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‘Truth’, technology and transmedial theatre in Europe

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KEYWORDS Theatre and technology; performance and populism; subversive affirmation and over-identification; transmedial art; post-truth politics

Introduction

Recent scholarship has expanded upon the concept of populism as performance to include a focus on how it employs digital technologies (Baldwin-Philippi 2018). However, a relatively unexplored dimension of such discussion is the relationship between political and ‘artistic’ or theatrical performances of populism. If the latter appropriate right-wing populist discourse to potentially parody how it frames its nationalist rhetoric as an ‘appeal to “the people”’ (Canovan 1999, 3), then how do the relationships between performers and spectator-participants differ from those forged through public manifestations of populist politics? How have artists who engage with populism employed technology to increase the reach and interactivity of their performances, and how does this seek to undermine, and/or generate a troubling ‘belief in, the supposed ‘reality’ of such projects?

This article examines two selected performances, from Austria and Estonia, that sought to engage subversively with the rise of far-right populism through arts practice developed across multiple media: Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria – first European coalition week!* (2000) and Theatre NO99’s *Unified Estonia* (2010).¹ These two events were exemplary in their respective engagements with increasingly technologized media to interrogate right-wing populisms in performances that drew widespread public attention, nationally and internationally. Schlingensiefel created an international controversy with his performance event *Please Love Austria!* in which a group of asylum-seekers were transported to a temporary site consisting of shipping containers located in the centre of Vienna where they would reside for 7 days. Via a dedicated website, Austrians were invited to vote out the foreigner they wished to see ‘deported’ the most. This public action, which sought to mirror the anti-immigration policies of Jörg Haider’s populist, far-right Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ), was reported worldwide to the detriment of Austria’s preferred centre-right, bourgeois national image. Ten years later, in Estonia (known for its technological advancement),² Tallinn-based theatre company NO99 held a press conference announcing their largest show to date which would culminate in a public convention for an audience of 7200. This 44-day-long project involved NO99

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inventing a fictitious political party, 'Unified Estonia', which the theatre company acted as throughout the project. Resonances with United Russia, the Russian Federation's ruling party, went beyond the title: NO99's performance as a party appeared to emulate the nationalist, populist, 'catch-all' public image of United Russia even though the project was inspired by, and drew on, populist politics in Estonia. *Unified Estonia* incorporated some evident satire, but its infiltration of real news media led to real polls indicating that it would take 25% of the national vote (Čepcová et al. 2015, 89). These projects operated through 'diverse popular cultures and digital media' and as such fit under Johannes Birringer's definition of 'hybrid theatre[s] of transmediality' (2006, 389). In the 10 years that separate these performances, digital technologies developed significantly and aided the spread of right-wing populisms across Europe. These very populisms can be seen as propagated transmedially, within 'a smudged ideological landscape in which counterfactual information or "fake" news circulates through a contentious array of social and mainstream media' (Arfara, Mancewicz, and Remshardt 2018, 3). This article critically reassesses the transmedial strategies of *Please Love Austria!* and *Unified Estonia* from the perspective of current understandings of populism within an increasingly digitized, post-truth society.

Populism is a slippery concept, but, for the purposes of this article, the term will be used to refer to a political and 'thin-centered' ideology that valorizes an 'imagined national community' and purports to represent the interests of 'the people' against established political and social institutions and those perceived to be elites (Mudde 2004; Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013, 311). Populist themes that reoccur tend to focus on 'an idealized sense of historical nation', economic issues of scarcity, and xenophobic immigration discourse, in ways that represent 'a fundamental rejection of pluralism' (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016, 49; Müller, 2016). For Albertazzi and McDonnell, populism can broadly be understood as 'an ideology that pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving [...] the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice' (2008, 3). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the rise of the populist far right in Europe has broadly been typified by anti-establishment rhetoric, Euroscepticism and strident opposition to immigration, and has tended to 'capitalize on the socio-psychological appeal of [...] pre-existing traditions of nationalism' (Petsinis 2019, 213). The creation of media spectacles drawing on established and emerging technologies has helped to foster that socio-psychological appeal across Europe and were identifiable in the FPÖ's campaign in Austria as early as the turn of this century.

Schlingensiefel, and subsequently NO99, included populist techniques intended to be subversive in their deliberate blurring of the lines between fictional performance and real politics. As such, both *Please Love Austria!* and *Unified Estonia* can be situated within European artistic genealogies of 'subversive affirmation' and 'over-identification', tactics that Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse theorized in 2006. Arns and Sasse argue that subversive affirmation and over-identification use such classical aesthetic methods as 'imitation, simulation, mimicry and camouflage' and 'always [involve] a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite', as such placing 'the viewer/listener precisely in such a state or situation which she or he would or will criticise later' (2006, 444). They draw on Žižek's ((1993) 2006) essay that defends the deliberately ambiguous appropriations of Nazi and totalitarian iconography by Slovenia-based collective Neue Slowenische

Kunst (NSK). Arns and Sasse trace subversive affirmation and over-identification back to Eastern Europe of the 1920s, where these practices proliferated as covert artistic resistance under repressive totalitarian regimes; after 1989, artists deliberately chose these methods as modes of stealth resistance to a culture industry that ‘manages to co-opt and appropriate even the most critical viewpoints and render them ineffective’ (2006, 444). NSK had formed in 1984 when Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia. The collective progressed to inventing their own transnational state, which was circumscribed by time rather than territory, following the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 (and the establishment of several new nations across central and eastern Europe); NSK established NSK embassies in various places and issued NSK passports that ‘challenged the credibility of the new nations and their national borders’ (Wilmer 2018, 142). Another Slovenia-based collective now known as Janez Janša began working together in 2004; its three artists built on NSK’s interventions by legally adopting the name of Slovenia’s right-wing prime minister (Janez Janša) in 2007 and exhibiting their identity documents with this new name in 2008. S.E. Wilmer, in his 2018 book *Performing Statelessness in Europe*, lauds how NSK, Janez Janša, and Schlingensief’s *Please Love Austria* subversively over-identified with extreme forms of nationalism, concluding that these strategies – combined with the wilful ambiguity of the works in question – were ultimately disruptive, prompting audiences to question the structures, ideologies and assumptions of the nation state and anticipating the proliferation of exclusionary nationalisms and xenophobia across Europe more recently (2018, 158).

Yet, we argue that subversively affirming, and over-identifying, with populist, right-wing nationalisms can be dangerous in that artists can be seen to reinforce such populist agendas if audiences fail to self-reflexively decode and reject subtle yet effective forms of mass manipulation – which is more likely when such manipulations are dispersed across multiple media technologies through which counterfactual information simultaneously circulates. Arns and Sasse, while ultimately praising over-identification and subversive affirmation as ‘possibly the most effective’ mode of arts-based resistance at their time of writing, also warn that these tactics can be risky as they ‘can easily be misunderstood’ (2006, 455). By ironically mirroring the language of the FPÖ, Schlingensief’s *Please love Austria!* can be seen as subversively affirming that campaign. What clarified Schlingensief’s position and enabled a distancing from the affirming strategy was that, in his frequent television appearances and interviews, he vehemently attacked Haider’s politics and debated other FPÖ ministers (2006, 445). In addition, his regular letters to politicians were publicized in the Austrian and German press, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published Schlingensief’s daily ‘Container Report’ – an ironic commentary on the events taking place in the square (Lilientahl and Philipp 2002, 116). It is important to note, though, that far-right populist parties had achieved minimal electoral success in Estonia as well as other Baltic states such as Latvia by the time NO99 produced *Unified Estonia* in 2010 (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 2013). However, Estonian mainstream parties had begun to draw on far-right discourses concerning such issues as immigration in order to appeal to ‘the people’ and, as such, maintain or extend electoral success (Auers and Kasekamp 2009). NO99 over-identified with this mainstream populism to create its fictitious far-right party. Following NO99’s *Unified Estonia*, the populist far right garnered significant electoral results in Estonia, most notably when the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia or EKRE won 8.1% of the vote in the 2015

elections and became the ‘third most popular party throughout 2017 and 2018’ (Petsinis 2019, 211). The Estonian far right has used populist techniques strikingly reminiscent of *Unified Estonia*, techniques that can be linked to the success of EKRE. As such, this particular comparative framework reveals how artists can possibly perpetuate – as well as respond to and anticipate – the rise of far-right populism. It also prompts consideration of the enduring critical value of subversive affirmation and over-identification within increasingly digitally mediatized societies in which facts, mis-/disinformation and parody are shared rapidly across multiple media platforms leaving little scope for heuristics so that such forms of information often become indistinguishable (Wardle 2019).

Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria!*

As noted above, Wilmer (2018) lauded Schlingensiefel’s use of subversive affirmation to parody ‘nationalist politicians and nationalistic practices’ in *Please Love Austria!* (2018, 139). A substantial amount of additional scholarship has also engaged with this controversial event for example, in relation to: ‘mobilizing public debate’ around the FPÖ’s far-right xenophobic populism (Forrest 2008); the ‘politics of appearance’ and the public sphere (Schmidt 2011); Brechtian aesthetics in relation to the connections between art and politics (Varney 2010); and the utilization of asylum-seekers to achieve the ‘hyper-authentic’ (Jestrovic 2008). What has not been considered thus far is how Schlingensiefel’s adept use of technology to mirror the FPÖ’s ‘strategies of provocation’, together with the deployment of contemporaneous tropes from popular culture, was highly effective in maximizing the reach of his project to engage the Austrian public (Wodak 2014, 101).

As Schlingensiefel’s project in Vienna is quite well-known, we will only provide a short synopsis of the event’s political backdrop to establish the given circumstances. In the Austrian federal election of 1999, Jörg Haider’s far-right, anti-immigration, Freedom Party Austria (hence FPÖ) won 27% of the national vote and Wolfgang Schüssel, the leader of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (hence ÖVP), had agreed to form a coalition government. The formation of this coalition was both significant and shocking as it marked the first time since World War II that a far-right party was invited to form a government in one of Europe’s member states (Wodak 2014, 106). Of particular concern was Haider’s apologist stance in relation to Austria’s collaboration with the Nazis and his explicit defence of the Waffen SS, whom he described in a public speech given in 1996 while he was the governor of Carinthia as, ‘decent individuals with characters who stuck to their beliefs despite strong opposition’ (Manoschek 2002, 8). Haider’s outspokenly xenophobic public statements emphasized an increase in criminal activities that he claimed were perpetrated by foreigners and he sought to generate nationalistic outrage with statements such as: ‘Every asylum-seeker immediately brings over his [sic] family at the cost of the efficient and hard-working Austrians’ (Lilientahl and Philipp 2002, 91). His campaign employed the oft-repeated slogan ‘Stop the Überfremdung’, a term that means ‘foreign overpopulation’, and is resonant with statements made by Goebbels in 1933 (Lilientahl and Philipp 2002, 27). Unlike the German process of coming to terms with the Nazi past, known as *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Austria had begun no such reckoning. The careers of politicians who spoke openly and

favourably about National Socialism were not jeopardized and nor were they ostracized as they might have been in Germany.

Haider's statements were intentionally provocative and offensive, but the FPÖ clearly recognized that this would guarantee maximal media coverage across a range of platforms. Unlike the traditionally staid and conservative Austrian electioneering practices, the FPÖ had been swift to capitalize upon the accelerating mediatization of the political and social realm. 'Mediatization' can be viewed as 'the process whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence' (Hjarvard 2008, 114). The rapid spread of affordable and portable communications technologies, such as mobile phones and laptops with Wifi connectivity, resulted in an increasingly mediated social order with mobile digital technology having a marked effect on most facets of everyday life. The FPÖ took a media-savvy approach to party publicity 'characterized by sound bites, video-clips, and entertainment', with the slickly curated persona of Haider casting him as a glamorous celebrity, photographed participating in extreme sports and enjoying fast cars (Pelinka 2002, 220). FPÖ brochures were designed to resemble comic books, and the internet – still a relatively new medium at the time – was used as a campaigning platform and featured a rap-song written for Haider and performed by himself. The increase in mediatization enabled new channels of communication to be opened up with target groups much broader than the customary Austrian voting base, and 'created a whole network of texts and images intertwined in subtle inter-textual ways with each other' (Wodak 2014, 101). This content utilized 'open and coded constructions' to generate a discourse that elevated (white) Austrian nationalistic pride and made discriminatory and xenophobic statements to generate the sense of an encroaching external threat (Wodak 2014, 101).

Haider's election campaign had been strongly supported by the *Kronenzeitung* tabloid newspaper that enjoyed the status of a print monopoly with 1 million issues printed daily and a buying public estimated at 43% of the total population (Poet 2002). The context of the FPÖ's employment of what has been termed 'communicative abundance' (Keane 2013, 1) supports Giancarlo Mazzoleni's claim that 'close ties' connect 'media-centred processes and the political phenomenon of populism' (2008, 62). These ties refer to the syntactical expression that tabloids employ to generate strong emotions and polarize topical issues in a way that Catherine Fieschi (2019) describes as 'outrage signaling [...] the politics of appealing to the gut over the brain'. These close ties would, however, also serve Schlingensiefel's strategy in *Please Love Austria!* very successfully as exemplified by his adroit incorporation of the *Kronenzeitung's* hysterical daily editorials as constituting 'the programme notes accompanying the work' (Lilienthal and Philipp, 216). Schlingensiefel's ability to absorb negative media reactions in order to regurgitate and reuse them as part of the events' provocative appeal demonstrate his understanding of the connection between contemporary populism and media logic that underpinned his strategic ambiguity in deliberately setting out to blur the lines between politics, truth, and art. In this context, 'media logic' can broadly be understood as 'the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the story-telling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people's attention' (Strömbäck 2008, 233). The FPÖ proved itself adept at operating within media logic and the party's strategic alignment with

popular mass culture can be seen as a striking example of ‘postmodern’ politics as Anton Pelinka deftly argues:

The FPÖ presents itself as a party that fully accepts that most voters are not especially interested in politics, and it successfully appeals to that majority. It does not claim to have a consistent message or platform. For this audience, a consistent agenda is simply not necessary, and may even be counterproductive. (Pelinka 2001)

Of critical relevance here is that the FPÖ had also organized campaigns targeting ‘progressive, experimental, or other avant-garde artists’ whose work ran counter to the moral values the party espoused (Gingrich 2002, 81). The FPÖ sought to have public funding withdrawn from artists whose work supposedly involved ‘blasphemy, sexual perversion, or anti-patriotism’ (83). The artists targeted included the playwrights Elfriede Jelinek and Thomas Bernhard, and the Viennese *Aktionist* painter, Hermann Nitsch, who were smeared in a poster campaign as ‘defamers of Austria’ (83). Andre Gingrich has observed the intention behind Haider’s public showmanship and his impassioned speeches claiming that the ‘FPÖ won’t allow our beautiful homeland to be smeared’ was to appeal to those ‘interested primarily or exclusively in mass entertainment and popular art’ (2002, 83). In so doing, Gingrich argues that the FPÖ sought to engender ‘an artificial rupture between popular culture and “serious” art, aligning the latter with radicals and intellectuals and re-orienting popular culture along neo-conservative and neo-nationalist lines’ (2002, 83). These attempts to generate scandal, muzzle artistic expression, and control desirable media platforms are strategies common to contemporary populism. The advantages for right-wing populists who understand how the ‘supply and demand relationship’ works with the media is that their soundbites and easy-to-grasp ideas are echoed and reiterated constantly which gives them traction in a socio-politically turbulent landscape where national identity and immigration policies are key themes (Mazzoleni 2008, 50). However, it is exactly this sort of knowledge that underpins the challenges posed by Schlingensief’s and NO99’s projects, both of which sought to pry open the populist toolbox to explore the ways in which populism performs and how its strategies might be subverted.

The significance of the additional context of the FPÖ’s attack on artists is that Schlingensief’s work had long traversed the vexed distinctions between highbrow, or ‘serious’ art, and lowbrow cultural forms. Schlingensief had worked with Jelinek previously and, as a fellow German-speaking artist presumably aware of her status as a public figure whom FPÖ had sought to discredit, specifically invited her to be involved in his Vienna *aktion*. Schlingensief himself was no stranger to scandal or forcing connections between avant-gardist art tactics and politics; he had targeted conservative politicians in many of his productions. As a result, he garnered a high profile in the news media that he used to cannily stage himself and promote his controversial, yet often witty, interventions into German politics. Therefore, the idea of challenging the far right in an Austria that was currently under EU sanction for having an anti-foreigner and Nazi-apologist party as part of a coalition government would have been of immense appeal.

Schlingensief’s response to the heightened political backdrop in Austria sought to expose the *mise en scène* of the FPÖ’s populism by assuming its ‘strategies of provocation’. The re-location of a group of asylum-seekers to shipping containers in the centre of

the Viennese bourgeois cultural district was, in itself, a provocative move that was heightened through the impact of livestreaming events in and around the containers via a dedicated internet website with Austrians invited to vote out the foreigner they wished to see ‘deported’ the most. Other strategies included mimicking the Party’s rhetorical style and the modes of representation it used to define foreigners by, for example, displaying posters featuring ‘mugshots’ of the asylum-seeker inhabitants on the container walls (Wodak 2014, 102). Xenophobic statements by Haider were broadcast via loudspeakers and FPÖ flags were attached to the container roof next to the large sign that read ‘Foreigners Out’. A banner displaying the *Kronenzeitung* newspaper logo was also visible and Schlingensiefel made the connection between the tabloid and the far-right party with his declaration from the rooftop that, ‘these are the images Europeans like to see . . . this production has been brought to you by the FPÖ and the *Kronenzeitung!*’ (Poet 2002). This assault on Austrian identity, with the image of ethnic minorities as inhabitants of a container separated from onlookers by a wire fence, yet accessible to public view via peepholes, was an unremitting reminder of concentration camps. The connection was emphasized by Schlingensiefel’s distribution of the *Neue Lager Zeitung* – a parody newspaper with ‘Lager’ being the word that refers to concentration camps as in ‘Konzentrations Lager’. The stakes were raised further as Schlingensiefel, an ‘artist’ from Germany, taunted the Austrian public by announcing to tourists, press, and spectators, ‘this is Austria!’, which fuelled the frenzied debates that occurred daily in the square (Schlingensiefel quoted in Poet 2002). The cumulative effect of this multilayered baiting was, for adherents to the far right’s ‘Austria-as-victim’ narrative, an abomination of their mythically innocent past, while for centrists and left-wingers, it was shameful and, at the same time, exposed the material reality of the FPÖ’s politics. In an interview in Paul Poet’s documentary film about the project, Schlingensiefel uses the term *Bilderstörungsmaschine* to describe the event. The German word *Bilder* means ‘images’, while the expression *störungsmaschine* describes a machine that functions as a disturbance or produces malfunction or breakdown in whatever object with which it is connected. Together, the invented term illuminates Schlingensiefel’s strategy regarding how he instrumentalized diverse media to serve the purpose of disturbing and destabilizing the preferred national images of the Austrian citizenry as a genteel, culturally sophisticated, and well-educated population. Schlingensiefel sought to tarnish such attempts at impression management (to recall Erving Goffman’s use of the term) by producing ‘dirty pictures from Austria’ (Poet 2002).

Ironically, when on the fifth day of the project, the FPÖ reported Schlingensiefel to the police, claiming that the signs above the container publicly encouraged violence against foreigners, Schlingensiefel promptly lampooned them as being at odds with their own policy – which, he claimed, he was merely playing out; he commented: ‘We are taking Haider at his word’ (Lilientahl and Philipp 2002, 27). The way in which the event engaged with what Jessica Baldwin-Philippi has recently termed the ‘technological performance of populism’ (2018) was critical to the notoriety of Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria!* two decades earlier, ensuring daily press reports. In addition to the public furore in the square outside the container, the high visibility of the dedicated website at webfree.tv.com with an ‘instructions for use’ sign posted on the container walls informed onlookers about the guidelines for participation: ‘Choose your foreigner! Dial their number! Throw them out of the country! Every day two will be deported!’ (Lilientahl and Philipp, 16). On day four,

there were over 80,000 hits per hour being registered by the website and the Austrian press obsessively focused on the happenings around the container, while the *Kronenzeitung* tabloid paper laid charges against the Vienna Festival authorities (132).

Schlingensiefel's ability to work with media logic and the performative dimensions of technology illustrate his reflexive awareness that populism is itself a performance. Martina Leeker asserts that 'digital devices and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform' (Leeker, Schipper, and Beyes 2017, 11). The happenings *inside* Schlingensiefel's container and the real lives of the people therein, despite the camera surveillance and the tabloid-style press releases, were never the centrepiece of the event. With its peepshow element, the container acted as a magnet to entice spectators into revealing themselves, their political views and their prejudices in a public arena normally a thoroughfare for tourists. Schlingensiefel's teasing out of the mechanics of political power to reveal their workings broadened spectatorship from those who visited the container site in person, to those who visited the website and who may have purchased newspapers that published updates on the project. The focal point of Schlingensiefel's project was not the mere parodying of a reality TV show to eliminate asylum-seekers, but rather, an attempt to invert its constructs. A main attraction of the *Big Brother* reality TV show is that viewers can, from the privacy of their homes, voyeuristically observe the show's candidates and vote on who gets evicted while being assured of anonymity and remaining unaccountable to others. In *Please Love Austria!*, the lure of watching 'real' people, allegedly asylum-seekers, and having the chance to vote for their 'deportation' behind closed doors was in effect a decoy, as the previously anonymous public participated effectively as co-producers and suddenly found the cameras of international media turned upon *them* as subjects of interrogation: the citizens who in the secret ballot of the electoral process had voted for a xenophobic party. Schlingensiefel's 'spectacularizing' of the Austrian public is resonant with Theron Schmidt's argument that the concept of 'the public' is 'itself spectacular – a matter of appearance, representation and simulation' (Schmidt 2011, 28). The mediatization of the public at large turns performance and audiences into spectacle, utilizing its ostension to draw attention, not away from the political context (as in Roman bread and circus spectacles), but back to it.

Despite its provocative challenge to Haider's far right, the ambiguous nature of *Please Love Austria* is also emblematic of the problem posed by the 'simultaneous complicity and critique of postmodern aesthetics' (Hutcheon 1991, 11). The fusion of complicity (i.e. the products of mass-produced popular culture) and critique risks being read 'primarily on the surface as complicity rather than as a subversive critique embedded in the subtext' (Rectanus 2004, 231). Ultimately, though, Schlingensiefel's project can be read as an attempt to critique Austrian populism and the media logic via which the FPÖ's ideology was reproduced. His strategy was to deliberately immerse himself within the operations of media logic, including tabloid sensationalism, while manipulating it to publicize his own subversive activities that mimicked and aligned closely with the postmodern media tactics of the FPÖ.

Theatre NO99's *Unified Estonia*

NO99, in operation from 2005 to 2019, shared concerns with citizenship and political responsibility with Schlingensiefel and other groups that Wilmer (2018) has recently praised for their disruptive engagements with nationalism. Early multimedia shows such as *Oil!* (2006) and *GEP (Hot Estonian Guys, 2007)* point to NO99's burgeoning political preoccupations. The company drew on interviews with Marek Strandberg, then leader of the Estonian Green Party, to create *Oil!*, incorporating cabaret and eliciting audience participation by adopting elements of popular game shows on contemporary Estonian television (Epner 2013, 168–71). In *GEP*, 'the national romantic discourse [...] was made to collide with sophisticated academic discussion about a nation as a mere cultural construct' (Epner 2013, 172). However, *Unified Estonia* – as a durational, transmedial project that infiltrated the actual political landscape – aligned more with works like *Please Love Austria!* in terms of its form and was a new departure for NO99. Through *Unified Estonia* 'the public sphere and actual audiences were openly addressed and involved'; NO99's next large-scale political project, *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* (2011), was performed in the company's theatre building but watched by 1200 spectators on a cinema screen in Tallinn's Nokia Concert Hall which 'put the audience into certain positions in the performance situation but gave them no actual voice' (Oruaas 2018, 120). Since NO99 was a state-owned company, and – as Riina Oruaas points out – Estonian theatre had long rehearsed 'the dominant national narrative of gaining and re-gaining independence', audiences expected both the final convention of the *Unified Estonia* project and *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* 'to be events with an almost sacred character, like the national Song and Dance Celebration' but their effects were instead 'rather disillusioning' (Oruaas 2018, 107, 108). NO99 sought to directly negotiate the complexities of Estonian national identity in *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* through fictional episodes representing different periods in Estonian history. Yet, with *Unified Estonia*, the company itself appeared to be grappling with the 'socio-psychological appeal' of Estonia's 'pre-existing traditions of nationalism' (Petsinis 2019, 213).

Unified Estonia offers a fascinating case study for re-examining how artistic tactics of over-identification relate to nationalisms in that NO99 appears to have been spurred by a nostalgic national consciousness associated with decolonization. The period following the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 had been characterized by political idealism. This idealistic national consciousness can be detected in how NO99 dramaturg and founding member, Eero Epner, explained the company's motivations for creating *Unified Estonia* in a telephone conversation on 1 October 2019:

It was a very idealistic period at the beginning of this century. We felt that [Estonia] had lost its utopianism. Politics got much more professional and much more cynical. Those in the company had had the experience of more authentic politics.

NO99 member Laur Kaunissaare explained in a telephone conversation on 9 September 2019, that the idea for the project came from one of the company's co-directors, Tiit Ojasoo, in response to frustrations with waves of populism that he saw as corrupting Estonian politics. For example, populism had helped Estonia's Republican Party to garner a short-lived flurry of support in its opposition to Estonia joining the EU

in 2003, which Estonia subsequently joined in 2004. Beyond such organizations as Estonia's Eurosceptic Republican Party, Ojasoo also detected populism creeping into mainstream Estonian politics, with politicians making empty promises to attract votes; it appears that NO99 saw these behaviours as a threat to the perceived integrity of earlier restoration nationalism. As discussed below, NO99 over-identified with far-right populism across a range of media, including television and the internet. They aimed to reveal how populism operated (Epner 2017) and, it appears, to forewarn of the potential for fascists to use populism to manipulate the public.

In the telephone conversation cited above, Epner emphasized the short time span in which *Unified Estonia* was developed and the experimentation that characterized the process: the concept of populism came in December 2009 and the company fielded ideas concerning a more conventional show accompanied by a documentary that would include rehearsal footage. Research drew on insider knowledge of Estonian politics that was not difficult to access in a relatively small and sparsely populated country such as Estonia; NO99 were able to gather information from elected members of parliament who had been classmates with company members, as well as one of the first managers of their theatre company who had gone into politics by the time *Unified Estonia* was produced. NO99's proximity to state offices in the Estonian capital also placed them in a key position to acquire data. As the project developed, the company knew that it would begin with a press conference and end with a large-scale party convention, but they were still unsure of what would happen in between. On 25 March 2010, approximately a year before Estonia's 2011 parliamentary elections, NO99 held the press conference announcing their largest show to date that would culminate in a convention on 7 May. Although they clearly framed the project as theatre and stated that they would, from then on, *act as* the fictitious political party 'Unified Estonia', they invited political commentators rather than theatre critics to the press conference. Literary scholar Luule Epner, in her essay about NO99's postdramatic strategies, discusses the process behind *Unified Estonia* as follows:

Daniel Vaarik, who had been employed as a government adviser, was engaged as a consultant and co-author of some texts. In addition, relevant research results, primarily drawn from sociological studies, as well as various cultural and media texts, were also employed. This heterogeneous material – partly purposefully collected, partly found, was either directly quoted in the performance or utilised as raw material for dialogues and scenes written by the dramaturg or the directors. (2013, 168).

Epner confirmed in 2019 that NO99 also researched Adolf Hitler's regime in Nazi Germany and the Nuremberg Rallies, which informed several aspects of the project.

Unified Estonia could be seen to employ over-identification in that NO99 studied and incorporated the behaviour of politicians elected to the contemporary Estonian parliament but amplified the populist practices they discerned to create the 'nastiest, most populist and most fascist [political] party ever' (Epner 2017); as such, NO99 aimed to subvert the growth of far-right populism. It is important to note that, by 2009, far-right populism had only sporadically appeared in the Estonian political mainstream and far-right movements usually failed 'to convert grass-roots activism and established organisational structures into electoral success' (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 242). Yet, while there were no far-right parties represented in the Estonian parliament in 2009, political parties

lacked ‘the membership and traditions that act as constraints on party behaviour’ with the result that mainstream parties were ‘free to adopt the radical rhetoric of extreme-right movements and parties’ (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 241). Far-right attitudes to ‘gay rights, minority policy, [and] immigration’ had crept into public discourse but had failed to impact on policy (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 252). Moreover, public trust in political institutions had been low in Estonia since the early 2000s (Auers and Kasekamp 2009, 245), with 70% of Estonians and 81% of Russian Estonians surveyed registering distrust in Estonian political parties in 2004 (Rose 2005). The complexities of this political landscape likely informed the production and reception of *Unified Estonia* in 2010. The ‘party’ lacked a developed programme or set of ideas, foregrounding itself simply as a ‘new force’ that was ‘against established parties’ (Epner 2017). NO99 created hype by infiltrating the media, doing radio and television interviews as this new political party, erecting posters of the company members posing as politicians along one street in Tallinn, holding various celebrations for the party, recruiting a ‘youth wing’ (for which young performers auditioned), and releasing satirical YouTube videos (collectively called the ‘Election School’) which, as shown on the *Unified Estonia* website (*Ühtne Eesti*) published in 2015, offered advice about populist and corrupt modes of gaining and maintaining political power. *Unified Estonia* became the top story on Estonia’s largest online news portal, *Delfi*, when NO99 secretly defaced their own ‘party’ posters as part of the project (Ojasoo and Semper 2013). The *Unified Estonia* website described the project’s strategies as seeking to engage emotionally with the public via popular media such as television, in addition to digital platforms and spectacular events, and by offering promises that facilitate the acquisition of political power: to reduce immigration and increase private affluence that ‘sum up all the fears, dreams and wishes of people nowadays’. As such, NO99 aimed to stimulate debate by tapping into public aspirations and discontent.

While NO99 succeeded in stimulating public debate, much of that debate hinged rather superficially on whether this theatre company would become a political party and take power. As pointed out earlier, polls revealed that if NO99 were to go into politics, they would take 25% of votes. Certain individuals passionately supported the theatre company’s potential to become a real political force. Epner’s elderly neighbour, for example, urged NO99 to enter politics (Epner 2017). Kaunissaare, in the telephone conversation cited earlier, recalled the improvisatory nature of the project, in that many elements developed as it went along, and it ‘gathered momentum’ which could be felt by both the actors and the public; as such, the project stimulated, worked with and ultimately revealed the public’s ‘hope for radical change’, for a ‘saviour moment’. Kaunissaare considered the project’s ambiguity – in that it kept people guessing as to whether *Unified Estonia* would become a real political force – as the source of its power. Yet, according to Epner, the company members were surprised when the public began to take the project for real. This is perhaps understandable since it had initially been framed as theatre and such elements as the ‘Election School’ were quite obviously satirical. However, NO99’s occupation of several distinct media platforms meant that some of their audience likely engaged only with parts of the project that, without the wider context, undermined its potential to parody. In this way, the very transmediality of *Unified Estonia* helped to generate the troubling belief in its supposed reality. Moreover, it embodied attractive features that real right-wing populist parties in

Estonia had lacked in the past. For example, Auers and Kasekamp, reflecting on Estonia's 2011 elections, argued that 'a chronic impediment to the success of the radical right in Estonia has been the lack of a well-known and charismatic leader' (2013, 238). Ojasoo, a well-known and charismatic actor playing the leader of a fictitious far-right political party, appears to have satisfied that lack in the run-up to Estonia's 2011 elections.

Unified Estonia, and particularly the final 'party convention', revealed how the performance of populism operates within larger cultural, technological and affective economies in the service of constructing a national community by what Sara Ahmed refers to as sticking or binding people together (2014, 43). In a 2013 documentary on *Unified Estonia*, directed by Ojasoo and NO99 co-director Ene-Liis Semper, the atmosphere at the venue before the convention began is described as resembling that of a rock concert. The convention, for which tickets had sold out in 48 hours, took place at the Saku Suurhall arena in Tallinn; it lasted about 4 hours and was also broadcast live on online news portals (Epner 2013, 171). Documentation (Memokraat 2013) shows that the stage was flanked by bowls of fire and flags depicting the party's logo, the backdrop was a large screen that flashed projections of the space from various angles, and musicians in front of the screen built rhythm through a range of percussion instruments as one of the actors fiercely delivered the party's nationalist rhetoric with a cumulative passion reminiscent of the Nuremberg Rallies. This actor progressed to announcing the party and welcoming its leader, Ojasoo, whose entrance was preceded by a marching procession bearing large flags alternating between depictions of the party's logo and the Estonian national flag; chanting, clapping, and singing nationalist songs appeared to stir up heightened feelings of fellowship in support of this 'new force' that seemed to promise a regenerated nation. Ahmed argues that the 'fellow feeling' associated with nationalism involves turning towards 'the repetition or reiteration of signs of fellowship', such as flags: 'The flag as a sign that has historically signified territorial conquest as well as love for the nation (patriotism) has effects, the repetition of the flag sign displays a sense of with-ness and for-ness' (2014, 74). Ahmed's views on the affective semiotics of national flags illuminates the communal set of patriotic affects that the *Unified Estonia* convention conjured. Yet, the interactivity promoted by certain elements of the event were self-consciously theatrical; for example, the documentary shows that the audience were invited to vote via SMS as to whether a challenger to Ojasoo's leadership should take over from him. The voting process was quite evidently (and humorously) rigged in favour of Ojasoo. Epner, in the telephone conversation cited earlier, recalled that NO99 used direct quotes from Hitler, which people clapped. However, later in the event the actors 'revealed that there were claqueurs in the auditorium who were paid to energize the audience' (Talts 2015, 270). As such NO99 sought to interrogate populist nationalism using a range of media, modes of public participation and live, large-scale public spectacle.

Despite moments in which NO99 pointed to their own satirical strategies, the sense of speculation that the project promoted appears to have persisted until the end of the convention – when NO99 announced that *Unified Estonia* would not become an actual political party. Parts of the convention continued to blur the lines between reality and fiction, for example when prominent political figures, including the former Estonian Chancellor of Justice, Allar Jõks, also gave speeches (Epner 2013, 173). The comparative responses of audience members interviewed as part of the event also illuminate the ambivalence surrounding the project. Several spectators revealed that they attended to

be entertained but also ‘because they were disenchanted with the political situation and wanted to show protest against the government’ (Talts 2015, 270). Others, as Epner reported in 2019, recognized the far-right populist strategies NO99 sought to parody as dangerous and corrupt, but simultaneously found themselves attracted by the emotional appeal of the very populism NO99 performed. NO99 concluded the performance by definitively dissociating the company from professional politics with Ojasoo declaring in a final speech that the company members would remain politically active only as citizens. After the project ended, fervent supporters still urged NO99 to continue as a political party and the company members themselves found it difficult to let go of the power that they had accumulated over the course of the 44 days (Epner 2017). In 2019, Epner recalled that NO99 had to make a concerted effort to ‘detox’ after *Unified Estonia*, deliberately producing a light comedy as their next show. As such, the ambiguity of *Unified Estonia* can be seen to have not only exposed how right-wing populism works on people but to have affectively tapped into the appeal of those techniques – an appeal that has proved difficult to suppress in more recent Estonian politics.

The ambivalence surrounding *Unified Estonia* has continued to characterize its legacy. Two years after the project, Silver Meikar, who had been a member of Estonia’s liberal, centre-right Reform Party from 2006 to 2011, revealed that he and fellow party members had money laundered for that party. This became known as the Silvergate scandal, and Meikar (2012) cited *Unified Estonia* as one prompt for his decision to expose corruption within the Reform Party. Meikar later reported the details of a closed Reform Party board meeting (in which he was chastised by his former colleagues) to NO99, who performed those details as *The Board Meeting of the Reform Party* on 5 June 2012. NO99 released its first film project in 2013, Ojasoo and Semper’s documentary *Ash and Money*, which concerns the making of *Unified Estonia* including interviews with NO99 and political figures who were in office in 2010. The film, which largely celebrates the project, toured to a range of international festivals. In 2014, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Kristina Ojuland attempted to name her newly established party ‘Unified Estonia’ (E. E 2014). NO99 intervened and, although Ojuland’s consultants rebutted that it was ‘a good name and so popular’ (as Epner recalled in 2019), NO99 succeeded in preventing its use for an actual political party. Meanwhile, the populist right party EKRE was established in March 2012 and would go on to win 8.1% of the vote in Estonia’s 2015 elections, climbing to 17.8% in 2019.

Developments such as the rise of EKRE make *Unified Estonia* appear prescient, or perhaps as offering a template for the growth of the Estonian populist right. EKRE (until July 2020) led by the ‘charismatic and media-savvy’ Mart Helme, has sought to present itself as ‘a new political force’, and is an ‘openly nationalist, socially-conservative party that uses cruder public discourse to engage with voters’ (Trumm 2018, 334). EKRE also has a youth wing called Blue Awakening. As Kasekamp, Madisson, and Wierenga (2019) argue, media – and particularly digital media – has been crucial to EKRE’s success. EKRE MP Jaak Madison has left particularly incendiary comments online, for example his 2012 blogpost commending fascism, which briefly resurfaced on EKRE’s website in March 2015, and his tweet expressing distain for the traditions of Estonia’s Russian ethnic minority in May that year (Rikken 2015). The latter is part of EKRE’s campaign of targeting ethnic minorities living in Estonia.

EKRE also espouses an anti-immigration stance – a stance that had also been performed as part of *Unified Estonia*. As outlined earlier, *Unified Estonia* might be considered to have been partly motivated by an idealistic restoration nationalism. However, EKRE have co-opted that very form of nationalism into its anti-immigration rhetoric:

EKRE's employment of identity politics over the refugee question and immigration is embedded within the pre-existing frame of Estonian restoration and decolonization nationalism. The party's campaign interlinks the collective memories of 'colonization' under the Soviets with the collective anxieties of becoming 'colonized' again by others in the future. This socio-psychological strategy has facilitated EKRE in augmenting its public appeal and consolidating its status as a potent actor in Estonian politics. (Petsinis 2019, 213)

In 2019, Epner considered EKRE's public image and strategies as strikingly similar to those performed in *Unified Estonia*, questioning whether 'today's populists' perhaps 'learned something' from *Unified Estonia*. Nevertheless, *Unified Estonia* remains the most well-known NO99 production. It won the top prize at the world's largest scenography event, the Prague Quadrennial, in 2015 and its online presence remained till at least Spring 2020 in the form of the website *Ühtne Eesti* where, on the one hand, the project's awards in the arts were announced but, on the other, *Unified Estonia* was presented as a consultancy franchise, offering 'high standard know-how on how to take power'. As such, the project's ambiguity survived also as part of its online residue, potentially continuing to provide a template for populist right parties even as it was framed as art.

Conclusion

Schlingensief and NO99 successfully infiltrated the political landscapes of Austria and Estonia with *Please Love Austria!* and *Unified Estonia* respectively. Schlingensief's subversive affirmation of the FPÖ goaded the party into an engagement with his project and used interactive media to spectacularize public attitudes to anti-refugee policies espoused by the FPÖ. NO99 also combined public participation and technology to spectacularize public engagement with populism. The company over-identified with the populism that had entered Estonian mainstream politics in 2010 by creating a fictitious far-right political party that sought to prevent but actually anticipated – and possibly helped – the subsequent rise of the populist right in Estonia. The use of transmedial strategies in *Please Love Austria!* and *Unified Estonia* revealed how increasingly technologized media operates in the construction of social and political realities. Yet, in their efforts to parody right-wing populism, these artists blurred the lines between reality and fiction in ways that become problematic in an increasingly digital post-truth society. Public intellectual and journalist Claire Wardle (2018) has identified an 'information war' in our current era, calling for people to stop using the term 'fake news' since its misuse has led to confusion concerning its meaning and it has been weaponized by populist leaders such as Donald Trump. Wardle has created a taxonomy of mis- and disinformation and, more recently, has developed the concept 'Information Disorder' in which there are clearer

distinctions between falseness and intent to harm. Yet, Wardle acknowledges that we often do not know what ‘harm’ might look like across a period of several years in a ‘drip, drip, drip’ of seemingly harmless memes being circulated on social media (2018). Her recent work problematizes satire that we may not recognize *as* satire in contexts in which ‘there is a lack of heuristics’ and ‘everything is flattened and looks the same’ (2018). This calls into question the enduring critical power of artistic strategies involving subversive affirmation and over-identification which even Arns and Sasse acknowledged as potentially risky in 2006. These tactics are deliberately ambiguous, making them even easier to be misunderstood or manipulated in digital milieus of information disorder.

The ambiguity that characterized *Please Love Austria!* and *Unified Estonia* was viewed by many as central to their subversive potential. Since then, artist groups such as the Berlin-based collective, Centre for Political Beauty, have continued to embrace subversive affirmation and over-identification, with such ‘operations’ as *The Bridge* (2015), *The Dead are Coming* (2015), and *Eating Refugees* (2016). Wilmer has criticised the latter, arguing that while this ‘sensational media event’ drew considerable attention from politicians and the press, it tended to focus on the Centre for Political Beauty’s ‘own seditious actions, rather than [...] refugees as individuals with specific needs’ (2018, 159). Wilmer concludes that their engagement with immigration is ‘less sincere’ than Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria!* in that they use ‘a fashionable topic to play games and provoke the authorities with symbolic gestures’ (2018, 160). However, the technological context has also changed since *Please Love Austria!*. As the analysis of *Unified Estonia* reveals above, increasingly digital, multiply-mediatized cultures in which various forms of counterfactual information circulate make the deliberate ambiguity produced through subversive affirmation and over-identification potentially pernicious – even when artists seem sincere in their aims. Moreover, no matter their duration or legacy, art projects such as these are temporary while the populist far right continues to rise across Europe. As such, these projects cannot sustain the counter strategies that might appear to be effective in offering subversive critiques in the short term.

Notes

1. The German title for *Please Love Austria* was *Bitte liebt Österreich – erste europäische Koalitionswoche*; the Estonian title for *Unified Estonia* was *Ühtne Eesti*.
2. Estonia began building a digital society through an e-governance system to provide public services online in 1997, with the addition of internet voting in 2005 and an electronic healthcare system secured by the national blockchain in 2008. In 2003, Skype was founded in Tallinn and precipitated a generation of technological entrepreneurs.

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