



**THE PERFORMATIVE  
DIMENSION OF  
ANTI-SPECIESISM  
ACTIVISM  
ESSERE ANIMALI  
AND ANONYMOUS  
FOR THE VOICELESS  
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## KEYWORDS

theatricality of protest, politics of public space, spectatoriality, participation, antispeciesist activism, flash mob, smart mob

## PAROLE CHIAVE

dimensione teatrale della protesta, politica dello spazio pubblico, spettatorialità, partecipazione, attivismo antispecista, flash mob, smart mob

# SUMMARY

In this paper, I present performance activists' work — developed at the beginning of the twenty-first century — that reflects and problematises emerging issues and problems relating to environmentalism and anti-speciesism in the form of 'smart mobs'. I would like to highlight how these 'alliances of bodies' in space (Butler 2017) use aesthetic strategies, reminiscent of agit prop and guerrilla theatre (Davis 1966), but from the early 2000s join the new media, becoming 'smart mobs', according to the definition by Rheingold (2003) to distinguish them from the more playful 'flash mob', also born in New York at the beginning of the 2000s. Although the correlation between art and politics has found its most explicit theme in the utopian thrust of the twentieth-century art and theatre scene, it is necessary to re-understand the political nature of art and the semantics of activism in the post-twentieth century historical-cultural context.

# SOMMARIO

In questo articolo propongo esempi di attivismo che usa mezzi performativi — che prendono piede all'inizio del XXI secolo — che riflettono e problematizzano questioni e problemi emergenti relativi all'ambientalismo e all'antispecismo sotto forma di 'smart mob'. Vorrei evidenziare come queste 'alleanze di corpi' nello spazio (Butler 2017) utilizzino strategie estetiche, che ricordano l'agit prop e il teatro di guerriglia (Davis 1966), ma dai primi anni 2000 si uniscono ai nuovi media, diventando smart mobs, secondo l'interpretazione data da Howard Rheingold (2003) per distinguerli dai 'flash mobs' più giocosi, anch'essi nati a New York all'inizio degli anni 2000. Sebbene la correlazione tra arte e politica abbia trovato il suo ambito più esplicito nella spinta utopica della scena artistica e teatrale del Novecento, è necessario ricomprendere la natura politica dell'arte e la semantica dell'attivismo nel contesto storico-culturale del XXI secolo.

# INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I propose to place the performativity of anti-speciesism activism — in favour of animal rights — in a historical lineage of related performance concepts. I will examine the perspective of Baz Kershaw (1997) who analyses the artistic dimension in political protests. His analysis of the ‘dramaturgy of protest’ starts from Richard Schechner’s considerations (1999a) in which political manifestations characterised by a strong dose of performativity are called ‘direct theatre’. Schechner also introduces the idea how both protest events and celebratory gatherings may activate a basic functionality of the carnivalesque. Kershaw further develops Schechner’s position. He also refers to the carnivalesque dimension of protest, including its ritualism by recognising its potential for political and social change. However, he also criticises the analogy as metaphor and highlights rather the historical dimension of the ‘dramaturgy of popular protest’ by examining demonstrations of the 1960s, such as those in Grosvenor Square in London in 1968, up to those in China, in Tiananmen Square, in 1989. Kershaw then identifies the sources of this ‘dramaturgy of popular protest’ in the American avant-garde theatre groups, like the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. They all demonstrate processes of mutual contamination between theatre and political activism.

Based on this theoretical framework, my analysis focuses on a ‘semantics of activism’ that takes into account forms of ‘guerilla theatre’ of the 1960s. I would like to illustrate a further branch of theatricalisation of protest that takes into account the transition to post-Web 2.0 media practices in the form of anti-speciesist ‘smart mobs’ on behalf of non-humans’ rights by the Italian group Essere Animali and the international group Anonymous for the Voiceless. These forms of protest, as I will argue, are characterised by a double dimension of space: a mixed space, both physical, in public space, and digital, on the Internet. The creation of hybrid spaces for struggle, be it real or virtual, is typical of a series of protests born in the early 2000s, from Tunisia to Iceland to Spain to the United States.

The specific form of anti-speciesist activism that I would like to analyse is that of the smart mob which identifies a double hybrid dimension of activism: between the domain of the real and the virtual between art and politics, and between bodily practices and the use of smart technologies. I propose a differentiation between the smart mob and the more playful flash mob on the basis of Howard Rheingold’s essay (2003) dedicated to this theme and I identify the performances of the anti-speciesists, born in the new millennium, as smart mobs that reconfigure the social space as a mixed reality, never completely real, never completely virtual, but rather an interplay of online and real life.

These performative forms have also been analysed by Milohnić (2005a) for which he proposes the term ‘artivism’, coined in the 1990s to identify a social urgency of art. Referring to smart mobs, Milohnić’s analysis of Slovenian forms of artivism will prove to be very useful, and, compared to that of Schechner’s, restricts the field to specific forms of activism that do not involve mass participation, but only a few activists, similar to smart mobs by anti-speciesist activists. Forms of activism, such as the anti-speciesist ones, put on stage what have been defined as

‘ethical spectacles’ (Duncombe 2007) capable of triggering ‘sensuous solidarities’ among the participants (Routledge 2011).

With respect to these forms of collective and embodied protest, I suggest that the analysis that Judith Butler makes in *L’alleanza dei corpi* (translated from *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2015) can open new insights. Their thesis is that ‘acting in concert’ can constitute an embodied form of protest against the most recent and powerful actions of political power. The gathering has a meaning that goes beyond all that is said and this mode of signification is a corporeal and concerted implementation, a plural performative form. The revolutionary dimension of performance, as also Schechner once claimed, is then to show us the way of the possible, to be a model of a utopian reality and society.

## Anti-Speciesist Activism

The form of political and artistic activism that I analyse here concerns animal rights activism (or anti-speciesism). It is a performative form that touches upon dramatically emerging issues in the contemporary world scenario: the climate crisis, the sixth great mass extinction of living species, the industrial exploitation of animal lives. Anti-speciesism is a cultural and political movement that opposes the belief — considered biased — that the human species is superior to other animal species and affirms instead that the human being cannot dispose of the life and freedom of beings belonging to other living species. Forms of anti-speciesist activism began in the late 1970s: the symbolic date of the birth of the movement is the publication of *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer 1975.

The two groups to which I will refer in this essay have been established in the new millennium. The first, Essere Animali,<sup>1</sup> is active in Italy. In the last few years their performances in the streets have recounted their investigative activism that operates under cover in intensive farms in which other animals are reduced to a mere function: to their being fur, meat, eggs, or milk. Activists film and photograph animals — under cover — to denounce, through the media mainstream, their intolerable lives, and they also engage in street protests with a strong dose of theatricalisation. The other group taken as an example of performance between the domain of bodies and that of mobile technologies is Anonymous for the Voiceless,<sup>2</sup> a not-for-profit animal rights organisation. Initially founded in Melbourne, Australia, they are now a global community with an abolitionist stance against all forms of non-human animal exploitation and they hold street activism events worldwide.

## The Guerilla Theatre of the 1960s

Guerilla theatre emerged in the mid-1960s as an upshot of other radical and participatory theatre groups, like the Living Theatre, whose *Paradise Now* performance, for instance, ended with a march in the streets that were shaken by the May 68 protests, in a historical moment in which both the repressive thrust and the revolutionary one were radicalised: the escalation of violence in the Vietnam War, the birth of the civil rights movement, and the Black Power movement.

1. <https://www.essereanimali.org/chi-siamo/> [accessed 15 September 2021].

2. <https://www.anonymousforthevoiceless.org> [accessed 15 September 2021].

The form, though, originated from the San Francisco Mime Troupe founded by Ronnie G. Davis<sup>3</sup> in 1959. Their performances took place in conflict zones, on the streets, in urban ghettos (Davis 1966). Davis himself coined the term ‘guerrilla theatre’ inspired by the methods of guerrilla theorised and practiced by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro — with the same purposes and tactics — so that those theatrical actions were able to ‘teach, direct towards change, be an example of change’ (Davis 1966: 131).

The expression ‘guerrilla theatre’ is inspired by the title of one of Che Guevara’s most famous writings: *La guerra de guerrillas* (1960). The first forms of guerrilla theatre took place in the Bay Area, organised by Ronnie Davis, founder of San Francisco Mime Troupe, who was inspired by playwright and political activist Peter Berg. The idea of Berg and his collaborators was to bring the theatre directly into the midst of the people, staging often disturbing situations, without realising that they were attending a show. The goal was to observe the reaction of bystanders, many of whom were completely unrelated to the dynamics of theatrical fiction, in the hope that they would show dissent or disgust. It was a cultural guerrilla, which combined the political activism of the New Left with the themes of underground counterculture; in 1965, for example, the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee sponsored tour of *A Minstrel show, or civil rights in a cracker barrel*. It became the most infamous production in the troupe’s history. The play used the format of a minstrel show and racial stereotypes to expose racism and white liberal hypocrisy. In 1967, they presented *L’Amant militaire*, to satirise the Vietnam war, touring the Midwest campuses neck and neck with recruiters for Dow Chemical Company, the makers of napalm.

3. [http://www.diggers.org/guerrilla\\_theater.htm](http://www.diggers.org/guerrilla_theater.htm) [accessed 15 September 2021].

# Street Guerilla: From Theatre Groups to Political Protests

A similar experience to San Francisco street theatre was that of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, founded in the early 1960s by Peter Schumann in New York. The performances, made with the help of huge puppets, revolved around the denunciation of social injustices, racism, and war. They experimented with the visual dimension of performance, particularly in their usage of masks and puppets that often took the place of the actors who were inside the puppets animating them.

El Teatro Campesino was born in the same cultural and political climate, founded by Luis Valdez in 1964, keenly aware of the potential inherent in theatre for reaching large Chicano audiences, and for influencing them to initiate change. Initially, the theatre had one specific, political goal: the organisation of farm workers. For the two years, the Teatro Campesino was actively involved in the everyday struggles of the farm workers' strike. It joined the strikers on marches to Sacramento, California, publicising the Huelga (strike), and gathering public support for the farm workers union (National Farm Workers Association). Responding to a demand for different forms to express the growing political and cultural consciousness of the Chicanos, the Teatro Campesino has developed two principal dramatic structures: the *acto* and the *mito*. The term *acto* was employed by Luis Valdez to define the short, improvised dramatic scenes performed by the Teatro Campesino during the farm workers' strike. The *mito* (myth) was an evolving dramatic form which presented the cosmic vision of pre-Columbian Indian civilisations.

Since the Teatro Campesino was aimed at an audience that did not know the theatre well, it took inspiration from other forms of popular entertainment, like the San Francisco Mime Troupe use of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and was also inspired by styles and techniques from other forms of popular entertainment such as the puppet shows, vaudeville, parades, and carnival sideshows.

Was it theatre or guerrilla *tout court*? During the 1960s in the US, the growing social and political clash meant that many of the most significant groups engaged in the theatrical experimentation of that time, chose direct and radical political action, and then dissolved or split into distinct units. Peter Berg who led the Diggers group — the extremist wing of the San Francisco Mime Troupe — put himself completely at the service of the May '68 protests. The Bread and Puppet Theatre broke into two sections, one of which devoted itself exclusively to guerrilla theatre. The Living Theatre also broke up into four cells. In Paris, the cell gathered around the Becks planned some abrupt guerilla actions (De Marinis 1987: 259). For a short time even performance theorist Richard Schechner left the Performance Group, which he founded in 1967, to devote himself to guerrilla actions (238). Before dissolving into pure guerrilla warfare, many avant-garde groups had been elaborating the search for a use value of the theatre, to make it a political instrument.

The linguistic and dramaturgical strategies used by the main American avant-garde groups of the sixties — from the Living Theatre to the San Francisco Mime Troupe, to the El Teatro Campesino and the Bread and Puppet Theatre — were similar to those employed in street guerrilla. They included stressing the visual display, reviving folk and popular elements, clown acts and puppets shows, and finally holding the shows in non-theatrical spaces with a strong dose of improvisation. In a continuous exchange, the techniques of 'guerrilla theatre' passed from protests to theatre and from theatre to protests: activism was

theatricalised as the theatre was in accord with the reality of the struggles. For example, the feminist protests of the 1960s used the tactics of ‘guerilla theatre’: sudden and alienating apparitions, using large puppets and masks. Still in 1989, the giant puppet the ‘Goodness of Democracy’ that appeared in Tiananmen Square in front of Mao’s portrait was compared to the great Bread and Puppet puppets used by the theatre group as a protest against the Vietnam war. These were archetypal and satirical elements, common to theatrical research and to the civil rights movements and the rallies for peace (Schechner 1999a; Kershaw 1997).

Regarding the performative dimension of street turmoils, Marvin Carlson (2018) points out that some performance historians have begun to recognise that political manifestations consciously include performative elements, although most of the chronicles of performances of the 1960s do not consider ‘the widespread and often highly theatrical street demonstrations of civil right sit-ins of the 1960s’ (210). The pioneer of performative analysis of street protests was Richard Schechner, one of the founders of performance studies, who already in the 1990s defined various forms of protest as ‘direct theater’, such as post-war rallies, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, peace camps, or vigils (Schechner 1999a; 2018).

Schechner places the performance in a broad-spectrum approach which includes some social phenomena and activities that are not strictly artistic or precisely theatrical, in which there is a strong component of ‘performativity’ (1999b: 43–4). He identifies and explores some examples at the ends of the spectrum such as the actions that he defines as direct theatre — a heterogeneous set of socio-political manifestations such as the student movement in Tiananmen Square and, in the same year, the spontaneous party atmosphere created for the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are mass protests employing the register of farce and parody against what inside the society is seen as oppressive and outrageous (1999a: 197–207).

## Forms of Hybrid Activism of the Early Millennium: ‘Global Networks of Hope’ and Artivism

This historical introduction on the reciprocal contaminations between theatre and political activism that began in the 1960s is necessary to clarify the political-social heritage assumed by the most recent forms of activism which, starting from the new millennium, have known a communicative turning point thanks to the overwhelming emergence of social movements and wireless communication networks. These new means of action — the communication and the dissemination of protest, through the internet and social networks — are also important for anti-speciesist activism. I refer in particular to the movements born by the aid of social networks, like in the Arab world to escape the control of governments, but also the Spanish *indignados*, the Gezi protests in Turkey, the American no-global movement ‘Occupy Wall Street’ — a world network that has mobilised hundreds of thousands of people in more than eighty countries (Loewe 2015; Castells 2012). In the last twenty years, the use of new media has become the characteristic of many forms of protests. The connection between digital communication (on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and on mobile phone networks), on the one hand, and the real occupation of urban areas, on the other, creates public spaces of a hybrid nature, somewhere in between virtual and real dimensions. Networking, creating meaning, and contesting power are the three levels of action of the movements (Castells 2012).

Castells looks then at the social protest movements born in the new millennium, from the Arab revolts and those in Europe, in particular in

Spain, to those in the USA. He highlights the constant double regime of protests, between the actual occupation of public spaces and their diffusion and amplification mainly due to the use of social networks. The movements themselves have networked with each other. For example, many of the activists of the Occupy Wall Street movement had travelled to Spain, visited the camps, and took part in the decision-making process, until the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* on 13 July 2011 launched the appeal to repeat the riots in Tahir Square by peacefully occupying Wall Street: #occupywallstreet. Thus, the demonstration of 17 September 2011 in Wall Street (New York) with the consequent occupation of Zuccotti Park was followed globally by audiences, and the more the police raised the level of repression, the more the images of these interventions spread on YouTube and motivated others to take to the streets, and to create spontaneous actions in other American cities. The breadth and spontaneity of the protest is largely due to what Castells (2012) defines as ‘global networks of hope’. Such networks enable large-scale communication that has undergone profound technological and structural transformations in recent years with the emergence of ‘mass self-communication based on horizontal multidirectional and interactive communication networks via the internet and even more so thanks to wireless networks, the communication platform present almost everywhere’ (Castells 2012: 182–3).

Occupy was born in the digital domain and was amplified by it, but Castells emphasises how the occupation of public space remains the most concrete form of the movement’s existence:

A space where protesters can come together and create a community beyond their differences. A space of conviviality. A space for debate. [...] A space for autonomy. [...]. What the Occupy movement had thus created was a space of a new kind, a mixed space made up of places

in a specific territory, and flows on the Internet. One could not be without the other: it is this hybrid space that characterizes the entire movement. (2012: 182–3)

The second level of this hybrid dimension, which we also recognise in the smart mob later, is that of ‘artivism’. Artivism is a neologism that combines the words ‘art’ and ‘activism’. It refers to both the social and political engagement of militant artists and the use of art by citizens as a way of expressing political positions. Only certain studies have been written from a social science perspective or have included art and activism in broader social movement studies, which mainly focus on the G8 summits, from Seattle 1999 to Geneva 2001 and G20 in Hamburg 2017, or on the Global Social Forum (in particular Porto Alegre, 2001), or Occupy Wall Street.

In 2022, the publication of the essay by Vincenzo Trione, ‘Artivism: Art, Politics, Commitment’, tries to delineate the boundaries of a polymorphic trend, with fleeting borders that developed between the nineties and the beginning of the new millennium. Collectives are also part of this archipelago, from Black Lives Matter to the Guerilla Girls. The contiguity with the art world has always been strong. In 2020, the English magazine *Art Review* placed Black Lives Matter, which started in 2013 in the US after the acquittal of a policeman who shot dead Trayvon Martin, a black teenager, at the top of its ranking of most influential people in the artworld; the global protest movement was revived after George Floyd’s murder. Trione defines artivists as ‘figures who operate in non-contiguous socio-cultural contexts, acting on the Net and in marginal places of the cities through happenings, participatory projects and hacking and counter-information actions, to feed debate and reflection on political and social issues: ecology, migration, globalization, human rights, gender equality, minority claims’ (2022: 142).

The Occupy Wall Street movement was celebrated in the dimension of activism, in the short circuit between art and politics, when the movement participated in *Documenta 13*, in Kassel (2012). Activists, veterans of the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York (2011), camped on the lawn in front of Museum Fridericianum, declaring that political action was itself a work of art ‘They considered themselves an “evolutionary art work”, adopting the slogan “Everyone is an Artist” by famous German artist and former *Documenta 7* participant Joseph Beuys. The activists in Kassel even considered themselves the “evolution” of the Occupy Movement’ (Loewe 2015: 192). There were those who argued that the Occupy Wall Street movement was the performing monument of injustice in society.

## The Smart Mob

As I pointed out, anti-speciesism activism manifests particularly in hybrid forms of protest, between the real and the virtual. This is well exemplified by the smart mob, to which I would like to turn now as a specific case. The smart mob which is the abbreviation of smart mobiles, that is, smart phones and, by extension, refers to every mobile computation and communicative device of its own ability to operate on the basis of the programming received and to connect to the network. Howard Rheingold uses this term, meaning of ‘intelligent multitude’, referring to the effects of the use of these tools on human communities (2003: 350). ‘Smart mob’ identifies specific social moments in which real acts of cooperation are disseminated and the relationships between individual decisions and group dynamics are reshaped:

The ‘participation threshold’ models in collective action and the role of the ‘order of interaction’ concern both means for exchanging

information in a coordinated manner. Understanding this allowed me to see something that I had not noticed until then, namely the connection of social networks made of communicating and thinking humans with wearable computers similarly to the swarming intelligence of ants, bees, fish, birds. [...] The coordinated movements of schools of fish and flocks of birds are the result of an aggregation of individual decisions that change dynamically. (ibid.)

Rheingold takes up the concept of ‘order of interaction’ from Erving Goffman and defines it as the social sphere in which individuals exchange complex verbal and non-verbal communications in real time and as not precisely the place where individual actions can influence the thresholds of action crowds. Mobile media have the potential to change the thresholds for participation in collective action.

Smart mobs therefore identify new ways of social communication induced by new, intelligent technologies: they operate as flash mobs, that is, with sudden and shocking ways of apparition-disappearance of some individuals, self-organised on the net, among the crowd of a city. Smart mobs, compared to the more playful character of flash mobs, convey political messages and social criticism. Rheingold, as a paradigmatic example, proposes the story of the President of the Philippines Joseph Estrada who, in 2001, lost power due to a smart mob. More than a million Manila citizens coordinated and mobilised and, thanks to text messages, gathered *en masse* at the same time to peacefully demonstrate their dissent towards the President.

Rheingold himself defines the smart mob as something acting in unprecedented ways, in situations where collective action has never been possible. These events are defined as ‘intelligent’ also in the sense of ‘sudden, creative’, generated by virtual communities whose collective intelligence is compared to the concerted action of swarms of bees,

flocks of birds, schools of fish (2003: 350). The anti-speciesist performances proposed here concern an elastic concept of smart mobs and present different phenomenologies and some constants in their being 'urban sets' and always being hybrid forms, between virtual choreography and real-time action. It can be said that the ubiquity of 'smart technologies' reconfigures social space as a mixed reality, never completely real, never completely virtual: 'an interplay between online and real life' (Brejzek 2010: 116).

Digital scenography is usually associated with an image production process, but it has also a spatial form if we consider virtual communities and networks as social, scenographic spaces. The virtual space of the virtual community operates on the basis of a grammar of ubiquity: digital becomes therefore not so much a specific medium, but an omnipervasive cultural technique in its 'mobile' application, thus creating a close link between the organisational and communicative structures of the social networks, their specific grammar, and the temporary scenographies in the urban space formed by small or large groups of performers. These 'urban swarms', creating temporary performative actions, stage their own transgressive action in the quick appearance and sudden disappearance in public space. These actions constitute a scenography as a design of space, one that has transformativeness and mediality inscribed within it. Brejzek describes scenography as 'a practice that utilizes transdisciplinary strategies in the design of performative spaces at the interface of theater, media, architecture and installation. With the emphasis on the performative, the processual and the constructed, formerly separate genres of spatial design merge towards staged gestures of spatiality' (Brejzek 2010: 110).

Within these particular forms of smart mobs by anti-speciesist activists, one can recognise some of the specific dimensions of performance. In identifying the main characteristics, De Marinis, inspired by Josette

Féral (2011) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), sees the manipulation that the performer's body undergoes as 'a fundamental and indispensable element of every performative act' (2013: 59). The anti-speciesists intend to convey a political message and they do it through their own bodies: these are actions that aim to undermine the ideological apparatus of speciesism — that is, the justificationist ideology of the dismemberment of the bodies of other animals — as historically happened in the 'guerrilla performances' of feminists who in a similar way targeted the ideological apparatus of the patriarchy (Carlson 2018: 210–1). To incorporate a political message and to address it to an audience is the basis of the performance: 'it forces the dialogue of bodies, of gestures and touches the density of matter' (De Marinis 2013: 62).

I would like to underline how the embodied dimension of these forms of collective protest is linked to the theories of Judith Butler. In particular, I refer to *L'alleanza dei corpi*, published in 2017 in Italy (originally *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2015). This essay begins with the Tahir Square demonstrations also taken into consideration by the aforementioned text by Manuel Castells on social protest movements (2012). It focuses on what Butler defines as 'alliances of bodies' (2017), namely social practices of plural, performative nature, that play out in urban spaces, mobilise activists and encourage the public to take direct actions against animal exploitation or oppose anything that wants to normalise the violence, such as products obtained from the killing of animals like clothing or food. Regarding the transformative effectiveness of these actions by anti-speciesist activists, the importance to protest in person is emphasised. It seems to me that this insistence on the immediate presence of protestors' bodies is intended to signal the intimacy of all animal bodies, be they human or non-human, for the protestors are not only the 'voice' of the other animals but also representatives of animal bodies, qualities which are interestingly not cancelled by the presence of the media.

It is relevant to note how anti-speciesist activists, like other political activists, are generated in the first instance by sharing deep emotions that have to do with the perception of a sense of injustice, of indignation. Having emotions in common, primarily among activists, means that collective identities are constituted and mobilised in a strategic way. Similar experiences, such as the mobilisations with respect to the Edinburgh G8 in 2005, were defined by Stephen Duncombe as ‘ethical spectacles or participatory, open-ended and playful urban transformations performance’ (2007: 124). They are actions that activate personal and collective emotions of resistance to blatant social injustices. The places and times of the protest ensure that the sense of ethical challenge, of danger, of solidarity, activates a particular capacity for resonance from one body to another and helps to create a shared memory. Routledge defines ‘sensuous solidarity’ as the incarnation of emotions shared among activists and also among those who assist. Tenderness, shame, anger, resonate from one body to another and act as counter-hegemonic forms in particular places of control:

Sensuous solidarities were grounded in particular places of protest and constituted disruptive emotional interventions and performances. Shared bodily and emotional experiences such as feelings of excitement, fear and joy, establish shared memories and stories of protest events, as well as shared strategic repertoires. In particular, in those places that comprise the targets of protest, where disruptive expressions of emotion are frequently controlled, or where intimidation is the preferred register of emotive control, emotive resonances that counter or transform such dynamics can be counter-hegemonic and politically empowering. (2011: 438)

The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators is the privileged vehicle of the transformative power of the performance, for both performers and bystanders (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Even the demonstrative actions

of *Essere Animali* take place thanks to an alliance of bodies, to a plurality of bodies in relation. Butler (2017) stresses how performativity, often associated with individuality, can be reconsidered in the forms that operate thanks to coordinated actions whose conditions and objectives consist in the reconstruction of plural forms of agency, or social practices of resistance. The thesis is that ‘acting in concert’ can constitute an embodied form of protest against the most recent and powerful actions of political power: the gathering has a meaning that goes beyond all that is said and this mode of signification is a corporeal and concerted implementation, a plural performative form. De Marinis, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, writes that the identity performances above all lead the performers themselves to experience the body to the full, as a mechanism of revelation (2013: 77). The mechanism of performance induces, in fact, those who perform it to explore their own identity and, ultimately, to reconstruct it, in that passage from the body to the flesh, or rather from the body-thing, compared to the *viande*, to the meat for slaughter, up to the lived body of Edmond Husserl, analysed and developed by Merleau-Ponty (2003) as observed by De Marinis (ibid.). It is a passage from body to flesh, from the body-object to one’s own body, through the theatre experienced as action and transformation, as a permanent initiatory effect. According to Schechner (2018), the performance that deeply touches the subjectivity of those who perform it deconstructs their identity and shows mutant identities.

# Performative Reading of Protests: Between Schechner and Milohnić

Schechner used Bakhtin's (1979) concept of the carnivalesque as one of the analytical tools to read the performative phenomena in which play, theatre, and ritual merge. These participatory forms share with the traditional carnivals the liberating drive for change in the form of creative playing. In Bakhtin's classic work his concept of carnival is characterised by the creation of an alternative space, one typified by freedom, by moments where anything goes, and where lines between performer and spectator are erased. Activists use some elements identified by Bakhtin as typical of the carnival, reminiscent of ancient popular festivals, such as masks and costumes of various kinds, images and, above all, the ritual (Bakhtin 1979: 239).

Baz Kershaw, while respecting his pioneering work, criticises Schechner's use of the concept of Bakhtinian carnival, so frequently applied to interpret this kind of manifestation; he argues that an exclusive focus on formal similarities can make one lose the historical meaning of each of these actions:

An approach which mainly stresses the aesthetics of protest, especially through its links to the carnivalesque, offers a useful model, but its concentration on formal similarities tends to detract from protest's place in the major ideological struggles of specific periods. Connecting 'action to its sense' in this way is not simply a matter of noting the immediate and explicit purposes of particular protests — Grosvenor Square as a reaction to the war in Vietnam, for example — but of trying also to discern how they are a part of any historical paradigm shifts which may be under way in the moment of their happening. (1997: 266)



Big rally against vivisection in Rome, 2012  
© Laura Budriesi

It remains understood that what Schechner writes can be fruitfully used to analyse the activists' demonstrations that provide for mass participation, like the one in June 2012 after the liberation of the beagle dogs of 'Green Hill' (near Brescia) destined for vivisection laboratories. The year 2012 saw the beginning of the anti-speciesist movement Occupy Green Hill in Italy determined to fight against vivisection and to stop the breeding of beagle dogs used for vivisection, which resulted in the closure of the facility and the condemnation of those responsible. It is no coincidence that the name of the movement has been inspired by that of Occupy Wall Street in the US.



'Chiudiamo Green Hill' as an example of the use of the 'gestic performative'  
Rome, 2012 © Laura Budriesi

Liberation of the beagle dogs destined for vivisection laboratories  
Italy, 28 April 2012, Italy © Filippo Venezia

After the closure of the lab, the situation evolved in a huge rally of different groups of the anti-speciesist movement in the streets of Rome, with parades played on the visual and aesthetic dimension of the party. Schechner specifies that, at the end of the mass protests, there is not always a return to order as in the ancient popular festival, but 'sometimes street actions bring about the change' (Schechner 1999a: 197). In the case of Green Hill, an irreversible social and judicial process was initiated by a smart mob: the Montichiari beagle farm for vivisection laboratories was closed, the guilt of the top management of the farm was ascertained with reference to the crimes of killing and

ill-treatment; in 2013, a law prohibited the breeding of 'dogs, cats and non-human primates' for laboratories on the national territory (96/2013).<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the twelve activists tried on 28 April 2012 for the release of the beagles were acquitted of all charges by the Brescia Court of Appeal.

4. In 2014, after what happened at Green Hill, some articles of the law 96/2013 have been modified regarding the matter of animal testing in research labs. Italy is the only European country where it is forbidden to breed dogs, cats or primates for vivisection: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2014/03/14/14G00036/sg>.

# Examples of Anti-Speciesist Smart Mobs

The anti-speciesist performative actions, like the procession and the parade, can fully fall within the concept of ‘direct theater’ identified by Schechner. Other ‘radical performances’ can be defined with other analytical tools, while remaining included in the broad spectrum of performative activities. In the smart mob, for example, compared to large mass protests, a small number of activists/performers are involved. Referring to smart mob, Milohnić’s analysis of Slovenian forms of activism is very useful, which — compared to Schechner’s analysis — restricts the field to specific forms of activism that are not mass, but involve only some activists: ‘forms of direct action that do not qualify as mass events but are rather guerrilla performances “staged” by a limited number of activists, primarily for television crews and photographers’ (2005b: 52). For the smart mobs’ participants Milohnić also uses the Brechtian category-concept of ‘spontaneous actor’ and his becoming ‘inevitably’ an artist as a consequence of an act with political purposes:

This presenter is not an educated actor, and his reconstruction of the road accident is not an artistic event, but despite this, says Brecht, this hypothetical amateur has a certain creative potential (Brecht 1979). In short, an activist is not an artist, but he/she is still not without a ‘knack for art’; an activist is an artist as much as is inevitable, no more and no less; the artisanship is a side effect of a political act. Precisely this constitutes the activist’s specific gravity, uniqueness and significance. (ibid.)

Furthermore, with regard to the performances of Slovenian activists, he introduces the category of ‘gestic performative’, that I will deal with in the following examples.

For the *Free Mink Campaign*<sup>5</sup> the organisers of Italian group Essere Animali devised a surprise action which exploited speed, silence, perceptual disorientation, also typical of the smart mob mode. The alienating appearance of large silhouettes of coloured cardboard minks was staged, placed in the fountains of fifteen Italian cities. Minks love water and yet they spend their lives in metal cages; their paws often remain glued to the cages due to the cold, but the cold makes the fur thicker and more valuable. The smart mob consists of the event itself and the narrative of the event. A poster clarified the relationship between the two elements, water and mink: ‘minks love water’, exactly what they are denied. Over the years, the same campaign has had different ways of appearing and communicating with an involuntary public.

For example, under the Two Towers of Bologna, the activists played the part of minks in the last interminable minutes of their existence, locked in a transparent case that wanted to represent, in the eyes of the occasional public on the street, what is not normally seen: the gas chamber that awaits them at the end of their miserable existence in the suffocating cages of intensive farming. The transparent case is a recurring installation device in contemporary art, which recalls a sense of death, starting from Damien Hirst, with the shark (Hirst 1991, installation) and with other animals in formaldehyde, up to works by the Societas Raffaello Sanzio.<sup>6</sup> The display case evokes a sense of death and dismay that recalls the dissecting gaze of the scientific laboratory. Activists, through their bodies, bring to the stage ‘bodies that do not count’ and

5. <https://www.essereanimali.org/visioniliberi/> [accessed 15 September 2021].



Free mink campaign, Italy, 2014  
 Courtesy of Essere Animali

that do not have the right to mourning in the definition of Judith Butler (2017): pigs locked in cages, agonised fish in nets or in the middle of the ice.<sup>7</sup> In years when perhaps the relationship with the ‘spectator’ was more confrontational, at the beginning of the new millennium, the activists brought the corpses of animals into the public space, dead in intensive

← 6. With respect to the figure of the reliquary that returns in the performances of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio theatre company, see, for example, the large reliquary containing *Cassandra in Oresteia (An Organic Comedy?)*, 1995; or the display cases of Madame Curie’s laboratory visited by Lucifer in *Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep*, 1999. On the theme, see Budriesi 2020.

7. In the interview with Butler in the essay by Filippi and Reggio (2015), Butler declares: ‘Life worthy of mourning can only include animal life’ (23).



Free mink campaign, Italy, 2014  
 Courtesy of Essere Animali

farming, waste from the system itself, tangible proof of the destruction of the bodies. They were real presences to which the mourning invoked by Butler was paid. Other sudden and unexpected actions were carried out in subways and city squares using animal figures.

Very often billboards are used in smart mobs — from 1968 onwards, they have had a creative revitalisation — on which key words of animal exploitation appear, such as ‘stress’, ‘diseases’, ‘discomfort’, ‘death’, ‘wounds’, ‘anguish’, ‘fear’: the psycho-physical conditions suffered by farm animals. Or each of the activists holds one of the letters that make up a word in their hand.

Commenting on this particular form that Milohnić had also found in Slovenian activism — in that case the activists had formed the word ‘Erasure’, in relation to political refugees — he had spoken of a ‘gestic performative’, a visual way of incorporating enunciation with the body’s own power of implementation that goes beyond what is said:

A gestic performative can be said to represent an attempt to extend the speech act to the domain of the visual, i.e. physical and bodily act, graphic act, gesture etc., in short, non-verbal yet still performative acts. Such a physical act has every appearance of a speech act: through their materiality, the activists’ bodies, which originally operate within the area of action (*actio*), now literally incorporate (embody) the utterance and thus enter the domain of delivery (*pronuntiatio*), in a non-verbal but eloquent manner. (2005b: 49–50)

The animals — in photographs or on tablets — are already dead or are about to die when shown to the public by activists: we know that the living immortalised in animal rights reports (the so-called ‘investigations’) almost always belong to the past; by the time we meet them they are already dead, it is like looking into the eyes of the condemned to death (Piazzesi and Belacchi 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Visual performances that merge bodies and images characterised one of the demonstrative actions carried out by the activists of Essere Animali in front of a university building in Bologna, in 2016, where experiments are still practiced on macaques: the activists have shown themselves with half of their faces uncovered and the other half covered by the half face of a monkey (Turrini 2016). An uncomfortable truth is

8. Benedetta Piazzesi, commenting on Stefano Belacchi’s images of denunciation, makes use of Barthes’ philosophical reflections on photography, 2003; by Didi-Huberman 2015; by Sontag 2004; by Agamben 1998.



Flash mob in the subway, Essere Animali, Italy, 2018  
Courtesy of Essere Animali



Flash mob with animals killed in the intensive farming, Essere Animali Italy, 2014  
 Courtesy of Essere Animali

Flash mob against intensive egg factories, Essere Animali, Italy, 2012  
 Courtesy of Essere Animali

hidden in that half face: the monkey's face is not neutral, it has an electrode planted in the brain, an archetypal image of vivisection that is still a reality.<sup>9</sup>

The international group that systematically uses the method of practicing counter-information with respect to the dominant channels is Anonymous for the Voiceless. Their performances, hybrid in nature, between the domain of bodies and that of mobile technologies, involve the creation of a 'cube of truth' formed by the bodies of the activists closed on four sides so as to form a figure visible from every direction.

<sup>9</sup> In that way, while a monkey had an electrode planted in the brain, Rizzolatti's team in Parma 'discovered' mirror neurons.

In front of them, other activists with Anonymous masks hold tablets that continuously broadcasts videos of denunciation of the real conditions of non-humans in factory farms, laboratories, circuses. They use technologies as weapons capable of building other stories, of thinking other thoughts (Haraway 2020). Bodies and technologies form a spatial figure of resistance. It can even be said that the smart mob incorporates the language of virtual communities: 'the flash mob is seen to operate as the physical articulation of a social network' (Brejzek 2010: 116). These sudden actions, usually played quickly by an anonymous 'flock' of participants with a precise script and costumes, intervene directly on the space. A space that I define as 'collective' to detect its nature of comparison and relationship.



Flash mob against vivisection, University of Bologna, Italy, 2016  
Courtesy of Essere Animali



Flash mob against intensive fishery industries, Essere Animali, 2012, Italy  
Courtesy of Essere Animali

The urban space as a performative place, where cultural, artistic, and political events intertwine, has an avant-garde twentieth-century tradition, from Dadaism to Fluxus, Happening, Situationist International, up to more recent forms of performative and participatory theatre. The examples in which the urban space becomes the theatre of anti-speciesist smart mobs present various modalities that recall the shape of a ‘frozen’ happening. The performative devices used are various and concerned with a re-semanticisation and ‘re-scenographing’ of the urban space through the performative use of the sit-in and the installation device. These are visual performances that, very often, do without language,

and are played in the ‘freezing’ of the action typical of the flash mob in which the message is generally entrusted to images, billboards, masks, banners, cages: elements that Schechner defines as ‘carnavalesque’. The creation by the anti-speciesists of spatial figures of resistance refers to the happening tradition of the early 1960s which was built on participatory strategies and presumed the convergence of the performer and the observer in the figure of the participant (Kaprow 1966).

The grammar of the smart mob, however, possesses the added pervasiveness of representing a new cultural phenomenon that implies the physicalisation of the user-generated viral culture (Wasik 2009): ubiquitous technologies transform social space into domains of mixed reality because this scenography practice is conceptualised, designed, and updated by online communities that get to constitute a single physical body capable of irritating the common urban transit spaces. Smart mobs are hybrid forms between online dimension and real life, between user-generated scenographic practices and the embodiment of the viral culture and have a high coefficient of self-reflexivity (the crowd that observes itself) in the direction of a political and cultural empowerment of all participants.

In the logic of the mob, it has been said, it is possible to be a performer and a spectator at the same time: thanks to the new media used in real time to comment on the performance itself in a profitable dialectic between ‘distant inquiry’ and ‘vital embodiment’. From within the spatial figure of the mob, its participants may comment on their participation in real time thus providing a self-reflective strand and communicating the action to the online social network: ‘Between physical action and virtual commentary; and its authorship within a social network locates the flash mob as a contemporary phenomenon of a digitally designed scenography that infiltrates the body of the city’ (Brejzek 2010: 121). Walking through one’s city one can become aware,



'Cube of Truth', Anonymous for the Voiceless, 2018  
© Anonymous for the Voiceless

'Cube of Truth', Anonymous for the Voiceless, 2018  
© Anonymous for the Voiceless

as in a Situationist *détournement*, that it is teeming with places of animal suffering, from the most obvious butchers, furrier shops, to leather garment retailers, to animal shelters for vivisection. If the performer also becomes a spectator, the occasional passers-by determine the formation of ephemeral communities, in which each is placed in front of a different reading of reality generated by an experiential logic from which an emergence of the spectator can arise, whose participation becomes material for observation. If this component refers to an intellectual and critical participation, the somatic level of participation itself cannot be neglected. As De Marinis (2013) notes, it is only during the twentieth

century, in particular with the continental new teatrology (above all the Italian theatre studies) and the American performance that theatrical theory has fully assumed the corporeal dimension of the theatre. Both branches of studies were born between the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to the resonance with the political ferment of the 1960s.

# CONCLUSION

What I aimed to outline in this essay is the smart mob as a new cultural phenomenon and as a physicalisation of viral culture as a pervasive game for conquest of the space of the city. I discussed the characteristics of the smart mob that is, it being participatory, temporary, and performative making it an heir of forms of artistic and political intervention in the public space, from the happenings of the 60s to the guerilla theatre, which sought the convergence both of performer and viewer as participants of the performative event. The smart mob possesses as an additional weapon a high degree of self-reflexivity (the mob observing itself): spectators and actors all in one, the two groups of mobbers enacting a choreographed performative action with a set beginning and set end in a public space. Its ‘cast’ comprises anonymous participants drawn from an online community and its physical body interrupts, spotlights, and irritates the relentless ‘passing-through spaces’ that characterise contemporary urbanity.

I considered performances by anti-speciesist activists a worthy part of the history of performative experiences of the second half of the twentieth century, both for their intrinsically performative value, and because the claims of anti-speciesists usually remain on the sidelines of political discourse, forgotten from the collective discourse, something that perhaps has to do with the worldwide exploitation of non-human animals and with the anthropocentric ideologies that justify it. Being myself at the same time a theatre scholar and an activist involved in the performances that I presented here, I offered added personal value to the analyses and discussions.

Simultaneously with the emergence of these activists’ performances there can be found a vast phenomenology of contemporary theatre in

which the participation of citizens in the theatrical event arises from a profound urgency to reconstruct the relational dimension — first of all, the theatrical walks undertaken by many groups, like the Dom Collective<sup>10</sup> or the choral involvement in the performances of multitudes of citizens such as the project on the Dante trilogy of the Albe<sup>11</sup> in Ravenna, a scenic writing open to hundreds of people and also played in city spaces.

A re-semantisation of the world that passes through corporeality: shared bodily and emotional experiences lead us to a terrain in which performance is a permanent and a potentially revolutionary transformative device with a strong ethical component. Ethical sharing is the generative spring of the ‘urban flocks’ of anti-speciesists and creates forms of performative protest that can be included within what De Marinis (2016) defines as ‘political uses of the theater’. It is an expanded use of theatricality, which, on the basis of Schechner’s revolutionary thought (2018), shows the disruptive power of performance. The activists collectively perform an idea of radical transformation of the world. Here lies the disruptive power of all the experiences analysed so far: to perform utopia. •

10. <https://www.casadom.org/about.html> [accessed 3 April 2022].

11. <https://www.teatrodellealbe.com/ita/spettacolo.php?id=93> [accessed 3 April 2022].

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