We Can't Go on Meeting Like This: Notes on affect and post-democratic organization

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A tale of two meetings

You applied to the Performing Arts Forum (PAF) London thing that takes place in two weeks' time and you heard yesterday that your application has been accepted. Apparently, you will be a group of ninety, selected from almost twice that number, who will be attending this thing, a gathering that is not a workshop 'accessible to students as well as teachers, cultural leaders, curators, commentators, academics and artists of all persuasions' and led by Jan Ritsema, Mårten Spångberg and Bojana Cvejić, all good souls and spirits in the European performing arts scene (Independent Dance 2015). You've never met any of them, although you know and admire their work, and you have no idea what may happen when we 'occupy' the Siobhan Davies Studios in South London and you don't think they do either, which seems to be the point: 'the do-er decides', says the invitation. You're excited and also a little surprised to have been invited at all. But someone read your application and said yes, let's have that person. It's reassuring. There's probably something on Facebook about it, but since you're afraid of Facebook you don't know about that. But perhaps you are now working on collaboration, a project, an action or even another encounter that was initiated out of a chance meeting at this gathering? Or maybe you don't know what PAF is and you're already feeling excluded and annoyed by the absolute triteness of having that pointed out? Or you feel excluded and annoyed because you applied to attend, but didn't get accepted and you're wondering what actually happened there? Or perhaps friends who did get accepted have

already told you how great, terrible, frustrating or boring it was, what so-and-so said, or did or didn't do, who left early or never turned up and who you met who was interesting or patronizing, friendly or unfriendly and what projects may get started as a result? Or, maybe in the end you didn't actually make it? Perhaps other things will have derailed your good intentions, including a familiar anxiety that arises in anticipation of such situations. So I got to go after all—I took your place at the meeting. I can tell you about it sometime, maybe at the thing in Brussels in the summer. You are going to that, aren't you? The gathering, the meeting, you know, that other *thing*?

In Old Norse, Old English and Icelandic, they would have written *þing*. In this etymology, the thing is—or was—the governing assembly in pre-modern societies of Northern Europe, made up of the free people of the community. The oldest parliamentary institution in the world is supposedly the Althingi, the Parliament of Iceland, founded in 930 CE and that traditionally met outdoors, once per year, for several weeks in a low-lying area east of Reykjavik, between two cliff faces about 2 km apart.

Visiting the site of the Althingi was more of a pilgrimage than a visit, a secular quest that you had long imagined but barely understood, being physically in contact with this mythic, originary scene of public assembly. There are a few information boards in the vicinity of where the archaeologists think the assembly must have gathered and some wooden walkways crossing the many fissures that striate the valley floor. A small, whitewashed church stands alone some distance from the clifftop where the tourist buses come and go. It seems that no significant building was ever constructed at the site of the Althingi until it was disbanded by the decree of the then ruling monarch of Denmark in 1798 and moved indoors to the capital. Until then, the gathering accommodated itself in tents and other temporary structures. Meetings themselves took place outdoors with the 'law speaker' presiding from the vantage point of a large rock that no longer appears to exist. So, for nearly 1,000 years, the Althingi was a permanently temporary institution, a site not only for law-making and judicial hearings, but also for the conduct of trade and marriage arrangements, celebration and feasting, the exchange of news and gossip and much other business between the various Icelandic clans. You can dive or snorkel in the Silfra fissure of the rift valley, where the

water is said to be the clearest in the world, transparent over several hundred metres as you look across the lake. Drifting through the icy water but insulated from it in a dry suit, you may well be profoundly moved—elated even. You are *in the thing*, the geological place of splitting apart and the political place of coming together. Deliberately lagging behind your group to enjoy some solitude, the guides sternly call you in to the shore towards the end of the forty minutes, since too long in the water can apparently do unexpected things to your sense of time and orientation.

Obviously, there is a very large historical fissure between the PAF thing and the Icelandic *þing*, which would seem to belong to entirely different orders of gathering. But from the perspective of a historical *longue durée,* they represent two moments that are sutured—both separated and connected—by intervening processes of what Wilbert van Vree has termed the 'meetingization' of society (van Vree 1999: 241). My intention here is to outline the shape of an enquiry into a new phase of what is perhaps the most enduring yet understudied process in the creation and maintenance of human organization: the physical, face-to-face meeting. Borrowing the idea of a double-edged 'civilizing process' from the sociology of Norbert Elias, van Vree construes the proliferation of increasingly standardized and regulated cultures of meeting as part of a long-term historical transformation in which physical violence as a means to solve inter-personal and inter-group disputes is replaced by the protocols and procedures of talk-based interaction, complete with their own regulatory nuances of dramaturgy, gesture and display. As such, the meeting is primarily considered as a rational form of '*gathering together in order to talk and come to decisions about the common future'* (van Vree 2011: 242). But what my opening anecdotes aim to illustrate is the ways in which meetings are profoundly ambivalent psychosocial events—in their actual, imagined and idealized forms—that perform a more expansive, yet unmarked, range of functions beyond those of rational decision-making. If the Althingi represents a certain kind of idealized form of democratic gathering in which a heterogeneous collective affirms and enacts its cohesion in a ritualized event that combines political, economic, social and cultural functions, PAF London can seen as just one among many similar events—secular meeting rituals—within discrete spheres of artistic and academic practice that play an increasingly significant role in the attempted formation of things that resemble participatory democracies within the loose networks of international art worlds. Indeed, the function of such events appears to be the creation of something like an

ecological niche within the monetization of a generalized 'creativity', in which artists can operate in solidarity as political, social and economic agents—and not merely as precarious cultural entrepreneurs competing with one another for public or private funding and market share. Like countless 'discursive platforms' that shape contemporary curatorial practice, PAF London is essentially a *meeting* decked out in the language of encounter, gathering, assembly, community and occupation that has become an established trope of art and politics.

Knowing how to operate in such an ordinary and pervasive activity as the meeting is central to the practice of virtuosic communication that constitutes the basic form of human capital today. Politics within contemporary artistic and academic milieux is figured as a set of contested and conflicting practices of commoning or enclosing, making things public or making them private, be they water supplies, education, personal data or art. Against the neoliberal drive towards deregulation and the privatization of public goods previously supplied by the state, a sizeable constituency of contemporary art appears to have taken on the self-assigned task of the resuscitation of the public sphere through a direct engagement with processes of 'self-organization', assembly, gathering and convocation—in other words, with the meeting as a form that enacts a properly democratic politics in an aesthetic, as well as a functional, dimension. In what follows, I attempt to think about the practice of gathering and meeting as an 'instituent' process that has become an ambivalent object of desire across this new political terrain.

Representing the meeting

Whereas Elias noted that the stylization of eating and drinking within the first two millennia of Western social history acted as one means for the bonding and social maintenance of an elite, today it is the stylization of meeting that marks a different set of social divisions. Indeed, to the various ways of categorizing forms of contemporary labour, class or other taxonomies of social differentiation, we may propose a crude yet potentially revealing addition based on a simple split between those who go to meetings and those who do not. While such a generalized distinction sounds initially implausible, power today is in many contexts, from the corporation to the commune, connected to the right and the ability to organize meetings, to decide who is eligible to

participate in them and to determine the appropriate mode of participation. From the perspective of the less powerful, meetings that seem to *really* matter always seem to be happening somewhere other than where one finds oneself. Hence the double message communicated in Jacqueline Hassink's two collections of images of the boardrooms of Europe's largest corporations, *The Table of Power* (1996) and its sequel *The Table of Power 2* (2011). For those companies that decide to meet her request (and more than a few refuse), the artist photographs the selected boardroom and its central table—but without the presence of those who meet around it. On the one hand, we are thus invited into the privatized place of power and to take it both literally and symbolically as empty and thus open for public participation or contestation; on the other, situated as an onlooker permitted only to dwell momentarily at the threshold, we are reminded not only of our exclusion from that private place but also from the knowledge of who controls and prohibits the imaging of power 'in action', power that can choose to be always elsewhere, unavailable, busy in another private meeting. Perhaps the pseudo-religiosity of the veiling and unveiling at work in the iconic presentation of these inner sanctums of the corporation demonstrates the extent to which the spaces of publically accountable representative democracy, made increasingly 'transparent' through technologies of imaging and architecture (for example, in the glass structures of the Reichstag or the London assembly or in the surveillance-style televising of a wide variety of parliamentary meetings), are no longer the place where power exercises its decision or can be made to account for it.

Hassink's project has its mirror image in that of Paul Shambroom's *Meetings* series, offering forty images of American town-hall-style assemblies that the photographer suggests show 'democracy in its purest form as farmers, teachers and insurance agents conduct[ed] the business of their community' (Shambroom 2004b). Shambroom presents this romantic mundanity in digitally enhanced compositions in which the participants appear akin to Duane Hanson sculptures— garishly life-like more than alive, fixed and transfixed in the contemplation of the terrible tedium that is democracy figured as an endless meeting. These images show a power devoid of the rhetorical trappings of performance, fated to deliberate with dutiful care over the enforcement of remote protocols that govern street drainage, parking and the large log blocking the sidewalk at a business on Main Street. Correlating the minutes of the meetings printed in a miniscule font at the

end of Shambroom's book with the corresponding photographic images, the sense of a democratic sublime falls through the fingers: the power to decide and act appears, as it does in Hassink's images, through its absence—more often than not the meeting and the people's representatives are denied the ability to act on a decision, which remains ultimately subject to the authority of another agency, meeting somewhere else at some other time. Thus, the representation of the 'local' democratic decision is always separated from its (non-)performance, perpetually deferred to another time and place.

Meeting as occupation

The language of 'occupation' used by PAF London's advance publicity explicitly evokes the potent image of the meeting as scene of a properly democratic, collective power that has captured the imagination of many contemporary leftist political philosophies: the general assembly taking place in occupied city squares and parks. This particular form of public meeting has become the fetishized object for the movements and moments that constituted the Arab Spring, Occupy, occupations in Greece, Istanbul and a constellation of urban mass protests across the world over the last decade. Within these politically charged events, subsequently framed as marking a series of watersheds in the transformation of cultures of mass political organization, methods of 'leaderless' consensus decision-making inherited from earlier grassroots social movements in the twentieth century have been widely adopted in surprisingly uniform and prescriptive ways.

Despite the obvious differences in their immediate geographical and political contexts, the urban protest camps of the last decade share an essential identity: they mark the appearance of a heterogeneous public in the symbolically significant urban space of the city square. Unlike marches or riots, contemporary protest camps involve a particular kind of place-making within which almost the entire infrastructure of material and social existence (from food, shelter and sanitation through to education, political process and ritual celebration) is recreated anew in miniature. To camp in this mode means to live in public with friends and strangers as a symbolic act of prefigurative politics, modeling in miniature forms of social and political organization that are imagined for a larger polity to come, in the parallel but temporarily unreal 'real' world that

continues inside and alongside everyday life beyond the camp. These encampments also share similar organizational forms, differently inflected in each location but remarkably consistent in many respects (Feigenbaum et al. 2013). These similarities, based on indifference to existing forms of political party and a commitment to a non-hierarchical and purely 'horizontal' form of organization, gather around the function of the camp as providing a material staging of a particular form of public meeting: the general assembly. As Keir Milburn and others point out, it was the general assembly run through a form of consensus decision-making that become the iconic organizational form of the 2011 protest wave (Milburn 2015: 189). Many of these assemblies across Europe and North America deployed the protocols and procedures evolved over a seventy-year period of grassroots protest organization into what can be described as a fully institutionalized meeting form conducted as participatory processes of rational decision-making. 'This is what democracy looks like' is the caption that the banners and placards supply for the image of the containing structure of the protest camp.

Meetings and feelings

The quasi-ecstatic experience and political promise of democratic participation in these forms of meeting have been described in many books, special academic journal issues, blogs and email discussion lists in years since 2011. Within most of these narratives and theorizations, the experience of assembly and meeting as capable of eliciting a profoundly ambivalent emotional effect on those who constitute it is quickly displaced by optimistic claims for their wider political ramifications. But the title of an anonymous reflection on the experience of an occupation (whose location is also kept anonymous) speaks directly to such ambivalence: 'Occupy—The end of the affair'. After declaring that 'we were all in love with Occupy […w]e were in love with the *idea* of it', the author goes onto describe the camp assembly's descent into a series of internecine conflicts between 'a team of argumentative activists, shouty alcoholics and well-meaning but unreliable stoners', ultimately leading to a atmosphere of intimidation and violence in which women were particularly vulnerable. Dejected and despairing, the author concludes:

> It was a horrible experience - real hatred was directed against me, from people who barely
> knew me, for things I hadn't even done…. I became afraid for my safety and for a few days

wouldn't walk anywhere on my own—from the distance of a couple of months, that seems like an overreaction, but the paranoid mindset is infectious. And in all rationality, the things they were saying and the aggressive behaviour had become so extreme that I couldn't tell myself for definite that these people wouldn't turn to violence…. I completely cut off all ties to the movement, only keeping in touch with a few people who'd become close friends. (Anonymous 2012: 444)

The American journalist Quinn Norton, who visited over a dozen Occupy sites across the US and UK, registers a similar ambivalence:

The GA [general assembly] was the constitution, crown, and divine right of Occupy. All authority flowed from the process, but it was more than this. Something that, in a matter of months, was baked into the social order…. The GA process also became part of everyday life…. All of it migrated into the culture of camp life. After a while in the camps, you put your concerns 'on stack,' and you twinkled people in conversation as a phatic. At first, like so many parts of Occupy, it was a wonder to see.

But living in parks, having to rub elbows with the people society was set up to shield from each other, began to stress people and make them twitchy from constant culture shock. Grad students trying to reason with smack addicts was torture for both sides. The GA became the main venue for this torture, and sitting through it was like watching someone sandpaper an open wound. Everyone said 'Fuck the GA' as a joke, but as time wore on, the laughter was getting too long and too hoarse; a joke with blood in it….

Because the GA had no way to reject force, over time it fell to force…. It became a diseased process, pushing out the weak and quiet it had meant to enfranchise until it finally collapsed when nothing was left but predators trying to rip out each other's throats. (Norton 2012: n.p.)

These painful testimonies are notable among the far more numerous celebrations of the occupation assembly form as the nascent and long-awaited embodiment of political philosophies of multitude. In many ways these raw descriptions of attempts to model new forms of public

institution as a series of face-to-face meetings illustrate the conflicted psychic landscapes of contemporary meeting cultures more generally: a passionate desire for the emancipatory power of idealized forms of collective gathering combined with an equal and opposite sense of frustration and despair and a paradoxical hatred for the very aggression that seems to inevitably accompany each and every attempt to realize that vision. As my opening anecdotes about PAF London and the Icelandic Althingi attempt to articulate, meetings are both abjected and idealized: spaces of intense but contingent sociality that are routinely ridiculed as useless and boring 'talking shops' (who likes to go to meetings, let alone enjoys them?) yet also held up as an exemplary form for the realization of collective desires.

Rather than replacing violence, the meetingization of social and political life thus seems to channel it in ways that are simultaneously productive and destructive of both individual and collective flourishing. This is by no means to suggest that successful forms of participatory meeting processes and 'lateral' forms of social affiliation and organization are not possible—indeed, the square occupations of 2008 to 2011 drew directly on what many had experienced as politically and personally empowering in previous iterations of anti-capitalist protest, which in turn evolved out of alternative organizational practices of civil rights and feminist movements of the twentieth century Neither is it to reassert the Hobbesian truth of sociality as characterized by an essential and inescapable violence of all against all, nor that hierarchy or party form is the answer to the oft-quoted 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1970). But it is to mark a fundamental ambivalence engendered in and through meetings within what are otherwise very heterogeneous cultural contexts. It seems that there is something invariant in the experience of meetings that amounts to far more than a matter of mixed feelings. Meetings seem to provoke the co-existence of mutually incompatible thoughts and affects that are felt as psychically intolerable. Hence the ambiguity in a recent advertisement in the UK for a new virtual meeting platform, which seems to suggest that technological mediation will protect us from the 'horror' of both the zombie-like commuting public we would otherwise have to join to get to our meeting *and* the physical encounter that is the meeting itself. In this vision of sociality, hell is indeed the physical presence of other people, be they strangers, fellow citizens or work colleagues, who come to embody a kind of excessive and predatory psychic insatiability.

The psychosocial life of meetings

If, as it seems, more and more people are finding themselves in more and more meetings in order to forge new kinds of political and social relations, then understanding the psychosocial dynamics of meetings would seem to be a useful task. The meeting as an explicit object of study lies in a curious blind spot at the convergence of multiple disciplines from group psychology to social anthropology, from organization studies to management science. While many research projects in these fields *make use* of the meeting—either constituted experimentally or studied in 'the field'—as a means to gather data, very few focus on the meeting form itself (for exceptions see Boden 1994; Schwartzman 1989; Haug 2013). Fewer still engage the meeting as the complex and psychosocially ambivalent event that is being tentatively sketched out here. However, two related fields that *have* explored this dimension of group cultures since the late 1940s are the group relations tradition that has built on the post-Kleinian work of the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (that remains connected to the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK and the A. K. Rice Institute in the US) and the group analytic tradition that develops the work of the German-British psychoanalyst S.H. Foulkes and remains connected to the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in London. Group relations has combined ideas drawn from Bion's psychoanalytic work on groups and from theories of socio-technical systems developed initially in the work of Kurt Lewin to develop a sophisticated set of concepts with which to explore the psychosocial dynamics of organizational cultures and small and large (typically more than twenty people) groups in different settings. The group analytic tradition has combined Foulkesian group theory, the social psychology of Elias and post-structuralist theories of discourse to elaborate the 'social unconscious' as an alternative to the somewhat worn-out concept of ideology. This notion is entirely different from and opposed to Jungian notions of the collective unconscious populated by universally shared myths and archetypes:

> The concept of the social unconscious refers to the existence and constraints of social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which people are unaware. Unaware, in so far as these arrangements are not perceived (not 'known'), and if perceived not

acknowledged ('denied'), and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic ('given'), and if taken as problematic, not considered with an optimal degree of detachment and objectivity. (Hopper 1999: 113)

Of particular interest here is that 'communicational arrangements'—that would presumably include meetings—are specified as socially unconscious processes that may be better understood through forms of analysis that are immanent to those same processes, rather than 'applied' to them from the vantage point of critique.

Both traditions grew out of forms of clinical group therapeutic practice within highly institutional settings (initially the British Army) and to a certain extent they retain a reified conception of 'the group' as a clearly boundaried object. While theories of the social unconscious recognize the group as a necessary but constructed abstraction in the dynamics of human sociality (Dalal 1998; Hopper 2002), the tendency is to consider more complex social systems up to and beyond the level of the nation state as simply different sized groups. These roots in an essentially therapeutic enterprise and an adherence to the group as model for all kinds of social phenomena may be partially responsible for the relative intellectual isolation from other political philosophies that make use of (typically Lacanian) psychoanalysis or more recent formulations of communization or commoning (for example, Laclau 2005; Linebaugh 2009; Badiou 2010; Hardt and Negri 2011; Dean 2012). In many of these approaches, dissensus and disagreement versus hegemonic or majoritarian perspectives are typically posited as virtues in processes of organizing, within which the affective dimension of interpersonal or group dynamics is rendered entirely benign. The sense is that the conscious political awareness generated by 'being in common' is sufficient to neutralize negative or destructive unconscious feelings generated by large group processes.

However, the regulated but unpredictable, event-like structure of the GA—and also of gatherings like the PAF meeting outlined above—resemble the experimental group and conference settings that are at the core of the group relations and group analytic research. These events are designed specifically to examine the affective dimension of large group processes, through organizational interventions by a facilitating team that stimulate the emergence and destruction of formal and

informal leadership and followership, intra-group competition, defensive small group formation, relations between the group and its outside and so forth. The lack of explicit political reformist demands that became another of the political memes of the 'movement of the squares' meant that the immediate primary task of the GA often became the maintenance of its own organizational infrastructure—in effect, the GA became the object of its own enquiry. This closely resembles the 'Leicester conferences' organized in the group relations tradition since the 1957, which gather large groups for a period of up to two weeks within an enclosed residential setting to explore the experience of meeting itself:

> Each conference is a temporary organisation consisting of a series of events which are designed to enable the exploration of different work experiences and behaviour. So, there are no presenters as such; instead the conference staff offer working hypotheses based on their experiences and understanding of what is happening in the 'here and now' during the various events. (Tavistock Institute 2015: n.p.)

Similarly, the introductory training programme at the Institute of Group Analysis uses a monthly large group setting in which the entire student and staff body (typically about 80 to 100 people) gathers for about 90 minutes in a spiral seated setting, completely filling the large room, with no set agenda or topic. The IGA also had a longstanding 'large group section' whose experiential research has produced some intriguing insight into the influence on group size on the psychological dynamics put into play in group contexts (de Maré et al. 1991).

Released from a fixation on 'the group' as a therapeutic object, these traditions have much to offer an investigation into the meetingization of organizational cultures. Their experiential exploration of group dynamics in what are termed 'temporary institutions' would seem to be especially relevant in a period of de-institutionalization dominated by outsourcing, time-limited project working, freelance contracting and flattened organizational hierarchies in which new combinations of individuals are continually brought temporarily together in order to complete a specific task—including the making of art and politics. They also offer a rich vocabulary for the psycho-social dynamics of group processes that give full weight to the negative affects that are typically mobilized

in settings that physically bring together more than a dozen people. These approaches offer new ideas about how larger, self-constituting gatherings can move from 'hate, through dialogue, to culture' and forms of non-identitarian impersonal belonging that remain the object of desire for many forms of 'horizontal' politics (de Maré et al. 1991), rather than assuming that individuals can axiomatically enact this complex psychosocial achievement simply with the aid of appropriate rules and behavioural norms. But in many progressive political and artistic meeting contexts, there is an operative but socially unconscious sense that somehow everyone comes automatically equipped to function within such a setting, possessed of the requisite knowledge, values and social skills. In addition, this assumption appears to be that of the group as a whole, rather than of any particular individual, who is typically inclined to feel anxiously uncertain about the precise parameters of these assumptions. In this respect, recent invocations of 'study' as part of dissident practices of commoning (Harney and Moten 2013) may then also include self-reflexive study of the social unconscious of meeting processes, which are often either taken as benevolently emergent or, as with the GA, subject to rigid forms of proceduralism that, in part, seem to lead to repeating patterns in which an idealized communicative social object is destroyed through aggression, paranoia and disenchantment. Put simply, those seeking out alternative and sustainable forms of meeting in social life are in need of more sophisticated explanatory knowledge of the psychological effects and affects of the apparatus of organization and communication that they inherit, invent or adapt—and that such knowledge may be found within traditions of psychoanalytic thinking that have been largely ignored within recent political and organizational theory.

Meeting as institution

If we can replace a reified concept of 'the group' with *grouping* as a process that happens across group boundaries, then what is proposed here is that *meeting* is the primary practical manifestation of this process. Meetings thus function as a new kind of institution within contemporary processes of organization. In other words, in settings where traditional institutions are being dismantled, organization is increasingly enacted through *the meeting as institution*, where organization is defined as an explicit, decided order and institution is an immanent order based on shared but largely tacit beliefs and norms (Haug 2013: 712). Under that definition, the general assembly in

the square occupation is as much of an institution as a board meeting of Goldman Sachs. In each context, there are ritualized procedures and protocols that govern the process, and to participate in the process entails a tacit but necessary commitment to sharing the beliefs and norms underpinning those procedures and protocols - for the Occupy GA, for example, that everyone present has a right to speak (a belief) and that their speaking is managed by a rule-governed facilitated process (a norm). In the Internet era, forms of organization such as Occupy are typically categorized as networks, following Castells' influential theorization of the network society (Castells 1996, 2012). However, while networked communication undoubtedly facilitates, for example, the rapid mobilization of the square occupation, it is not primarily a network phenomenon—an order based on trust and friendship. Neither is it an organization or an institution, although it borrows elements from each of these forms. Invoking the earlier example of the Icelandic Althingi, we may think of it as a *thinging*, a processual series of meetings with aesthetic and affective, as well as functional, dimensions—of which the GA is only the most public and performative iteration. If you want to 'join' a movement like Occupy, there is no process of admission or membership qualification: you participate in meetings.

It seems likely that this particular episode in the meetingization of social and political life is set to continue as material and psychic investment in traditional institutions is eroded by the successes of neoliberalism. As with PAF London, these changes will undoubtedly continue to shape the field of art in the ongoing ascendency of a passion for all things processual in contemporary art. As communication in social settings in and beyond the context of work is increasingly outsourced to computational platforms that asynchronously connect dispersed individuals, the physically shared space–time of the face-to-face meeting appears as a strangely antiquated event that paradoxically appears more necessary than ever: a valiant but faltering attempt to politically cohere, establish a shared history and plot a common story, in which the timelines of individual lives temporarily fall 'in sync'. As such, could we see meetings as a form of Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism', frayed social rituals that appear both as the pathway and the obstacle to the satisfactions of a collective desire for collectivity (Berlant 2011)? In a time that itself seems to suffer from a poverty of time and a future, every face-to-face meeting of more than three or four people comes as something of a surprise in its ordinary exceptionality—the very fact of actually getting together in order to plan a

common enterprise strikes us as both banal and extraordinary, hopeless and inspiring, interrupting the diffuse experience of immersion in the ever expanding sea of mediated weak ties that constitute the social network. At the same time, we have to reckon with the conscious and unconscious emotional storm generated in all our encounters with others, including those we trust and even those we love, that meetings bring to the fore. Meetings, as no-one needs to be reminded, are places of anxiety, hope, aggression, solidarity, anger, envy, reparation, confusion, clarity, decision and inertia, de-dramatized events in which alliances are forged and broken through a single glance or gesture. In the context of a meeting, one can act decisively by simply leaving—or by not turning up at all. In short, meetings are rule-bound occasions where we get to make unruly contact with our 'contacts', who often refuse to stick to the script. Unsurprisingly, it is only as hegemonic forms of mediated communication now reach a degree of saturation and degradation (email would be the prime example) that we come to a point where it may be possible to understand and explore the significance of something as apparently banal as the meeting for social and political life today.

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