.

29
'Occupy would ultimately seize even abstract, conceptual objects as well: Time, Theory, the Disciplines, the Arts, the Imagination, the Media, the US. A poster with the words "Occupy Everything" spelled out the unlimited scope of this figure', in *ibid.*

In terms of communication, Occupy focused on becoming representative yet engaged with the practicalities of occupying. Miscommunications proliferate in the spaces between these dimensions: between the idea of the GA as a space producing a consensus and the manipulation of Occupy's agenda observed above; in the symbolic gestures allowing for all to take part, while only agreement was to be visible to the crowd; in how the ideology of equal participation in the oratory of the GA contrasts with how space was designed to speak from an elevated stage facing the crowd; in the symbolic strength of one voice with no demands against a proliferation of posters held up by protesters and numerous statements online, that made visible multiple demands; in the people's mic being a practical solution of repeating to be heard, whilst leaving little space for actual listening; or the fact that the people's mic became a symbol of speech that compromises speech by breaking it into repeatable sentences; in how a practical tactic transforms into a symbol; and in participating in-between the representative and performative.

The practical dimensions that disappointed me at St. Paul's become interesting grounds to explore in this context, because miscommunication points to other formations of publics, beyond ideological ones, and to different types of communicative arenas. It seems the domain of the practical, the grounds upon which processes of communication were occurring, allowed miscommunication to permeate

communication and generate a sense of paradox, of idiocy which, if acknowledged, creates impassés to faithful communication that demands a positioning that may reshape the terms on which communication is designed.

We use our magic to thwart their magic. They have pepper spray. We have burning sage. They prohibit microphones. We have the people's microphone. They prohibit tents. We improvise tents that are not tents but what nomads used before North Face. They build buildings higher than Egyptian pyramids, but that allows our drumming to reverberate all the louder and our projections of images and emails at night to be all the more visible and magical.³⁰

30
Taussig 2012, p. 77.

Grounding Miscommunication

As occupation required 'structure—general assemblies, websites, Twitter accounts, UPS deliveries, teach-ins, libraries, medical units and volunteer lawyers'³¹ an intense logistical operation took place, aimed primarily at establishing its territory, its grounds. However, to structure meant more than building practical infrastructure. It meant that materialities were also bodies projecting their own set of disputes. Actions staged political resistances in unforeseen ways: walking, standing, shouting, rubbing shoulders, moving things, holding posters, and posters embodied as masks.³² For example, when authorities prohibited gasoline-powered generators at Zucotti Park in New York City, people pedalled fixed bicycles to generate electricity, doubling the reading of bikes: now fixed in place while staging a resistance.

31
Hartcourt 2012, p. 43.

32
Taussig 2012, p. 9.

Occupancy rendered the physical *act* of occupation as a generic figure to set a political *movement* in place: different sites adopted similar guidelines during occupation in order to identify themselves as part of the larger Occupy movement.³³ Each site could have allowed for miscommunications emerging from specific challenges, groups of people and locations, to create political disputes around each occupation. Moreover, the pairing of *act/movement*

33
See for example: OCCY-PYLSX 2011.

relocated into other dichotomies such as *space/cause*, *particular/universal*, triggering ambiguities that weakened Occupy as a political movement.

The radicalism and the political potential that could emerge from looking at the particulars of each site being occupied were denied in favour of construing a movement. For example, politicians tried to attack the Occupy camp as dirty, propelling the idea that the camp lacked hygiene—a health and safety hazard—and that the camp was polluting and destroying the space of a wider public than the protesters. Cleaning was not only used as a metaphor for the idea that the space needed to be cleaned from occupation, it was also an act as political as occupying itself. Since authorities used the argument of cleaning to de/re-occupy the square, occupiers took matters into their own hands and started cleaning. As occupiers tackled the health and safety requirements of the municipality it became obvious that the dichotomy dirty/clean referred to other dimensions. In accusing Occupy of dirtiness, the movement, and not the camp, was under attack. I assume that, in concentrating on the 'occupying act', on occupation per se as the grounds for a political movement, perhaps Occupy could have moved this discussion to a political dimension, but cleaning was displaced to the generic space of an Occupy movement, in this sense neutralizing its political potential.

Had Occupy been centred on the act of occupying (how/what to Occupy) rather than on projecting a consensual stage around occupation, the intense discussion of logistics would have made sense. However, by insisting on generalizing, discussions around occupation become generic across different cities, and Occupy played into the hands of its opponents. In criticizing the events at a square, opponents of Occupy criticized the act to weaken the movement. A focus on the act of occupying could have led to disputes around the particular grounds of each occupation. Disputes that could have allowed for productive miscommunications to play out on the level of the materialities.

An example of such a materiality was the tent. Occupying took full form in the act of sleeping on the square, transformed into a camp, covered with tents. This was not a temporary demonstration³⁴ but a durational protest. However, while the tent became a sign of permanence—even if no strings were attached to the ground—the tent in itself is a sign of nomadism. So, when captured as symbol of Occupy, the tent transposed this contrast between its role as a sign of permanence and transience.

34
Mitchell 2012, p. 14.

At a certain point, the camp in London became the focus of a dispute among critics of Occupy who claimed that the tents were empty as occupiers went back to the comfort of their homes. Other rumours started being associated with the tent camp: that it was unsafe, that there once was a rape, or that the distribution of tents in the campus was simply re-enacting the pre-existing differences of wealth among the collective of protesters.³⁵

35

'As time goes by—horror of horrors!—something like property and real estate interests surface. Someone quips that there is an Upper East Side section of tents in the park, and one hears muttering of gentrification as if this utopic space is reproducing what it is against.' In Taussig 2012, p. 63.

At St. Paul's, the strongest rumour was that the tents were empty. Media reports alleged that tents had been photographed with thermal lenses, suggesting vacant tents.³⁶ A debate between reporters, experts in thermal imaging and protesters discussed the reliability of these tests and the 'reality' of occupation in the media. This revealed key aspects of the tent as a symbol for Occupy. The tent is configured as a singular space of privacy in the open publicness of the occupied square. The thin cloth of the tents was the dividing line between public and private spaces and, as any private space, its interior was concealed. But the fact that this space was 'open' in such a public space bore striking contrast and constituted the ultimate provocation. The tent became a surface of projections of what was unseen, invisible: the tents sheltered secret meetings, fugitives, drugs and, symbolically, the very absence of protesters. This indeterminacy opened up a significant sense of emptiness that conjures a sort of zero degree of representation, and reveals the paradoxes of opening invisible private spaces inside public spaces.

36

Thermal images of Occupy camp in London, taken by an independent thermal imaging company and commissioned by the *Daily Mail*.

Inhabiting Indeterminacy

The example of the tent sets out modes of inhabiting the political that transport communication to the territory of the practical where the stress is not in interlocution, and communication is not subject to achieving forms of agreement or disagreement. In 'Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism', Stengers expresses this different sense of the political, where what is at stake is not common values, but rather the fostering of a set of connections. Connections that allow 'hesitat[ing] about our conditions of thought',³⁷ in this sense creating new readings, brought from being connected and affected by a situation, where one 'do[es] not think in terms of determination but in terms of entangling speculative questions'.³⁸

37
Stengers 2008, p. 41.

38
Ibid., p. 48.

Occupy is an attempt to occupy, to claim a territory, but it is a territory where assertions are undermined by what is happening in public space. This creates miscommunications that can be productive of impasses—of indeterminacy—at those key junctures of saying how we should live in a democratic space, and based on what kind of exchanges. In proposing the idiot as a conceptual character, Stengers is asking her readers to occupy places of indeterminacy, as a practical proposition to inhabit and think the political:

And this means reclaiming an ecology that gives the situations we confront the power to have us thinking feeling, imagining, and not theorizing about them. In this I am a Marxist—the point is to 'change the world, not to understand it', but I add that this implies giving to the world the power to change us, to 'force' our thinking.³⁹

39
Ibid., p. 57.

In Occupy, the participatory processes devised were constructed from the experience of anarchist movements, which in their drive to become consensual ignored

miscommunications. These miscommunications in turn present an opportunity for new political configurations to emerge. Miscommunications, which were often not discursive but manifested themselves as impasses to occupation, interrupting ideas of faithful communication, calling on other ways of being affected by Occupy and presenting an opportunity for new political questions to emerge.

Moments of idiocy, states of indeterminacy, as described by Stengers, are states that have both infinite potential and definitive impossibility. The idiot, in provoking states of indeterminacy, shapes disturbances that work communication into productive forms of miscommunication where '... we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know'.⁴⁰ A miscommunication by idiocy transports the practical into communication, and challenges the terms of faithful communication.

40
Stengers 2005b,
pp. 994–95.

Stengers appropriates Deleuze and Guattari's 'idiot' as a character indicating a paradoxical state, which provokes an indeterminacy of senses. This paradoxical state creates an openness to indeterminacy that matters when considering miscommunication within the field of communication design. First, because it draws in matters of positioning and affect, which contemplate an attachment⁴¹ and positioning that involves a 'thinking with', and being implicated with what will happen in the realm of a practice. Choosing to work from indeterminacy implies allowing the nonsense of the idiot to resonate in design processes and the personal commitment to allow indeterminacy to provoke political questions. Secondly, because indeterminacy calls on a performative quality where miscommunication links diverse perspectives, even if incapable or unwilling of interlocution; moving from representational frames to consider materialities and affects in communication. Finally, indeterminacy demands a political transformation from inhabiting a situation, while lacking keys to interpret or unlock it.

41
Puig de la Bellacasa 2011.

In terms of communication design this means that the positioning of the designer matters and that the concern

of the designer as mediator is not in threading questions of accountability or public visibility but rather an affected and speculative inhabiting of a communicative situation where miscommunication surpasses the level of what might or might not be equally understood.

In emphasizing the value of faithful communication, the design of communication limits the conditions for participation to the sharing of a common knowledge of political problems, based upon political spaces that allow for interlocution, but that render affect silent and exclude miscommunication *a priori* as condition to participate. In engaging with Occupy I have attempted to demonstrate how it becomes interesting to probe what it means when people try to work through processes to arrive at consensus, but are also producing miscommunication and modes of indeterminacy that re-root the pursuit of the good, of the faithful, to allow for other forms of political participation.

The question becomes one of understanding communication design in a way that allows for a more complex and eco-positioned discussion of political matters, and shaping of political arenas, where what is at stake is '... a matter of imbuing political voices with the feeling that they do not master the situation they discuss, that the political arena is peopled with shadows of that which does not have a political voice, cannot have or does not want to have one'.⁴² Thus, not narrowing participation to those capable or willing to enter processes of interlocution.

42
Stengers 2005b,
pp. 995–96.

The idiot as a figure of miscommunication shapes connections that suspend what would be assumed as logical correspondences, and allows other layers, other connections, to surface. Indeterminacy renders miscommunication visible by transporting exchanges from the domain of the representative to a practical dimension and by drawing other modes of participation that are not shaped around representation, but rather a 'lived' dimension of communication.

Conclusion

My expectations when participating in Occupy were that we would be tentatively shaping an occupation and in doing so addressing how and what it meant to take over public space. At St. Paul's I felt that my presence was rendered as somewhat idiotic, leaving me with a set of questions about how a diversity of publics and multiple modes of assembly could be brought into a political space. In this text, I expanded on these questions by exploring the idiot as a figure of miscommunication, but still questions remain as to probing communication design from the position of the idiot. For example, at the site of Occupy, what could working from the position of the idiot in the terrain imply? I consider that transporting communication to practical grounds allows other terms for participation in shaping a grassroots movement such as Occupy. But my reaction to falling into the script of how to assemble was to redraw from Occupy. My idiotic presence did not create an impasse to communication, but rather was silent and did not affect the collective. This raised ambiguities between individual and collective forms of idiocy and made me reflect on the role of the designer in creating conditions for what may appear as silent withdrawals, to contribute to collective moments.

Communication devices at Occupy failed to consider what might be deviations to how participation was scripted into the modes of assembly presented. I consider that observing faltering attempts to faithful communication—which might be even described as unsuccessful in some cases—may actually allow opportunities for miscommunication to be carefully explored and can open new insights where subversion, mishaps, hesitations, silences and tactical responses have the potential to create new political formations. But these ask for a change of positioning in designing communication; a change that involves an ethopolitical engagement that recasts communication design and the qualities of participation brought into a communicative arena. In this more permeable and complex understanding of a design

context, participation becomes an open, shared, speculative process of negotiation, nuanced by the subjective and affected position of the designer, by considering diverse types of participation—brought for example by human and non human partakers—and new inhabitations of communication that expand on what it means to participate in a communicative arena.

For a communication designer, taking on miscommunication is not easy, because miscommunication design demands a move towards challenging readings of contexts and situations and making the political choice of allowing questions brought by what is exterior to faithful communication to reshape practices. This view implies that communication should not be limited to general levels of the political, but should create other modalities of exchange, affects, performances of communication that call on diverse ways of being and becoming public. In an approach to communication design that is open to trial, to error and risk; to creating new communicative arenas and political formations; an approach that is speculative and explores miscommunication as a productive part of communication.