Interpassivity and the Impossible: From Art to Politics in Pfaller's *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*

Robert Boncardo

As a philosophical and anthropological concept, the importance of interpassivity today seems secured, thanks in no small part to Robert Pfaller's tireless efforts over the last two decades.[1] Beginning life as a conceptual weapon in Pfaller's late-90's polemic against interactive art, interpassivity has since shed light on domains as different as rhetoric,[2] religion[3] and popular culture.[4] A striking feature of Pfaller's work in this period, in addition to its impressive scope, is his constant attention to the way interpassivity might inform political theory and practice.[5] Here, I track Pfaller's thoughts on interpassivity as he transports the concept from art, to the politics of art, and finally to politics proper. My aim is to understand the various levels of significance interpassivity has in Pfaller's thought, particularly as it is related to politics. Towards the end of this paper, I briefly bring Pfaller's thought into dialogue with the work of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, and assess the degree to which his polemic against the Left's call for increased participation in politics is consistent — albeit paradoxically so — with the way these two thinkers relate

politics to equality and to the category of the impossible. My chief reference will be Pfaller's recent book *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*, though I will also draw on his masterwork *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*,[6] first published in German in 2002.[7]

To see what's at stake in thinking about interpassivity and politics, consider the following passage from *Interpassivity*, a work that brings together some of Pfaller's most ground-breaking essays published between 2003 and 2013. Pfaller writes:

> Thinking about interpassivity […] means no less than investigating a basic, unquestioned assumption of most emancipatory movements since 1968, namely the assumption that active is better than passive, subjective better than objective, own better than foreign, changeable better than permanent, immaterial better than material, constructed better than essential, and so on.[8]

As this passage suggests, interpassivity promises not only to illuminate the human sciences in general, but also to rectify certain theoretical errors that allegedly handicap the Left's politics. In the most polemical essay from *Interpassivity*, 'Against Participation', Pfaller argues that the apparently progressive injunction to increase participation in politics — to make people more "active" — has become a "trap"[9] for the Left[10] since it has obscured the differences between distinct forms of participation in public life, ultimately giving succour to today's reigning "narcissistic cultural conditions".[11] With a renewed appreciation for interpassivity, Pfaller implies, the Left will be better able to propose directives that won't cause its politics to devolve into the more nefarious forms of identity politics, nor provide *de facto* support for neoliberal policy measures.

Formulated in these terms, Pfaller's intervention into contemporary political thought has a distinctly counterintuitive appeal. Why might we privilege forms of passivity over activity, particularly in politics? What can

the theory of interpassivity offer us that the Left's political thought of the last half-century has either neglected or misconstrued?

To appreciate the subtly of Pfaller's claims, it's best to return to his arguments against the "spontaneous philosophy"[12] of interactive act, the place where interpassivity's conceptual life began. While Pfaller admits that this original enemy "has now largely vanished into thin air",[13] in my view his polemic against interactivity in art contains the core of his thought on interpassivity's role in political life. Instead of immediately spelling out what interpassivity consists in, I'll first allow its conceptual contours to become visible in Pfaller's polemic, before treating it with greater precision further on.

The Spontaneous Philosophy of Interactive Art

In the 'Introduction' to *Interpassivity*, Pfaller narrates that in the last two decades of the 20th century, many artists felt a diffuse yet intense pressure to make their artworks more "interactive".[14] There were a number of interrelated reasons for this, at once historical, political and theoretical. Politically speaking, there was an apparent resurgence at the time of the avant-gardist idea according to which it was essential to "dissolv[e] […] the separation between the performer and the viewer".[15] This resurgence was doubtless inspired by the rise of civilian internet use in the early to mid-1990's and its promise of a fully interactive public sphere.[16] The idea this imperative was based on — that artworks are deficient if they don't allow their prospective audiences to participate in their creation — had nevertheless been in circulation since the avant-gardes of the early 20th century.[17] When artworks leave no space for the public's involvement, this argument runs, audience members are automatically placed in the position of passive spectators subject to the intellectual and affective power of the artwork. They are seduced by the ideas and beliefs it expresses, their "pleasure" a sure sign of their complete "identification"[18] with the ideology the artwork espouses. At the same time, professional artists jealously appropriate for themselves the collective's capacity for artistic creation. Instead of allowing audience members to showcase their inherent creative potential, artists privatize artistic production and

habituate everyone else to thinking they can only ever be consumers of art, not creators in their own right.

There is an obvious analogy in this discourse between art and politics. That is, if audience members switch from being passive consumers to active contributors in the domain of art, then they are far more likely to want to take their political destiny in their hands as well. As Pfaller narrates, the new artistic movements of the 1980's and 90's took up these century-old ideas and again imagined art as a training ground for political engagement. Instead of the Surrealist's "collective unconscious" or the "events" of the Fluxus group, however, we now had "interactive high-tech installations and participatively structured low-budget fields of action in which everyone [could] join in".[19]

For Pfaller, these examples of interactive art represented less a new artistic movement bolstered by a compelling theory of art and more a case of wishful thinking. They encapsulated modern artists' spontaneous desire for political influence at the same time as they produced new concrete forms that seemed to promise this desire's long-delayed fulfilment. Unlike the theory of interpassivity, which opened up new and unpredictable paths of inquiry,[20] on Pfaller's account "interactivity" was a discourse that had all of the answers in advance — even if it could never quite justify them.

The essence of Pfaller's arguments against interactivity in art comes down to the following claim: far from divesting people of agency, artworks that maintain a distinction between "performer" and "viewer",[21] "transmitter" and "receiver",[22] or "stage" and "auditorium",[23] actually *give* people capacities. Reciprocally, "interactive" art risks narrowing their domain of possible action.

To understand this unexpected claim, let's begin with a question: what do people bring to an artwork when they participate in its creation? As I've already intimated, Pfaller's answer to this question is informed by an account of today's "narcissistic cultural conditions",[24] which he draws from the work of Richard Sennett, among others.[25] In such a context,

when individuals are called upon to participate — whether in art or in political life — they typically understand this as a summons to bring something of *themselves* to the situation. They think they are being asked to speak and act as egos possessing an "authentic"[26] self that merits being paraded in public. Correlatively, in their engagement with others individuals feel they must remain faithful to this self and not allow the homogenising force of the public sphere to diffuse it. Indeed, it matters little if this self is commendable in others' eyes or not: as Pfaller sardonically notes, we're more than ready these days to welcome philanderers and necrophiles onto any number of daytime talk shows.[27]

Pfaller sees most instances of interactive art as continuous with this narcissistic culture: "Better familiar than foreign!"[28] is the watchword not only of consumer culture but also of much participatory art. Rather than being confronted with pieces that challenge their beliefs, when asked to help create an artwork individuals tend to contribute something of what they already know and value. Since they are now responsible for it, the temptation exists for them to avoid investing the artwork with disconcerting or dangerous ideas that they couldn't enthusiastically assume in the mode of an ideal identification. Similarly, when it's a matter of the collective production of an artwork, the emphasis is placed on harmonious and mutually-reinforcing interactions with others. As Pfaller notes, in such conditions it's unlikely that political ideas that risk splitting participants into opposing camps of "friends" and "enemies" can ever be explored. While such collective works think of themselves as staging ideal political forms that emphasise cooperation and creativity, for Pfaller they actually make politics — understood as the site of irreducible antagonisms — vanish. In short, while interactive art appears to make people more active and even to "return"[29] certain capacities to them, in reality it confines action to the libidinal circuit of the ego and robs collective life of its properly antagonistic substance.

But if interactive art reduces the scope of individuals' activity, how do artworks that maintain a clear division between "stage" and "auditorium" expand it? How can Pfaller's concept of interpassivity shed light on these hitherto unperceived virtues of "traditional" artworks? How

might it help us conceive of different forms of participation that escape the egological trap?

This is an ideal point to offer a more in-depth discussion of interpassivity itself. In my view, the best point of entry into interpassivity is the much broader concept of "illusions without owners". Along with interpassivity, this concept lies at the heart of Pfaller's thought.[30] Take the performance of a religious ritual: while I carry out the requisite gestures, in my psychical interiority I can simultaneously entertain all kinds of thoughts, including the thought that my religion is implausible, stupid, or just plain boring. Nevertheless, as seen from the "outside", my ritual gestures rigorously attest to my faith. Or rather, they do so for a "naive observer":[31] that is, for someone who is "only concerned with external appearances"[32] and who doesn't think to delve too deeply into my intentions, as an inquisitor might.[33] Returning to the concept of "illusions without owners", in this instance it is the "naive observer" who has such an "illusion": specifically, the illusion that I'm performing the ritual with full attention and subjective faith. Of course, nobody else present really thinks this is the case: this is precisely why it is "nobody's illusion".[34] But in allowing me this space between my subjective life and my outward, objective existence, the other followers of my religion are not acting cynically. On the contrary, they are making it possible for the religion to function at all. By way of this "illusion without a present owner", religious life continues in all of its objective forms, while its "believers" are divested of the overly-demanding — if not impossible — duty of demonstrating their perfect adherence to its strictures.

How might the concept of "illusions without owners" work in art more specifically? In the chapter 'The Work of Art That Observes Itself', Pfaller briefly remarks on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. He wonders whether it's the case — as some critical theories might argue[35] — that my emotional investment in Romeo's destiny means "I not only sympathise with a person, but accept the whole presupposed structures of Renaissance class division, heterosexual monogamy and so on".[36] Does my pleasure in the artwork and in one character's trajectory betray my unconscious adherence to what is essentially feudalism? Do my hopes

for the lovers mark me out as a traitor to today's politically-correct opinion?

In no way, answers Pfaller. Taking pleasure in the artwork doesn't mean identifying with it narcissistically. On the contrary: I don't adhere to feudalism at all. And yet, in my consumption of *Romeo and Juliet* I project an invisible viewer — a "naive observer" lacking all of the sensitivities of a good 21ˢᵗ century leftist — who *does* enjoy in an unmediated fashion the ideas and values that the play espouses. This observer is decidedly *not* me — nor is it anyone in the audience of a present-day production of the play. Yet by delegating my pleasure to them I can enjoy the play *through* their imagined enjoyment without having to give up my political convictions. This is interpassivity: instead of experiencing certain pleasures myself, I allow someone else to do so in my place. I outsource my *passivity* — my receptivity to pleasure — to an other.[37]

Before we transition from art to politics proper, a few words are in order regarding the nature of the intersubjective relations that arise when such a "naive observer" is in play in a discourse or a collective practice. When Pfaller writes that this observer is the carrier of "nobody's illusion", he means that "nobody" in a given social group — for instance, in today's audiences of *Romeo and Juliet* — is under the sway of this illusion. The "naive observer" need not coincide with any person present. There are salutary effects produced by this outsourcing of pleasure and belief. Consider what would happen if, by contrast, the slightest sign of enjoyment on my part of *Romeo and Juliet* was taken by others to signal my secret commitment to compulsory heterosexuality or patriarchal social relations. Rather than have the time and space to consider the play in all of its complexity, I would be forced to expend enormous amounts of psychical energy pre-emptively repressing this pleasure (an impossible task, since affects always find a way of coming out). Guilt would then ensue, followed by resentment for all those who let themselves enjoy spontaneously without doing any of the hard work of ideological purification. I would be moved to use the play as a means of proving my incorruptibility. At the same time, my relations with others would be marred by intense suspicion and games of one-upmanship: each of us

would seek to purge any trace of pleasure from ourselves and from others, before purging those deemed to have failed in this difficult task. In short, rather than a community of critically-minded individuals capable of reflecting together on the play's content, we would get a form of cultural Terror that would stunt all of our capacities.

To return to Pfaller's polemic against interactive art, we can now catch a glimpse of a virtue of maintaining the distinction between audience and artwork. As Pfaller suggests, by keeping audience members at a distance from the artwork, there is less pressure on them to identify with it in a narcissistic mode. Such a structure thus constitutes a local site of resistance to one of contemporary society's dominant tendencies. For in today's climate of generalised egotism, it is not only lay participants who are likely to claim that the interactive artwork represents *them* (read: their ideal ego); others are likely to interpret these individuals' actions as the emanations of an ego as well, and consequently to expect from them "authentic" expressions of their adherence to the artwork's values. Again, this risks making it impossible to explore controversial, or even tasteless, ideas. However, if our encounters with artworks are mediated by a "naive observer" who shoulders the weight of illusions belonging to nobody, we are much more capable of engaging with difficult works. As Pfaller writes with reference to the theatre, with interpassivity as a mediating screen between the performance and the audience, actors "can act in a sarcastic or cynical — or even excessively naive — way and play something evil".[38] By means of interpassivity, everyone present knows they are dealing with an entirely fictional scene where all actions occur according to an "as if"[39] structure: actors act "as if" they were really "evil", while the audience enjoys the work "as if" they were really seduced by the characters' wicked ways. But again, the person who *really* believes or enjoys the "evil" isn't present: they are the "naive observer" to whom all of the work's values are attributed. Meanwhile, the actually existing audience members can at once enjoy the work *and* engage with the difficult ideas it presents, without wasting time proving their ideological purity to one another.

We can see now how interpassivity clarifies the critical virtues of maintaining a division of labour between artists and audience, along with a functional distinction between stage and auditorium. Concomitantly, we can see how interactive art plays into the hands of today's widespread narcissism: instead of expanding subjects' capacities for action, it reduces everything to the level of Lacan's Imaginary register. Of course, Pfaller admits that this need not be the destiny of all interactive art: no rule stipulates that audiences have to participate in the guise of their ideal egos.[40] Rather, interactive art might well be a space where participants can take on a role that they play in an "as if" mode. They could thereby explore something beyond the confines of their ideal identifications.

Playing the Impossible

By exploring Pfaller's thoughts against interactive art, we've discovered that his polemic against participation is only against certain forms of participation: specifically, those that mobilise individuals' egos. Even more significant, however, is the discovery that the theory of interpassivity might help clarify what forms of participation in public and political life we should actually strive for. In other words, Pfaller ultimately writes in favour of participation, albeit of a purified kind.

To see some of the salutary effects of interpassivity in public life, let's begin by considering Pfaller's remarks on politeness:

> politeness is itself a game — a 'comedy' according to Alain: everyone is invited to stand back from oneself a little, not to take oneself too seriously, as one might tend to do, and to play a role instead that is pleasant to others.[41]

A "naive observer" is clearly operative in games of politeness. I need not feel in my psychical interiority a pressing concern for others' feelings; I need only act "as if" I did. Once again, it's the "naive observer" concerned exclusively with "external appearances" who judges — both for myself and for others — whether my polite gestures are sufficiently

convincing. When we encounter one another in "polite" society each of us therefore plays a role that is minimally "fake": we feign interest in each others' lives, make self-deprecating remarks about ourselves, and pursue lines of conversation that might contradict our innermost feelings. The point, of course, is not to deceive others. In any case, this is impossible: politeness is "a deception with no one deceived",[42] as Kant recognised long ago. Rather, we play these "fake" roles so as to allow a shared space of discussion to emerge; a space where our individual idiosyncrasies, our hatreds and hang-ups, simply don't feature. By applying Pfaller's theory of interpassivity to the public sphere, we see that the relevant opposition is not between the perverse artificiality of public life and the authentic expression of self that occurs in the private sphere. Rather, it is between forging a common discursive space concerned with collective goods on the one hand, and aggressively asserting the truth of our ideal selves on the other.

Pfaller clearly thinks that a renewed appreciation for interpassivity can encourage us to construct a public sphere less encumbered by aggressive demands for recognition and more attuned to truly public questions — questions of distribution, of shared history, and of justice. For beyond liberal platitudes about the "personal" (read: the egological) being political, these questions necessarily require us to abstract from our individual idiosyncrasies and consider ourselves and others in terms of our relative social anonymity. The theory of interpassivity promises to make us sensitive once again to specificity of the language games we should ideally play in public. It also shows us that these games can be more liberating — indeed more humorous — than the ego-talk currently flooding the public sphere with petty resentments and delusions of grandeur.

Pfaller takes this argument a step further in *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*. There, he claims that when subjects tend to identify directly with systems of ideas or values — that is, when they draw their "ideal egos" and "ego ideals" from them, rather than attributing belief in these systems to a "naive", inexistent other — they inevitably experience any pleasures that don't correspond with these "ideals" as profoundly

disturbing occurrences: they feel guilty for having failed to live up to the standards required of them. Consequently, they turn to forms of ascetism and make a virtue of their ability to resist pleasures, simultaneously reacting with anger, disgust and scornfulness to those they see as having given in to them.[43] For Pfaller, this unholy alliance between narcissism and ascetism has provided the perfect ideological conditions for neoliberal governments since the early 1980's to pursue austerity measures that demand populations accept the wholesale destruction of institutions that once guaranteed them more comfortable, fulfilling lives. He writes:

> These affects shape those ideological conditions under which people not only accept, but actively affirm politics that harm them. The most obvious phenomena resulting from the current, ascetic affective organisation of the masses is the joy in 'rational' appreciation of supposedly necessary 'austerity measures', and the affected persons' active compliance in the neoliberal attacks on their own most immediate interests — such as social security, pension plans, education, infrastructure, and so on.[44]

Pfaller's work suggests that the Left's call for increased participation, insofar as this has taken the form of participation by individuals *qua* egos, has thus long been complicit with the Right's attempts to dismantle the welfare state and to replace solidarity with sacrifice — both of one's own living conditions and those of others. Thus, in addition to neutralizing the narcissism of identity politics, learning to live again with our pleasures through forms of interpassivity would help remove what Pfaller identifies as one of the "key ideological pillars of today's seemingly omnipotent neoliberal politics":[45] the ascetism that arises from pursuing "self-esteem" over simple "joy".[46]

The power of Pfaller's concept of interpassivity to clarify the stakes of today's dominant ideology, not to mention to guide us as we try to resist it, is undeniable. In the remainder of this paper, I'd therefore like to bring his work into dialogue with two other philosophers who have also offered compelling accounts of how we might struggle against the

rampant inequality unleashed by neoliberal capitalism: Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. To the best of my knowledge, Pfaller has never written on Badiou's work, though he has critiqued Rancière's account of the politics of art, albeit only briefly.[47] How might Pfaller's work on interpassivity connect with the central place these two French philosophers accord equality in their political thought? My claim will be that interpassivity's political horizon is potentially egalitarian.

To begin with, it's worth noting that for Pfaller interpassivity has more than a conjunctural significance politically: it entails a discovery concerning the nature of subjects' submission to ideologies *in general* and to the social systems these ideologies help perpetuate. This discovery consists in the idea that subjects have an intrinsic capacity to *subtract* themselves from the predicates they possess in a given political situation — at least in part. That is, while interpassive subjects might appear outwardly to be engaged in the practices of some belief system like Christianity or capitalism, their interpassivity allows them to attribute a sincere adherence to these doctrines to a "naive" other — someone who precisely *isn't* them. Consequently, such interpassive subjects can never be said to be *completely* Christian or capitalists, for in reality they expend a heap of psychical energy trying *not* to be these things. Interpassivity thus shows us that the power of an ideology can never be total; concomitantly, it demonstrates that subjects always have a trick up their sleeve should they wish to resist being subjectivized by an ideology: the trick of interpassivity.[48]

This subtractive capacity implied by interpassivity should resonate with readers of Badiou and Rancière. For these two thinkers, politics consist in subjects speaking and acting both *from* and *for* a position that doesn't coincide with any existing position in a structured political situation: specifically, a position of *equality*. Since all existing political situations are structured by way of an unequal distribution of capacities for thought and action, for Badiou and Rancière true political change comes about only when subjects effectively verify that *all* are capable of intervening with equal import in the affairs of the collective to determine its egalitarian political destiny. Doing politics therefore always means

becoming something unrecognisable from the perspective of established ideas regarding people's political capacities.[49]

Intriguingly, at one point in *Interpassivity* Pfaller writes that interpassive subjects are similarly "impersonal":[50] their most intimate being can't be identified with any existing subject position. Furthermore, as we've seen above, Pfaller's account of the political virtues of interpassivity all turn around the way it allows subjects to strip themselves of their individual particularities so as to better engage with issues affecting all citizens of a *polis* indiscriminately. Being interpassive means being *no one* — no one with any clearly-identifiable interests, beliefs or capacities. Might interpassivity's political horizon — the ideal it at once augurs and helps bring about — thus be consistent with the practices of equality that both Badiou and Rancière affirm?

Before answering this question, two words of warning about hastily adopting interpassivity as an intrinsically egalitarian concept. First, Pfaller's own writings present a mixed assessment of interpassive practices. He is well aware that such practices don't necessarily augur the overthrow of an ideological system. Rather, as his own example of religion shows, they can help them persevere in their being. As an interpassive Christian, for instance, not only can I keep the flame of faith burning — at least objectively; I can also enjoy thinking of myself as less of a dupe than other Christians. In such cases, interpassivity means ideologies can live on by means of a toxic mixture of psychotic faith and narcissistic contempt, without any end in sight. Second (and here I take up a suggestion briefly made by Pfaller himself), interpassivity can function as a purely descriptive term for the way social groups define themselves negatively with respect to others. As we saw, in the concrete the phrase "nobody's illusions" actually resolves into the phrase "nobody in a given social group's illusions". Thus, a social group can be united by each of its member *not* being the "naive" other who really believes in or enjoys a certain phenomenon.[51] At the same time, however, this "naive" other need not be entirely inexistent, as Pfaller often suggests they are.[52] Rather, it is more than possible that it correspond to another social group that is constituted as, precisely, the "naive" other who *really* believes or

enjoys. In other words, while interpassivity can suggest a resistance to being a subject of an ideology, it can also betray a more profound allegiance to a social imaginary in which certain "naive" or even "stupid" others figure — others who are thought to really exist in the form of political, ethnic or cultural groups different to one's own. Moreover, as Pfaller's own remarks suggest, there is a resistance on the part of such social imaginaries to change. In the case of what he calls "disconnection-type" relations to the other, the delegation of pleasure or belief is not only necessary in order to avoid a certain psychic tension, it also has to be secured by conclusively *othering* the "naive" other involved. As Pfaller writes, such "disconnection-types" of delegation "mak[e] acts necessary that confirm a disconnection"[53] between the subject who enjoys or believes interpassively and the other who is *really* duped by certain ideas or practices. Social groups can therefore have a profound interest in cultivating an ideology in which other groups are framed as irredeemably "naive" or "stupid". In such cases, interpassivity seems less a weapon that can help fight for a better world and more just another tool in the sociologist's already-well-equipped toolbox. It seems very distant from a politics of equality.

These two caveats aside, it still seems pertinent to insist on the promising points of connection between Pfaller's work and the political thought of Badiou and Rancière. Recall first, however, that Pfaller framed his theory of interpassivity as a counter to the Left's injunction to increase participation in politics. Given that both Badiou and Rancière understand politics as the effective verification on the part of those excluded from the management of the collective's existence that they have equal capacity to participate in collective life — and to do so by steering the collective in the direction of greater equality — it initially appears paradoxical to align their thought with Pfaller's. For at one very obvious level, both Badiou and Rancière argue *for* increased participation. And yet, as we know, Pfaller's thought is only opposed to participation if it means the participation of individuals *qua* egos. Thus, just as Badiou and Rancière see politics as a practice where individuals become impersonal, their pre-political identities having been determined by a situation of *inequality* (thereby making their political pursuit of equality entirely indiscernible relative to

their starting situation), so does Pfaller imagine political life as a site where individuals ideally become anonymous: equal in their lack of identity, in being *no-one*. Pfaller's account of interpassivity suggests that it might be one practice among others that would work effectively in the direction of equality.

What's intriguing is that Pfaller also makes repeated reference to the category of the "impossible" in his discussion of the political efficacy of interpassive practices. As is well known, the "impossible" constitutes the key category that Badiou and Rancière mobilise in their political though. For them, what is "impossible" is precisely equality itself since existing situations are built on the constitutive denial that all people are equally capable of thinking and acting with regard to collective life.[54] For Badiou and Rancière, politics involves local attempts to make the impossible possible; to verify the efficacy of equality in the midst of its negation.

There is nevertheless a homonymy operative here in the use that Badiou, Rancière and Pfaller put the category of the impossible to. In conclusion, it's worthwhile clarifying the different senses of the impossible in their discourses in order to bring Pfaller's own distinct contribution better into focus.

On a number of occasions when writing about art, Pfaller argues that one politically effective technique available to artists is to occupy an "impossible" position, one that nobody else in the field can take up.[55] Elsewhere, as we know, he describes this "impossible" position as an "impersonal"[56] one since it falls between the cracks of individuals' existing sites of subjectivization. As an example of such an "impossible" position, take Pfaller's discussion of the work *Please Love Austria* by Christoph Schlingensief in his 2016 article 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art'. As a provocation to both Left and Right, in the year 2000 Schlingensief set up two shipping containers in the middle of Vienna, which he claimed held immigrant workers. He then invited the public to vote, *Big Brother*-style, on which worker should be expelled first: "the cook from Kenya or the engineer from Vietnam"[57]? An outcry ensued,

with outraged leftists trying to "free" the immigrant workers while rightists accused Schlingensief of being a neo-Nazi. By making explicit the secret wishes of a contemporary racism informed by consumer culture, Schlingensief took up an "impossible" position that no one else dared occupy, thereby forcing the right in particular to confront the racist fantasies at the heart of its politics. From the perspective of interpassivity theory, most of Schlingensief's furious respondents obviously attributed the enjoyment contained in the artwork directly to him, as opposed to an inexistent other. Yet they could well have made a distinction between Schlingensief and the "naive" other who *really* enjoyed voting immigrants out of their country, and then use the artwork as a means of reflecting on the structure of contemporary Austrian politics. As Pfaller sums up the political efficacy of this artwork, "[e]ngaging individuals with a belief-position that does not allow for identification prove[d] to be an efficient means to shatter predominant subject-effects".[58] By occupying an "impossible" position, Schlingensief illuminated what the "possible" positions in Austrian politics actually involved.

Now, the sense of "impossible" here is obviously not that of equality as the possibility that is absolutely foreclosed by an unequal situation, as it is in Badiou and Rancière's thought. Rather, it names those statements or subject positions that constitute the disavowed or otherwise invisible substrata of a given ideological constellation, the exposure of which can lead to change. Thus, we have to retain a distinction in Pfaller's thought between the specific political efficacy of art, which functions by way of a distinct actualisation of the "impossible", and politics proper as a practice centred uniquely on making the impossible position of equality a real possibility.

To my mind, Pfaller's own politics are ultimately consistent with this account of politics. Indeed, as I've suggested throughout, we can read his analysis of interpassivity as a lesson in how collectives might work without constant reference to their members' egos, which is also to say without reference to the determinate positions they occupy in a given, unequal situation. Politics, then, really is about increased participation: not about increased participation on the part of egos or of

our intra-situational selves, as Pfaller teaches us, but of ourselves as "impersonal" — even "impossible" — members of a generic humanity committed to verifying our equality. Pfaller's work on interpassivity stands as a brilliant signpost on the path to this new world.

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[1] Pfaller offers his own account of the concept's genesis in Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 2-5. For other significant contributions to the discussion of interpassivity, see Mladen Dolar, 'The Enjoying Machine', *Umbra* (2001), pp. 123-40, and Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989).

[2] See the essay 'What Reveals the Taste of the City: The Ethics of Urbanity' in *Interpassivity*, in particular pp. 117-123.

[3] See *Interpassivity*, pp. 62-64, as well as Pfaller's remarks on the distinction between belief, faith and paranoia in Robert Pfaller, 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art: An Althusserian Account' *Stasis*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2016), pp. 44-46. This distinction is key to *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*. See, for instance, pp. 35-72.

[4] See, for instance, Pfaller's comments on *Sex and the City* in *Interpassivity*, pp. 127-130.

[5] For other explicitly political uses of interpassivity, see Gijs van Oenen, 'A Machine that Would Go of Itself: Interpassivity and its Impact on Political Life', *Theory & Event*, Vol. 9, No .2 (2006) and Gijs van Oenen, 'Three Cultural Turns: How Multiculturalism, Interactivity and Interpassivity Affect Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2010), pp. 293-306.

[6] Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners* (Verso, 2014)

[7] Robert Pfaller, *Die Illusionen der anderen: Über das Lustprinzip in der Kultur* (Surhkamp Verlag, 2002).

[8] *Interpassivity*, p. 4.

[9] *Interpassivity*, p. 91.

[10] I use the term "Left" here as synonymous with the "emancipatory" politics of which Pfaller speaks in the above passage.

[11] *Interpassivity*, p. 101.

[12] For Pfaller's use of this Althusserian vocabulary, see *Interpassivity*, pp. 92-93

[13] *Interpassivity*, p. 2.

[14] *Interpassivity*, pp. 2, 20, 92-96.

[15] *Interpassivity*, p. 94.

[16] "In the 1960s, communication theory dreamed to a large extent of media through which everyone could transmit information to everyone else. [...] With the onset of the civilian use of the Internet at the beginning of the 1990s, these at least thirty-year-old ideas found a massive technical equivalent in reality for the first time", *Interpassivity*, p. 95.

[17] *Interpassivity*, p. 94.

[18] *Interpassivity*, p. 46.

[19] *Interpassivity*, p. 100.

[20] "The discourse of interactivity, facilitated mainly by new media, was a revival of very old wishes and utopias, which had become unquestioned facts — consequently, this discourse was more of an ideology than a theory. Contrary to this, the thinking of interpassivity consisted of a series of disturbing observations, questions and considerations, regarding which no one — not even those who advanced them — knew where they would lead. It is precisely this uncertainty and openness that distinguishes a theory from an ideology", *Interpassivity*, p. 3.

[21] *Interpassivity*, p. 94.

[22] *Interpassivity*, p. 96.

[23] *Interpassivity*, p. 100.

[24] *Interpassivity*, p. 101.

[25] *Interpassivity*, pp. 79, 99, 100, 126, 129, 135.

[26] *Interpassivity*, p. 99.

[27] *Interpassivity*, p. 96.

[28] *Interpassivity*, p. 98.

[29] For Pfaller's discussion of the relation between interpassivity and the Althusserian critique of "reappropriation" as the overcoming of a perceived "alienation", see *Interpassivity*, p. 4.

[30] For the most extensive exploration of the concept of "illusions without owners", see the second chapter of *On The Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 'Belief', pp. 35-72.

[31] *Interpassivity*, p. 7.

[32] *Interpassivity*, p. 126.

[33] "...the invisible observer's powers of discovery apply only to performed acts. That which is secretly thought or felt remains hidden from this observer", *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 237.

[34] *Interpassivity*, p. 112

[35] Pfaller's chosen reference here is Laura Mulvey's famous essay 'Visual Art and Narrative Cinema', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation* (New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), pp. 361-74.

[36] *Interpassivity*, p. 46.

[37] The opposition between *activity* and *passivity* in interpassivity theory needs to be taken with a grain of salt. As Pfaller himself admits, the inversion of his enemy's concept "interactivity" was initially a tactical — and not a purely conceptual — matter: it was part of a "battle on the enemy's ground", *Interpassivity*, p. 47, n. 4. For the most extensive treatment of the strange forms of both activity *and* passivity that are involved in interpassive practices, see Mladen Dolar, 'The Enjoying Machine'. Dolar proposes to reframe the discourse of interpassivity in terms of Lacan's concepts of desire, drive and enjoyment. He writes: "this line of reasoning [...] places interpassivity in the realm of interactivity: it is a possible strategy to circumvent the impasse of desire and a way to prolong it. [...] Desire mimes passivity in order to deal with the deadlock of its inherent interactivity", 'The Enjoying Machine', p. 131. Pfaller's own remarks on interpassivity as

an active "strategy", particularly in forms of obsessional neurosis, can be found in *Interpassivity*, pp. 42-44.

[38] *Interpassivity*, p. 101.

[39] For Pfaller's discussion of the "as if" structure, see *Interpassivity*, pp. 124-126.

[40] "...might it not be conceivable that inclusion of viewers in art could serve to allow the to become astute and alert, in particular with respect to attempts *of the same kind* to include them *in society*? The beginnings, for instance, of Action Art or Body Art (e.g., Günter Brus or Franko B), during which viewers were forced to ask themselves if they were able to calmly watch the self-violation being performed on the stage of if it would not be better to intervene, point strongly in this direction", *Interpassivity*, p. 103.

[41] *Interpassivity*, p. 124.

[42] *Interpassivity*, p. 125.

[43] For this argument, which runs throughout Pfaller's book, see *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, pp. 195-201, 204-210.

[44] *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 194.

[45] *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 283.

[46] *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, 204-5.

[47] See 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art', p. 60, n. 27.

[48] *Interpassivity*, p. 8.

[49] See, among many other relevant texts, Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (Verso, 2005), 98, Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (Continuum, 2005), 347, Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30.

[50] *Interpassivity*, 101.

[51] Pfaller very briefly remarks on the potential for interpassivity theory to account for social group formation: "...the consequences of Mannoni's discoveries could cause a major theoretical revolution not only for aesthetics, but also for mass psychology. For they indicate that social groups can be held together by the pleasures provided by delegation. Interpassivity would thus prove to be a key for the understanding of libidinal mass-bondings. Masses could not only be held together by common identification, as Freud had thought [...], but also by common disidentification...", *Interpassivity*, p. 45.

[52] For instance, take the following passage: "Interpassive behaviour thus always involves a certain 'as if': parents act as if Santa Claus existed, children act as if they believed in Santa Claus. So the illusion contained in the 'as if' might very well be nobody's illusion. Nobody needs to be the real believer here', *Interpassivity*, p. 112.

[53] *Interpassivity*, p .44.

[54] "As far as I am concerned, I posit explicitly that *politics is the art of the impossible*", Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (Continuum, 2009), 317. See also Rancière's account of "impossible identification" in Jacques Rancière, 'The Cause of the Other', *Parallax*, Vol. 4, No. 20 (1998), pp. 25-33.

[55] See, for three excellent examples of this, 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art', pp. 55-59.

[56] *Interpassivity*, p. 101.

[57] 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art', p. 59.

58 'The Efficiency of Ideology and the Possibilities of Art', p. 59.

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