

DEMOCRACY IS NOT POSSIBLE HERE

A Private Argument in Public

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About the Authors

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Gary: Here we are at Tate Liverpool. Here we are at the Liverpool Biennial. Here we are in Athens' shadow. It's tempting to say that democracy is available. Democracy is coming. After the social engineering experiments the polis of Athens undertook with slaves, women, and children, it is tempting to say that democracy has grown up, matured, and become possible. It is tempting to say that the warring factions for economic and political control that depended on the enslavement of the many for the advancement of the few—in other words around 80% of the population of Athens had no say in how their lives were run, whilst the Athenian men, patricians and public figures got to say how things went—have indeed advanced the processes of democracy. It is tempting to think that the polis of Athens in the 6th and 5th centuries BC is the birthplace of modern democracy. It's tempting to think that, because it's comforting. The ideas we have today stretch back in a nice, neat line to the same place where legal process and theatre began; a place from which we get better and better at everything. Democracy is something we get better and better at, and it all started about 7000 years ago in a place where some of us go, if we're lucky enough, for summer holidays.

Lena: Gary, come on—why doom and gloom? You are one of the lucky ones who went to Athens last summer, for a kind of working holiday. Okay, you can't have it all, but why don't you tell us about what's happening over there now? You met some interesting people who are setting up sustainable anarchist spaces. You came back full of stories of another world being possible, another organizing principle. We shouldn't waste our time critiquing, let's celebrate the alternatives.

Gary: But things haven't got better, they've gotten worse. At least in Athens things were clear and up front. You are a woman, shut up. You are a slave. Shut up. You are a boy jumping up and down in the gym all day; pleasure me, then shut up. (In a posh accent) "I am working for the polis of Athens and I have 300 slaves in my field. None of them are interested in politics, we know that. We are the 20% and we run the show. You can't move from there—where you are--to here—where I am—except by birth right, and because you've already been born, you're screwed, there's no chance. Social cohesion at its finest: Democracy, indeed!" But today, in 2016, sitting here in Tate Liverpool, associated with the Biennial, we support a ruling elite of not 20% but 1%. We, the 99%, are in the service of the 1% of people of planet earth who own more than 80% of the world's wealth. Or, as the completely non-independent newspaper, the *Independent*, said, in a story it ran recently, 62 people own more than 57% of the world's wealth and resources. 62 people. Our day makes the Polis of Athens look like a socialist utopia.

Lena: Is it really that bad, Gary? I mean, being a woman these days I can speak here at Tate Liverpool; moreover, I'm a foreign woman, and here I am, barbarian, allowed to say what I think. I'd rather be alive here today than in Ancient Greece.

Okay I am not rich, not one of the 62 people, but life is fine for me. Academic job, some artist commissions, four kids, my own house (with mortgage of course, but that's the way it is), holidays in Dubrovnik where I come from, you as my husband, radical arts practice called the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, ability to have my voice heard, 10 minutes is all mine. What do you want? Let's tell these fine people here about some affirmative celebratory joyous initiatives we've been a part of, or organized.

Gary: I'm not entirely sure you can hear this voice, this interrupter, this voice from the domestic sphere, this token, this voice of joy, of celebration and the forging of alternatives. This private voice. I get to speak in the public realm. That's my job. Your job is to support my public speaking, my public realm making, my political engagement. You are speaking about details, I'm speaking about things that matter, making connections between your insignificant detailing and my macro picturing. So, if you don't mind, the point I wanted to make was that democracy is impossible here. Democracy can't happen here. Democracy depends on the taking into account of everything here and now, right here, right now and having enough time to put a democratic process in place, shaping that space according to who is in it, what they bring to it, how they respond to others. Also, there needs to be an underlying assumption about difference, not an underlying assumption about equality. We're not equal, we're different. We need to operate a collective policy of asymmetrical reciprocity, but we need to be equal enough to know what that means. Nobody should be exiled. My friends? There are lots of friends; friends in Green Park Athens, organisers of *No Future*—Gigi Argyropoulou, Vassilis Noulas and Kostas Tzimoulis—who say wonderful things like this,

No Future: Performance Biennial: A Self-Organised Biennial on Performance, Art and Politics: playfully subverting the term “biennial” into a self-organised practice, the event will test self-instituted forms of culture and politics.

There just next to the “anarchist” quarter of Athens, Exarchia, a democratic pulse, a trust in people getting together to think things through. Radically open, radically tolerant. You call *this* a biennial? I call *that* a biennial! Is democracy possible right here, right now? That's the test?

Lena: There's a desire to always be in the here/now and create what's possible from a situation, but 10 minutes is not enough. 10 years might not be enough. We are here, employed, paid £100 for these 10 minutes, to provide a few critical, radical thoughts. You mention biennials and democracy. What forms of organization are possible which allow direct democracy? This one is not one of them. And we all know it, and yet, we all continue in this vein. We are waiting for something ... something else. We forget to enact an alternative in the now. We might mention

some examples, *No Future*, certain attempts at the Institute we co-organized over the years. These attempts are often doomed to failure: the Free University of Liverpool, the various reading groups, JCTC (Jeremy Corbyn Touring Campaign) or the Just Classics Theatre Company, which wanted to stage *Antigone* in Tory marginal seats with a cast of refugees as the chorus. Maybe democracy is too hard work. It's much easier to do this: attend a conference provided for us at the Biennial, at the Tate, get some cultural capital, some academic exchange and go back home to our sofas. What do we really want? A redistribution of capital and resources? Really? Come on!

Gary: Can't we do anything more than talk about our failures though? Can't we do anything more than admit our own complicity in the clogged up sewer system of wage slavery and hunting for REF capital? Running round in ever-smaller circles to maintain our tiny comforts of, "Oooh, we're radical artists saying risky things inside structures like the Tate and Biennial—wouldn't it be just awful if they threw us out of the building?" Well it's not the architecture around us that we need throwing out of, but the neo-liberalised architecture within us that we need to throw out of ourselves.

Lena: Anyway, we have to go and get the kids from the symposium organiser's mum, Hattie, soon. We can't stick around here all day pretending to be edgy.

[They leave—in a huff!]