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The Heckler's Promise

Scenes of heckling punctuate public life. Think, for instance, of British Prime Minister David Cameron being heckled when campaigning in 2015 in Alnwick in Northumbria for the general election. During the visit, a man with a ukulele sang tunefully to him a melodic performance of the words “F**k off back to Eton with your Eton chums,” staged in such a way that made both the Prime Minister’s entourage and the bystanders anticipate a welcome. For sure, heckling has departed from abusive alcohol-infected jibes at comedy performers; it is more than the “shouting up” at football matches—heckling and its associated formats have become sophisticated. Moreover, artists and performers are also using heckling as tactics in open discussion events and performative actions. DV8’s *Can We Talk About This* (2012), for example, a performance aimed at provoking discussion on issues relating to multiculturalism, freedom of speech and censorship, made direct usage of heckling in performance by including a moment when an audience member shouts, “This is Islamophobic shit.”

Our purpose in this article is to reassess the role of the heckler as a vital agent in processes of democratic exchange. The research has grown out of Jordan’s larger project, *impossible publics*, and proposes a re-examination of the discredited actant that is the heckler and attempts to articulate their productive role in the disruption of rational speech acts. For Campbell, the Heckler offers an original type of politics of participation through performance. In placing together two different perspectives on heckling, “The Heckler’s Promise” draws from earlier writing on the function of the heckle published by Jordan in *Art and the Public Sphere* (Jordan 2011) and Campbell in *Scenario* (Campbell 2017b).¹ Here we adapt and extend these prior publications in order to advance and enforce a new proposition; the Heckler as *productive interrupter*. Together, we acknowledge that the presence of a heckler is nothing new in comedy (and the literature/discussion well-trodden), however our contention is that the heckler operates as a counter position to dominant speech moments in democratic exchange. This, coupled with our introduction of the heckler into the critical literature and practice of contemporary art, operates as a charge towards readdressing complex power relations within both participative art exchanges and democracy itself.

This paper therefore seeks to do two things: first, to explore the heckler as a “device” for reassessing the potential of interruption in democratic exchange, particularly in relation to contemporary theories of art and participation, and second, to try it out; to put the heckler

at the centre of an artwork. We will discuss the potential of the heckler in general by calling on examples in comedy, however the aim is to extend its potential and scope from comedy into the everyday practices of debate and opinion formation. In short, we propose a rethinking of the heckler. In Part 1, “Heckle, Hiss, Howl and Holler,” Jordan asks if there is something worth considering in the process of heckling for democratic exchange. In Part 2, “Contract, Collaboration, Countdown and Confrontation,” Campbell strikes out to see what happens when you present an artwork that trials a performance about heckling via the act of heckling.

Part 1: *Heckle, Hiss, Howl and Holler*

Notes on the Democratic Function of a Heckler

Speaking out in the wrong place at the wrong time is surely one of the reasons why there is political potential in the heckler. Institutions of public speech inscribe the heckler as anti-social, but I want us to consider her in quite the opposite way, as the very embodiment of becoming social. Let us upend the conformist definition of the heckle as anti-social and instead think of the heckler as heroic, a kind of public speech super hero with the ability to suspend rhetoric, preserving the right to speak out of turn. The violence, awkwardness and embarrassment of the heckle are signs of its political courage, fearlessness and agency. The heckler’s interruption opens up a space for public discourse. Deprived of the heckler, we would have one less method of turning passers-by into assembled publics.

The heckler is the name we give to the unauthorised public speaker, or, in other words, the public speaker with no public of their own. Magpie-like, the heckler occupies a place belonging to another. The audience who hear the heckle and who, in fact, are the addressee of the heckle, are not the heckler’s public: they are assembled to listen to somebody else. This incongruity helps us unpick the definition of a public; a public is not constant but always temporally changing as it moves from one encounter to the next. As we walk through public space we are not fixed subjects, never *only* a consumer or a commuter; we are always mothers, daughters, wives, friends and colleagues. We are also accessible agents of encounter for politicising acts or events. Most criticism of the heckler assumes that the heckler wants to exchange places with the official speaker as opposed to being a member of the crowd, but what makes the heckler an “impossible” speaker is the fact that is she wants to be neither official speaker nor silent mute.²

The heckler’s repertoire needs to be explored as a series of tactics and as such we plot ways in which we have seen heckling enacted. Heckling’s performativity as embodied through the trope of the heckler can be characterised by the following:

- Disruption of events predicated upon an interruption that demonstrates a sophisticated usage of language in conjunction with split-second timing and “wit, volume” and a razor-sharp tongue (White 2006);
- Using interruption to command the immediate attention of others (Garner 1998);

- Participation and aspects of performance: someone's opinions being challenged by another in front of a live audience through the usage of tactics, including methods relating comedy and humour in language, as made explicit, for example, in the "put-down" (Hound 2011);
- Power relations in terms of *schadenfreude* and superiority theory (Moreall 1983);
- Actions taking place within the historical context of the Roman gladiatorial games in which the audience shouted, "Habet! Hoc Habet!" ("He's had it!"), "Mitte!" ("Send him back!") (Auguet 2012, 48–49), and used their bodies to express disapproval; *pollice verso* meaning "downturned thumb" (Corbeill 2004, 4).
- Divisive in terms of heckling being "relegated to the realm of vulgar and uncouth" but also "courageous" (Jordan 2013).

The heckler's origins are embedded in the political struggle of the industrial working class. The primary definition [of heckling] refers to processes in the textile trade, where to heckle was to tease or comb out flax or hemp fibres, to go through them, as might be said, with a fine-tooth comb. The leap across to the secondary meaning—to interrupt political speakers with awkward or embarrassing questions—was made in Scotland, and specifically perhaps in Dundee, a famously radical town where the hecklers who combed the flax had established a reputation as the most radical and stropky element in the workforce (McKie 2005).

More recently, we know the heckler as a figure in stand-up comedy; "owning" the heckler means that you deal with her directly, that you confront her interruption and incorporate it into your act or your routine. A comedian's response to a heckle seems to say more about the comedian than it does about the heckler; the way you deal with an interruption reveals your relationship to fearless speech and fearless listening. In a stand-up routine by Jamie Kennedy, the comedian starts his joke by describing an incident in a diner. When he says, "the woman comes over to my table" he immediately gets heckled by a member of the audience who says "Server!" She explains, "not 'woman', 'server.'" After a few abusive remarks to her—"I'd like you to serve your mouth shut" and "Serve you up these nuts"—Kennedy eventually asks her what it's like to be a server and she delivers what I would like to think of as a punch line for representational democracy; she replies, "I am not a server I am a nanny," In this instance, the heckler speaks up for someone else, perhaps for her class or her gender. Significantly, she uses this speech moment to represent another, making the exchange between heckled speaker and the heckler a political act; in this case, the heckler is not simply an individualistic nuisance-maker but a speaker for others.

Without the heckler, public speaking cannot be nominated as democratic. When politicians give key speeches in front of supine audiences without any danger of heckling, their televisual professionalism is bought at the cost of the genuine encounter between speaker and audience that the heckler embodies. Think about the trouble that is caused when well-meaning liberals are made to contend with the "Hecklers Veto." Under the US constitution, it is illegal to limit the opportunity of free speech by banning those from a public rally that might interrupt. ("Hecklers Veto", n.d.). This initially seems a step towards the inclusion of all publics, but let's face it, when the heckler is only allowed to be present

to represent a symbol of free speech we can suspect that no fearless listening will ensue (Jordan 2011, 117–19).

The heckler is therefore both a symbol of “free speech” and at the same time an “improper” speaker. If we turn our attention to the economies of speech acts, which the heckler interrupts, then the dual character of the heckler is revealed as a badge of the heckler's political being. Heckling is made possible by the allocation of places within the public sphere; the heckler is not responsible for the allocation of places by virtue of transgressing them. The heckler is a political actant; when the listener speaks, the invisible boundaries between speaker and listener are made visible.

There is something useful in exploring the heckler and her methods as a potential political actor in the public sphere. I see the act of the heckler and the event of the heckle, for example, as enabling us to understand how we form opinions and values through communication and exchange. Moreover, the figure of the heckler provides new potentialities for developing practices of representation democracy. In the process of deliberate democracy, deliberation is central to collective decision-making. Deliberative democracy appears to be a way to make decisions face-to-face and through participating in discussion but it is not without its shortcomings as deliberative participation by *all* those affected by collective decision-making is extremely implausible (Parkinson 2003, 81). The process of rational argument, for example, is sometimes inhibiting to those members of the community not experienced in public speaking or accustomed to presenting their views in a “reasoned” manner. Enter the heckler, who ignores these rules but provides us with a practising alternative of disruption.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe acknowledges a crisis in representative democracy, suggesting that it is failing because it is not agonistic enough. In an interview in 2013 with Biljana Đorđević and Julija Sardelić for the Subversive Festival, Mouffe stated:

it's the lack of agonism, which is the origin of the crisis of representative democracy today. And the solution is not simply to abandon representative democracy but to transform it and to make it really agonistic. And I think these movements are a symptom of this lack of an agonistic debate and this is why one of the mottos of these movements is “we have a vote but we don't have a voice.” And to give a voice is to allow for an agonistic debate. (Mouffe, quoted in Đorđević and Sardelić 2013)

Mouffe prefers what she calls “agonism” over a continuing consensual neoliberal democracy (2010, 249), arguing that it has the potential to allow different positions to co-exist. For Mouffe, turning antagonisms in to agonism results in a pluralistic community with no one political position dominating a group, thereby providing us with new alternatives for how to live together. Agonism allows people to disagree without treating each other as enemies, or, as Mouffe describes, “[agonism is] a form of adversarial confrontation instead of antagonism between enemies” (quoted in Đorđević & Sardelić 2013). She continues:

My argument is that we need a conflictual consensus for democracy to exist. There needs to be some form of consensus but the consensus is on what I call “the ethical-political principles,” the values that we are going to accept in order to organise our coexistence: liberty and equality for all. But those values are going to be interpreted differently according to different perspectives.

I see the heckler as playing a crucial part in the development of agonism; by stepping up and performing the conflict in the room, the heckler brokers a route from confrontational antagonism to agonism.

Notes on the Performative Function of the Heckler

Awkwardness and embarrassment accompany the heckler. Their interruption is a symbolically violent act that not only exhibits disrespect for the authorised speaker, but also the public who have consented to hear one individual but find themselves listening to another. The heckler begins with controversy, viewed as the enemy, but nevertheless she allows the onlookers an opportunity to see more than one position at a time. The unwanted imposition of the heckle is not prefaced with the courteous phrases that the educated and polite are accustomed to issuing before an interruption (“may I just say...,” “pardon me for interjecting, but...,” or even raising a hand to acknowledge turn-taking). Seeking permission to speak is alien to the heckle.

Putting your body in the place of interruption is no mean feat. This interruption undermines the neoliberal democratic method of turn-taking and holds out for content over process. The heckler does not acquiesce to the normative need for harmony in personal relations; she ignores the turn-taking method that is an implicit part of the process of arriving at agreement through the practice of deliberative democracy. But not only does she avoid civil processes, she never waits to be asked; she is an unreasonable speaker, but a wholly necessary communicator. The heckler sticks out both her neck and her tongue out in order to reveal our customary habits of transaction.

The heckle thus harnesses the combination of speaking and acting; the meaning of the language one uses in a heckle is not as significant as the fact of the interruption. This recalls J.L. Austin’s theory of speech-acts, wherein words not only describe something but do something (Austin 1962, 5). Or as Judith Butler elegantly puts it, a performative word or phrase “enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 1993, 13). So, for example, the phrase “I bet” enacts, produces and names the bet. More notably for my consideration of the heckler, both Austin and Butler asserts that “context” is a crucial factor of communication; understanding “context” and utilising it as an aspect of the meaning constructed through words is what enables speech acts to become actions. Where Austin provides us with the notion that language is itself an action, I propose that the heckler’s act of interruption be understood as an “act turned speech.” The embodied interruption of the heckler, always responding to a public context, allows us to consider the role of the *body* in the construction of the meaning. Moreover, the heckler helps upturn Austin’s original

arrangement to demonstrate how the combination of action with speech can in fact operate beyond language, to become “act-then-language;” to acknowledge that action, as in protest, is a form of debate and that the figure of the heckler opens further opportunities to think about the relationship between the body and language. If the body is not inherent to political action, then, as scholar Ian Bruff asks, “why do the police employ teargas at a political demonstration? Why not just talk the people into going home?” (Bruff 2013)

The embodied “act turned speech” of the heckler furthermore offers up an additional way to consider art’s relation to politics through art as opinion formation (Jordan 2017, 8). Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) has dominated the idea of social and participatory art practices since the 1990s. Through various forms of participatory art practice, including community and socially engaged practices, the notion of the participant contributing to the production of an artwork—or more accurately becoming a “co-producer”—has been used to circumnavigate the problems identified with hierarchy and power in artistic authorship. So, to render art more “democratic,” solutions have been directed at the issue of authorship, building on the work of Roland Barthes (Jordan 2014, 6; Barthes 1977, 142–48). However, scholars have also started to interrogate the very term “democratic,” as art historian Claire Bishop does:

When Bourriaud argues that, “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why? (Bishop 2004, 65)

Co-production ensures that conviviality is a key process of interpersonal relations, but could we accommodate a heckling participant? What would a heckling co-producer do to customary ideas of conviviality and consensus in participatory art practice? Could we perhaps, by utilising the heckler in this context, transform consensual participation into agonistic art?

Shouting encouragement from the side is not heckling. Neither “hear! hear!” nor “encore!” is a heckle. Heckles are typically derisive, aggressive and abusive. They can also be comic, clever and sarcastic, but they are always barbed. The heckler is the speaker that should not be heard. The “should not” here is an effect of the pragmatic circumstances of the speech act, not an abstract principle. Every public forum is a regime in which the capacity to speak and be heard is authorised for some and not for others. The heckler transgresses the institutional designation of speaker and listener. The heckler is ear-turned-mouth. Hecklers fail to be constrained by their given role. The heckler is the impossible speaker, the unacceptable talker, the bigmouth in the crowd, the whistle-blower, the trouble maker, the barracker, the jeerer, the gabber; but make no mistake, the heckler is never understood as the schmoozer or the contributor to understanding the complicated debate. Forget rational reasoned exchanges and you can even disregard language—consider bodily acts, make

speech acts as well as speeches, generate sounds; say “Yuck,” “Argh” and “Err,” shout “Boo,” sigh loudly, breathe heavily, hiss, howl and holler, shriek, scream and cry all for the cause of interruption.

Part 2: Contract, Collaboration, Countdown and Confrontation

The term “critical incident” refers to specific moments triggering critical reflection and possible revision of how to proceed with making practice. As the result of a critical incident involving me being interrupted by an audience member at the start of a participation-dependent, performance-related artwork, a major shift took place in the focus of my creative research. To explain, I sought to extend my then existing repertoire of comedy tactics and usage of slapstick to provoke audience participation by taking part in an artist residency entitled *The Experimental Comedy Training Camp* (2012), which took place at The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada. This residency set out to interrogate an emergent genre of performance, coined “experimental comedy,” by exploring the intersection between comedy, performance, fine art, and humour theories (see Billig 2005; Critchley 2002; Morreall 1983). From the start of the residency, myself and the other participants were expected to perform in nightly skits (short comedy performances lasting approximately ten-fifteen minutes). Their purpose was to: (1) gauge audience reaction to our existing strategies of generating comedic performance; (2) test out different methods relating to comedy to extend our repertoire; and (3) play around with what the term “experimental comedy” may mean.

When it was my turn to perform for the first time at the camp, I presented an iteration of my performance, *Lost for Words*, as a skit that sought to emphasise physical bodily gesture and made direct usage of slapstick comedy. I wasn’t bothered about demonstrating to the audience how clever (or not) I could be with verbal language (most of the skits by other participants before me had relied upon spoken word and verbal humour). I didn’t care if my audience saw my usage of slapstick as a philistine’s form of humour. By repurposing aspects of *Lost for Words*, I wanted to explore whether there could be a universal form of slapstick that *anyone* could find funny. When I began my iteration of *Lost for Words* by handing out plastic cups to audience members, one of the audience members shouted at me, “Do it your fucking self!” Never had an audience member reacted to my invitation for their participation in this manner. I was stunned for a moment and thought that he was joking. I replied, “Here you go,” and attempted to give him one of the cups. He responded, “Participatory shit!” and walked out of the room. Although his verbal assault did take me by surprise, I did not engage in conversation with the audience member. I shrugged my shoulders and carried on with the skit. Using the remainder of my time on the residency to explore physical and linguistic interruption specifically, I began by thinking through the reasons why we interrupt in verbal exchange. I identified two key reasons: first, the interrupter disagrees with what is being said, and second, the interrupter seeks to “score a point” over the speaker: “A common example of this is to show up a speaker by posing a question that they cannot answer” (Cowan 2016). Relating these reasons to aspects of my study, I noticed that the activity of heckling to be a common form of physical and linguistic interruption that has threads within both comedy and performance.

Experiencing physical and linguistic interruption directly via being heckled whilst performing during the residency enabled me to extend the possibilities of using interruption; it prompted me to explore heckling in practice, and to study the performativity of the heckler as a means of thinking about the possibilities of physical and linguistic interruption. In a discussion with Manick Govinda about why the heckler should be considered (Govinda 2012), he told me that his most embarrassing moment of heckling was at a performance club night in Birmingham in the early 2000s. During the performance *I Miss You*, performer Franko B attempted one of his signature catwalks where he purposely cuts himself to bleed. The artist inserted tiny pins into his feet and then walked fully unclothed repeatedly up and down a stretched canvas as the pins slowly released blood. Govinda told me that during the performance a member of the audience shouted out, “Flaming hell. Big deal! What a bloody farce! Every woman bleeds.” By way of contrast, I had experienced an iteration of this performance at Tate Modern, London, the same year and I stood amongst an audience who were silent throughout its entire duration. The performer demanded our silence and commanded our gaze—there was no interruption and no heckling—a situation bearing resemblance to the theatrical concept of the “fourth-wall.” Nobody (the audience during Franko B’s Tate Modern performance) wanted to upset the status quo in terms of us (the audience) watching, listening and being respectful of the performer’s wish that we remain silent and concentrate fully on his actions during the performance. Audiences were mindful of the fourth-wall effect. Audiences were *polite*. The two iterations of Franko B’s performance performed under two different contexts (art and comedy) yielded alternate polite and impolite responses from the audience. There is an implicit contract when I (the performer) do *this* and you (the audience) do *that*. Performers often have strict rules for managing the audience and, if a performance goes badly, the heckler. Yet whilst in Canada, I saw the heckler as positive, as *an opportunity*—an important means of increasing the possibilities of interruption. The rest of my time in Banff was spent refining my usage of existing comedy tactics and trying out some new ones in subsequent skits. This was to both learn more about the relationship between audience, performer and (non-convivial) forms of comedy by noticing everyone’s reactions; and also, akin to the performances of David Hoyle which involve the audience being insulted by Hoyle to provoke their participation, to instil audience members to become hecklers (engage in physical and linguistic interruption during the skit) by me using the mechanisms of comedy.

Two Months and Counting

Whereas in Banff I had anticipated instilling hecklers during events framed as performance art, on my actual return to the UK I adopted a different tack. A lecture that I had written shortly after my return, “Slipping and Slapsticking: In Promotion of the Heckler,” was accepted for a conference in London on performance practice-as-research. The paper argued in favour of heckling in terms of, first, destabilising the theatrical fourth-wall effect, referred to in the paper as a liminal threshold of politeness, and secondly, reminding the audience that there is no fourth-wall. When I asked artist Claire Makhlof Carter if she were interested in collaborating with me on a paper regarding slapsticking, her response was to

send a participation contract between a documenter (Carter) and a performer (myself). (Here Carter interjects, “This is not the narrative I remember, but then this is your paper and your version of events.”) When I explained more fully my focus, it was modified to that of a heckler (Carter) and a speaker (myself). I initially responded with bemusement at the contract’s formality but saw the potential within it to address the relationship between an artist and viewer that Kathy O’Dell (1998) refers to as a “contractual arrangement.” The term “contract” relates to, first, an agreement which contains sets of propositions and, second, a document which operates performatively—performative in the sense that an action must take place to fulfill a propositional statement that has been contractually agreed on. Rather than me undertaking an action that resulted in a document(s) as record of a live performance, here Carter and I flipped this process and started with a document (the contract) to provoke an action; the contract as a list of instructions that required enactment, as tongue-in-cheek and a playful performative prop.

Carter knew that the paper’s content would concern the contextual, philosophical and historical frameworks related to the philosophies and practices of heckling. All I knew about her participation in my delivery of the paper was that at some point she would interrupt me and I did not know when or how she would do this. By Carter interrupting me, she would have completed her main contractual obligation. The future events of our collaboration hung on the contract being signed by both me and Carter.

One Month and Counting

I was keen to discover how our planned interruption would play itself out in terms of managing the audience to my paper. What would be their responses? Would they engage positively with the interruption in terms of its potential or would they shun it as negative disruption to their ease of listening to my paper? I could not envisage any complaints; audience members were to experience heckling on a theoretical level (my paper) as well as be provided with a physical demonstration of heckling *in practice*. I devised three approaches that I could adopt in the face of Claire’s interruption:

1. Abandon speaking and leave the room as an effect of being so deeply affected by the nature of the interruption on an emotional level;
2. Carry on with speaking at the point before the interruption or “start again from scratch” (Dacre 2013). Appear emotionally unscathed even if feeling a bit bruised. This approach works in conjunction with stand-up comedian David Alan Grier’s advice for comedians presented with a heckler: “ignore him” (Grier as quoted in Dougherty 2003, 258);
3. In opposition to Grier, revel in the interruption to engage the heckler in a form of live contest. In the spirit of much heckling that takes place in stand-up comedy, see the interruption as an opportunity to engage with the heckler in a battle of the put-downs. Stand up to the heckler and regard

their interruption as “positively contributing to the show” (Double 2005, 195). Demonstrate resilience. Defeat the heckler!

One Day and Counting

The contract generated tension, anxiety and ambivalence towards its being signed. It stated that Claire’s interruption may involve abusive comments or actions. Even though the term abusive is so ambivalent, I could deal with Carter potentially drowning me out with the sound of a trumpet, intermittently shouting me down with expletives or even subtly heckling me with a giggle, a frown, a sideways glance, or falling asleep as an act of intention rather than as a natural bodily response to tiredness. Concerned with the performative element of the contract and its capacity for violence between Carter and I, I contemplated wearing a bulletproof vest while delivering my paper the next day. There was still time left for me *not* to sign the participation contract. I started to think about the enforceability of the contract, which, if signed, would make it legally binding.

Crunch Time: Delivery of Lecture

I signed the contract. What was Claire plotting? What was hidden inside her bag? A trumpet, a rat, a snake, a knife, a gun, a bomb? Although she had told me that she was nervous, I had no sympathy. Have you ever heard of a nervous heckler? Upon beginning to read my paper at the conference (with Carter seated in the audience), I tried not to externalise the trepidation that I was feeling at the time to the audience by way of facial expressions or punctured moments in what I was saying, or displaying anxiety in the tone of my voice. The majority of the audience was unaware that my emotional investiture with Claire was entirely different from that which I had with everyone else in the room at that time. Although Claire did not reveal herself as the perpetrator of the interruption to my paper until later in the question and answer session, audiences were unaware of the power relation at play in terms of me being at the mercy of Carter.

After approximately ten minutes a security guard walked into the room. He was approximately six-foot two-inches tall and weighed approximately eighteen stone. He had short black hair and dark eyes. He wore black shoes, black trousers, and a white shirt. He instructed me that I must stop reading. I refused and continued reading. The guard put one of his hands on one of my shoulders and demanded that I stop. Recalling proceeding, Carter suggests that as an audience member, to her the security guard seemed quite calm as if it might be bad news rather than an arrest and that “you seemed quite resistant, sort of holding ground” (Carter 2018). The guard grabbed my paper out of my hands and put it on the table in the presentation area and escorted me out of the room. I was told to sit on a seat and not speak. When I was permitted to re-enter after about ten minutes, Claire was sitting down at the presentation table, reading my paper. She stopped reading, handed me back my paper and indicated the point in the paper that she had stopped at. A slide towards the end of the presentation informed the audience of the contract between Carter and I. Carter recalls the following of the Q&A that then proceeded:

The audience were sympathetic to you and badmouthing me with comments such as ‘how could you ruin his paper’. They didn’t see it as a collaborative form. My aim wasn’t to irritate the audience [*unlike that being one of my aims*]. I didn’t know what might be but imagined it would create a discussion, dissensus possibly. (Carter 2018)

In the question and answer session that followed my paper, some audience members complained that this ruined their enjoyment of my paper and felt uncomfortable at being part of an artwork without their consent and prior knowledge of exactly what was going to happen in terms. For example, one expressed frustration at what she had witnessed and said she was unsure what exactly she was meant to “get” from the interruption to my paper. Another expressed disapproval at my promotion of heckling and interruption as a positive and insinuated that heckling is okay so long as it is not too disruptive.

Others, for instance audience member Farokh Soltani, were (positively) provoked by the discomfort embodied in the interruption to my paper:

I really enjoyed it [*the discomfort Soltani experienced being in the presentation room*]. After a while the discomfort gave way to “ooh that’s interesting.” What is happening is clearly an act of thought; it is an act and it’s an act of thought. I can clearly understand even if the paper was not about [*heckling*] [...] it’s about interruption and disruption and the only way that comes across is that it is completely unexpected and unacceptable and if what happened was completely acceptable, if it [*Claire’s interruption*] had been announced and if it had not been so uncomfortable there would really be no point in it. And when it ended and the Q and A started, I thought people would say “Wow! That was cool!” but [*they said*] “Oooh you should have warned us!” It was completely ethically justified, exactly for that reason. (Soltani 2015).

Another audience member remarked, “have you ever heard of a polite and pre-announced heckle?” The planted “interruption” to the delivery of my paper has taught me about using interruption to control an audience by disrupting their expectations of “the presentation of critical ideas within academia” (Soltani) by using practice-in-action related to physical interruptive processes deployed as tactics to undermine those critical ideas (in this case, theories of heckling) from having to be “controlled and framed within a very specific set of regulations.”

Carter and I employed “doing” and “action” as methodology—thus embodying a critical performative pedagogy underpinned by doing and action — to stimulate understanding of heckling and interruption. Following practice-as-research and practice-based methodologies, I believe that one of the most profound ways to gain embodied knowledge and enact personal development is through practical exploration. Rather than telling people what something is like, they get to experience it. So, rather than just verbally

explaining heckling or showing some form of distant pictorial representation, we took a leap into action and confronted the audience with heckling in action, “doing heckling” rather than serving up a pale imitation. This allowed the audience to experience some of the unfolding consequences of heckling in action. Configuring the presentation room as a “venue for the construction of knowledge, not merely for its inculcation” (Kincheloe 2008, 88), we deliberately positioned the presentation room as a space of liminality (part-laboratory/part-discussion arena) so that audiences could move theories beyond abstraction physical/emotional/practical tangibility, thus allowing them to connect theory with practice.

Conclusion: No One “Likes” a Heckler

Performance art (and art *per se*) is predicated on rule-breaking, even on discomfiting audiences, especially the elitist audiences of live art and performance. Forced Entertainment’s *Showtime* (1996) used interruption to do just this. Having listened to performer Cathy Naden describe in detail an imagined suicide, performer Terry O’Connor (dressed in cardboard as a tree) “break[s] the mood” and starts shouting out towards the audience: “What the fuck are you looking at? What the fuck is your problem? Fuck off! Voyeurs! There’s a fucking line and you’ve just crossed it. Where’s your human decency?” (Etchells 1999, 63). Whilst Campbell created edges and parameters in which to guide a practical study of interruption, he encouraged a degree of anticipation as methodology (Campbell 2017a). Interruption was the topic of his doctoral study and ironically, the most important critical incident that re-shaped the conditions of his practice and expanded the possibilities for examining different forms of interruption related to an act of physical interruption—“Do it your fucking self!” The subsequent *Contract with a Heckler* was a performance-based collaborative project that explored the possibilities of heckling and audience discomfort involving written participation contracts that set out conditions to be performed. They were understood as having a multi-function as: legal agreement, artwork, a durational prop, which simultaneously developed and tested the boundaries of our collaboration in terms of shifting power relations. There is, of course, the specific quality of such conventional set-ups in art: the audience is either expecting or delighted or disturbed by these tacit contracts being broken or exceeded. Through the interruption that Campbell and Carter set up, practice was used to demonstrate that some audience members could deal with the theory of heckling but had problems when being confronted with heckling and its associated interruptive processes. As disruptors, they used interruptive processes in live performance. Although they acknowledged many of the complexities involved upon commencement of this work, they did underestimate the audience being so conservative.

Discussion and practice addressed throughout this paper provoke important questions: How can contemporary art practice utilise the concept of the heckler to overturn the relationship between audience and artwork? What sort of public speaker is the heckler? Are there existing rules for heckling? and ‘What does an examination of these rules tell us about democracy? We propose the heckler as a metaphorical figurehead of impoliteness, a person both “loathed and welcomed” (Allen 2004, 16) who makes explicit usage of

interruption to gate-crash the spotlight of those being listened to whilst maintaining a presence amongst an outraged public who give the heckler their name. The heckler is unfettered by politeness and social protocol and uses physical and linguistic interruption to express their opinion, as well as those of others around her who dare not criticise the named presenter. The heckler is one in the eye for politeness and should be congratulated by those ashamed of their lack of nerve to heckle. The heckler's sophisticated usage of interruption should be thumbed-up for discussion. If social relations of any kind are to be democratic, then this must, as Mouffe suggests, include everybody's opinion and actions and embrace potential confrontation; it is morally and ethically problematic if opinions and actions seen as confrontational are somehow denied or quashed. The heckler enables us to think of another public as well as another type of speaker. The Heckler, together with the Whistleblower and the Philistine provide new ways to consider subaltern publics; heckle, act and be heard!

Notes

1. Previously published excerpts are republished here with the kind permission of Intellect Publishing (Jordan 2011) and University College Cork (Campbell 2017b).
2. The reassessment of the role of the heckler as a vital agent in the processes of democratic exchange is part of Jordan's larger project titled *impossible publics*. This work proposes a re-examination of previously discredited actants and attempts to articulate their productive role in the disruption of liberal democratic processes. These *impossible publics* also include the impossible participant (see Freeeart Collective 2014), the passer-by, the whistleblower, and the philistine.

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