

What does innovation owe to convention? John Poulakos suggests an ironic relationship between the two with his working definition of Sophistic rhetoric as “the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and [yet] attempts to suggest that which is possible” (“Toward” 36), which necessarily involves a proposal of an alternative in (and possibly *to*) a contextualized moment where, yes, there are rules to be followed—rules which perhaps stand in opposition to that which is proposed. Poulakos’ definition, in other words, “links rhetoric to a movement originating in the sphere of actuality and striving to attain a place in that of potentiality” (“Toward” 36). Elsewhere, Poulakos explicitly phrases Sophistic rhetoric as one concerned with “the possible” which “posit[s] the world as it is not” in contradistinction to an Aristotelean “actual,” or “the world as it is” (“Possible” 218). Yet in spite of being apparently oppositional forces, the two are nevertheless inevitably intertwined. The suggestion is that the actual, though contrary to the possible, is still a kind of prerequisite even to revolutionary potentiality. Later in the first essay, Poulakos offers a crucial analogy: “To be sure, man walks on earth and his feet are a constant reminder of his connection to the ground. But at the same time, he looks at the horizon” (“Toward” 43). This paradox is interesting for reasons beyond those concerning the appreciation of contributions from the contested “sophists” to a multiplicity of rhetorics. The tension between actual and possible directs attention to questions involving rhetorical agency, invention, and subjectivity.

I want to consider and potentially complicate this codependence of the possible on the actual by way of situating Poulakos in the context of flash oriented performance art inspired by a spirit not unlike that motivating Situationist happenings. Consider the work of Improv Everywhere, a “New York City-based prank collective that causes scenes of chaos and joy in public places.” Examples of such doings include [flash Broadway style musical performances](#) and stunts in which performers (rhetors) board NYC trains bundled up in winter clothing with one major exception for “[No Pants Subway Rides](#).” Other “missions” invite bemused onlookers to play a constitutive role in the scene by endowing them with participatory power, as did a stunt in which a podium and megaphone were installed and then abandoned on a busy NYC sidewalk. A simple note left behind encouraged passersby to “[Say Something Nice](#).” Responses to Lloyd Bitzer’s situations these are not. It is not my intention to consider Improv Everywhere in a full blown Bitzerian analysis. It should suffice, then, to say that if we were to align ourselves with his personifying assertions that “the situation controls the rhetorical response” (6) and “the situation . . . obviously does not invite just any response” (10), we would have some pretty disappointed situations on our hands when Improv Everywhere came to town!

Obviously, a group like Improv Everywhere is basking in the possible; their slogan: “We cause scenes.” In the performances just now described, the constraints and constrictions of the original situation are exploded, shaken off, and heretofore unseen expressive capacities emerge. Rhetorically speaking, an entirely new situation has been created. . . Right? *Have* we left the realm of the actual and moved on to the horizon of a sophistic possible? Poulakos tells us “the sophists stressed that speech

must show respect to the temporal situation it addresses, that is, it must be timely” (“Toward” 39). One wonders, when’s the right time to board a subway in one’s underwear? Further rules and regulations abound in the Poulakos essay. He attributes the following stipulations to the sophists: “what is said must conform to both audience and occasion”; “speech must take into account and be guided by the formal structure of the situation it addresses” (such reflects the “propriety” of the rhetor); and finally, listed in the “factors contributing to one’s sense of the timely and the appropriate” is none other than “cultural norms” (“Toward” 41; 42). A parade of postmodern devil terms! What has happened to the empowering rhetoric of “possibilities, opening what is closed, undoing what is done” (Poulakos, “Possible” 221)? After all, one function of propriety and decorum can be to *foreclose* possibility and discourage alternatives.

There is, of course, more going on here. Look again: “when appropriate, speech is perfectly compatible with the audience and the occasion it affirms and simultaneously seeks to alter” (Poulakos, “Toward” 41). That’s better. And then Poulakos celebrates the “unusual” and “unprecedented” qualities of sophistic rhetoric emanating from its cultivation of “surprise” and “curiosity” (“Toward” 44). Check, check, check, and check: performance art like that of Improv Everywhere definitely covers all these bases of novelty, clearly promoting the strange (possible) in the customary (actual). And there it is—the actual, lurking below all along—necessary to understand the possible that follows it. To be understood as the novel act that it is, riding the subway sans pants depends upon the normative dress code of the context. But what kind of “respect” does showing undies give to propriety? What’s going on here in this im/proper, have it both ways rhetoric? To what or whom—*why*—would an alternative rhetoric cater to the normative?

It is well known that the sophists offered high price lessons in oratory which only the elite could afford. These practices no doubt contributed to an association of the sophists with *nomos*, or human law, as opposed to *physis*, or natural law. However, Bernard Miller’s productively nuanced discussion of *kairos* as it appears differently in Plato and Gorgias offers a useful complication here. Traditional, Platonic conceptions of *kairos* are typically understood as “quite simply a recognition on the part of the rhetor of a situation that he appropriately responds to or masters through...propriety or expediency” (Miller 172). In Gorgias, however, things appear differently: “*kairos* as understood here is not the application of language rhetorically selected and suited to fit the occasion or proper time, but through the aegis of the irrational *logos* it deals most significantly in the creative generation of language itself” (Miller 177). The creation of the (a?) possible! Importantly, then, “*kairos* is not a concept only. It is an experience or encounter as well” (Miller 169). Or, as Victor Vitanza phrases it, the Gorgian *kairos* proffers “a view of the ‘subject’ as a function of *Logos/Kairos*” (124). So much for *nomos*.

Even something like flash performance art, though incongruous in terms of formalist accounts of time, place, and audience expectations, nevertheless offers a kind of *appeal* to its audience: check this out—it’s like nothing you’ve ever seen! Gears grind in the tension between timeliness and untimeliness, the appropriate and inappropriate—but is this friction everything, the whole point? Poulakos suggests at least two origins of impetus for sophistic rhetorics. First, he posits that “the starting

point for the articulation of the possible is the ontological assumption that the main driving forces in man's life are his desires, especially the desire to be other and elsewhere" ("Toward" 42-43). Later, he says somewhat cryptically that "for the most part, what compels a rhetor to speak is a sense of urgency" ("Toward" 39). How do this desire and this urgency figure into questions of the appropriate, the timely, expectations, and norms? Is it tenable that an audience could desire something about which they are not yet aware?

I believe so!

If, as Poulakos himself suggests, sophistic rhetoric "invites [audiences] to abandon their familiar modes of thought" ("Possible" 224), creates "new ways to perceive ourselves and the world," and "privileges becoming over being" ("Toward" 46), then the possible seems to have departed from the actual indeed. But what happens when the possible is embraced? I once had a professor who told me that as soon as you can point to something and say "that's postmodern," it becomes recognizable as part of a historical narrative (i.e., the actual) and is postmodern no longer. But if or when the possible gets actuated, one thing that remains slippery is the rhetor's execution of her role in an eternal "existential dilemma," using the possible to "exploit people's proclivity to perceive themselves in the future and their readiness to thrust themselves into unknown regions" (Poulakos, "Toward" 43). There's always tomorrow. What will it bring? It's hard to say from here in the actual.

Works Cited

- Bitzer, Lloyd. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1.1 (1968): 1-14.
Improv Everywhere. [Improve Everywhere. *Improveeverywhere.com*](http://improveverywhere.com). n.d. Web. Sept. 24 2012.
- Miller, Bernard A. "Heidegger and the Gorgian Karios." *Visions of Rhetoric: History, Theory, and Criticism*. Ed. Charles W. Kneupper. Arlington: Rhetoric Society of America, 1987. 169-184.
- Poulakos, John. "Rhetoric, the Sophists, and the Possible." *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 215-226.
- . "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16.1 (1983): 35-48.
- Vitanza, Victor J. "'Some More' Notes Toward a 'Third' Sophistic." *Argumentation* 5 (1991): 117-139.