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**ESSAYS**  
**ACTIVISM**  
**AND**  
**SPECTATORSHIP**  
**GUEST EDITORS**  
**AGATA ŁUKSZA**  
**PIETER VERSTRAETE**



**EDITORIAL  
INTRODUCTION**

**AGATA ŁUKSZA  
PIETER VERSTRAETE**



The past decade has seen an upsurge of protest movements all over the globe as well as scholarship on activism in diverse disciplines. Concomitant to the upward thrust of social media platforms in our daily interactions, new and re-emerging forms of collective protest have proliferated and strengthened social movements as well as civil society groups. More often than not we see that these protests have themselves born theatrical and performative aspects. They have also inspired new generations of theatre practitioners to recalibrate their own response-ability through their representations on the stage as well as through actions in public space. Whether it be reclaiming *spaces of appearance* to (inspire to) act as equals ‘in concert’ in the streets (Arendt 1958), like Standing Man in Turkey, or capitalising on the *society of the spectacle* (Debord 1967) to invoke strong affective reactions in complicit spectators at home or in the theatre, like the images of *Querdenken*’s storming of the Reichstag or its uncanny simile in Milo Rau’s *General Assembly*, theatrical and performative qualities of present-day activism often intertwine at the intersection of visibility, subjectivity, and spectatorship.

As editors of this fourth special Essays section of the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, we ask ourselves: what can a theatre and/or performative lens bring to the table to understand contemporary forms of activism? What can we learn from past forms and scholarship? What is the contribution of theatre and performance concepts to critical social and political inquiry, like in current debates of democracy, populism, environmentalism, violence, racism, sexism, social justice, etc.? What does it really mean ‘to act’, ‘to move’, or ‘be moved’? What is theatre’s or performance’s real (bio)power? How does theatre ‘assemble’ people or create spaces to carry on the memory of a movement in times of absence and repression? How do theatre and performance bypass censorship in support of an activism of the stage? Or do they contribute rather to a democracy that looks more like Plato’s vexed ‘theatrocracy’? And how do theatrical modes of spectating, framing, and referencing specific symbiologies come into play to incite citizens to re-act, to take part in solidarity, be it directly in the streets or more distant, in theatres or through our mobile devices?

This is all not that very new, of course, albeit that social media have certainly increased visibility, as well as the speed of connectivity and accessibility to knowledge that can mobilize people. From the nostalgic ‘decade of revolution’ in the 1960s up until today, tactical repertoires (Tilly 1978), scripts and scenarios (Kershaw 1997; Taylor 2003) have been drawn from earlier forms of peaceful protest and ‘guerrilla theatre’ (Davis 1966, crediting Peter Berg for coining the term). Already in the 1990s, theatre scholars like Baz Kershaw observed how most forms of contemporary protest are encroached by ‘performative considerations’ (1997: 274) and tactics, even when spontaneous, which he describes as ‘dramaturgies of protest’. He goes so far as to describe performance, particularly in the wake of 1989, as ‘central to all socio-political processes, producing a “performative society” and maintaining ‘performative democracies’ (257). The latter is defined further by Elzbieta

Matynia (2009) in a more sustainable role of activism to create urban pockets for uninhibited expressions of political agency, possibility, and positionality. According to Judith Butler, who observes collective acts of political protests since the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring in 2011, performativity is the *sine qua non* for public assemblies who call into existence a performative politics that is closely tied to the bodies of its constituent members. They particularly highlight the protesters’ precarity that operates as a ‘site of alliance’ even while such members do not otherwise have much in common with each other (Butler 2015: 27).

The history of activist forms and the performative concepts they inspired constitute one thread in this Essays section that some of the contributors have focused on. Hanna Huber makes a comparison between the occupations of the legendary Théâtre Odéon (aka Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe), a cultural symbol in Paris, in 1968 and 2021. Huber demonstrates the differing theatrical nature of the protests, their main symbols, mobilising techniques, and interweaving of aesthetics and politics, while offering perspective on the theatre’s recent occupation, which so far has not received much academic attention. Laura Budriesi delves further into the historical roots of theatricalised forms of protest, in search of a ‘semantics of activism’, by zooming into the legacy of guerrilla theatre in the 60s as an upshot of other radical and participatory theatre groups, like the Living Theatre, juxtaposing their arsenal of techniques to more recent phenomena like artivism in the 90s and smart mobs in the 2000s. She also touches on the feminist legacy in today’s antispeciesist activism in Italy.

Most of the cases analysed in this Essays section confirm Victor Turner’s long-standing thesis on the deep interdependency between social and theatrical drama, or to put it more broadly — theatrical practice — developed further by Richard Schechner (Turner 1987). Diverse examples from different times and spaces reveal how these two human social

activities interfere and fuel each other not only on the level of ideas, but, perhaps more importantly, in the field of repertoires of contention and collective action (Tilly 1983), modes of being together and assembling, and ways of constructing public space. Such connection occurs regardless of the political profile of the movement and its position in the political spectrum, whether it belongs to the right-wing, conservative, or populist realm, or it situates in the left-wing, socialist, or communist pole, whether it stems from grass-roots oppositional and anti-systemic aspirations, or it constitutes a part of hegemonic myth making by state or non-state actors. Whatever the case, public space, which becomes the site of activism, gains a liminal dimension — the way it is understood in anthropology after Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner — because a public assembly triggers a subjunctive mode which opens a possibility of self-reflection and questioning of the dominant order by revealing its contingency and arbitrariness. In this perspective, social protests emerge in response to social crises as a way of overcoming these crises and imagining new social models.

Drawing from Judith Butler, who appears to be a major influence for most recent scholarship on social and political protests, most authors in this issue acknowledge the importance of *the bodies* constituting the public assembly. The bodies are the locus of the protest performativity; however, it is no less important where the bodies gather and in what ways their presence reshapes the space they occupy (as well as in what ways this space affects the assembly). The category of space directs towards the privileged relation between theatre and protest as theatrical buildings often host the very core of the protest or constitute important links in the protest spatial network. This interdependency shows how easily the site of artistic expression, which is liminoidal by its nature, can evolve into a liminal space where social drama unravels.

Due to its spatial nature, theatre has then the potential to extend the concerns of public space and its revolutionary imaginings to the stage,

particularly when its symbols and traces in the streets have been erased by authorities. This is the case, for instance, in Turkey, where both Zeynep Uğur and Deniz Başar report from, in the wake of the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Uğur focuses on the genuine potential of alternative theatres in Istanbul to carry further the response-ability of artists who took part in ‘Gezi’ as well as in its central desire for creative ‘space making’ in the city after Henri Lefebvre’s adage of claiming the ‘right to the city’ (1968; 1996). Başar, inspired by the work of Diana Taylor, is more interested in the performative extension of repertoires of resistance contributing to what she calls ‘monuments of absence’ be it physically as urban objects or felt as tactile absences of performativities in the public sphere. In both instances, the power of collective memory and commemoration is a role that theatre and performance artists can make their own to counteract the state’s wilful forgetting and myth making around new national memories of the resistance and its aftermath.

Most of the essays published in this section relate to Kershaw’s concept of ‘dramaturgies of protest’ and, as such, challenge a ‘common sense’ assumption about the inherently chaotic and spontaneous nature of social protests. On the contrary, juxtaposed studies of different cases point to the fact that such protests unravel not unlike a theatrical performance, that is according to scripts and through established and restored repertoires of behaviour, often borrowed from the realm of theatre or other cultural performances, such as sports.

Juliana Coelho de Souza Ladeira and Julia Guimarães Mendes teamed up to discuss the many street protests of the ‘new Brazilian right’ between 2013 and 2021 in three thematic cycles following the protests’ main symbols (‘Patria’, ‘God’, and ‘Guns’), thereby discerning different theatrical strategies used in these protests. One such theatricalised moment is when the impeachment process of President Dilma Rousseff in the Chamber of Deputies in 2016 followed all the scripts of a televised

World Cup final, identifying the protesters as the representation of the crowd or even, ‘the people’ through what Kershaw (1997) would call the ‘synecdoche character of protests’, in which a part of the social (in this case the protestors) are made to stand for the whole, the society at large.

A similar tactic is discussed by Leon Gabriel who describes the 2020 images of protesters in Germany’s conspiracy-prone and QAnon-like *Querdenken* movement storming the Reichstag building, the seat of the German Parliament, in their claim to be a ‘true uprising’ of ‘the people’ as a whole who were insurrecting against the allegedly corrupt elites. While comparing the images to Milo Rau’s *General Assembly* in 2017, which was in itself a re-enactment of the storming of the Russian Tsar’s Winter Palace in 1917, Gabriel problematises theatre’s simplistic equation of being a place of (political) assembly just because of its ability to assemble, and therefore automatically being imbued with the task to be an environment for testing out democracy. He refers to Plato’s critical notion of ‘theatrocracy’ in his *Republic*, revealing the dangers of proximity between politics and theatricalisation, thus reminding of Samuel Weber’s reading that theatricality only becomes subversive when it separates itself from the confines of the *theatron*, in short, the theatre (2004: 37).

The theatricalisation of protests that Kershaw also observed calls for questioning not only the particular framing through which the actions of individuals and groups appearing for each other in the Arendtian space of appearance can be seen, but also the spectatorship that this theatricalisation hails, *on performative terms*. Theatricality and performativity are then often more interdependent than at odds with each other. When discussing the theatrical and/or performative aspects of protest and activism, one should be cautious of an essentialist dialectics. As Rebecca Schneider (2014) points out, traditionally the category of performance used to be linked with such values as authenticity,

sincerity, and purity, and thus legitimising one’s right to act within the Habermasian public space. The same for Butler, performativity in this context is related to the possibility of appearing in public space. The insurgence of the precarious bodies and their existence within this space would be performative.

The gendered concept of theatricality, on the contrary, constituted its polar opposition and shed dark shadows on one’s public actions. To quote Schneider, ‘[t]heatricality refers to posing, feigning, appearing “as if,” miming, dissimulating, masquerading, camping, and acting. Theatricality always announces an ambivalent relationship to the real. Most often, theatricality is evident to a viewer. That which is theatrical is that which does not quite pass’ (2014: 26). This unequally valorised gendered distinction, which ideological matrix Schneider dismantles, demands further investigation in the context of social protests. The more so concerning the genealogy of the very word ‘theatricality’ which was coined to comment on the commemorations in the era of the French Revolution, Europe’s first epochal mass media event. Thus, from the very beginning, theatricality becomes ‘tinted’ with a political agenda as a propaganda tool applied in the performance of power.

According to Tracy Davis, ‘theatricality is neither an aesthetic effect nor a relationship of theatre to lived reality, but goes beyond this clichéd polarity to address the commensurability of spectating to civil society’ (2003: 151). While the essays collected in this section do not explore this sharp division between theatricality and performativity, it remains to be answered to what degree, on the one hand, contemporary social protests have overcome this binary juxtaposition and profit from the subversive potential of theatricality recognised by Schneider and, on the other hand, to what extent theatricality is still invoked when for instance speaking about manipulative actions undertaken by masquerading agents of authoritarian rules.

The final two essays do give us some ideas of the ideological underpinnings of the theatricality and spectacle of activist images, memes, and symbols. Yingjun Wei discusses the performance of state power in China through what she calls a gendered ‘disaster nationalism’ (borrowed from Zhang 2020) in support of state-led nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism. Her case in point focuses on online strategies of objectifying female bodies and strengthening gender performativity during the Covid-19 pandemic through hashtags on the Chinese Weibo social platform and the spread of images of female health workers wearing masks like soldiers or of bald-headed nurses. Quite contrary to the above ‘clichéd polarity’, Wei counterposes the state-controlled gender performativity with Butler’s necessary severing of the ‘theater of legitimacy’ (2015: 85) which she finds in the performative feminist resistance of *Jiangshanjiao* that calls into question the legitimacy of this performativity by the state apparatus, targeting ‘the regulation of the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution’ (ibid.).

Rebecca Hillman closes the Essays section in homage to Kershaw, following his proposal to deliver ‘a kind of historical relief map of changing civil desire’ in a climate of incumbent radical social and political change with the emergence of Corbynism in the UK, which yielded a potential to ‘disrupt socio-political expectations and produce new kinds of public discourse’ concerning collective power, socialism, and communism, specifically (1997: 256–7). Hillman’s argument revolves around contemporary reclamations of symbols and practices associated historically with socialism and communism. She particularly looks at the use of red flags in a 2016 performance of *Love on the Dole* by Salford Community Theatre and gives a more personal account of her engagement in a group called ‘the red bloc’ with which they choreographed in 2015 a disciplined bloc of marching people. Her insider’s perspective gives an insight into the choreographies of protest by a new generation of activists taking the baton where previous generations may have left it.

With that, our investigations into Activism and Spectatorship come full circle. The present essays observe a wide array of perspectives, on either side of the political spectrum and in different corners of the globe. As editors of this issue, we hope that it may open new insights into the past and present of activist forms, the relevance of theatre and performance scholarship in this field of study, and that it may inspire many scholarly as well as political debates. In true Delacroix style, we wave the flag at you. ●

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**L'ODÉON EST  
OUVERT !!!  
THEATRICAL ACTIVISM  
IN PARIS  
1968 AND 2021  
HANNA HUBER**

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Employed at the University of Vienna (Austria) since 2019, Hanna Huber currently works on her PhD project 'Performing on the Fringe: Narratives on the Festival OFF d'Avignon'. Conceptualised as mixed-method research, the project draws on a combination of qualitative interviews, quantitative data evaluation, and performance analyses. Hanna Huber successfully completed her MA in Theatre, Film, and Media Studies; her MA in English and American Studies as well as her BA in Romance Studies at the University of Vienna, with exchange semesters at the University of Malta and the Université d'Avignon.

## KEYWORDS

Théâtre Odéon, protest, activism, politics, May 1968

## MOTS-CLÉS

Théâtre Odéon, contestation, activisme, politique, Mai 1968

# SUMMARY

The Théâtre Odéon in Paris has a long history of occupation and political protest. On 15 May 1968, students, artists, and workers converted the iconic monument into a political stage to express their concerns and dissatisfaction with the conservative political system of President Charles de Gaulle. After occupations in 1992 and 2016, the theatre has once more become the stage of political protest and centre of public attention. On 4 March 2021, protestors occupied the Théâtre Odéon to fight for support for the two hundred and seventy-five thousand *intermittents du spectacle*, i.e. cultural part-time workers, who have been deprived of their work and livelihood due to the coronavirus pandemic. This paper examines theatrical practices, symbolic elements, mobilising techniques, and means of communication during the Odéon occupations and places a particular focus on the intertwined relationship between aesthetics and politics that develops as soon as protest movements conquer a cultural institution.

# RÉSUMÉ

Le Théâtre Odéon à Paris a une longue histoire d'occupation et de contestation politique. Le 15 mai 1968, étudiants, artistes et ouvriers ont transformé le monument emblématique en scène politique pour exprimer leurs inquiétudes et leur mécontentement face au système politique conservateur du président Charles de Gaulle. Après les occupations de 1992 et 2016, le théâtre est redevenu la scène de la contestation politique et le centre de l'attention publique. Le 4 mars 2021, des manifestants ont occupé le Théâtre Odéon pour lutter pour le soutien des 275.000 intermittents du spectacle, privés de leur travail et de leurs moyens de subsistance à cause de la pandémie de coronavirus. Cet article examine les pratiques théâtrales, les éléments symboliques, les techniques de mobilisation et les moyens de communication pendant les occupations de l'Odéon et met un accent particulier sur les relations imbriquées entre esthétique et politique, dès que des mouvements contestataires conquièrent une institution culturelle.

# INTRODUCTION

As soon as the evening performance by the Paul Taylor Dance Company ended on 15 May 1968 and the neatly dressed spectators left the Théâtre Odéon in Paris, over three thousand students, artists, and workers stormed the building and occupied the halls, balconies, boxes, orchestra pit, and stage. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German student involved in the May Revolution, proclaimed ‘[w]e must consider this theater, once a symbol of bourgeois and Gaullist culture, now an instrument of combat against the bourgeoisie’ (quoted in Feenberg and Freedman 2001: 40). The protestors converted the theatre into a political stage, a ‘tribune libre’ to express their concerns and dissatisfaction with capitalism and the conservative political system under president Charles de Gaulle.

# The Theatrical Nature of Political Protest

In spring 2021, more than eighty cultural institutions in France were occupied by protestors after repeated shutdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic. Independent artists had been especially hard-hit by the crisis and thus fought for visibility and political attention. From 4 March to 23 May, a group of forty-two artists occupied the Théâtre Odéon. Is the legacy of 1968 still present during the occupation of 2021? To what extent do these two manifestations of resistance that conquered and repurposed the monumental theatre differ with regard to their theatrical practices, symbolic elements, mobilising techniques, and means of communication? How have the protestors expanded their repertoires of linguistic and embodied actions?

This essay examines theatrical practices of the Odéon occupations in 1968 and 2021 from a comparative point of view and situates them within the wider context of major ideological and political struggles in France. While the *enragés*<sup>1</sup> of May 68 converted the large theatre hall into an open-access forum for political debates and used speech as a means to renegotiate society, the occupants of 2021 transferred their protest space to the forecourt of the Odéon — due to Covid measures only a limited number of people was permitted inside — and expanded their visibility to a global media space by either uploading pre-recordings or livestreaming collective action. The public theatre was chosen in an attempt to continue a history of protest, yet its symbolic significance has changed over the past fifty years.

1. The term *enragés* (literally ‘madmen’) originally designated a group of extreme revolutionaries under the leadership of the priest Jacques Roux during the French Revolution. They demanded social and economic support for the lower classes. The term was then reused by student activists in May 1968.

Political protests mark a legitimate way to publicly express disapproval in opposition to a status quo which the protestors are unable or powerless to change themselves. Consequently, policymakers in the government or private organisations are addressed in the presence of a general public, which increases the pressure on the protestors’ target group to act or stop acting in a certain way. According to the American sociologist Ralph Herbert Turner, an act of protest is intended to draw attention to grievances within a system. As ameliorative measures can only be taken by a third party, the protestors depend on a combination of sympathy and fear on behalf of their target group (1969: 816). The German-American sociologist Rudolf Heberle acknowledges that protest movements do not merely represent a public statement for or against political decisions, but instead raise the claim to co-create the existing social reality (1967: 6).

Political protest occurs in — literally physical or medially transmitted — social spaces that guarantee visibility and generate the potential for collective action. Typically, the street — a seemingly neutral route connecting private and public venues, permitting movement, transport, and exchange of people and goods between these separate locations — becomes the stage for political protest. As soon as a group of protestors stops the regular flow of movement by blocking the street in the form of a sit-in, their ‘unconventional behaviour’ disturbs the order of the communal system, interrupts the daily functioning of society and, thereby, attracts public attention.

Exploring the political-symbolic use of public space in Berlin from 1900 to 1914, Thomas Lindenberger distinguishes between top-down

and bottom-up street politics. While police forces take preventive measures to guarantee state security and maintain the public order (top-down), dynamic confrontations in the form of verbally explicit and bodily implicit actions by the common people challenge those in power (bottom-up) (1995: 13–15). Thus, the street, on the one hand, serves as a visual manifestation of public order and the existing social hierarchy; visibility facilitates surveillance and control according to Michel Foucault. On the other hand, however, the street may be transformed into a stage for political demands and protest rituals; visibility generates power and the potential for collective action according to Hannah Arendt.

In May 1968, French students discovered the street as an available medium to voice social criticism, question traditional values, reject political authorities, fight for free expression, and dream of a new society. In an interview Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theatre who partook in the Odéon occupation on 15 May 1968, emphasised ‘The street is a great mystical venue. It belongs to everybody, it belongs to nobody’ (quoted in Rosenthal 1998: 150). Viewing the street as the most egalitarian public place, distant from institutionalised channels of information subjected to government control and censorship, students relocated their discussions from lecture halls to public venues and, thereby, invited intellectuals, artists, and factory workers to join.

Maurice Blanchot notes, ‘[s]ince May 1968 the street has awakened: it speaks. [...] Once again the street is alive, powerful and sovereign: a venue of all possible freedom’ (2003: 180).<sup>2</sup> The public expressions of this multifaceted political movement were completely heterogeneous with regard to their *content*, e.g., topics ranging from the Vietnam War to contraception, and their *form*, e.g., verbal utterances in assemblies, meetings, and demonstrations as well as written statements on flyers, posters, and mural paintings (Canut 2009: para. 10).

Michel de Certeau states, ‘[e]n mai dernier on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789’ (‘Last May, we took the speech, just as we took the Bastille in 1789’) (1994: 40). While the medieval armoury and political prison, the Bastille, was interpreted as a symbol of royal authority and the monarch’s abuse of power, the *enragés* of 1968 seized the Sorbonne, ‘a temple of learning and house of cultural initiation’ and the Théâtre Odéon, ‘the citadel of traditional culture’ (Feenberg and Freedman 2001: 41). The documentary film *Le Droit à la parole* (*The Right to Speak*) by Michel Andrieu released in 1978 depicts how students and workers rose to speak and, thereby, took possession of their own voice. Pierre Nora even describes the happenings of May 1968 as a ‘festival de la parole agissante’ (‘a festival of the acting speech’) that united ‘speeches by protest leaders and anonymous participants, words by students and workers, original and cited phrases, slogans written on walls and posters, political, poetic, educational and messianic words, speeches without words and pure noise’ (1972: 163).

2. Quotations in French have been translated into English by the author.

## 'L'Odéon est ouvert !!!'



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in May 1968 © Eric Koch  
Courtesy of National Archives of the Netherlands / Photo Collection Anefo

According to Cécile Canut, human speech was not only a means of expression during the student revolution, but even constituted the event itself; speech had become performance, the substance of the political movement (2009: para. 2). While speech had so far been reserved for political authorities who used it as an instrument to manipulate and control the people, it was then substituted by a 'parole libre' which found its expression in humour and irony, equivocation and subversion (ibid.: para. 6). In light of this, the bourgeois Théâtre Odéon was occupied and transformed into an open forum for political debates. Class distinctions and social status should be temporarily suspended to permit every actor visibility to articulate their individual stories and concerns. At the renamed 'Odéon-Théâtre libre' the occupants discussed 'issues that went far beyond the subject of culture' (Loyer 2011: 318–9), like politics, philosophy, and utopian visions of a new society.

On 3 May 1968, four hundred students demonstrated in the courtyard of the Sorbonne University and publicly criticised the outdated, overburdened education system in France. The centralistic structure and hierarchical administration of universities was perceived as obsolete and discriminating. Universities, even those which were situated close to the *bidonvilles*, did not tackle the actual needs of society in the lecture halls. Moreover, the imbalance between the increasing number of students and the limited career opportunities led to economic and social insecurity among the young population (Jurt 2009: 64). To end the demonstration, the rector of the Sorbonne University Jean Roche called the police who then forced the protestors off the premises and arrested several students. On 7 May, twenty thousand protestors in Paris expressed their dissatisfaction with low-wage jobs, bad living conditions, little social mobility, and economic inequalities, which even led to street fights with the police in the Latin Quarter during the so-called 'Night of the Barricades' on 10 May. Three days later, altogether nine million workers went on strike in France and seized control of the factories. Prime Minister Georges Pompidou ordered the police to withdraw from the Sorbonne on 13 May, whereupon the protesting students seized the university and raised a red flag. The celebrations of their victory were accompanied by impromptu jam sessions (Drott 2011: 2). Paul Berman describes the utopian exhilaration of the '68 generation world-wide as permeated by the belief 'that a superior new society was already coming into existence' (1997: 9). Amidst this tumultuous atmosphere, students and artists met and envisioned the occupation of the Théâtre Odéon.

Patrick Ravignant published an anonymous report of two hundred and fifty-five pages written by a member of the Comité d'Action

Révolutionnaire during the theatre occupation. On the evening of 13 May, the assembled students declared that art was no longer communication, exaltation, magic, but had become a consumer product dominated by the scandalous myth of stardom, completely cut off from life, parked in museums, galleries, or theatres. This kind of art would only nurture passivity, irresponsibility, narcissism, cowardice, and stupidity. Thus, venues of cultural production should be boycotted (Ravignat 1968: 34). On this very evening, the occupation of the Théâtre Odéon was decided.

'Let's take a theatre,' someone said.

'The Comédie-Française?'

'Non, it's like the Academy, too dusty, already dead...'

Indeed the impact would have been zero. It had to be a 'young' theatre that truly embodied the art of this consumer society.

'So, let's take the Odéon!'

'Yes, that's it,' everyone shouted, 'Let's take the Odéon!'

(Ravignat 1968: 35)

Its representative architecture gave the Odéon the reputation of a venue reserved for the cultural elite, a symbol of bourgeois supremacy, a national theatre under de Gaulle's Presidency. Yet, a glimpse at the history of the Odéon and its artistic director Jean-Louis Barrault reveals a more ambivalent picture.

The formerly called Théâtre-Français was inaugurated by Marie-Antoinette on 9 April 1782 and already in its early days became the site of a theatre scandal: *Le mariage de Figaro* by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais in 1784 (Baecque 2010: 31–5).<sup>3</sup> The theatre's history

<sup>3</sup> The comedy in five acts *La Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* is today considered a forerunner of the French Revolution, as it questioned the archaic privileges of the aristocracy and criticised the social injustices of the Ancien Régime.

is marked by its frequent renaming: during the French Revolution in 1789, the National Assembly baptised the emblematic venue Théâtre de la Nation, whereupon a group of actors renamed it Théâtre de l'Égalité 'by and for the people'. Since 1796, the name Odéon was mostly used in allusion to the antique 'Odeum', i.e. a site for sung declarations, literally a 'singing place', while Napoleon preferred to call it 'Théâtre de Sa Majesté l'Impératrice et Reine' (Bredeson 2018: 29). Following an invitation by theatre director Thomas Sauvage in 1827, British actors staged the first continental performances of Shakespearean plays in English (Rootering 2010: 88). Sarah Bernhardt celebrated her first successful performances with François Coppée's *Le passant* (*The Passerby*) in 1869 and Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas* (*Ruy Blas*) in 1872 at the Théâtre Odéon before joining the Comédie-Française (ibid.: 106–7).

Jean-Louis Barrault, who had taken over the artistic direction of the Odéon in 1959, did not only include a canon of classical plays in his repertoire, but also contemporary dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras, and Eugène Ionesco. The Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, founded together with his wife Madeleine Renaud, caused a scandal when staging Genet's *Les Paravents* (*The Screens*) directed by Roger Blin in 1966, which explicitly criticised French policy during the Algerian War. Interestingly, students of the UNEF (Union nationale des étudiants de France), including Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who later became a symbol of the May Revolution as 'Dany le Rouge', stood up for Barrault and defended his decision to stage the scandalous play (Goetschel 2010: 176). Due to his progressive and innovative attitude, Barrault could only mistakenly have been perceived as antagonistic to the student revolts two years later. According to Martin Zenck, the protests were directed against the self-representation of the French state in public and the supremacy of national cultural institutions, but did not criticise the theatre director and his ensemble (2009: 46).

The report published by Patrick Ravignant lists various reasons why the Odéon constituted the ideal venue to expand the student revolts. First and foremost, it was situated close to the Sorbonne, which would facilitate the cooperation with the university occupation. As a national theatre, the Odéon represented a cultural institution under governmental control. Well aware that Barrault was a self-declared political leftist and also programmed avant-garde plays, the protestors considered this circumstance an even greater danger. Enacting a make-believe revolution on stage would in fact discourage the real revolution among the audience, they argued (Ravignant 1968: 38–9). On 17 May 1968, a student representative explained to the radio journalist Pierre Janin that the Odéon would only ‘hide behind such stuff like Genet’ and was, thus, ‘even more dangerous’ to their revolutionary ambitions (quoted in Janin 1968a: 02:50). Graffiti sprayed on the theatre confirmed this conviction: ‘Let us not dwell on the show of protest, but let’s move on to the protest of this show’ (quoted in Soulé 2008: para. 3).

## ‘L’imagination prend le pouvoir !’

On 15 May, rumours circulated that the Mouvement du 22 Mars<sup>4</sup> was planning the occupation of the Odéon. Yet, as no protestors were in sight and the evening performance of Paul Taylor’s dance company could take place as scheduled, Barrault and Renaud left the theatre and went home. Around 11 p.m. they received a telephone call by Félix

4. The association dated back to 22 March 1968, when students occupied the University of Nanterre to protest against the arrest of seven members of the Comité Vietnam National (CVN) in opposition to the Vietnam War.

Giacomoni, administrative director of the Odéon, who informed them that a crowd of three thousand students, artists, and workers had entered the building. Francis Raison, director at the Ministère des Affaires culturelles, remembers having received the following instructions: ‘avoid any bloody confrontation, leave the doors of the theatre open, dialogue with the demonstrators and “accompany” them — that was the word used — as long as possible’ (Raison 1994: 57). In view of the cramped hall, the theatre ensemble was worried about fire safety regulations: the dancer Micky Berger screamed, ‘Watch out for fire, and most importantly, do not smoke!’ and Michel Bertey, Barrault’s assistant, distributed leaflets with the telephone number of the nearest fire brigade (Rauch-Lepage 1994: 74). In 1799 and 1818, the Odéon had already been the victim of a large fire, whereupon its personnel were cautious to prevent any further tragedy.

What followed was a night of speeches, debates, and non-stop discussions. The French artist and political activist Jean-Jacques Lebel declared, ‘Comrades, the Odéon [...] has become a centre of revolutionary expression and creation, an emergency station and refuge; the imagination takes power! You can do and say whatever you want! You are art! You are the revolution! The Odéon is open to everyone!’ (quoted in Ravignant 1968: 55). In an interview of 2008, Judith Malina recalls her observations:

People stood up and talked about their hopes and their fears, about what they should do and what they shouldn’t do, and read poetry. Late that night, Jean-Louis Barrault [...] came through the back of the house and Julian [Beck] was onstage, and Barrault said, “what a great show you’re putting on here. What a wonderful performance!” Then there began a long siege during which, twenty-four hours a day, there was talk, talk, talk—revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak. (quoted in Pellerin 2018: E3)



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in May 1968 © Eric Koch  
Courtesy of National Archives of the Netherlands / Photo Collection Anefo

For the upcoming days, Barrault suggested continuing the scheduled dance performances parallel to the theatre occupation and reminded the student radicals that ‘Paul Taylor has danced in Cuba: he is with you, he is a revolutionary!’ (quoted in Ravignat 1968: 60). However, his suggestion was only shouted down. Instead, the protest leaders read a public declaration on the following morning, broadcasted by the national television station ORTF: ‘Artists, actors, students, and workers decided to found a revolutionary action committee on the premises of bourgeois culture. The Odéon was chosen not to personally attack a company, but to have the Théâtre de France cease to be a theatre for an unlimited period. With 16 May, it has become a meeting place

between workers, students, artists, and actors’ (ORTF 1968: 01:10). A large banner saying ‘L’Odéon est ouvert!!!’ was attached on the balustrade of the theatre amidst the golden lettering ‘Odéon Théâtre de France’. Instead of the French tricolour, the red flag of communism and the black flag of anarchy decorated the noble entrance. The author Hervé Hamon remembers, ‘Nobody knew where all of that would lead, not even us, the students. Everybody was allowed to talk; and everybody talked at once’ (quoted in Veiel 2018: para. 5).

However, the utopian vision to grant ‘everybody’ unrestricted possibilities to express themselves did not include all members of the French society in equal shares.<sup>5</sup> Julie Pagis’s study of May 68 based on questionnaires and interviews with three hundred and fifty participants reveals that ‘[f]eelings of legitimacy and competence in public speaking, as well as responsibilities in activist organisations are primarily associated with men from upper-class backgrounds [...], even when they had limited experience in activism’ (2018: 90). Women of May 68 chose forms of participation that were ‘less institutionalised’ and ‘more on the fringes of (or outside) the main union, activist, or partisan organisations’ (ibid.: 89). Khursheed Wadia remarks the absence of women in images and accounts of May 68, yet their contribution in the background was massive and unprecedented (1993: 150–51). It is criticised that marginalised groups did not have the same chance to speak up and defend their rights. In his study on gay liberation in the occupied Sorbonne, Michael Sibalís argues that ‘the attitude towards homosexuality was hardly progressive’ (2011: 130). Still, women and gay liberation movements were impacted by the revolutionary spirit of 1968 and gained momentum in the 1970s.

5. Cross-class thought and action in 1968 were also exposed as a myth in the autosociobiographical writings of Annie Ernaux (*Les années*; 2008) and Didier Eribon (*Retour à Reims*; 2009).

# The End of the Student Protests in 1968

As Barrault understood the revolutionists' demands for cultural democratisation and socio-political change in France, he did not strictly oppose the occupation of his theatre. Instead he observed the happenings, ensured that the protestors did not cause any harm to the theatre equipment, and even gave the oft-cited and fatal speech, in which he radically declared 'Barrault est mort'. His symbolic death should represent the end of a bourgeois theatre, while there remains 'un homme vivant' who intends to actively support the political activist movement (Loyer 2010: 189). In view of the increasing chaos at the Odéon, Barrault decided to rescue important documents like reports and accounts, prompt books, and video recordings of performances, paintings and busts, furnishings and costumes, which he then stored in an empty apartment in Paris (Rauch-Lepage 1994: 81).

On 19 May, Francis Raison was informed of the government's intention to evacuate the Odéon. President Charles de Gaulle had returned from Romania and spoke the famous words, 'Réforme, oui; chienlit, non' ('Reform, yes; chaos, no') (quoted in Raison 1994: 61). On 22 May, Jean-Louis Barrault disobeyed the official command to cut off the electricity and telephone at the Odéon. In further consequence, the cultural minister André Malraux dismissed Barrault due to his cooperation with the student radicals.

According to the historian Marie-Ange Rauch, anti-authoritarian protest movements naturally develop until that point when the actual *comité d'action* is incapable to act and the occupation becomes wild, which also explains the serious damages to the theatre interior (Sorbier 2021:

05:10). After the first days, only a few leading figures of the Odéon occupation remained at the theatre. Lebel, Cohn-Bendit, Beck, and Malina had already left to pursue other plans, e.g., attending the rehearsals for the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* at the Festival d'Avignon. Thus, '[b]eginning with the second week of the occupation, the Odéon became a shelter for the capital's nomadic population. By June, waifs, tramps, and starvelings were there in force' (Brown 1980: 447). Outcasts of society inhabited the Odéon, while the revolutionists had apparently lost interest and abandoned their provisional forum for political debates. As a consequence, the occupation had lost its symbolic value in the last weeks. 'I do not believe that the student organization would have defended the last occupants', Rauch argues, 'When an occupation is no longer directed by the people who have initially launched it, then it gradually loses its meaning' (quoted in Sorbier 2021: 08:05).

On 14 June, the Théâtre Odéon and the Sorbonne University were forcefully evacuated by the police. After one month of occupation, the theatre building was severely damaged, as windows and mirrors were shattered, empty alcohol bottles had been discarded everywhere, and cigarette burns had caused holes in the cushions. Francis Raison describes the devastation of the theatre's interior: 'Inside, the sight is more than appalling: the doors of the costume store have been smashed down; the costumes have been torn, trampled, filled with rubbish and even excrement; in the hall the seats are broken; everywhere there is a foul odour; all objects of value are gone' (Raison 1994: 64). On 30 May 1968, Charles de Gaulle dissolved the national assembly and announced new elections. Simultaneously, the Prime Minister Georges Pompidou managed to calm the workers' protests by reducing the work week from forty-three to forty hours, raising the minimum wage by 35%, and decreasing the retirement age. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands publicly expressed their sympathy for de Gaulle and Pompidou on the Champs-Élysées (Veiel 2018: para. 9).

In the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* Amanda Bahr-Evola describes the end of the May Revolution in France as follows, ‘The momentum for the protesters was gone with the end of the strike and De Gaulle’s assumption of control, and the movement simply faded out of apathy, factional infighting within the New Left protesters, and an overall sense of futility’ (2007: 921). With regard to the Odéon occupation, Jean Genet criticises that the verbal orgy and utopian visions never ventured beyond the theatre walls. ‘True revolutionaries’, he claimed, ‘would have occupied law-courts, prisons, radio-stations’ (Bredeson 2011: 310).

Some argue that the revolutionary fervour of 1968 expired without lasting impact, yet the May events have marked a caesura in Europe’s cultural memory and have inspired a variety of political, social, and cultural movements. The field of theatre, for instance, saw a politicisation in the daily practice and the theoretical debate; artists increasingly reflected on the social function of cultural institutions (Jurt 2009: 71). Hierarchical structures were partly dissolved in order to pave the way for so-called ‘créations collectives’. French acting companies that originated at this time and operated on this principle include the Aquarium, the Salamandre, and the Théâtre du Soleil (Jackson et al. 2011: 301).

In May 1968, the Odéon was perceived as an official theatre of the Fifth Republic, an important public institution under cultural minister André Malraux and President Charles de Gaulle. Marie-Ange Rauch doubts that the 2021 occupation had the same symbolic weight, as the Odéon does not represent Macron’s government, whereupon she speaks of an ‘ignorance of the real historical links of this theater with the protest movements’ (Sorbier 2021: 03:10). Stéphane Braunschweig, Artistic Director of the Odéon since January 2016, does not understand the choice of venue either: ‘I am a theatre director. I do not represent the government.’ (interview with the author, 14 September 2021).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Karine Huet, General Secretary of Snam-CGT (Union Nationale

des Syndicats d’Artistes Musiciens) and representative of the Odéon occupation in 2021, brings up the argument of sustaining a memory of protest in times of need, with the Odéon as a continuously contested space. The theatre was chosen for the occupation, because it represents a ‘public theatre’ and ‘direct link to the cultural ministry’, Huet emphasises (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). Marc Slyper, who partook in the Odéon occupations of 1968 and 2021, remarks, ‘[t]his theatre permits us to give those a voice who are not heard otherwise’ (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). In this regard, the memory of the Odéon having been converted into a public forum with ‘spectacular heated debates about the creation of a new society’ (Jouve 2018: abstract) still resonates in the public memory.

## Facing the Coronavirus Pandemic

In 2020 and 2021, safety and hygiene measures to combat a spread of Covid-19 gave the performing arts sector a particularly hard time. Theatres, concert halls, cinemas, and music venues had to close repeatedly and were left in uncertainty regarding when and under what conditions they would be permitted to welcome an audience again. In France, as in all other European countries, the mandatory regulations varied from one lockdown to the next: from March to May 2020, French citizens were only allowed to leave home for work purposes when it was impossible to do the job from home, for the purchase of food and everyday essentials, for medical appointments that could not be postponed, and to help a person in need.

← 6. All interviews were conducted in French. The direct quotations in this article have been translated into English by the author.

# 'Occupons ! Occupons ! Occupons !'

On Easter Monday, 13 April 2020, the French President publicly announced the extension of the nation-wide curfew until 11 May and the annulment of all major festivals and events with a large audience until mid-July. In a radio report broadcast by *France Culture* two days later, Françoise Benhamou, specialist in cultural economy and a professor at the Université Paris XIII, recalled that the cultural sector in France accounted for 2.5% of the GDP and employed 2.2% of the working population. Around two hundred and seventy-five thousand were registered as *intermittents du spectacle*, i.e. cultural part-time workers, and were now lacking the obligatory hours on stage or behind the scenes.<sup>7</sup> Benhamou doubted whether the immense loss could be entirely compensated and feared that several theatre companies would go bankrupt (Erner 2020). On 6 May 2020, Emmanuel Macron announced an *année blanche* for all *intermittents du spectacle* and guaranteed an unconditional payment of their unemployment benefits until the end of August 2021 (Guilloux 2020: para. 5).

After a relaxation in the summer months of 2020, which permitted performances conforming to coronavirus requirements (e.g., face masks, reduced seating capacity, regular ventilation, and disinfection), the falling temperatures of autumn were accompanied by a second wave of infections. A renewed lockdown starting on 28 October 2020 obliged cultural institutions to close and again everybody working in the performing arts sector was either at a standstill or chose digital alternatives.

The new year started with demonstrations in various French cities fighting for the opening of cultural venues. Protestors claimed that performing arts are vital in stimulating creativity, fostering cultural exchange and connectivity, which is especially needed in times of increased social isolation and cannot be replaced by online alternatives.

On 4 March 2021, the artists' union CGT Spectacle called out for occupations of cultural institutions all over the country. 'We explicitly chose this date, as it marks an important anniversary', explains Karine Huet, General Secretary of Snam-CGT, 'In 2020, this was the first day when artists and technicians were prohibited to pursue their profession due to the pandemic, followed by the first lockdown on 17 March' (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). While the May Revolution of 1968 radically questioned state power and envisioned a utopian society, the activists of 2021 focused on more specific demands like the withdrawal of the planned unemployment reform and a prolongation of the *année blanche*. 'Yet, our fight against precarity and impoverishment also tackles more fundamental questions of the social system in general', Marc Slyper adds (interview with the author, 6 July 2021).

Stéphane Braunschweig describes three phases of the 2021 occupation: in the first weeks, he insisted on proceeding with the rehearsals of Christophe Honoré's production *Le Ciel de Nantes* (*The Sky over Nantes*) as planned. Only on Saturday, 6 March, the protestors also seized the stage to 'demonstrate that they were ready to prevent the rehearsals if necessary' (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). The fragile balance due to conflicting interests lasted until the rehearsals had ended in April and the theatre ensemble left the Odéon. 'Due to Covid regulations the entire administration had already been

← 7. According to official regulations, *intermittents* have to prove altogether 507 hours on stage or behind the scenes within twelve subsequent months in order to be granted unemployment benefits, which thus finance their time conceptualising, planning, and rehearsing performances.

transferred to home office before the occupation,' Braunschweig confirms (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). Thus, in the second phase, the protestors were almost alone in the empty theatre, which deprived them of their power to exert pressure on political authorities. The situation, then, radically changed when Emmanuel Macron announced the reopening of cultural institutions with the end of the coronavirus lockdown on 19 May 2021, which led to a third phase marked by conflicts and disputes.

Every day, the protestors held general assemblies on the large square in front of the Odéon, as they were not permitted to host public discussions indoors due to sanitary reasons. The theatrical set-up on the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon gave symbolic weight to their collective protest actions. During the so-called *Opération Flightcases* on 23 April (Occupation Odéon 2021b) more than fifty performers beat a rhythm on flightcases arranged in a triangle, while an opera singer standing on a small podium in their midst accompanied the steadily accelerating drumbeats with her strong and clear voice. The mighty rhythm of the drumbeats, shared patterns of movement, symbolic gestures like clenched fists, and colour-coded clothing of the performers strengthened feelings of group affiliation and solidarity. The carefully orchestrated dramaturgy of silence, vocalisation, and rhythm of the performance framed the public declaration of the protestors' demands, read aloud from the balustrade of the theatre.

While all protestors wore sanitary face masks, some were additionally costumed to display their profession, e.g., by wearing a red nose or a clown's hat. Apart from these visual identifiers, several spectators in the background held up white cardboard signs stating their regular profession which they were currently prevented from pursuing, e.g., 'Comédien', 'Régisseuse', 'Guide Conférencier', and 'Chanteur'. With the progressing pandemic and repeated lockdowns permitting only

'system-relevant employees' to leave their home, these professions were pushed to the oblivion of the private realm. The public display of these visual signs and symbolic accessories raised awareness of the existence and relevance of artistic professions.

The performance was replicated digitally and shared across social media networks to reach a global audience and to increase the pressure on political authorities. Global media technologies not only permit dissemination of collective protest actions, but also create an alternative, participatory space. Online attendees had the ability to react by posting comments and engaging in discussions with other spectators.

## Reframing the Legacy of a Protest in the Twenty-First Century

While the Odéon occupation of 1968 coincided with the time of mass media modernisation and the rise of television, protestors of the twenty-first century use online tools and social networks to disseminate messages, mobilise large groups, and organise collective actions. In return, offline actions are recorded, framed, edited, and displayed on the internet to expand the scope of public attention. The 2021 occupation launched a website, Facebook page, and YouTube channel to reach the general public and communicate their demands.

The YouTube channel *Occupation Odéon* counts more than one hundred and sixty video uploads since March 2021: recorded protest actions and artistic interventions in front of the theatre, music videos, panel discussions, live Q&A sessions, and explanations on the legal situation of French cultural workers during Covid-19. The creation and dissemination of accessible resources to communicate political demands



Occupation of the Théâtre Odéon in 2021  
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has become imperative to attract media attention and to shape the public opinion. In the series *Allô, Odéon?*, the protestors responded via livestream to questions of interested spectators and reported their experiences at the occupied theatre. The interplay of online and offline protest practices contributes to the affective and material occupation of virtual and physical spaces. Text-based communication, e.g., chat discussions during live-streamed videos, gains in spatial and temporal density, concreteness, and corporality, as soon as protest practices are transferred to the streets (Hamm 2006: 78). The video collection in the section *Ça se passe aux agoras (That happens at the agoras)* displays either talks (*Paroles d'agoras*) or performative acts (*Agor'art*) organised in front of the theatre building. The latter includes recitations of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 66*, extracts of the musical *Les Misérables*, concerts and jam sessions, contemporary dance choreographies, orchestral music, and physical performances.

Music videos were also produced to communicate the protestors' demands. Under the title, *En colère et déterminés (Angry and determined)*, a pianist strikes up a peppy song, when about twenty-five protestors assembled in a columned hall of the Odéon join in (Occupation Odéon 2021a). Accompanied by an accordion, tambourine, and contrabass, the catchy melody unfolds and the chorus line goes, 'Occupons, occupons partout où nous pouvons. Occupez, occupez partout où vous pouvez' ('Occupy, occupy wherever we can. Occupy, occupy wherever you can'). All performers dancing and singing to the lively rhythm wear sanitary face masks to also communicate that the current pandemic and protective measures are taken seriously. Gwennaël Hertling confirms, 'We managed to respect all the regulations and did not have one single case of Covid-19 among the occupants within the two and a half months.' (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). Even a ventriloquist's dummy singing the chorus line is equipped with a face mask.

The music video also shows a female statue in the Théâtre Odéon wearing a yellow reflective vest in allusion to the *gilet jaune* protest movement. This grassroots protest movement had neither a trade union nor political party behind it, but was instigated by the totality of working people expressing their dissatisfaction via the internet. After online petitions against the planned fuel tax rise had sprung up on social media networks, 17 November 2018 saw the first offline demonstrations attended by two hundred and eighty thousand people from all over France. What had started as a protest against the fuel tax rise hitting hardest the French lower classes living in rural areas, soon became a wider anti-government movement to express dissatisfaction with the economic programme under Macron's presidency. Images of high-visibility jackets, encampments on roundabouts, and violent protests spread around the globe. The police blamed extreme left- and right-wing rioters for infiltrating the peaceful demonstrations and inciting violent fights, which had led to multiple arrests and injuries. After a long silence on behalf of the Government, Macron addressed the protestors in a televised speech on 10 December 2018, showed understanding for their concerns, and promised a minimum wage rise as well as tax concessions. Until today, the *gilet jaune* movement has made it their continuous goal to detect and expose profound social injustices.

Likewise, the Occupation Odéon expanded their catalogue of demands, as they did not exclusively focus on the pandemic's impact on artistic professions by demanding a prolongation of the *année blanche*, but also fought for more equality in the French social security system in general. The above-cited video shows how protestors attach large white banners on the building saying 'Expiations des Crimes Capital' ('Atonement for financial crimes'). Others distribute flyers and invite pedestrians to so-called 'Vendredis de Colère' ('Fridays of Wrath') to protest against the announced unemployment reform.

# Reopening the Theatres

The approaching end of the coronavirus lockdown on 19 May 2021 led to a heated debate: the cultural minister Roselyne Bachelot emphasised that the reopening of all cultural venues would be incompatible with the ongoing occupations. Stéphane Braunschweig shared her opinion and announced the cancellation of all scheduled performances until the end of the occupation. By contrast, Karine Huet remarked that the protest movement would not prevent any performances, as all necessary measures to co-exist had been taken. Marc Slyper added that the occupants had only planned to distribute flyers at the theatre entrance. They did not intend to disturb the performance or meet with the audience afterwards (interview with the author, 6 July 2021). By contrast, Stéphane Braunschweig reports having suggested a compromise: ‘You occupy the theatre during the day until two hours before the performance starts. Then you leave and return the next morning’ (interview with the author, 14 September 2021). This suggestion was rejected by the activists, as it robbed the movement of their public presence and political pressure.

In a video uploaded on 20 May 2021, the protestors expressed that the Odéon occupation did not and should not prevent the reopening of the theatre (Occupation Odéon 2021c). While a calm female voice greets future theatre visitors and rationally explains the protestors’ motives, the camera slowly moves from the entrance hall, mounts the marble staircase, crosses the buffet area with all chairs neatly arranged, follows a hallway and enters the central box, which permits a majestic view on the illuminated theatre hall. Not one single person is shown. In contrast to other protest videos depicting clenched fists and shouts in unison, this video portrays a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Only some orderly piled flyers and leaflets, banners attached to the walls, and the yellow vest decorating the marble statue silently remind of the occupation.

The calm voice ends her monologue with the words, ‘Have a good evening! And I hope to see you soon in our joint fight’. The video fades to black and displays the message, ‘Everything is ready. All that’s missing is you’.

Yet a compromise could not be found. In further consequence, the occupants decided to leave the theatre on 23 May 2021 and the Odéon took up the scheduled performances of *La ménagerie de verre* (*The Glass Menagerie*), directed by Ivo van Hove, with Isabelle Huppert in the leading role.

## ‘The First Stage of Any Revolution Is Always Theatrical’

Baz Kershaw argues that protests have become ‘increasingly theatricalized’ (1997: 255). In particular, he considers ‘the dramaturgy of protest events’ to be ‘an effective key to an understanding of major socio-political change in the late twentieth century’ (ibid.: 257). Demands are not just communicated verbally, but displayed in public via so-called ‘repertoires of collective action’, which the American sociologist Charles Tilly defines as a whole set of means shared by social actors with common interests: ‘the repertoire in question resembles that of *commedia dell’arte* or jazz more than that of a strictly classical ensemble: people know the general rules of performance more or less well and vary the performance to meet the purpose at hand’ (1986: 390). Such repertoires include boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, pamphleteering, marches, and blockades. The theatrical metaphor alludes to learned scripts and scenarios, combined with the spontaneity and improvisation of people’s interactions in protest movements. Similar to the long history of theatre traditions tracing an evolution of acting and viewing habits, such ‘repertoires of collective action’ also draw on interaction rituals and performative codes of previous political struggles.

The 2021 occupation took up protest repertoires of May 68, e.g., by organising marches and sit-ins in public, orchestrating speeches of union representatives, raising red and black flags, putting up banners and posters, and distributing leaflets. Symbolic elements like the iconic representation of the clenched fist often displayed on posters of 1968 were reused fifty years later. Yet differences are noticeable with regard to the significance of the occupied space, the audience/performer dichotomy, ways of communication, media presence, and the use of costumes.

The chaotic usurpation of the theatre interior in 1968 contrasts with the orchestrated dramaturgy of protest actions on the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon in 2021. The student protests of 1968 converted the Théâtre Odéon into a liminal space situated 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial' (V. Turner 1969: 95). The anthropologist Victor Turner claims that 'in liminality, new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted' (1977: 40). During its occupation the 'bourgeois theatre' with restricted accessibility and a code of conduct was transformed into a testing field for alternative political systems and a prototype of a new society. Jean-Jacques Lebel declared, 'the first stage of any revolution, is always theatrical. [...] The May uprising was theatrical in that it was a gigantic fiesta, a revelatory and sensuous explosion outside the "normal" pattern of politics' (1998: 180). The *enragés* revolted against the restrictive social order, bourgeois codes of conduct, and the conservative politics under Charles de Gaulle by publicly enacting an alternative mode of living, seizing power over their own body and voice.

In 2021, only forty-two protestors were permitted to occupy the theatre interiors due to Covid-19 and consequent safety measures.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the protest space was transferred to the semi-circled Place de l'Odéon and the impressive theatre architecture became the scenery

of the orchestrated events and speeches. The demands were oftentimes read by representatives from atop the balustrade, while performers and spectators assembled on the forecourt. The elevated positioning of the union representatives accentuates that a community on ground level — united in the shared rhythm and movement of the framing performance — carries and supports the verbally transmitted demands from above. The vertical spatial arrangement communicates a paradoxical separation between union representatives residing in the Odéon and the general public joining from the outside.

The occupants of May 68 tried not only to theoretically demand a democratisation of culture, but also to experiment with and implement a horizontal structure within the newly established liminal space. In the theatre hall, hierarchies were levelled, as revolutionists spoke from the stage, the boxes, and the floor. According to Kate Bredeson, 'lights illuminated the audience seating galleries, so people were visible all around the theater' (2018: 39) Judith Malina remembers, '[T]here was talk, talk, talk — revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak.' (quoted in Pellerin 2018: E3). Communication was non-directional and circular, as 'everybody' was allowed to join the provisional forum and to give a speech.<sup>9</sup>

← 8. All four interview partners — Stéphane Braunschweig, Artistic Director of the Odéon, as well as the three representatives of the occupation, Karine Huet, Gwennaël Hertling, and Marc Slyper — confirmed the difficulties of negotiating and finding compromises. In the end, the theatre was occupied by forty-two representatives of the protest movement. Stéphane Braunschweig accepted a maximum of ten people with valid Covid tests changing shifts per day to minimise the risk of infection, but pointed out that the theatre staff did not control the entrance. By contrast, the protestors criticised the lack of cooperation and, thus, decided to relocate their protest action to the public square in front of the theatre.

9. As noted above, 'everybody' mostly included white male upper-class students, while minorities participated on the fringes, in the background, or outside the movement.

Fifty years later, the development of digital technology permits global dissemination of recorded protest actions, facilitates networking of like-minded individuals, noticeably expands the sphere of influence, and increases the pressure exerted on political authorities. The knowledge that collective action is livestreamed or recorded and, thus, perceived from a different perspective (e.g., aerial shots by drones) impacts the dramaturgical nature of public mass protest. Thus, protest actions on the Place de l'Odéon were well orchestrated to demonstrate unity and power. The performers join in a rhythm of drumbeats and claps, shared patterns of movement, and speaking choirs, which strengthens the community spirit and transmits the impression of a cohesive assembly ready to fight for their goal(s). According to media scientist Kathrin Fahlenbrach, the individual participants experience their 'personal identity' merging in a 'collective protest identity' due to their intense physical and emotional involvement (2009: 101). The reciprocal perception of the 'Other' as a member of a collective unity strengthens their determination to act. In *Opération Flightcases* on 23 April 2021, the acoustic demonstration pauses for the announcement of the protesters' demands, which are then read by a union representative on the balustrade (Occupation Odéon 2021b).

The use of accessories and costumes in the protest actions of 2021 served the purpose to display artistic professions that have vanished into oblivion with the progressing pandemic. While 'system-relevant employees' were permitted to leave their home during the lockdown, artists were confronted with the closure of cultural institutions and were robbed of their offline connection to the audience. In the 2021 protest actions, the public display of symbolic accessories like the red nose should raise awareness of the existence and relevance of artistic professions. During the occupation of 1968, the use of costumes had a different significance: 'Girls adorned themselves with all the bracelets and diadems in the prop store, so that the disaffected theater was

soon swarming with a Mardi Gras crowd got up in strange disguises. Any swatch of black or red material — including the stage curtain — was requisitioned for the fabrication of flags [...] The costume ball included a constabulary which had armed itself with helmets, swords, and pikes — these, too, looted from the prop store' (Brown 1980: 447).

The protestors repurposed the theatre inventory, stage props, and costumes of the Odéon, which gave the occupation a carnivalesque character. Richard Schechner draws a connection between revolutions and the carnival, as they both 'propose a free space to satisfy desires, [...] a new time to enact social relations more freely' (1993: 47). Participants are permitted to 'mask and costume or act in ways that are "not me." These behaviors are almost always excessive relative to ordinary life' (ibid.). According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), the carnival represents a time when all rules and regulations are suspended. Yet, social hierarchies are reinforced as soon as the festivities have ended. The briefly lived utopia at the Odéon manifested an anti-society to the existing order and a counter-culture to the bourgeois system.

In 2021, the Odéon occupation also repurposed the theatre interior and established a protest site 'betwixt and between', but instead of a carnivalesque inversion of the everyday the protestors under the lead of CGT Spectacle defined precise goals, set up a schedule, mapped out strategies, orchestrated protest actions outdoors, and transmitted their demands via offline and online channels. In 1968, by contrast, leading figures like Lebel, Cohn-Bendit, Beck, and Malina had already abandoned the Odéon after the initial rush to pursue other plans and left the occupation to a movement without a lead.

Baz Kershaw is cautious when associating protest movements with notions of carnival, as one should discriminate between 'events which change and those which reinforce existing social orders', and he views

the purpose of contemporary protest in achieving ‘efficacy by inventing unprecedented symbolic-real configurations’ (1997: 266). While revolutions break open rigid social structures and do not have a foreseeable end, the carnival operates within a strictly defined time and place; the status quo is restored after the liminal phase of reversed social hierarchies has come to an end. The chaotic usurpation of the Odéon in 1968 was evacuated by the police, after leading figures had already lost interest and directed their attention to different projects, whereas the much more organised occupation in 2021 argued for a co-existence with recommencing theatre productions, did not come to a compromise, and then decided to peacefully leave the public venue.

The May Revolution of 1968 started as a series of student protests which criticised the centralistic structure and hierarchical administration of universities, the restrictive academic practices, and absent dialogue on pressing social issues. On 13 May, the students were joined by the labour unions who fought against the exploitation of the work force and the economic imbalance among the French population. The occupation of universities and factories, nation-wide strikes, street fights, and demonstrations paralysed the entire country. Intellectuals and artists expressed their solidarity with the striking students and workers, located their demands in an even larger context, and discussed courageous visions of a new society.

The occupation of the Théâtre Odéon on 15 May 1968 marked a briefly lived utopia amidst this tumultuous atmosphere. Perceived as an institution of state power and a citadel of bourgeois culture, the Odéon was transformed into an open-access forum for political debates, a democratic assembly granting ‘everybody’, i.e. mostly white male upper-class students, the right to speak — from the stage, the boxes, and the floor. The revolutionary talk had become performance, the substance of the political movement.

On 16 May 1968, a Parisian journalist reported, ‘At the Odéon tonight [...] the show is in the theatre. A show without a director, without a playwright, without an usher, but with 3000 actors: the occupants of the orchestra, the dressing room, and even the stage. But those who have taken the Odéon [...] are not here to stage a play. They talk’ (Janin 1968b: 02:05). Instead of being subjected to the words, demands, and orders of those in power, students and workers experienced the freedom to rise and speak in public. Yet, as Jean Genet put it, the Odéon

saw ‘a circular movement of revolutionary speeches’ which ‘never left the theatre’ (quoted in Bredeson 2011: 310).

Fifty years later, the theatre interiors were occupied by forty-two protestors only, due to hygiene and safety reasons. The activists, therefore, decided to (1) stage protest actions on the public square in front of the theatre and to (2) disseminate recorded messages via online platforms and social media networks. The interplay of online and offline protest practices permits reaching a broader audience, to occupy not only physical, but also virtual social spaces, and to increase pressure on political authorities.

With its long history of occupations — in 1968, 1992, and 2016 — the Odéon was once again chosen as a ‘public theatre’, a ‘direct link to the cultural ministry’ (Karine Huet), and a platform ‘to give those a voice who are not heard otherwise’ (Mark Slyper; interviews with the author, 6 July 2021). In 2021, it was primarily the symbolic significance and impressive architecture of the theatre that attracted attention, while the collective protest actions were transferred to the public forecourt and media spaces.

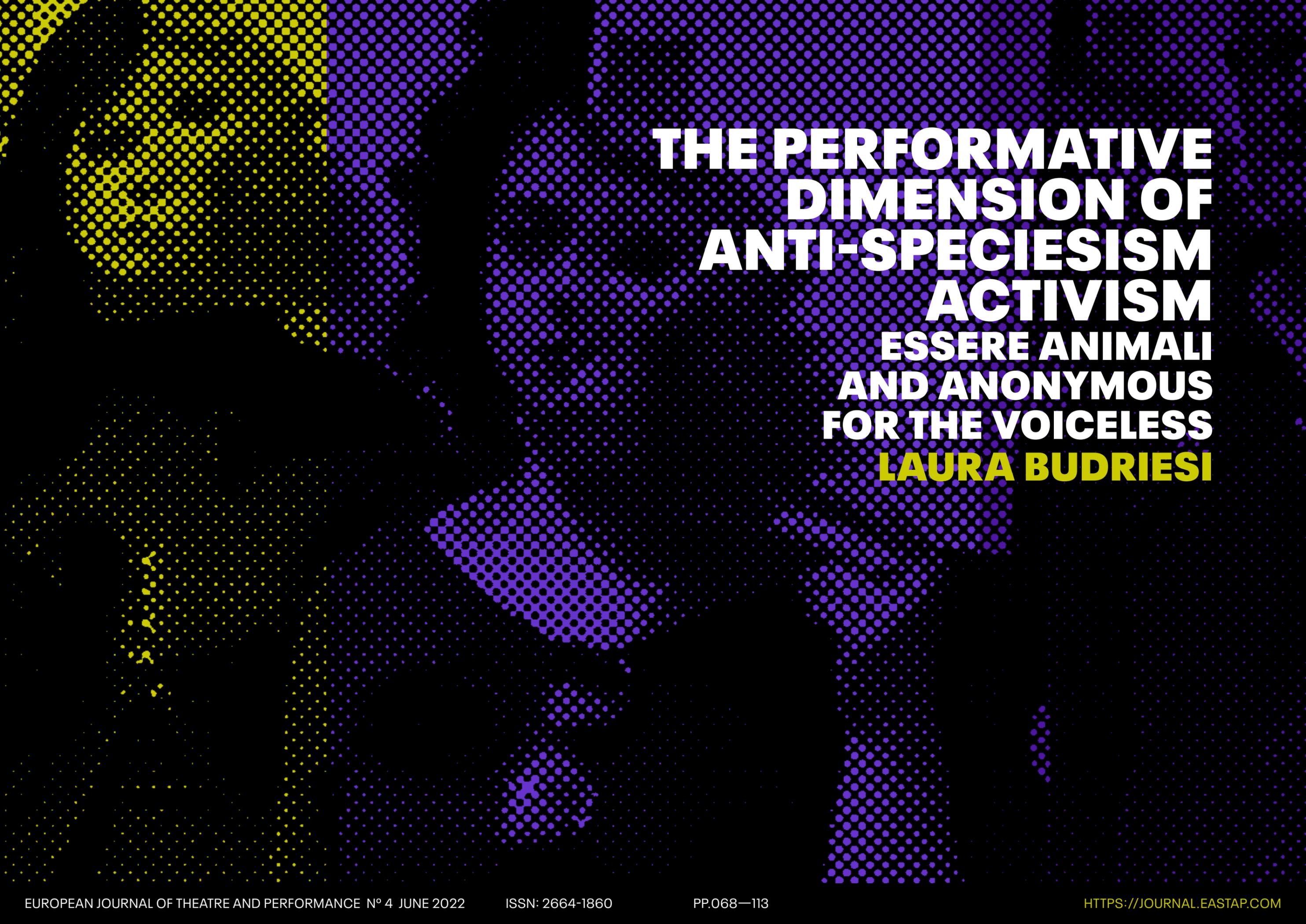
In contrast to the chaotic usurpation of the national theatre in 1968, the 2021 movement is characterised by an orchestrated dramaturgy of events with clearly defined objectives. Yet, there are parallels with regard to the *theatrical* practices, e.g., shared patterns of movement, *symbolic* elements, e.g., the iconic representation of a clenched fist, and the *ideological* foundation, e.g. scepticism towards political, economic, and cultural authorities. •

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**THE PERFORMATIVE  
DIMENSION OF  
ANTI-SPECIESISM  
ACTIVISM  
ESSERE ANIMALI  
AND ANONYMOUS  
FOR THE VOICELESS  
LAURA BUDRIESI**

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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.

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

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

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.

← 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).

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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**REAPPROPRIATION  
OF PUBLIC SPACE  
AUTONOMOUS SPACE  
MAKING FROM  
ISTANBUL'S ALTERNATIVE  
THEATRE SCENE TO THE  
GEZI MOVEMENT  
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## KEYWORDS

Gezi, public space, theatre, urban activism

## MOTS-CLÉS

Gezi, espace public, théâtre, activisme urbain

# SUMMARY

I analyse Istanbul's Gezi movement in 2013 to explore the intertwined relationship between public square movements and theatre. An *alternative* theatre movement in Turkey emerged in the 2000s in Istanbul that can be traced back to the 1990s, when theatre companies started to construct their own spaces by converting unexpected places into theatres and, thereby, enabling new ways of practicing theatre. The essay presents empirical fieldwork using semi-structured interviews and participative observations with independent theatres since the 1990s. Alternative theatre practices in Istanbul offer an alternative history of autonomous space making in the city before the Gezi Movement. In the aftermath of Gezi, alternative theatres gained momentum by extending political resistance and transforming their relationship to urban space and, hence, to politics.

# RÉSUMÉ

J'analyse le mouvement Gezi à Istanbul en 2013 pour explorer la relation entre des mouvements de la place publique et le théâtre. Le mouvement du théâtre alternatif en Turquie est apparu dans les années 2000 à Istanbul mais il peut être retracé depuis les années 1990, lorsque des compagnies de théâtre ont commencé à construire leurs propres espaces en convertissant des lieux inattendus en théâtres et, ainsi, ils ont rendu possible des nouvelles façons de pratiquer le théâtre. Cet essai présente mon travail de terrain empirique utilisant des entretiens semi-structurés et des observations participantes avec des théâtres indépendants depuis les années 1990. La pratique du théâtre alternatif à Istanbul offre une histoire alternative sur la création d'espaces autonomes dans la ville avant le mouvement Gezi. Dans la période 'après-Gezi', les théâtres alternatifs ont pris de l'ampleur en prolongeant la résistance politique et en transformant leur rapport à l'espace urbain et donc, au politique.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the Istanbul art scene gained a new momentum with the rise of independent theatres, also known as ‘alternative theatres’. I choose to use the term ‘alternative’, directly translated from the term ‘Alternatif Sahneler’ (i.e., alternative stages) commonly used by actors and audiences in Istanbul. Alternative means here the space where the theatrical practice takes place. Unlike proscenium stages characterised by a net separation between the stage and the audience, alternative stages convert spaces that are not originally designed as theatres into black-box stages. As such, they reconfigure the relationship to the spectator and to the space. Any unexpected place, such as a garage or an old workshop can be converted to a theatre. In these theatres, with a capacity of usually around fifty to one hundred people, the stage is not fixed but reorganised for each play with folding chairs. There is no velvet curtain, seats are not fixed, and the stage’s floor is visible to the spectators. The transformation of a theatre’s form and architecture stimulates new ways of making theatre. Renewal of subjects, style, language, and dramaturgy enables a theatre rooted in local and public life.

In the early 2010s, Istanbul's main commercial and cultural district Taksim was hosting more than ten alternative theatres sparking a new spatiality and sociability in the city. This specific area appears as a site of cultural effervescence but also a site of conflict marked by gentrification and urban transformation targeting the spaces of secular lifestyle. It is in this context that on 27 May 2013 a group of ecologists organised a sit-in at Taksim's neighboring Gezi Park against its demolition by bulldozers uprooting its trees. As one of the rare remaining green spaces in the city centre, Gezi Park was about to be demolished and to be replaced by a building complex which would bring together a reconstructed 'historical' building (an Ottoman barracks), a mosque, and a shopping mall. Protestors faced harsh police retaliation and the protest rapidly transformed into massive political resistance against Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian regime. While Gezi Park was occupied by protestors for two weeks until it was emptied by the police, protests spread around the country and among the Turkish diaspora in other countries. During the occupation, citizens from different classes, social backgrounds, ethnicities, ideologies, and lifestyles dwelt in Gezi Park. For example, seculars surrounded Muslims to protect them from police violence when they were praying. The meeting of the Kemalists and the Kurds revealed the frictions and tensions of the society. In occupy movements, the shared sensory, bodily, and affective experience sets in motion liminal moments where links are constantly made and undone, even if it is not possible to speak of the absolute overcoming of divisions (Ayata and Harders 2019: 125). Thus, the Gezi movement cannot be identified by social class as in the 1960s labour movements, neither by a shared identity as in the 1980s feminist, ethnic, religious movements. What brought the protestors together was their claim of urban space.

The Gezi movement illustrates an example of 'public square movements'<sup>1</sup> that emerged all around the globe in the 2010s from 15M in Spain to Occupy Wall Street in the US (Göle 2018). These movements are named after physical places that protestors occupied, repurposed, and reappropriated, such as Gezi Park in Istanbul, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Syntagma Square in Athens. Tony Fisher identifies a new kind of 'dissensual' politics *in situ*, emphasising the material and spatial character of the newly emerging political forms (2017: 18). Protestors interfere to claim the right to the city (Lefebvre 1968), reclaiming it to (re)make it as truly public space. These urban spaces matter in their localisation, architectural form, and the publicness that they generate. Marvin Carlson's emphasis on the political events of the 2010s shows that the 'here' where an event occurs may so profoundly affect the event that it overshadows the 'what' of the event itself (2013: 101). In this political context of the 2010s, public square movements reveal how important the topology is to the publicness of contestation and to the social fabric of its participants and the urban environment.

Although public square movements might be considered as spontaneous events gathering a heterogeneous public, each one has a particular context rooted in the political and urban atmosphere. For Gezi Park, different interpretations locate Gezi in the history of social movements, urban resistances, and youth movements in Turkey. Focusing on the reappropriation of the public space as a mark of singularity, alternative theatre practice in Istanbul presents a history of autonomous space making in the city preceding the social movement.

This essay, then, takes the Gezi Park movement and its associated alternative theatre practices around the Taksim neighbourhood as a case

1. It should be noted that the Gezi movement started in Gezi Park, then expanded to Taksim square beside the park and it affected many forms of activism taking place on public squares across the country.

study to reflect upon the tight relationship between artistic reconfigurations of space and reappropriation of the public space as an act of political resistance. Henceforth, I will call the Gezi Park movement ‘Gezi’ as it is called in the vernacular language. I will present empirical fieldwork from my doctoral research realised in intervals since 2017 (thirty-seven interviews) using semi-structured interviews and participative observations with independent theatres since the 1990s, such as Kum-pan-ya, Bilsak, Tiyatro Dot, Kumbaracı50, Şermola Performans, Tiyatro Biriken, and D22. My hypothesis is that the Gezi movement can be traced back to the alternative theatre practice in Istanbul which was already in existence prior to the protests claiming autonomous spaces in the city for artistic creation and sociability. In other words, it provides an alternative history to analyse the sociopolitical transformation of citizens claiming their ownership in the city. Furthermore, alternative theatres become spaces of political resistance in the aftermath of Gezi. I will try to explore how the spatial turn in theatrical practice echoes in the relationship between citizens and the city before and after Gezi (2013) by means of (re)appropriating the space and enabling new political imaginaries.

## (Re)spatialisation of the Politics: Framing and Staging the City

Experimental scenographies reconfigure the framing and the distinction between the stage and the audience. Consequently, I ask the following questions: Who appears on the stage and who is assigned as audience? How does this kind of framing echo with the spatial segregation in social everyday life? What kind of artistic work and organisation shape those spaces? Who is their public? What kind of a sociability takes place in those semi-public places? How are they engaged with their locality? How do they transform their urban site? How do they engage with the spatial memory? What are the ways in which alternative theatres are engaged with the public space?

To analyse the articulation between aesthetics and politics, I follow Jacques Rancière’s approach, who defines the distribution of the sensible as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’ (2004: 12). (Re)configuring space means reconfiguring the relationships that take place there and creating a new regime of the sensible (ibid.). Thus, reorganising the spatial organisation of daily life and the visibility regime has a political character. The artistic practice of alternative theatres becomes political and anti-establishment by building narratives and making visible minorities who are invisible and inaudible in public space.

New perspectives on space and performing arts became relevant, such as questions of framing and site-specificity, as well as the relationship

between performance, urban politics, and geography (Wihstutz 2013: 26). Social sciences frequently adopt theatrical metaphors to grasp the spatial dimension of public square movements. Judith Butler puts forward the aspect of performativity in their analysis on public assemblies and argues that bodies assembling already signify prior to, and apart from, any demands that they make in a discursive way (2015: 8). During the protests, creative combinations appeared between the audience and the public. My analysis will point out a physically situated approach to politics where social and political antagonisms are shaped around which bodies are allowed to be visible and which ones are excluded in public space. The body here is not considered as a distinct entity but a relational one whose existence is intrinsically linked to the space where it is situated and to the other bodies surrounding it.

The use of space in occupy movements resonates with the theatrical framing, thus also the spectatorship. Sophie Nield emphasises the newly altered *mise-en-scène* of protests as a potentially transgressive force that challenges the preexisting ‘proscenium’ or ‘frame’ for demonstrations (2015: 122). Nilüfer Göle refers to the occupied space as a ‘stage’ where citizenship is ‘rehearsed’, and a choreography of pluralism is ‘enacted’ (Göle 2018). It is the physical space that enables the encounter and visibility of the bodily presences. The framing of social life is embodied by the proscenium arch that divides the space into observers and those who are observed. Each framing draws a societal inside and an outside (Goffman 1974). In the global age, public space is subjugated to a top-down construction of the city. Citizens are positioned as passive spectators of the spectacle of political power. However, a free public space enables citizens’ bottom-up participation in politics. In the social and political context of the 2010s, those two ideal types coexist in a permanent state of negotiation.

City making is then a social process, a relationship between the social and physical shaping of cities, between how people use, create, and inhabit social spaces (Tonkiss 2013: 1). Creating new spaces in the city and re-determining the use of the existing ones transform the spatial organisation of the city and, thus, the social life constrained by the material conditions. Occupy movements interfere with the spatial framing of the public space in a deliberate way. According to Arendt (1998), the precondition of democracy is the existence of a public space where citizens can make themselves visible to each other. As such, one can say that citizens take up the stage, disrupt the framing of social life, and they make themselves visible first to each other and then to the political power. Hence, an ideal public space should function as a stage where actors stepping on it become visible. Citizens are both actors and spectators of this co-performed act of visibility. In a city that is considered as a stage, citizens should be aware of the norms and social codes of being in public.

To analyse the alternative theatre scene’s engagement with the space making in the city that offers an approach to the Gezi movement and its aftermath, I will first analyse the emergence of the autonomous theatre scene in the 1990s, then focus on the alternative theatre’s spatialisation tactics in the Taksim district, and finally turn to its relationship with the Gezi protest movement.

# Emergence of an Alternative Theatre Scene in Turkey

The theatrical tradition in Turkey largely comes from two different registers: traditional forms of performance composed of *Karagöz*, *Ortaoyunu*, *Meddah*,<sup>2</sup> and village plays performed in public places and theatre in a Western tradition. This dichotomy already illustrates two different constructions of public space. The first one is the space of pre-modernity and shared experience where the artist is not distinct from the public. The second forms a public space as a site of modernity, characterised by the proscenium stage that separates strictly the scene from the audience. Theatre, in the Western tradition, emerged in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century as a result of foreign companies and Armenian, Italian, and Jewish minorities in Istanbul (Güllü 2008). In the nineteenth century, the Pera district in Taksim became a cosmopolitan hub of all sorts of cultural activities mostly practiced by non-Muslim communities (Mills 2010: 52). During the Ottomans' modernization and reform, theatre was used as a tool for the civilisation process aimed at reshaping the *habitus*, the forms of visibility, and the production of a common sense (Altınay and Adak 2019: 189). The Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, pursued the focus on modern Western drama in favour of a modern national theatre purged from non-Turkish elements. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatres (IBST) and The State Theatre (1949) were founded as republican institutions, staging examples of the Western canon, encouraging the playwrights of the newly emerging Turkish theatre and embodying

2. *Karagöz* stands for the shadow theatre; *Ortaoyunu* is the popular farce form; *Meddah* is the one-man story-teller performance. All of these three were performed in the public places.

modernity in the public space in architectural sense. In the 1950s, private theatres such as Dormen and Kenter theatres emerged with their repertory of classics, Western comedies, and dramas. In 1960s, avant-garde theatre experimentations, searching for new ways of using the theatrical space and relating with spectators all around the world, had an impact on Turkey's theatre scene.

The 1960s are marked by the materialisation of theatrical space theory initiated in the early twentieth century. Western theatres began to move out from the established theatre institutions with proscenium stages towards found and appropriated places that were not initially conceived as performance spaces (Fischer-Lichte 2013: 615). Avant-garde theatre groups transformed found spaces like garages, barns, and warehouses to theatres. Among others, the search for found places was inspired by Antonin Artaud's direction toward the use of hangars or barns as theatre spaces (1958: 96). While Artaud's theatre theory appropriates the Eastern theatre forms, 1960s avant-garde theatre in Turkey was inspired by the Western theories without reappropriating pre-modern traditions in Turkey. Spaces that are not originally conceived as performance venues were preferred because they did not set any clear guidelines for the relationship between actors and spectators and thus opened possibilities for a performance-generated spatiality (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 110). Gordon Craig's and Adolphe Appia's approaches, on the contrary, advocated empty spaces built from scratch for experimental plays (Wiles 2003: 246). Hence, they propose new models for theatre architecture varying from the proscenium stage.

The backbone of Turkey's avant-garde wave were Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba (Başar 2014: 41). Brook's 'empty space' description of the 'stage' inspired the idea that any place might be converted to a performative space. Grotowski's and Barba's theories were adopted as alternative acting pedagogies in Turkey's Stanislavski-based conservatoire system.

The Language and Culture Centre (LCC) stands out as a unique example in Turkey's history of theatre architecture with its experimental design. LCC was initially established as a German language school. Its theatre branch was founded in 1965 by Beklan and Ayla Algan, pioneers of the Turkish theatre avant-garde. LCC's theatre building was built in Nişantaşı by architect Tuncay Çavdar as a mobile construction that included Turkey's first revolving stage and platform for the spectators (Pekman 2011: 290). Weininger's global theatre project, Malnur's u-shaped theatre, and Gropius's total theatre designed for Piscator were inspirations for this project (Çavdar 2008: 119). The construction enabled many different stage configurations and even the possibility to change the positions of the stage and spectators during a play. Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade* on 30 May 1968 was the only play staged in this theatre after three years of formation. Çavdar states that his aim was to build a performance space whose spatiality would transform accordingly with social change outside of the theatre (2008: 119). One could say that the 1960's political atmosphere of social experimentation, civic engagement, and political demonstrations in Turkey encouraged an active citizenship that was manifested in theatrical experiments.

In the 1970s, the methods of Erwin Piscator's and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre became a huge influence in the political turmoil of violent clashes between right-wing and leftist movements in Turkey. Ankara Art Theatre (originally Ankara Sanat Tiyatrosu or AST) and Dostlar Theatre in Istanbul were the prominent theatres of that period. 'Movement Theatre for Revolution' founded by Mehmet Ulusoy in 1968 engaged in street theatre in public places and factories. In 1976, Beklan Algan founded Tepebaşı Experimental Stage under IBST, a former carpentry workshop, which was transformed into Turkey's first black-box scene. Scenographer Metin Deniz tried many different usages of the space during the five-year run of this theatre, including a circular design for Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* directed by Algan.

For this creation, spectators had turning seats and were positioned in the centre of the stage to watch the play encircling them.

The military coup of 12 September 1980 reconfigured the artistic sphere in Turkey alongside the political and the social sphere. Private theatres faced closure, censorship, and surveillance. Leftist intellectuals were purged from state-funded theatres and obliged to go into exile in European countries. Exiled theatre directors, actors, and actresses met and worked with the avant-garde theatre institutions of the period, such as Başar Sabuncu, Beklan and Ayla Algan in the Schaubühne. This generation's return to Turkey planted the seeds for an alternative theatre scene challenging conventional theatre architecture and scenography.

In the 1980s, Bilsak (Science Art Institution), TAL (Theatre Research Laboratory) as well as Şahika and Esat Tekand's Acting and Art Studio appeared as private initiatives which all invested in applied research practices. In 1984, Bilsak founded as an interdisciplinary initiative of academics and artists who lost their positions in the political purge that followed the military coup. Acknowledged theatre academics, actors, and directors such as Oben Güney, Erol Keskin, Ayla Algan, Beklan Algan, Prof. Cevat Çapan, Taner Barlas, Ahmet Levendoğlu, Macit Koper, Müge Gürman, Metin Deniz, and Ergüder Yoldaş took part in the foundation of the Bilsak Acting School. Situated in the Taksim district, Bilsak became an important cultural centre for dissident intellectuals after the coup. Algan quit Bilsak in 1986, but former students Nihal Geyran Koldaş, Alp Giritli, Emre Baykal, and Ceysu Koçak ve Şerif Erol founded a theatre company under the name Bilsak, which went on for thirteen more years. This company chose venues like the Roxy Nightclub and the Hagia Nicholas Orthodox Church for their performances.

In 1988, Beklan Algan returned to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality City Theatres and founded the unit TAL with Ayla Algan.

TAL was designed as a workshop focused on research, method, and experimentation instead of a product-based theatre. The theoretical inspirations came from Grotowski and Barba. Barba himself participated to the events regarding the Odin Theatre's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1995. TAL served as a school for all the prominent artists who marked Istanbul's theatre scene after the 1990s.

Commonly inspired from TAL, a generation born between the 1960s and the 1970s emerged in Turkey's performing arts scene in 1990s. This generation shares common traits such as coming from secular and urban elite families, possessing strong cultural capital, graduating from prestigious foreign high schools of Turkey, speaking foreign languages, and having international experience. Kerem Kurdoğlu (Kum-Pan-Ya), for example, was born in Istanbul in 1964 and graduated from Robert College and Bosphorus University's Economics department. He is one of Turkey's first 3D-animators and runs a company specialising in visual effects. Mahir Günşiray, founder of Tiyatro Oyunevi, is the son of actor Orhan Günşiray. After his education at the Ankara State Conservatory, he obtained his Master's degree at Leeds University. Theatre director Emre Koyuncuoğlu graduated from the Austrian College and Bosphorus University's English Language and Literature department. She worked as a translator and a journalist before her career in performing arts. She has significant international experience, including at the Royal Court Theatre in the UK and the Schaubühne in Berlin.

Inspired by TAL and Peter Brook's theory of the empty space, according to which any place can be transformed into a theatre, this generation created theatrical spaces in the city that engaged with the urban fabric and the spatial memory of the places which they occupied. The symbol of this period would be ISM (Istanbul Art Center).

## 'Istanbul Sanat Merkezi': A New Cultural Hub for the City

ISM was a 'found-place'; a deserted monastery that created a new artistic hub, reassembling different actors in an unexpected place in an unexpected neighbourhood. It was discovered in 1988 by actress Nihal Geyran Koldaş, while she was on location scouting for the TV series *Cahide*. After the shooting, various painters heard of this place and rented ateliers in the building.

This building, commonly referred to by its habitants as the 'Monastery', was built in 1843 as the first Armenian-Catholic monastery of Turkey. In 1930, it became an Armenian school for girls until its closure in 1982 due to a lack of students. It was situated in Tarlabaşı, five minutes away from Taksim Square, the symbolically and historically charged, main public square of Istanbul. Historically, Tarlabaşı has always been a cosmopolitan district inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities of Turkey. In the 1990s, Tarlabaşı was considered as a 'shady' and black-listed district marked by urban poverty, criminality, sex work, and drug dealing, and referred to as the district of transgenders and Kurdish inhabitants after the forced migration of the 1990s. ISM's moving into Tarlabaşı was completely unexpected as this district had never been a site for cultural or social events in the city.

In 1991, Kum-Pan-Ya (literally Com-Pa-Ny) rented ISM's first floor. This company was founded by the couple Kerem Kurdoğlu (playwright, director, actor) and Naz Erayda (stage designer and director). They called their stage a 'playground', marking their experimental approach.

They were followed by Green Grapes Dance Theatre in 1992,<sup>3</sup> Mustafa and Övül Avkıran's 5<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in 1997, and the Mahir Günşiray-led Theatre Playhouse in 1999. The members of these companies became the prominent figures of theatre, performance, and dance of Turkey in the following years and inspired the founders of the alternative theatres of the 2000s and 2010s. ISM operated between 1989 and 2006, and hosted twenty-three artist ateliers, movie shoots, an Irish Pub, and many associations besides those theatres.

In the archive project realised by SALT Online, Vasıf Kortun describes this unique place as follows:

The main reason of Monastery's emergence is a community that took shape in the end of 1980s. [...] Different from similar organisations, Monastery's components are not reassembled around a shared ideology. [...] In the first years of the Monastery, the new order of culture, art, performance, and entertainment history did not fall into place yet limits of freedom were constantly extended, globalisation was shaping the city through many different migration flows, and the dynamism brought by a different creative local sector who seeks for its own cultural expression was strongly felt. (2014; my translation)

Kortun stresses the singularity of ISM artists as pioneers of a new conception of the city who do not have a shared identity, but whose commonness arises from the space they share. ISM could be thought of as a new urban community, whose foundations lie outside an identity reflex of sameness based upon a republican and ethnically Turkish identity consolidated against an 'Other'. Sennett advocates new urban communities in the early 1970s in their search for diversity dissensus to

modulate a new urban fabric that emerges from the interaction among people (1970: 181). Gielen puts forward Sennett's analysis and argues that artistic space making practices produce a common rather than a defined community (2015: 189). This trait might be considered as a precursor for the 'commonness' created in the public square movements of the 2010s. It is the physical space that reunites the people and enables a space to experiment. ISM interfered in the city's spatial organisation by moving arts practices and culture to an unexpected location. The site allows a new approach for how theatre companies interact with the physical space that they occupy, namely the urban locale in which they are situated and through which they interact with each other. Collaborations and solidarity were born from sharing the same building and organising discussions around a drink at night in the Irish pub on the rooftop. Artistic practices in ISM bring forward close relations with the street and the Taksim district. Among different experimental creations of theatre companies, I will take a closer look at the creations that adopt a reflexive approach to the space itself.

Kum-Pan-Ya gave particular importance to the relationship to the space as one of its founders; Naz Erayda was a scenographer putting the space at the centre of her artistic creation. Kum-Pan-Ya adopted a total conception of theatre and rejected an authoritarian approach which privileged the director or the actor. It claimed that all components of the theatre were equally important for the artistic creation without any hierarchy (Erayda 2002: XI). Kum-Pan-Ya did not name their performance space a 'theatre', 'scene', or 'stage', but the whole place was referred to as 'playroom' to emphasise the laboratory approach. The audience seats were not fixed but organised accordingly for each play.

In *Revived Space: A Theatrical Projection of an Agonizing City* (1993), the scenography was the spark for the creation, reversing the usual production process where stage design was only thought of at the end as an

3. Founded by Deniz Altınay, Ziya Azazi, Zeynep Günsür, Mustafa Kaplan, Bikem Kerametli, and Emre Koyuncuoğlu.

accessory. Instead, Erayda set up the space and invited the performers to interact with the space once she finished. The only direction for the play was the theme 'Istanbul'. Erayda stresses that she designed an unfinished scene to be created by the performers' actions (2002: 19). Instead of a contained stage design having a meaning of its own, she opted for a space which would be created by the performers' interaction with the objects and the empty spaces in between them (74). It is interesting to note that the theme for their first spatial experimentation was Istanbul, as a fragmented, distorted, chaotic representation of the city with performers who tried to create meaning in it. Spectators were invited to engage with the objects, answer questions, and, thus, take an active role in this meaning-making process. This can be read as an attempt to craft a feeling of belonging to and agency in a city where citizens were marked by a feeling of loss and subjugated to radical transformations leading to exclusion and alienation.

This dynamic spatial approach based upon permanent movement and change resonates with De Certeau's definition of space, constantly in the making and created by human action in a place. De Certeau argues that *place* is a top-down construction of the city seized by the political power to shape the social interactions taking place within, such as borders and walls segregating a city (1984: 117). Space stands for a practiced place dynamically shaped by the social interactions occurring in it (ibid.). Pascal Gielen emphasises that space is being continuously created by utilising place, actively controlling it and, therefore, it is in a constant state of spatialisation and transmutation (2015: 276). In this case, Istanbul is re-enacted in an alternative theatrical space in Istanbul with performers and participants during the given time and space of the performance.

In *Kim O?* (*Who is it?*, 1996), Erayda turned her gaze to the Monastery's memory calling for the disappearance of the Armenian minority and then to its urban surroundings in Tarlabası. Erayda explains her

spark for inspiration as follows: 'The playground had a window looking to the street, which was always closed with curtains to isolate the performance space. One day, the curtains were open, and the window was welcoming the street to the playroom with all its noises, colours, and history' (interview with the author; my translation). Hence, Erayda designed the theatre's playground as a transparent space extending its scene to Tarlabası and by extension, to Istanbul (interview with the author 2018). The artistic choice of playing with windows open introduced an element of spontaneity. Street fights, music, and different languages spoken in Tarlabası were included in the play. Time was also an important element for this performance, which began before sunset, on a different hour every day. In one particular scene, the artists were opening the windows and a muezzin's call to prayer from the minaret nearby heard in the street became part of the performance.

*Who is it?* was developed as a play on minority; despair; solitude; fear; national, social, individual identities; paranoia; forced migration; and discrimination (interview with the author 2018). The play reflected upon being a minority on an individual and psychological level. However, performers sang in silenced minorities' languages, namely in Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Kurdish, which was particularly risky for the period as their use was forbidden in public space in the politically violent atmosphere caused by the conflicts between the Turkish army and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

Kum-Pan-Ya's approach combining political actuality and artistic experimentality pointed out a new way of relating to politics, as formulated by Kerem Kurdoğlu:

Before 12 September, people who were engaged in theatre were doing it for political means. We had to ask ourselves why and how we were going to do theatre after 12 September [...] After 12 September,

# Alternative Theatres: Artistic Space Making in the City

everyone who claimed themselves on the left and engaged in arts had to go through a similar transformation. While they were only trying to explain why revolution is necessary to the mass before, they started to analyse the political issues in the little moments of life, in its subtleties. (interview with the author 2018; my translation)

Kurdoğlu's statement displays a disruption, challenging the differentiation and hierarchy between content and form, between *politics* and the *political*. A bifurcation appears between Brechtian political theatre of the 1970s and avant-garde theatre of the 1990s. It is not possible to define a paradigm in the heterogeneity of the theatre scene in the 1990s with new public, commercial, and political theatres popping up. However, avant-garde theatres stand out with their research on artistic forms and approach to what is commonly considered as political. According to Fischer-Lichte, policies that underpinned theatre's appropriation of new spaces attempted to shift the threshold between the theatre and other domains of everyday life, to create shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute a participatory form of democratic activity (2013: 654). The very fact of embedding theatre into the spaces of public life carries a potential to create alternative communities within the nation state. Thus, sociopolitical organisation of the city and the public space are transformed. The alternative theatre's space making in the Taksim area contributed to this sociopolitical transformation from below in the following years.

In the early 2000s, the alternative theatre scene gained a new momentum with the increasing number of theatres spreading around Taksim. The founders of these theatres are commonly inspired by the avant-garde of the 1990s; however, their own personal trajectories are different. Almost all of them take their roots from university theatre clubs instead of conservatoires or theatre departments. Thus, socialisation emerges as a mobilising motor. To 'create their own space to be able to make theatre as they want' is an often-repeated phrase in the interviews that I conducted in Istanbul. A young audience profile, mostly college students, adhered to this emerging theatre. Deniz Başar argues that the young and amateur background of the founders played a role in the formation of this new young audience profile diverging from the conformist and older audience profile of the state-funded theatres (2014: 5). Audience's youth and enthusiastic engagement is referred to as an encouraging factor for alternative theatres for both economical and artistic risk taking.

In 2005, a theatre which we might consider as the pioneer of the alternative theatre movement of the 2000s, Tiyatro DoT, opened its doors in the heart of Beyoğlu in the iconic Mısır Apartmanı on İstiklal Street, precisely chosen to be able to anchor the theatre in Istanbul's urban life. DoT introduced the British movement of in-yer-face theatre in Turkey, which aimed at creating a moral shock by showing that which was unsettling on the stage. In 2007, Garajistanbul was opened by former ISM resident 5<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in the Galata parking lot. These spaces, their artistic choices, and their architectural organisation allow

for a close, face-to-face encounter with the audiences. In the 2010s, İkincikat opened in September 2010 in Olivia Passage, Maya Sahnesi in 2011 inside Aleppo Passage on Istiklal Street, and Asmalı Sahne in 2014 in Asmalimescit. This initiated a microcosmos of alternative theatres in the Taksim area.

Alternative theatres' creation conditions were determined by precarity, instability, and fragility of resources and venues (Uriarte 2016: 75). For converting the found spaces to black-box scenes, construction work was mostly done by the artists themselves due to the lack of resources. In the fieldwork, it is observed that construction work is referred as a founding act of ownership and belonging to the physical space. Moreover, a lack of resources provoked a do-it-yourself logic in every domain, from costume design to technical equipment. The absence of resources reconfigured the traditional distribution of work.

It is not possible to categorise the alternative theatre scene in Istanbul as a homogeneous entity; however, the local memory of the physical urban space that they occupy is a shared trait. a commonality in the content and form sorts out as the collective and individual memory arising from the physical urban space. In other words, the cosmopolitan past of Taksim, where the alternative theatres are mainly situated in the 2010s, brings into being the multilayered memory that can be traced to the local urban tissue. The emplacement in Taksim provokes questions, such as: Who was here before us? What are their stories? Why are they not here anymore? While the contested narratives of minorities are not recognised in the monolithic construction of the nation-state glorifying a Turkish, Muslim, and neo-Ottoman identity, alternative theatres become the *spaces* for memory.

This transformation is strongly linked with the emergence of an intellectual sphere engaged in activism for women, LGBTIQ, Kurdish

as well as Armenian causes, anti-war, and alter-globalisation, such as the Petition for Solidarity with Hrant Dink (11 October 2005) or the 'I Apologise' campaign (15 December 2008) that recognises the Armenian Genocide. Newly emerging civic society's politicisation extended to the cultural sphere (Duclert 2010: 118). A new type of public intellectual emerged that might be described as autonomous, stepping outside of the framework imposed by the institutional politics and economic capital.

I will now turn to the examples of site-specific creations that take as a starting point the urban site that they occupy, namely the Taksim district.

GalataPerform was founded by playwright, director, and actress Yeşim Özsoy on the first floor of a historic nineteenth-century building in an ancient district of Taksim. Inspired by the theatres she discovered in New York while she was studying, Özsoy created this theatre of thirty-five seats in 2003 and it remained open until 2021. The Visibility Project which continued for eight years, aimed at anchoring themselves in the locality of Galata and making visible its multilayered memory. Organised like a treasure hunt, this one-day project gathered artist studios, artist apartments, and realised performances in artisanal workshops mainly present in the district. One of the spaces that was discovered during The Visibility Project was Pessah Bakery, which was later used as a performance space by GalataPerform and then D22.

Özsoy's various plays bring together people from different cultural, political, and social backgrounds in a particular cityscape and the clashes and transformations that they get involved in. In 2013, on the verge of the Gezi movement, GalataPerform staged *İz (Stain)*, written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak and directed by Yeşim Özsoy. Inspired by the nineteenth-century building of GalataPerform, *İz* tells three intertwined stories taking place in three different decades of Turkey. The first story in 1955 shows a narrative of the 6–7 September 1955

pogrom targeting Istanbul's Greek community from the point of view of two Anatolian Greek sisters Eleni and Markiz. The second story is set in 1980, right after the 12 September military coup and stages the encounter between young leftist revolutionary Ahmet and his conservative nationalist landlord Tuğrul. The third story occurs in 2010 and portrays the relationship between Rizgar, a young Kurdish man who has immigrated to Istanbul, and his transgender girlfriend Sevengül. The commonality between those three stories is the space that they occupy. They all take place in the same apartment in Tarlabaşı, marked by gentrification politics in the 2010s as a new spatial layer added onto its multicultural history. *İz* illustrates a common theme of the period to take the space as a starting point to unfold the multilayered past, as a site of cultural clash and conflict where antagonisms potentially transformed to agonism.

Another notable alternative theatre stage is Kumbaracı50, which was founded by a group of friends in 2009 who met at Istanbul University's theatre club and continued their theatrical practice in their company Altıdan Sonra Tiyatro (Theatre after 6pm), after working hours, so to speak. It is the oldest alternative theatre remaining in Beyoğlu. In 2012, Kumbaracı50 realised an international project with Lokstoff! theatre known for their public space works in Germany. This collaboration entitled *Yokuş Aşağı Emanetler (Things Entrusted Downhill)* reflects upon leaving, being sent away, and being destroyed by stigmatisation. The play starts in the street where audiences follow the performance, delivered by the company, with headphones. The audiences are positioned as people who will be displaced and who must entrust their stories before leaving. The first story is told by an Anatolian Greek woman who talks from restaurant's balcony in the upper floor. She tells that all her close ones have left taking all their stories and food with them, the reason why she cannot cook anymore. Audiences walk along İstiklal Street to Kumbaracı50 listening to the characters that they meet and

watching them giving their keys to the new owners of their apartments. The walk finishes in Kumbaracı50 where audiences and characters take shelter in the theatre while bulldozer noises suggest the demolition in the city. However, the characters continue to sing and invite the audiences to sing with them and overpower the surrounding forces. They simply reject displacement. Thus, spectators become activists of urban resistance in the play.

A final alternative theatre worth mentioning is Tiyatro Biriken, which shares the feeling of urban dispossession with the aforementioned creations, but brings in their queer approach on the matter. Biriken was founded in 2006 by the duo Okan Ürün and Melis Tezkan when they were studying performing arts in Sorbonne University in Paris. Their interdisciplinary works combine installations, theatre, and performance. They do not own a theatre but pursue their career between Istanbul and Paris. They define their works as 'queer'. Their 2017 creation *Kıyamete Kadar Kapattım Kalbimi (I Closed My Heart until the Apocalypse)* refers to the lyrics of a 1990s Tarkan hit of the same name and shows three people on the stage in a haunted nocturnal space. The space is inspired by a Turkish *pavyon*, which was a popular night club culture that spread around Taksim until the 2000s. The space of the *pavyon* is approached as a place of transgression and possibility, where different sexual orientations and social classes can meet. Its portrayal as a haunted space materialises the feeling of loss and dispossession in the city.

The selected examples above put physical urban spaces in the centre of their creation process and engage actively with questions such as how different bodies make themselves visible to each other in public space, how citizens can reappropriate the city they live in, and which narratives are heard while others are excluded from public space. Emine Fişek argues that these projects are engaged in different types of site-specificity. Taken together, they are indicative of a shift in alternative theatres'



GalataPerform, *İz (Stain)*

Written by Ahmet Sami Özbudak, directed by Yeşim Özsoy, performed in GalataPerform, 2013

© Hande Göksan



Kumbaracı50, *Yokuş Aşağı Emanetler (Things Entrusted Downhill)*  
Directed by Yaman Ömer Erzurumlu and Wilhelm Schneck  
A scene in *Kumbaracı Yokuşu (Kumbaracı Descent)* where Kumbaracı50 is situated, 2012  
© Volkan Cengen

relationship to urban history, political violence, and spatial memory (2018: 353). She points out the self-reflexivity, the awareness of the fact that alternative theatre in contemporary Istanbul is not external to processes of gentrification; it is, however, ambivalently shaped by these developments (ibid.). As concerned actors of dispossession and gentrification, alternative theatres witness urban transformation first-hand. Alternative theatres' localisation and mobility in the city offer an entry point to understand the city's turbulent urban dynamics. However, their urban and cultural practices go beyond showing the power relations between citizens as victims, passive spectators of urban transformation politics. I argue that this creation of spatial belonging was taken further by the Gezi Movement, when many citizens actively occupied public spaces and thus disrupted the daily life.

These examples above illustrate different ways of engaging with the city, each one addressing a different aspect of the questions, to whom does the city belong? Who has the right to appear in public space? In *İz*, an apartment in the Tarlabası neighbourhood revealed different layers of memories in Turkey. Tarlabası was presented as a space of unexpected encounters, which causes both clashes and negotiations. Each time period pointed out whose existence in public space disturbs the most, from Anatolian Greeks of 1955 to Kurds and transgenders in 2010s. *Things Entrusted Downhill* told the story of Taksim from another perspective and turned the audience into protestors against the gentrification. *I Closed My Heart until the Apocalypse* staged a narrative of the 'Others' of the city. Queer characters invested the nocturnal spaces in nostalgia against the heteronormative construction of the public space. In those three plays alongside many others, Taksim is staged as a site of continuous struggle between its national top-down construction and its 'undesirable' lifestyles. Moreover, in plays about the city in the 2000s and 2010s, most commonly a part of the city was chosen, such as a nightclub, a bar, a park, or a laundromat where people from different social

backgrounds and political convictions encounter one another. These encounters lead towards clash and finally to transformation where the characters 'see' one another outside of social labels.

Artistic experimentation with the theatrical space and spectatorship in Istanbul's theatre scene since the 1990s might be seen as a breach contributing to the formation of the idea that citizens are not condemned to be passive spectators of the city dwelling in a top-down constructed décor, but they might act upon their right to the city and step onto the stage. The Gezi movement can be considered as the paroxysm of radically claiming ownership in the city.

## Gezi Movement: Extension from the Stage to the Street and from the Street to the Stage

When the Gezi movement started on 28 May 2013, the alternative theatres were directly concerned and involved in the movement given their spatial proximity. In 2013, the topography of the alternative theatre scene was around Taksim. Daily life in theatres was interrupted by the collective time, the rhythm defined by protests and police violence. During the fieldwork that I conducted in Istanbul, Gezi was commonly referred to as a life-changing experience in the interviews. The interviewees all stated that they actively participated in the Gezi movement since its beginning. During the movement, they mostly cancelled their plays and went to Gezi Park instead. While protestors were searching for a shelter from the police violence in the streets around Taksim,

theatres opened their doors to them as shelters and make-shift nurseries. Hence, theatre company members and protestors shared an extraordinary sociability around hiding from the police, taking care of the ones affected by tear gas, eating together, and even sleeping in the theatres. Camille Louis analyses this ambiguity as a passage from the stage organised by political art to stages beckoning towards the current places of politics (2014: 63). The occupied place became the place of visibility, where citizenship was staged. While the public square became a stage, the theatres in turn became the extension of that public square.

During Gezi, famous theatre actors' presence in the movement drew a reaction from the political power to the point of public targeting. A few among several examples: Mehmet Ali Alabora was accused of inciting the Gezi movement through his play *Mi Minör (E Minor)* (2013), a story of an uprising in a fictional country under the domination of a dictator. Alabora emigrated to the UK following the trial. Barış Atay, member of the alternative theatre Emek Sahnesi (Labour Stage) was arrested and accused of being a member of the socialist group of Redhack. In the aftermath of Gezi, Atay became a member of the pro-Kurdish party HDP and later, of the workers' party TİP. Twenty artists, including Ragıp Yavuz, Levent Üzümcü, and Sevinç Erbulak, were dismissed from the municipal theatres of the city of Istanbul.

Furthermore, the presence of performing arts contributed to the performativity of the movement. Boal's theatre of the oppressed inspired forum theatres that were practiced during park forums (Aydemir 2020: 125). During the protests, four authors from the alternative theatres staged the play *Gezerken (As We Stroll)* composed of four monologues about the different experiences in Gezi Park. The play is performed at the park during the movement with four superimposed stories revealing different moments of Taksim Square's spatial memory. The first one, written by Cem Uslu from SahneHâl, staged the story of an apolitical

protestor played by Serkan Altıntaş, whose first experience of marginalisation happens in Gezi. The second one by Mîrza Metin, from Şermola Performans, shows the point of view of a stray dog played by Sermet Yeşil. In the third one, Erdem Akakçe plays a ghost who was killed in the 'Bloody' 1 May 1977, where thirty-four people died because of police violence. The fourth one, written by Yiğit Sertdemir from Kumbaracı50, was an absurdist text whose protagonist was the TOMA,<sup>4</sup> a symbol of police violence, played by Şebnem Sönmez and Sevinç Erbulak alternating. This piece was staged in the occupied Gezi Park during the movement; thus, it can be considered as a simultaneous narrative creation and memory making in the present. *Gezerken* was performed on the stage constructed for public speaking during the occupation in Gezi Park, then in other neighbourhood park forums in the following months.

On 15 June 2013, the police evacuated Gezi Park and violently repressed the protests spread around the whole country. Temporally reappropriated public space was once again confiscated by political power with amplified police control and surveillance. The political context in the post-Gezi period is marked by the criminalisation of the streets and the polarisation of society between supporters and opponents of the Government. The authoritarian political climate led to a suffocation of the public space and the oppression of opposition actors, journalists, academics, intellectuals, and artists alongside political figures. This atmosphere of authoritarianism also manifested in the theatre sphere. Twenty-two theatres including Şermola Performans and Kumbaracı50, which openly supported Gezi were deprived of state subsidies. Due to the urban transformation politics and gentrification of Taksim, most of the theatres had to close down or move to other parts of the city, like Kadıköy on the other side of the Bosphorus, which became a new cultural hub of the city. Many theatres had to close for good.

4. *Toplumsal Olaylara Müdahale Aracı*: vehicle of intervention to social incidents.

# Theatre: Space of Political Resistance after Gezi

In the latest authoritarian political context, the stories and memories of the Gezi Park movement have become inaudible and invisible in the political discourse. After the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, any kind of opposition to the Government is now criminalised. The Government condemns and discredits Gezi as a ‘terrorist’ movement to the extent of incarcerating philanthropist Osman Kavala as its main financier. The shift to authoritarianism has caused a discourse of defeat according to which Gezi did not have any impact on political sphere. However, citizens’ space making in the city temporarily suspends the political power rather than directly opposing it. Within this climate, activism may not entirely disappear but change its form.

The vulnerability and precariousness deepened in the alternative theatre scene after Gezi. However, these become exceptional strengths in an authoritarian context where the absence of state control translates to an autonomy, a way to escape political oppression. Despite the closures and the ubiquitous censorship, theatres can move in the city. Pascal Gielen argues that a lack of resources imposes material constraints on cultural production on the one hand, but it also enables adaptation and agility to create temporary and mobile spaces in the city, on the other (2015: 212). Theatres which continue their activity in a permanent state of crisis gained resilience and came up with different ideas to continue their artistic practice. Many groups like D22 no longer have their own theatre but they continue their practice. DoT’s mobility in Istanbul correlates with Istanbul’s urban transformation since the 2000s.

Their first theatre space in the iconic Mısır Apartmanı on Istiklal street in 2005 can be considered as the first alternative theatre and inspired others. In 2011, they moved to the G-Mall in Dolmabahçe, then to the Kanyon shopping Mall in Levent in 2015, and finally to Kemerburgaz City Forest in 2020 with an open-air project.

Alternative theatres in the aftermath of Gezi contribute to autonomous political practices of citizens as a continuity of what is commonly referred to as ‘Gezi spirit’. Regarding the creations, some examples reclaim narratives and stage the contested memories of lived experiences in Gezi. Pieter Verstraete points out that some of ‘post-Gezi texts’, the immediate and straightforward creations, were didactic, uncritical, reifying, and too celebratory (2019: 285). An ambition to represent the movement on the stage contradicts the very anti-representative character of Gezi and thus cannot go beyond a fading shadow. However, I argue that the plays that make visible the contested minorities and narratives of the movement instead of directly imitating Gezi on the stage were the ones that continued the politically emancipatory potential of ‘Gezi spirit’.

Next to the pieces that bear directly on Gezi, the implicit references mark the creations as a way of recalling the atmosphere shared in Gezi in a way only accessible to the spectators. Among others, D22 staged *Karabatak (Cormorant)* in 2013 which showed Gezi’s narrative through poems by Nazım Hikmet. In Moda Sahnesi’s *Hamlet* (2014), the soldiers were wearing police helmets and uniforms, and Gezi’s ironic slogans were part of the décor. *Istenmeyen (Persona Non Grata)* by Gülce Uğurlu and Ceren Ercan presented a story of a meeting between a character called Khaled who immigrated to Istanbul, due to the political defeat in Egypt, after Tahrir, his wife Bahar, and her brother Barış during Gezi. In the same year, the famous German director Thomas Ostermeier’s adaptation of Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, which tackled the theme of authoritarianism and resistance, sparked a controversy



TiyatroDoT, *Sarı Ay (Yellow Moon)*  
Written by David Greig, translated and directed by Pınar Töre, performed in G-Mall, 2012  
© Muhsin Akgün

due to its interactive structure which ended with a forum at the end where spectators were keenly involved in discussing Gezi. These subtle references recreated a shared memory of Gezi with spectators.

Furthermore, alternative theatres gained a more social character in the aftermath of the Gezi movement with increased public interest in theatre classes for amateurs, seminars, workshops, presentations, concerts, and parties. This sociability enhances a citizenship practice based upon community making alongside artistic production. Thus, these theatres are not only visited during show hours, but they became living spaces of sociability. Beyond spectatorship, followers of these theatres socialise in theatre classes after working hours. Among these theatres, Kara Kabare takes one step further and refuses to sell tickets for their plays but sets up a barter exchange economy. A theatre ticket can be paid for by means of books, meals, lessons, etc., which allows for a longer-lasting interaction with the audience. Furthermore, this alternative economy works as a resistance strategy against a capitalist logic. It interferes in the dependence between the theatre's existence and box-office income. Furthermore, it resists considering the audience as a consumer, and it attempts to create a community in solidarity.

In the empirical study on alternative theatres in Istanbul, I focused on artistic micro-practices that reshape public life. Tracing alternative theatres' space making in Istanbul offers a way to observe the transformation of the urban space. Avant-garde experimentations in Turkey since the 1960s created a practice of alternative space making in the city. Each generation recognises the impact of the previous generation. In the 1990s, artists from dissident careers created an 'underground' scene opening up a new topography of arts and culture in Istanbul as well as new ways of creating commonality around shared spaces. 'Risky' political issues became part of the artistic agenda with plays relating to the urban site where theatres moved to.

Firstly, the location of new theatres around the Taksim district since the beginning of the 1990s negotiated urban encounters with a multi-layered memory carved in public space and triggered artistic creations that addressed the former habitants of the districts they resided in. Secondly, the staging of the oppressed and forgotten minority narratives and the stories of gentrification provoked the potential of a new distribution of the sensible by giving voice to people who were otherwise invisible in public space. Thirdly, alternative theatres created new physical spaces in the city by reappropriating vacant spaces, in which new artistic expressions, encounters, sociabilities could emerge. Lastly, alternative theatre's mobility and dispossession in the city represents a form of activism of the space.

Investing, repurposing, converting, manipulating, reappropriating the spaces that were vacant or under state control demonstrates how space making in a city can become the precondition for creating a sense of

belonging and relating with each other. Re-confiscated autonomous spaces enable the emergence of a pluralist political imaginary. Particularly in authoritarian political contexts, autonomous physical places reveal a potential for political resistance against the closure of public space and the political system. Activism changes form and space towards fragmented public spaces on a micro-scale where state surveillance can be suspended.

Arendt emphasises that the space of appearance can emerge at any time and place if a plurality of people create space between them through action and speech (1998: 83). Butler stresses the cruciality of the public space of appearance for its theatrical self-constitution (2015: 85). Beyond the action and the word, the new dramaturgies and the reconfiguration of the relation to the spectators forge a shared sensory experience and, thus, put forward the performative to create new social bonds.

Artistic expressions in public space that create new forms of public agency, which transform the citizens to owners claiming their right to the city rather than passive spectators, can change the spatial organisation of politics. While the public square becomes a stage, the theatres in turn become the extension of the public square and, thus, the political potential of theatre becomes apparent in new articulations between aesthetics and politics. The shared sensory, bodily, and affective experience sets in motion liminal moments where links are constantly made and unmade, even if it is not possible to speak of the absolute overcoming of divisions. As aforementioned cases have shown, alternative theatres can gain political character by creating autonomous spaces where the relationship to the space and the city are changed by reclaiming spaces where social norms are formed and negotiated. •

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**FROM  
REPERTOIRES  
OF RESISTANCE  
TO MONUMENTS  
OF ABSENCE**  
**DENİZ BAŞAR**

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## KEYWORDS

Gezi, repertoires of resistance, monuments of absence, hunger strike, public sphere

## ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER

Gezi, bedenselleşmiş direniş repertuarları, yokluk anıtları, açlık grevi, kamusal alan

# SUMMARY

The Gezi Park protests developed some practices of resistance that can be remembered, recounted, reproduced, and re-enacted in instances, when necessary, in the future. These practices are to do with embodied action, knowledge of solidarity, cultural agency, specific use of language and body. This essay discusses how the repertoires of resistance is accumulated, and when suppressed by hegemony, creates 'monuments of absence', while still holding the potential vocabularies for future resistances.

# ÖZET

Gezi Direnişi kendisinden sonra gelebilecek direnişler için gerektiğinde hatırlanabilir, yeniden üretilebilir, tekrar yapılandırılabilir bazı direniş pratikleri geliştirdi. Bu pratiklerin bedenselleşmiş hareket dinamikleri, dayanışma bilgisi, kültürel temsiller, dilin ve bedenin özelleşmiş kullanımları ile doğrudan ilgisi vardır. Bu çalışma bedenselleşmiş direniş repertuarlarının nasıl biriktirildiğini, hegemonya tarafından baskılandıklarında ise nasıl 'yokluk anıtlarına' dönüştüğünü; buna rağmen gelecekte olabilecek direnişlerin kiplerini nasıl hala içlerinde barındırdığını tartışıyor.



# INTRODUCTION

## Towards a Theory of Monumental Absences

Performance scholar Diana Taylor's body of works is the main theoretical inspiration of this essay, especially her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003).<sup>1</sup> She explains the essence of her distinction between archive and repertoire as follows: 'For years, I had worried about the "other" of the archival, what I finally came to call the "repertoire" of embodied practices that survived the erasure wrought by the colonial archive' (Taylor 2020: xi–xii). Continuing my theoretical dialogue with Taylor, I find it relevant to recall her work in *Disappearing Acts* (1997), which engages 'with the politics of disappearance: the forced absenting of individuals by Argentina's military forces and the paradoxical omnipresence of the disappeared' (2003: xvii). The notion of absence has been a difficult phenomenological entity in performance studies, since there is a 'paradoxical omnipresence' of certain political absences. Due to my own experiences and witnessing since 2013, I came to think of such absences in terms of monuments, a monumental kind of absence, or monuments of absence.

1. The first draft of this essay was presented under the name 'Performative Turn in Turkish Politics Since 2013 Gezi Uprising' in the Post-Coup Turkey Panel of 23rd Annual ASN (Association for the Study of Nationalities) Conference, which took place between 2-5 May 2018 at Harriman Institute, Columbia University.

‘Monument’ is a contradictory notion in this case because the meaning of a monument is generally attached to a reaffirmation of a governmental body in a public space.

Monuments may begin and end in tumult, but in between they become inert. In 1927, the Austrian novelist Robert Musil described them in their normal, steady state: ‘Monuments possess all sorts of qualities. The most important is somewhat contradictory: what strikes one most about monuments is that one doesn’t notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments’ [1986, 320]. Musil has a point. Something about monuments inoculates them against attention. You may know dimly that there’s a statue or plaque on a building you pass every day, but what it stands for you often cannot recall. (Koerner 2016/7: 9)

A monument then, in its state of inertia as described above, can be read as the embodiment of hegemony in the public space. Here, I use the term hegemony, in Raymond Williams’s sense, as ‘a lived system of meanings and values, not simply an ideology, a sense of reality beyond which it is, for most people, difficult to move, a lived dominance and subordination, internalized’ (1977: 108–15). Hegemony is unnoticed once it is established just like the monument, it stands and occupies the space as a seemingly neutral entity. A monument of absence is rooted in the texture of public urban space as much as the monument, and how they differ from each other lies in their relationality to the political power. A monument of absence has an uneasy relationship with the governing bodies, which keeps its precarious presence or straightforward absence noticeable, therefore never allowing it to fall into a state of complete inertia. I argue here that there are two particular ways that monuments of absence come into being:

1. *A monument of absence as the precarious urban presence of an object:* These can be a physical urban element placed by an independent artist either without the support of the governing bodies or directly against the will of the governing bodies, such as İskender Giray’s sculpture, which will be discussed as an example later. There are also certain cases where an urban object is initially established with the support of the governing bodies; such as Metin Yurdanur’s sculpture, which will be covered as an example later too; but the urban object changes its meaning over time as it starts associating with acts of resistance in the public psyche. These kinds of monuments of absence can be graffiti, murals, sculptures, or other kinds of urban physical objects that exist in precarity due to their unapproved or officially ambiguous presences in the urban space. Their ambiguous presence is a constant reminder of the missing bodies that define the meaning of these urban objects.
2. *A monument of absence as a reduction, censorship, lessening of the performativity of the body:* Protests, the act of protesting, the linguistic and bodily creativity involved in resistance, create and cultivate repertoires that allow self-expression and self-realisation even under the most drastic authoritarian regimes. When the individuals who contributed to the making of these repertoires of protest are pushed back into a cage of authority-approved and authority-appropriate behaviours and discourses, this creates a tactile absence of performativities in the public sphere. This tactile absence of the repertoires of performativities is monumental in the sense that these performativities are produced and reproduced everyday by many people.

Both types of monuments of absence are in dialogue with each other, as they precariously but noticeably co-exist in the public space in a constant negotiation with the hegemonic presence that regulates the space and the bodies. I will apply the notions of the *repertoires of resistance* and

*monuments of absence* to suggest a rereading of the Gezi movement and its aftermath, since I find these two notions helpful to contextualise the regime of emotions and embodied political dynamics in contemporary Turkey. Therefore, what is discussed here consecutively starts with what constructed the repertoire of Gezi, continues with discussing how this bodily repertoire of resistance was suppressed, and finishes with questioning how these seemingly forgotten repertoires of resistance translated themselves to monuments of absence.

## Repertoire of Gezi: Remembrances, Sense of Solidarity, Joy, Humour, and Language

The Gezi Park protests developed practices based in embodied action, knowledge of solidarity, cultural agency, specific use of language, and perhaps most importantly, anti-hegemonic use of the body. First, the repertoire of Gezi unearthed the bodily histories of previous anti-hegemonic protests in Turkey. For example, one of the most cited poems during the Gezi Uprising was a section of Cemal Süreya's (1931–1990) poem 555K, originally written in 1960 'following the 555K protest which arose in the same year in response to the murder of two university students during the 28–30 April university protests' (Yeşil 2020: 318). As public sphere scholars Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge claim, the 'intimate knowledge of reliability' has the potential to be carried 'over onto [...] new situations' (2014: 353), just as a poem written for the context of 1960 could speak on behalf of a generation in 2013. Therefore, to understand the potentiality of sudden moments of remembering

in contexts of embodied resistance, I quote this famous section from Cemal Süreya's poem at length:

*you see that we speak now below our breaths  
that we unite in silence and leave in silence  
our mothers steep tea for good days  
our beloved ones put flowers inside the cup  
in the mornings we go to work quiet and retiring  
all this does not mean that things will stand as they do  
we now come side by side and multiply  
but the day we chant with one voice the song of liberty  
then that day even Gods can't save you.*

(Damla Yeşil 2020: 318–9 – translated by Yeşil)

The emotional gravity, and threat to authority, of these lines lie in the re-activation of the repertoire of resistance, which might seem to get vanished under hegemonic authoritarianism until a moment when a collective resistance takes place again. Jacques Rancière argues that each individual 'links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen [...] in other kinds of place [and] *composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her*' (2009: 13; my emphasis). Experiences of Gezi activated such memories of left-wing protests from the past, of the poems before us, along with the violent memories of clashes with the police and mobs of right-wing groups; especially in relation to the history of Taksim Square.

Another striking artistic remembrance took place in the play *Gezerken (As We Wander)*,<sup>2</sup> written for the occupied Taksim Square in June 2013 and performed for the first time in the open stage of Gezi Park during the resistance. *Gezerken* was a composition of four different monologues

<sup>2</sup> See Zeynep Uğur's essay on pp. 114–159 (European Journal of Theatre and Performance, Issue 4, Special Issue on Activism and Spectatorship) for more details on the performance of *Gezerken*.

that grounded themselves in the moment of the Gezi resistance, written by four playwrights (Cem Uslu, Özen Yula, Yiğit Sertdemir, and Mîrza Metin) and performed by various performers connected to the same theatre circles. In the piece entitled *Boşluğu Doldurmak* (*Filling in the Emptiness*), playwright Özen Yula brought back the memory of bloody 1 May 1977, when thirty-four people were killed by state-related provocateurs, through the monologue of a ghost of a man (named as ‘adam’, i.e. ‘a man’ in the text; and performed by Erdem Akakçe and Reha Özcan interchangeably) who was among the murdered people (Başar 2014: 192, n:222 & Rüzgar 2013). The name of the monologue refers to an emptiness, an absence, which can be filled — even if momentarily — with recalling a repertoire that was believed to be lost until it was brought back through another resistance. This grafting of memories, calling moments from the collective past, echoes of ghost presences are what triggers the past repertoires of the bodily resistance. As this particular unearthing of collective memory was taking place, Gezi was also inventing its own repertoires of resistance that were enrooted in a sense of solidarity, joy, humour, and a new language.

As several scholars discussed, ‘Gezi broke down the wall of fear’ (Verstraete 2014: 2) against a government which ‘inflicted a series of oppressive actions designed to transform Turkey into an Islamic authoritarian regime’ (Evren 2013: 7). This overall hegemony of AKP’s<sup>3</sup> neoliberal-Islamic conservatism, which transformed legal structures and urban space ideologically over the years, could be challenged in public only under some special circumstances in which people could voice their uneasiness with the authority *together*. According to Diana Taylor, ‘[t]he repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of

3. ‘Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi’ in Turkish; ‘Justice and Development Party’ in English. It is the main governing party in Turkey since 2002.



Reha Özcan performing the character named ‘Adam’ (‘A Man’) in the occupied Gezi Park on 8 June 2013. Screenshot from the video documentation of *Gezerken* (As We Wander). © Onat Eesenman

the transmission’ (2003: 20). This is why the need for ‘physical closeness’ in ‘mass demonstrations’, according to Negt and Kluge, ‘serves as a mutual confirmation of [the protestors’] own reality’ and for people who ‘as a rule do not carry weapons, only physical massing can achieve anything against the military, the police, or security guard’ (2016: 39). In the case of Gezi, the physical closeness of protestors against the armed and uniformed police confirmed their collective reality of being oppressed by the same regime, and the confirmation of this reality cracked ‘the wall of fear’, which is the disciplined body as embodied hegemony. Although the protests were sparked with the need to defend the park, it was clear from the beginning that the collective unease about the political situation was bigger than just the defence of the park.

The Gezi protests took place under heavy police attacks, and, in the less central places where the protests were carried on, eight young Alevi working-class men were killed,<sup>4</sup> one directly by a police bullet (Ethem Sarısülük), another by a targeted tear gas cannon (for the case of Berkin Elvan, see Eylül Fidan Akıncı 2018), and others got lynched by AKP supporters. These acts of systemically supported violence were the foreshadowing of the street level restructuring of hegemony that desired to re-discipline the bodies in the aftermath of Gezi. Despite all the atrocities, in the case of İstanbul, Gezi Park and the surrounding area was closed by barricades and was made into a seemingly state-less zone under the continuous threat of police attack. Zeynep Tüfekçi describes the emotional state of this state-less zone as follows:

It may seem counterintuitive [sic] but many protesters also treasured what happened *after* they were teargassed, pepper-sprayed, water-cannoned, and otherwise attacked by police: strangers helped and protected them. There is nothing pleasurable about being teargassed, but the experience of solidarity and altruism within communities engaged in collective rebellion was profoundly moving for people whose lives were otherwise dominated by mundane struggles for survival and the quest for money. (2017: xv)

This description is quite in-tune with my own Gezi experience. At the time, I was an MA student in Boğaziçi University and as Gezi was taking place in the period of the final assignments, I was toing and froing between writing my final essays and getting teargassed. I remember being taken care of by strangers, and taking care of strangers on many occasions. The resistance itself opened up a liminal area beyond the peripheries of the mundane daily life of economic survival and

4. Ethem Sarısülük (age: 26), Ahmet Atakan (age: 22), Abdullah Cömert (age: 22), Mehmet Ayvalıtaş (age: 20), Berkin Elvan (age: 15), Medeni Yıldırım (age: 18), Ali İsmail Korkmaz (age: 19), Hasan Ferit Gedik (age: 21).

sustainability of the individual or the family unit. Here, there is something to be said about the ‘sharing economy’ (Tüfekçi 2017: xv) and the practice of care. These are practices of reliability, and the ‘object of all labor is reliability’ in relationships (Kluge and Negt 2014: 353). Once this reliability is practiced (therefore proven to exist), it brings a *futurity claim* through its own practice since it is grounded in the basic knowledge that it can be practiced *again*. From that moment on, people who communally practiced reliability (or solidarity in more political terms) have every right to presuppose ‘a specific amount of basic trust, which is nothing other than the intimate knowledge of reliability that [is carried] over onto the production and temporal structure of new situations’ (ibid.).

In her article on the Gezi Resistance (which includes a short history of Turkey, a day-to-day account of the Gezi Resistance, and its emotional and social impacts), Arzu Öztürkmen notes many aspects of how tactile repertoires of bodily resistance broadened and diversified during Gezi. Öztürkmen’s academic vocabulary includes words and descriptions like: ‘expressivity’, ‘Bakhtinian dialogue’ between multiple performances, ‘a fast-forward sense of linear time’, ‘evenementiality’, humour of Gezi, and ‘language of Gezi’ (Öztürkmen 2014: 39–68). All these descriptions grasp aspects of the collective experience, as the experience itself resists the previous codes of language where the fluidity of performance can grasp it through intervening in material relationalities of urban social life. The feedback loop between performativity and language that Gezi allowed, challenged and changed the previous codes of language from within. Verstraete notes that after Gezi ‘a new performative awareness in Turkey has started, which expresses itself in many forms and which grew out of the social uprising’ (2014: 9); where this anti-hegemonic performativity ‘reclaim[ed a] social function: to dare to show an alternative, free world by enacting a positive change’ (7).

The shift in the experiential level of living and being was echoed in the language — the ‘language of Gezi’ — which constructed its own transgressive humour as its key element, as a reflection of the absurdity of the situations and discourses created by the authority. The need for another kind of language is rooted in the bodily resistance, because the body ‘responds to the cynicism of domination with satirical laughter, defiant body actions, or strategic silence’, which in turn redefines the language because of ‘the impossibility of self-language without worldly language’ (Shapiro 1999: 68). Similarly, Negt and Kluge’s reading of the relationship of the worker to language is applicable to the protestors and their use of language and the mobilisation of their cultural agency. Gezi protestors had ‘a tactile relationship to language and a need for confirmation through objects and other people’ (Negt and Kluge 2016: 47), which as a result created a linguistic in-group for protestors (the people who ‘get the joke’, so to speak) which allowed them to notice one another in contexts other than the protest itself in years to come. Humour, arguably, has become a part of the repertoire of resistance after Gezi, despite the fact that discourses of dissent got overtly cynical<sup>5</sup> over the coming years. Whereas previous political movements in Turkey did not employ humour as a major tool of protest or endorse joy as a public feeling of mobilisation; Gezi spontaneously did so in a deeply anti-hegemonic manner. This challenged the multifaceted cultural cult of masculinist seriousness employed de facto in politics and protest culture in Turkey for a very long time.

The second half of 2013 and the entire year afterwards were marked with many experiences of direct democracy from public forums in parks to squat houses. The aftermath of Gezi was also marked with an intensification of authoritarianism, which could be interpreted as

the authority’s attempt towards rebuilding ‘the wall of fear’, which was constructed multidimensionally in all fronts of social life and was — sometimes — improvised on the spot by the authorities and supporters of the regime through *their* own repertoire (such as pogroms, lynching, hate speech, etc.). While Gezi was a vivid and accessible memory up until 7 June 2015 elections, and it was a constant reminder of the political potentialities of coming together on the streets, the countless bomb attacks targeting *only* the public gatherings non-complicit with the AKP Government and the aftermath of the 15 July 2016 military coup attempt particularly blurred and buried the memories and hopes of the ex-protestors and sympathisers of Gezi. Today, based on my own witnessing, people who protested the Government during Gezi do not use the humour and language of Gezi any longer. Gezi seems to be a distant and somewhat painful memory, mostly forgotten in the Turkey of 2022 for those involved in the protests of June 2013.

5. As Sherry Shapiro notes, ‘[t]he life experience of victims are revealed in their bitterness’ (1999: 70).

# Hegemonic Interventions to the Repertoire of Gezi

Starting from 5 June 2015 Diyarbakır bombing of the HDP<sup>6</sup> rally, there was a string of bombing attacks that influenced countless civilians within a few years. Hundreds of people died as a result of these bomb attacks. In late 2015 and into the early days of 2016, AKP Government brutally ended the peace negotiations with PKK<sup>7</sup> through a series of curfews and military operations against Kurdish-majority cities in Southeast regions of Turkey, which heavily impacted civilians including pregnant women, children, and old people. That was when the Academics for Peace initiative took action, which was immediately targeted by Erdoğan himself, and even by state-related mafia figures like Sedat Peker who publicly declared that he was willing to ‘shower in the blood of academics’ (İlbeyoğlu, 11 May 2021; for more information on Academics for Peace, see Özgül Akıncı 2018). These were all violent interventions to the embodied repertoires of resistance, suppressing primarily the will to protest through fear and then through imposing practices of self-censorship for survival. The failed military coup attempt on 15 July 2016 marked an important threshold in the increase of the scale and intensity of these hegemonic interventions. On 20 July 2016 a nation-wide State of Emergency was declared, which continued for two years and ended on 19 July 2018. The State of Emergency fundamentally handicapped the legal system after the military coup attempt and organisationally allowed the waves of Governmental decrees (which is the main bureaucratic tool of the Government to by-pass the law) that stripped thousands of public

6. ‘Halkların Demokratik Partisi’ in Turkish; ‘Peoples’ Democratic Party’ in English. The main Kurdish party in Turkey.

7. ‘Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê’ in Kurdish; ‘Kurdistan Workers’ Party’ in English. PKK and Turkish Armed Forces have been involved in an ongoing armed conflict since 1984.

servants, including the Peace Petitioners, of their rights of employment, insurance, and international travel, through publishing their names in the *Resmi Gazete* (Official Newspaper) in seemingly never-ending lists.

Diana Taylor notes that ‘[h]istories were burned and rewritten to suit the memorialising needs of those in power. The space of written culture then, as now, seemed easier to control than embodied culture’ (2003: 17). When one examines the mass-scale ideological propaganda and actions taken under the new legislative powers that the State of Emergency allowed, it can be seen that this state-constructed selective reconstruction of recent history served to blur three key areas of the collective memory:

1. The close ties between the Gülenist movement<sup>8</sup> and the rise of AKP;
2. The potentiality that Gezi resistance held for an alternative political and social re-imagining of Turkey;
3. The peace negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK, which took place between 2012 and 2015.

*Hak ve Adalet Platformu* (the Platform of Rights and Justice) created a detailed research report (2017) about the injustices that were carried out during the State of Emergency period through in-depth surveys

8. Gülenists are an Islamic organisation whose leader Fetullah Gülen, a preacher, has been living in US since 1999. Gülenists closely worked with AKP until early 2010s and developed a large-scale base following through missionary education institutions and by intervening in areas that the social state was not efficient enough, particularly to recruit youth. Until the AKP-Gülen alliance started to fall apart publicly around 2014 through Gülenists’ leaking of governmental elite’s corruption information, many journalists, academics, and public intellectuals who criticised Fetullah Gülen or his organisation went through biased or staged trials and were imprisoned for many years. AKP’s narrative around Gülenists shifted 180 degrees after they were officially blamed for the 2016 military coup attempt. See Altınordu 2017 for a more detailed account of the aftermath of the coup attempt in relation to Gülenists. Along with the people who were accused of having relations to Gülenists, many left-wing, secularist, Kurdish, feminist, LGBTIQ, minority-related NGOs, parties, and organisations were heavily targeted during the two-year-long State of Emergency.

with victims of the State of Emergency and the Governmental decrees. The report documents the deep traumas of many people who went through abuse and mistreatment in police stations and interrogations, and suffered through biased legal processes, which created ‘significant changes in their social/political identities and mental perceptions/judgements’ (441). According to the same report, the State of Emergency and Governmental decrees created ‘serious ruptures between individual-state and society-state relationships’ and many people could not get over the shock of being declared as terrorists overnight (470). This economic, social, and psychological damage is not limited to the victims themselves, but extends to their relatives, friends, and broader social circles. The public sphere, according to Habermas, depends on ‘[d]iscursive democracy [which] requires a continual and variegated ‘interplay’ between a multiplicity of ‘public spheres’ emerging across civil society and a broad spectrum of formal political institution’ (White 1995: 13). When such spheres were systemically abolished during the post-Gezi period, and during the aftermath of the failed military coup attempt, bodies were used for political intervention even in the highest levels of the institutional political fields. Therefore, it was not a coincidence when Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s<sup>9</sup> Justice March from Ankara to İstanbul took place with the participation of thousands of people in the summer of 2017 (Kılıçdaroğlu 2017). This was a major performative moment that spoke to the dissent with authority through a long-durational performance instead of a Habermasian diplomatic debate in the parliament.

The first step of establishing the July 15 official narrative was mobilising the streets and public spaces with groups from nationalist and conservative tendencies for weeks to come. The level of state support for this mass mobilisation was incomparable to anything prior: throughout

the night of July 15 all imams across the country were mobilised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to recite the *ezan* (call for prayer) and *sela* (funeral call) non-stop to bring more people on the street to ‘fight back’ against the attempted coup, creating a distinct soundscape. All means of technology and state security information on citizens were used to call people to what they called, ‘Democracy Watch’ gatherings in public spaces in weeks to come. These meetings were organised by the Government significantly as an anti-Gezi movement, through appropriating discourses (making the ‘spirit of Gezi’ into the ‘spirit of 15 July’) and occupying the same city spaces (Taksim Square once again becoming a major landmark of the ‘Democracy Watch’), and through funding these large-scale meetings by making public transport free and serving food. The step that followed the weeks-long state-funded mobilisation of the ‘Democracy Watch’ parties was the construction of a national memory around the official narrative of 15 July. The official narrative of 15 July was grounded in the mass mobilisation through religious symbolism and discourses of a sacred defence (and martyrdom). This mobilisation took place through the initiatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and was incomparable in the scale of the past appropriations of the Turkish state’s official utilisation of institutional Islam (see Solomonovich 2021). It is possible to read these bodily interventions to the public sphere as both the suppression and appropriation of the repertoire of resistance of the Gezi movement. This propaganda-soaked public sphere carved its marks in the bodies of the people who were not content with the Governmental narrative or the hegemonic interventions to the public sphere, through intense self-censorship, depression,<sup>10</sup> and sometimes through triggering other physical illnesses.<sup>11</sup>

One of the major results of this mass level engineering of the erasure of recent history, through the strict regulation of the official narratives and the oppression of counter-narratives, resulted in a difficult-to-document emotional shift in the memory of Gezi Park protests for

9. The current political leader of the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People’s Party). It is the foundational party of the Republic of Turkey and currently the second most popular party.

# Monuments of Absence: Urban Palimpsests of Morally Ambiguous Witnessing

the people who took part in it. Gezi was a freeing practice of resistance for many because it challenged and changed the acceptable social performativities defined by a nationalist, Islamist, neoliberal, masculinist, and heteronormative regime, namely the embodied hegemonic system. In the realm of the body, hegemony manifests itself as an internalised process that defines how the body can move and be in the public sphere under acceptable conditions for the authority. As dance scholar Sherry Shapiro argues, hegemony as a situation ‘can be found in our bones, our nerves, our eyes, and even in the corners of our mouths’ (1999: 70), which means that the hegemony not only disciplines, but essentially shapes our bodies. As Shapiro explains: ‘Our bodies speak to the growing awareness of the structuring of subjectivity through the ‘embodiment’ of the dominant ideology. Yet, to move beyond unconscious challenges or emotional defiance, there has to be a critical connection able to thread together the fragments of the contradictions, accommodations, and resistances’ (1999: 73). What was threaded together as a repertoire of resistance during Gezi could not be practiced anymore, due to intensifying violence of the authority and the disciplining tools of hegemony infused in the daily life. The phantom of this unused repertoire creates monuments of absence, especially when in relation to the spatial memory of individuals.

← 10. One telling case took place on 16 October 2014, when a 36-year-old successful white-collar administrator, Mehmet Pişkin, committed suicide leaving behind a 14-minute video that he shared on social media, explaining the reasons of his decision as desperation and hopelessness (“Mehmet Pişkin’in”, 16 Oct. 2014). At the time this video was widely discussed in social media with many judgemental comments attached to it. I think Pişkin’s video, and his description of the reasons for his suicide as someone who seemed from outside as in good financial and social standing had a triggering effect on the post-Gezi zeitgeist as many people related to his feelings, especially if they were not involved in organized activist groups. It can be argued that Pişkin was made into a scapegoat by many social media users through the postings of many judgemental comments as he was perceived as the embodiment of the desperation that many people were feeling.

← 11. ‘We know now of the long-term effects of the ongoing process of subjugation that manifest not only in issues related to self-esteem but also as physical illness’ (Taylor 2020: 12).

Urban palimpsests are composed in ways similar to those the analogy suggests: like the parchment that has been overwritten multiple times and composed of multiple scripts becomes a palimpsest, urban palimpsests are composed of layers of history and memory documented in the physical space through accumulating interventions and meanings. In urban palimpsests ‘representations of the visible will always show residues and traces of the invisible’ (Huysen 2009: 10). This is how the physical space of Taksim Square can bring the memory of bloody 1 May 1977, during Gezi for playwright Özen Yula. Traces of the invisible, traces of absence, generate strong networks of affect for the people who know the history of the space. The spaces where momentary interventions, clashes with authority, or long-duration resistances took place, shift their meaning for the people who remember these events, which in time translate themselves into monuments of absence in the trans-individual level of the urban space.

The space holds onto memories, the repertoire of resistance, that are cut out of the archive during the making of official narratives. Of course, one may argue, just the physical space itself cannot accumulate these meanings, there should be people associating these clusters of meaning with each other, since space can only make meaning through the bodies that make meaning out of it. Here, I find Avishai Margalit’s notion of ‘moral witness’ useful to deconstruct how bodies moving in and through a physical urban landscape can associate and construct certain meanings through the accumulation of the repertoires of resistance:

# Standing as Temporary Monuments of Absence

'We should remind ourselves that being a moral witness means being subject to an extremely harsh reality. In such a reality it is possible that one's chances of survival are slim and that the only way of enhancing the chance to stay alive and be able to tell one's story is by betraying, in one way or another, one's fellow victims' (2002: 162).

A monument of absence, namely the precarious presence of an object or a person reminding of the monumental absence of many others, can only be created within the texture of an urban palimpsest, through many people witnessing that hegemonic threat to the right to live, and to live with dignity. In the context that this essay discusses, witnessing is a morally ambiguous state of being: it may include the betrayal of victims and causes of social justice since the witness might need to step aside to *witness*, while leaving the target of the hegemony alone. The witness must be a survivor to tell what has happened, despite having shared, or perhaps currently sharing, some of the risks that the victims of hegemonic violence went and are going through. Therefore, Margalit's notion of the moral witness is useful but not completely applicable in this context. The moral ambiguity of the witness in contemporary Turkey, and the emotional burden attached to this ambiguity, is what constructs the monumental absences. The examples I have chosen to discuss in the following section construct particular dialogues between politics and urban space through the performative interface of the body (inspired by Castelli 2019: 177), to be able to speak to how monuments of absence are constructed.

One particular item of the embodied resistance repertoire of Gezi stood out with its reproducibility, which made it into a specific form of resistance and a phenomenon throughout the entire country within a day, and managed to create a simple performative protest vocabulary for anyone who wanted to demonstrate their agency against authority. Erdem Gündüz, a man with a modern dance training, went to the Taksim Square at around 6pm on 17 June 2013, after Taksim square and Gezi Park were occupied by the police, at a moment when Gezi protestors were feeling incredibly defeated. He stood there alone for eight hours. As argued by dance scholar Susanne Foellmer, 'a similar aesthetic of slowing and stopping, also oriented toward postmodern movement practices of standing still' was explored before in modern dance, notably in a performance by Jérôme Bel, which might have inspired Gündüz who was informed by the modern dance field (2016: 59). Gündüz's performance was a moment that 'the repertoire [...] transform[ed] choreographies of meaning' (Taylor 2003: 20). Gündüz came to be known to public as 'Duran Adam', meaning 'the Standing Man'. Performance scholar Erin Mee explains how his act of protest went viral in less than half a day as follows:

By 2:00 a.m., roughly 300 people were standing with Gündüz. Not only did the photos and videos of the performance go viral, the act itself went viral. The following day people began standing in other neighbourhoods around İstanbul and in cities around Turkey: a woman in Ankara stood in the spot where protestor Ethem Sarısülük was shot by police on 1 June 2013 during the first days of Gezi Park protests; another group stood at the spot where protestor Abdullah Cömert was killed by police; three

men stood in the spot where Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink had been shot in 2007; people stood in front of newspaper offices that had failed to cover the protests; they stood in front of CNN Turk, which had famously shown a penguin documentary on 2 June instead of covering the protests; and they stood where intellectuals and Kurds had been killed for various reasons over the past 10 years. (2014: 69)

The act of mere standing has become an act of resistance in the context of Gezi. When standing became a protest, police started taking standing people into custody, which led more people to replicate this form of protest in their bodies across the country. As the immediate performances of standing that repeated Gündüz's initial performance demonstrate, standing was also utilised as a simultaneous act of remembering the past state atrocities, as people started standing in spaces where the state has committed crimes, such as the place where Hrant Dink was shot, as they were also protesting the on-going atrocities. This commemoration through standing still at the place of the murder also shared similarities with a mass choreography organised by Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası (Bare Feet Dance Troupe) right after Hrant Dink's murder where fifty participants replicated his shot down body, blanketed with newspapers ('Agos'un önünde vurulup', 27 Jan. 2007). The three men standing where Dink was shot, along with the people who stood where Ethem Sarısülük and Abdullah Cömert were murdered, layered the urban palimpsest in the early morning hours of 18 June 2013 with their performances becoming temporary monuments of absence.

## Murder and Sculpture: Spatial Superimposition as a Monument of Absence

Between the critical years of 2015 and 2016, at the levels of the interpersonal and street life; the crafting of the hegemonic presence manifested itself through a buzz of anxiety and masculine aggression. During this period, many individuals I know went through a sense of constant claustrophobia and a perpetual sense of disorientation. One telling case that took place before the military coup attempt was the murder of Nuh Köklü during a snowball fight game with his friends in the Yeldeğirmeni part of İstanbul's Kadıköy district on 17 February 2015. Köklü was stabbed by a grocery shop owner who got agitated because of the act of an adult mixed-sex group playing in public ('Nuh Köklü Statement', 20 Feb. 2015). It was revealed afterwards that the grocery shop owner was a devout supporter of AKP, and the act of an adult mixed-sex group playing in public revealed to him that they were not AKP supporters, as their bodies were not disciplined according to the hegemony of the regime, which fuelled his violent agitation. The act of playing and being unashamed with joy in public tied the group to Gezi protestors in the collective subconsciousness of the immediate post-Gezi zeitgeist. This was a murder that had a significant disciplinary meaning, since during the Gezi Resistance President Tayyip Erdoğan was discursively trying to mobilise particularly small shop owners against committing lynchings of Gezi protestors. This was also why the murderer's older brother felt full entitlement to write a letter to Erdoğan, which was publicised later, claiming that his brother's act was a defence on behalf of AKP at street level against the enemies of AKP such as the Gezi supporters, which is why his brother's crime should be forgiven ('Nuh Köklü'nün katilinin', 6 Aug. 2015).



Nuh Köklü statue made by İskender Giray  
© Handan Salta, 23 April 2022

In early April 2015, sculpture maker İskender Giray made and placed an abstract sculpture for the memory of the murder of Nuh Köklü on the street where this crime took place which, despite the controversies it caused, still remains in place ('Nuh Köklü adına', 9 April 2015). The sculpture depicts two people who share the same lower body. One figure is trying to free the mind of the other, which is visualized by means of opening the door of the cage that depicts the head of the second figure; where the cage holds a tiny and scared prisoner inside. The second figure simultaneously stabs the first figure. As I mentioned at the beginning, monuments of absence can be both bodily, mostly manifested in our survival control mechanisms of suppressing our repertoire of resistance, along with a spatial re-definition of physical landscapes. Köklü's murder and the commemorative sculpture that Giray made overlap in the urban palimpsest, in which the sculpture reveals the memory and ideological meaning of this murder. The place has now gained a particular meaning through the omnipresent absence of Nuh Köklü, becoming a monument of absence.

# Hunger Strike in Public Space: A Long-Durational Performance that Turns a Present Monument into a Monument of Absence

The state's increasing levels of direct violence to silence resisting individuals, who are sacrificing their bodies for political justice, illustrates a certain dialectic between the 'political culture of hyper-punitiveness' (Giroux 2014: 52) and the severity of the bodily tactics that resisting individuals utilised against the normalisation of it. As Turkey's political scene moved to demonstrations of more and more violence in the public sphere, the individual protests became more and more difficult to carry out. Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça's hunger strikes,<sup>12</sup> which they started to regain their working rights that were taken away from them during the State of Emergency through a Governmental decree, lasted for 324 days (between 9 March 2017 and 26 January 2018). They decided to end the strike through their own means in early 2018 ('Gülmen ve Özakça', 26 Jan. 2018). Nuriye Gülmen's personal resistance actually started 120 days before the first day of their collective hunger strike, and the stages of her protest prior to the hunger strike are documented as follows:

**12.** Here is a short self-description of the process of this resistance: 'We, as academician Nuriye Gülmen and teacher Semih Özakça are two of the revolutionist democratic public workers from Turkey who were dismissed with the emergency decrees. Both of us also are the members of Education and Science Workers' Union. We did not accept this unlawful, unjust dismissals and we started sit-down strike in Yüksel Street, Ankara; in front of the Human Rights' Statue from 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2016. In time, our friends, who were also dismissed with Statutory Decrees came and joined us. Sociologist Veli Saçılık, teachers Acun Karadağ, Esra Özkan Özakça and Mehmet Dersulu also became a part of our resistance. Thousands of democratic citizens have been supportive for our resistance. Opposing voices around the world, international press have been tried to make our voices heard.' (HUNGRYFOROURJOBS 2017)

Nuriye Gülmen, a comparative literature professor, was first suspended from her position in Selçuk University via a statutory decree in November 2016. To protest her suspension, Gülmen started a sit-in protest in the Turkish capital Ankara, where she was arrested 17 times over her 17-day long protest. She was subsequently fired from her position via the new statutory decrees released on January 6, 2017, and on January 11 she was beaten and detained by the police in Ankara. (Abramson 2017: xviii)

Before the Government realised the public attention around Gülmen and Özakça cases, which became visible especially after the concern triggered among the public after a critical threshold in their health was passed on the sixty-seventh day of their hunger strike, there were two consecutive responses from the state. At first the Government did nothing to acknowledge the demands of the strike, and on the seventy-fifth day Gülmen and Özakça were taken into custody in an early morning operation to keep them away from public view despite their worsening health. Because, as Sara Ahmed notes, '[t]he punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death' (2014: 1). In this case, the state was establishing the conditions of a politically convenient death of protestors through strategically not allowing them to access the necessary medical care. In fact, the Government was so deeply scared of the individual protests of Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça that the Ministry of Internal Affairs published a fifty-four-page propaganda booklet in English and Turkish against them, entitled 'The Unending Scenario of a Terrorist Organization,' ('İçişleri'nden', 21 July 2017), accusing Gülmen and Özakça with unproven claims of being related to terrorist organisations.

The place where Nuriye Gülmen was carrying out her public protests in Ankara, the Human Rights Sculpture (made by artist Metin Yurdanur and placed in its current position at Yüksel Street in 1990) was later surrounded by police barricades for weeks starting on 23 May 2017

(Acer 2018), not allowing anyone to approach the immobile bronze object, creating a vivid image of the political insanity by arresting a statue. The arrest of the statue became an unexpected performative act in itself, as a sort of meta-performance of authority, which vividly illustrates the attempts to rebuild the ‘wall of fear’. Here, the similarity between the authorities’ handling of the resisting body and of the memorial space of that resistance is striking. The resisting body is forced out of the public eye to make its influence disappear, while the memorial space is cut out of the organic structure of the city in an attempt to obscure its political gravity. The space as the physical reminder of the memory is kept under significant surveillance and, therefore, criminalised, which pressures passers-by into a disengagement with the space and its integral memory. Despite the heavy-handed intervention of the authorities, the space is a physical reminder of the memory of the resistance; in this case, the Human Rights Statue at Yüksel Street holds the memory of Nuriye Gülmen. Gülmen and Özakça’s withdrawal from their protest due to their worsening health, and their absence from the public sight since then, do not erase the history of their resistance from the urban space; but rather — I argue — create a monument of their absence. Between the monument of absence in the physical space and their almost sacrificial public performance for justice, there remains a constant interplay of meaning making on both individual and collective levels.

A hunger strike is *inevitably* performative: the body embodies the demand in a realm beyond language since ‘[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language’ (Scarry 1985: 4). Through such embodied repertoire of resistance, the individual declares their ‘material presence’ (Gupta, Hajimichael, Katsarska, and Spyros 2017: 1), where the individual can imagine themselves as politically determinative, as a political actor, as a person with agency (Gupta, Hajimichael, Katsarska, and Spyros 2017: 2). The intensity of a hunger strike largely impacts



Human Rights statue made by Metin Yurdanur. The statue depicts a woman reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. © Zeynep Baykal, 30 September 2017

its reproducibility and locates the act within significantly more bodily risk, but it also amplifies the affect of the resistance on non-resisting individuals, the ambiguous moral witnesses, by constantly reminding them that they are *obeying*, since they are not resisting. The urban palimpsest of resistance works through creating performative patterns and layers in the space: the Human Rights Statue was also a major meeting hub during the Gezi resistance for the protestors in Ankara (Acer 2018). Andreas Huyssen describes, ‘an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of

what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is' (2009: 7). The spatial memory of Gülmen's resistance became embedded in the 'urban imaginary' through the monument of absence it constructed, signing towards an alternative Turkey in which Gülmen's resistance resulted in justice rather than more state violence.

This is a case in which we, as ambiguous moral witnesses, survived to tell what has happened, despite our betrayal of the person, for whom we could not do more than witnessing. This emotional burden is a major constructive element of this particular monument of absence. Because, if this is a performance, then 'the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes. If you're sufficiently patient, it will happen. You will see it, but it will not be visible' (Özgül Akıncı 2018: 48, quoting Blau 1982: 156). The watching of this slow and wilful erosion of life, the act of witnessing the cost of the demand of justice resists the black hole of amnesia as the urban space stays as a constant reminder of this monumental absence, along with the potentiality that this absence holds.

## CONCLUSION

### A Futurity Claim

I agree with Uruguayan political scientist Paulo Ravecca who claims that 'situating disciplinary introspection through personal introspection may open fruitful paths to interrogate and unravel knots of experience made of knowledge, power, and politics' (2019: 166). My own history is entangled in the history of contemporary Turkey: I was one of the protestors in the Gezi Park during June 2013 like many people I know, and the experience influenced — and perhaps shaped — me in multiple ways. The experience of Gezi shifted my positionality in Turkey from

a somewhat respectable citizen to a threatening and disposable body overnight between 31 May and 1 June 2013, while I was in the Istiklal Avenue with many other people. During my personal poisoning with tear gas that night, I knew in my body that this was barely the beginning of the bodily threats of authority towards its dissentients. The visceral experience of Gezi changed the meaning of the armed state forces for me from within my body: the theoretical knowledge of what police can do to individuals, as the legal definitions of crimes can be tailored to the needs of the authority, was suddenly translated into my body as an act of constant calculation of my physical proximity with the armed and uniformed officials in public spaces. My courage and knowledge to move, hide, and re-arrange in urban public spaces with the crowds of Gezi under tear gas attacks is my repertoire; whereas my fear of armed forces, my awareness and alertness around controlling my speech, clothes, and behaviour in public is my body's monument of absence. It is a monument of absence because who I am, and who I could be, is partially absent in my public presence. Therefore, the need to write this essay has partly come out of the necessity to reflect on which parts of our collective repertoire of resistance is forgotten and why; and under which circumstances these 'lost' repertoires might be re-enacted.

The present difficulty to imagine other potentials for Turkey is a public feeling that creates many monuments of absence in many urban spaces. Imagining of a different future is only possible through remembering that what has happened can happen again, and knowing that the body — our bodies — still hold onto the repertoires of the collective resistance. 'Trauma lives in the body, not in the archive' (Taylor 2020: 201), which is why the 'future is written into the body' (McLaren 1999: ix). What has been embedded into the body through experience, namely the repertoire of resistance, which has been transformed into many monuments of absence through the hegemonic interventions to the public sphere, is also the key potentiality that can trigger a future resistance. •

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**PATRIA, GOD,  
AND GUNS**  
AN ANALYSIS OF  
BRAZILIAN RIGHT-WING  
STREET PROTESTS FROM  
2013 TO 2021

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## KEYWORDS

extreme right, spectatorship, street protests, performance, theatricality

## PALAVRAS-CHAVES

extrema-direita, espectadores, manifestações de rua, performance, teatralidade

# SUMMARY

This article analyses the different cycles of street demonstrations that arose in Brazil between 2013 and 2021, especially those politically situated on 'the new Brazilian right' and 'the extreme right'. We attempt to identify different performances and theatrical strategies used in these protests through an approach that combines politics and performing arts. These events have played a central role in constructing the country's recent history. They endorsed critical political processes, acted in the discursive battle about these processes, and operated as a mechanism to encourage social adherence to conservative discourse. To understand the social and ideological functions of these protests, we examine how they explored theatricality to organise the spectator's gaze. These theatrical strategies projected strong and effective symbolic images around conservative agendas.

# RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa os diferentes ciclos de manifestações de rua que eclodiram no Brasil a partir de 2013, dando ênfase àqueles que se situam no espectro político da direita, denominada 'nova direita brasileira' e 'extrema-direita'. Através de uma abordagem construída pela aproximação entre política e artes cênicas, identificamos diferentes performances e estratégias teatrais usadas nesses protestos. Esses eventos exerceram um papel central na construção da história recente do país e corroboraram para a consolidação de importantes processos políticos, seja ao atuar na batalha narrativa acerca desses processos, seja ao operar como mecanismo de estímulo à adesão social. Para compreender as funções sociais e ideológicas presentes nesses protestos, investigamos de que modo esses grupos exploraram a teatralidade no intuito de organizar o olhar do espectador. Trata-se de estratégias que projetaram um imaginário simbólico forte e eficaz em torno de pautas conservadoras.

This article proposes a more detailed reflection on street demonstrations from the ‘right-wing’ in Brazil from 2013 to 2021. The aim of this essay is to analyse an ensemble of symbols used in these protests, seeking a deeper understanding of their meanings and of their strongest tendencies, interpreted here as three thematic cycles: ‘Patria’ (from 2014 to 2016), ‘God’ (from 2016 to 2017), and ‘Guns’ (since 2018). The division between these cycles is porous, as we considered the most often recurring symbols operated by the protesters in each period. All these symbols were constantly present at the performances in juxtaposition, but one theme gained more prominence and visibility in each of the cycles. If we see the demonstrators as performers, it is necessary to consider the semiotic constellation proposed by them. In this way, some of the questions raised by Kershaw (1997) about what social protests might signify in periods of crisis and how they may ‘embody their historical context through their location in identifiable traditions’ (257) are pertinent to the essay.

At the end of the 1970s, Brazil experienced a great and important cycle of protests, unprecedented within the military regime,<sup>1</sup> ranging from general strikes to the campaign for direct elections (during 1983 and 1984) and the promulgation of a new Constitution (1988). The main

1. From 1964 to 1985, the military forces established a tutelary regime in Brazil, imposing elected generals as presidents and installing indirect regional elections. Brazilian dictatorship served as a political model for other military regimes in the Southern Cone (Napolitano 2018).

protagonists of these movements were the lower-income and trade union sectors. In the following decades, the Brazilian left dominated political confrontations on the street, to a large extent thanks to organisations that had a solid mobilisation capacity, such as the Unified Workers' Central (CUT), Landless Workers Movement (MST), National Union of Students (UNE), and even the Workers' Party (Tatagiba 2018: 114). The Workers' Party (PT) years of federal administrations (from 2002 to 2016) allowed for the large-scale institutionalisation of various actors from these movements, disrupting their organisations of origin and disconnecting these actors from their bases.

In June 2013, a cycle of street protests broke out in Brazil, led by movements on the left of the political spectrum, wishing new forms of political representativity. These *Jornadas de Junho*<sup>2</sup> (*June Journeys*) also marked the beginning of a period of widespread political and social turbulence and the emergence of what is usually called the 'new Brazilian right' (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2018; Solano, Ortellado, and Moretto 2017). The protests that arose after the *Jornadas de Junho* revealed a heterogeneous set of political forces opposed to Dilma Rousseff's Presidency and created a political crisis that contributed to her impeachment and the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

As Pierucci (1987) observed, being right-wing was perceived as shameful in the years that followed the end of the military regime. The right did not identify itself in this way because it was offended 'by its own name, a victim of their infamous positions' (38).<sup>3</sup> Voters and politicians alike found it difficult to define themselves as ideologically right-wing, avoiding radical stances and even placing themselves slightly to the left.

Understanding the right as internally diverse, Pierucci pointed out that the 'radical right' was the political group that most hid their positions, never presenting themselves as extremists: 'In Brazil, during the democratic transition, for politicians [...] it is certainly not very advisable to confess being right-wing. Worse yet of the extreme right' (Pierucci 1987: 38). However, since 2014, politicians and voters have fiercely defined themselves as being on the 'right', or as 'liberals', and made an effort to deepen the ideological fissure and the ontological opposition between themselves and 'leftists' or 'communists'.

During the years in question, street demonstrations and their reverberations on the social networks became the principal collective *loci* for making demands and, therefore, one of the major territories of political dispute in Brazil. The development of performances and theatrical strategies presented in different spaces, whether on the streets, social networks, or in the National Congress, accompanied these events. The different political sectors have explored various theatrical resources, such as the discourses, the choice of objects, effigies, slogans, choreographies, and iconic images to symbolise demands in public protests. In this way, these strategies have exercised a central role in the construction of the country's recent history, whether in helping to endorse political processes, acting in the discursive battle about these processes, or playing as mechanisms to stimulate social adhesion. The desire to propose this theoretical investigation is related to the need to contribute to a collective reflection on this socio-political movement through the prism of the arts, understanding them as a field of production of knowledge.

2. The *Jornadas de Junho* had pointed to the contestation of sporting events held in the country, such as the Confederations Cup (2013), the World Cup (2014), and to a lesser extent, the Olympic Games (2016).

3. We translated all the citations originally in Portuguese into English.

# Performativity/Theatricality/ Performance/Theatre

To understand the main strategies forged in the protests examined here, this research worked with the assumption that the fields of performativity and theatricality may contribute to the construction of specific angles to approach these phenomena. Furthermore, an expanded perspective on these concepts allows for an analysis of the uses and effects of the migration of these strategies from the sphere of the real to that of the virtual. Following Josette Féral (2015) as well as Féral and Bermingham (2002), theatricality is simultaneously understood as an action that organises the spectator's gaze and a domain that creates fictional distance, without which the spectator could intervene in what happens on stage. Theatricality is a process of self-perception of the spectator as a spectator of something; the recognition of a cleavage between the performance and the one who observes it. For Elizabeth Burns (1973: 33), theatricality exists in 'any kind of behaviour perceived and interpreted by other and described (mentally or explicitly) in theatrical terms', and this is particularly applicable to those behaviours composed according to conventions that are recognised as theatrical. Always political, theatricality for Diana Taylor (2003) 'flaunts its artifice, its constructedness' and 'strives for efficaciousness, not authenticity', highlighting the mechanics of the spectacle (13).

In each demonstration, the performers reactivate their demands at the same time as they align themselves with a pre-existing symbology. This constellation of codes must be understood by protesters and their audience (Kershaw 1997: 270). So, theatricality here also involves a 'stylization with aesthetic and self-referential dimensions of performance'

(Rai, Gluhovic, Jestrovic, and Seward 2021), establishing a set of references that are constantly tested on the streets. The analyses developed here will prioritise the understanding of the effects of the theatricality in these manifestations, through the analysis of symbologies and framings produced in each one of them. In accordance with the 'double reading' proposed by Féral (2015: 251),<sup>4</sup> our analysis will consider the 'performances', their constructed meanings (theatricality), and the political subjects involved in them (performativity).

In dialogue with the Performance Studies' field, Taylor presents an expansion of the analysis of the performance phenomenon, transforming it into a system/epistemology of expressive behaviour. For her, performances 'function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called "twice-behaved behaviour"' (2003: 2); as 'the object/process of analysis in performance studies' (2); as an epistemological framework; and as incorporated practice. In this way, we are framing the events described here *as performances*, observing what the performers do and how they show this doing. Street demonstrations need to be understood as performances where a form of expressivity emerges that is simultaneously individual and collective, aesthetically materialised by a complex ensemble of verbal and non-verbal signs articulated by protesters/performers. Here, theatrical strategies refer to the arrangement of this constellation of elements, intended to perform a set of claims, directing the viewer's gaze.

In demonstrations, the protestors share the public space as they embody their demands collectively. In these events, we have the bodily performativity that requests, not only with written and spoken words

4. Josette Féral's book *Além dos Limites* (2015) presents several excerpts that do not have yet a published version in English.

(linguistic performativity) but also through bodily actions and gestures: ‘it is not that bodily action and gesture have to be translated into language, but that both action and gesture signify and speak, as action and claim, and that the one is not finally extricable from the other’ (Butler 2011: 5). In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler (2015) addresses the question and the urgent necessity of making alliances between various minorities or populations considered disposable. Understanding how precarity operates in regimes of appearance, Butler also examines how the idea of ‘the people’ is constituted through public space. The bodily performativity of the demonstrations observed in this article was guided by a logic of confrontation, with an explicit desire to act directly in society (by removing a president or by the annulment of artists and authors). In the right-wing assemblies analysed here, the bodies assumed ‘full access and rights of appearance’ (Butler 2015: 8) in the streets. The examples here reiterate Butler’s proposition showing which bodies are understood and defined as ‘the people’ by various power structures, such as the police and the press.

In this sense, we understand the streets as a territory of continuous experimentation, where performances and theatrical strategies by various political groups are constantly created, tested, and restaged, always taking into account their ‘virtual’ impact on social media. As collective performances, street demonstrations propose a multiplication (or fragmentation) of the spectators’ attention, since every demonstrator is also a performer of their demands. Occasionally, they can have a centrality of focus, provided by an ephemeral ‘stage’, such as the podium, sound car, or high-profile objects. Effective strategies for capturing focus at times need considerable financial investment. As we will see, far from being part of a spontaneous creation, some of these strategies were conceived by political marketing and advertising professionals.

Once protesters appropriate the public space in a non-quotidian way, deliberately expressing their demands or simply uttering their revolt, to whom do they direct the performance? Who would be their final spectators? It seems that the onlookers, those for whom the performance is intended, would be outside the event. However, it is difficult to define precisely who these onlookers might be. Indeed, in our examples, the performances searched for ways to spread their claims through their amplification by the mainstream press coverage and social networks replication. The protesters virtualised their presence on their Facebook timelines, while the press coverage validated and valorised their participation.

## The Demonstrations during Dilma Rousseff’s Government

From the beginning of 2014 until the hosting of the World Cup in the same year, various protests were organised throughout the country with the slogan: ‘If we do not have rights, there will be no World Cup’ (Barros 2014). Ideologically close to the *Jornadas de Junho*, these demonstrations confronted the PT administration with the inconsistencies between the holding of the World Cup (which would be followed by the Olympic Games two years later in Rio de Janeiro) and the social improvements promised and not carried out during the organisation of these events.

In June 2014, left-wing social movements called for demonstrations on social networks. The protests were violently repressed by the gendarmerie (or *Polícia Militar*) in the states, as in the previous year. The cycles of protests between 2013 and 2014 confronted the Rousseff Government with dissatisfaction primarily related to the precariousness of public services in large Brazilian cities and the hefty public

investment in these events. At this moment, the national flag and other national symbols could regularly be seen in the demonstrations and were identified with individuals who were often neophytes in these events, generally without any previous participation in social movements. As on the macro-global scale, collective action was ‘based on fluid and personalised engagements, mediated through digital communication and suspicious of traditional institutions’ (Domingues 2019: iv).<sup>5</sup>

A tacit expression of a profound crisis of political representativity, as well as the limits of the conciliatory class policy of the PT administrations,<sup>6</sup> these cycles of protests have produced a multivocal and non-consensual academic interpretation. Without focusing exceedingly on this discussion, we tend to agree with the analysis of Tatagiba and Galvão, who state that both the sectors which requested the progression of social reforms and those which intended to restore the *status quo* emerged from the 2013 protests (Tatagiba and Galvão 2019: 65–6).

Also in 2014 were the first protests of *Vem Pra Rua* (Come to the Streets), in which people frustrated about the election results carried banners saying ‘PT Out’, among others. In the months which followed and until Rousseff was impeached in 2016, the demonstrations grew in volume and became the most expressive protests in the history of the country. In this interim, the investigations of Operation Lava Jato,<sup>7</sup> whose actions synchronised institutional and extra-institutional arenas, above all sectors from the national press, collaborated to create an intense anti-*Petista*

5. This should not be understood in a definitive manner. The interviewees who saw themselves as ‘non-left’ in the work of Domingues, for example, were connected to the PSDB, the *Partido Social-Democrata Brasileiro*, or Brazilian Social Democratic Party.

6. The class conciliation policy promoted by the PT during its mandates (2002–5 and 2006–9 with Lula, and 2010–15 with Rousseff) consisted of the maintenance of a neoliberal economic policy and the expansion of social policies.



FIGURE 1

feeling in the population. The demonstrators expressed this sentiment through criticism of corruption scandals and the urgent demand for the moralisation of politics. In these demonstrations,<sup>8</sup> some actions from previous protests appeared, such as face-painting (Fig. 1), notably in green and yellow, reworking the performance of the *cara-pintadas* from the movement for the impeachment of President Fernando Collor in 1992.<sup>9</sup>

From 2015, inflatable puppets emerged, and the inanimate characters *Pato da FIESP* (Fig. 2), ‘Pixuleco’ and ‘Bandilma’ (Fig. 3) gained notoriety, with the latter two being parodies of the former PT President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and the then-President Dilma Rousseff. The inflatable puppets proved to be an effective strategy for capturing the fragmented focus of the protests. The *Pato da FIESP*, a twenty-two-metre Yellow Duck, became an icon, at first neutral, apolitical, installing a peaceful action, seeking a playful and childish interaction with the passing public. In effect, the FIESP’s Yellow Duck was an itinerant



FIGURE 2

performance that marked a fundamental counterpoint to the demonstrations up to that time, in which police violence was a constant. It was part of a more extensive and expensive campaign that encompassed other actions, sponsored by the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP) and conceived by a well-known political marketing agency the Prole. In turn, the creation of ‘Pixuleco’ responded to a very concrete problem: between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, the number of street protesters decreased considerably. Consequently, the publicist Paulo Gusmão created this character to fill the streets (Kaz 2015), replacing the presence of the protesters with the puppet, which was reproduced in different scales.

← 7. Operation Lava Jato (Car Wash) was an extensive criminal investigation led by the Brazilian Federal Police branch in Curitiba. Between 2014 and 2019, the investigation implicated executive members and business people from major Brazilian companies and politicians: former Presidents, federal deputies, senators, and state governors, including PT members.

8. The documentation of the iconography of the *Jornadas de Junho* and the protests against the World Cup is abundant. Our main sources of analysis were the collection of *Mídia Ninja*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de S. Paulo*, and *O Tempo* newspapers, and the G1 website.

9. *Cara-pintadas* may be translated as ‘the painted faces’. The action of painting the face in the colours of the Brazilian flag and in black, adding the slogans ‘Out’ or ‘Out Collor’ became the most iconic expressive strategy of the protests for the impeachment of the former President Fernando Collor. In 1989, Fernando Collor de Mello was the first President democratically elected after the military dictatorship. Accusations of political corruption culminated in the process of impeachment approved by the Chamber of Deputies, in September 1992. Collor resigned from the Presidency of the Republic, hours before being convicted by the Senate. For further information, see, <http://memoria.oglobo.globo.com/fotos/caras-pintadas-contra-collor-9430223>. [accessed 24 September 2021].



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

Also evident were performers using red clown noses (Fig. 4) and politicians masks (Fig. 5, 6, and 7), and even the partial (topless) and total nudity of women, above all in protests on Avenida Paulista, in São Paulo.<sup>10</sup> Equally, since the beginning of the protests, there were initiatives materialised in posters calling for ‘Military Intervention Now!’, ‘SOS Army Forces’, ‘Vote Bolsonaro 2018’<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 8 and 9; also written in English), trucks with loudspeakers (Fig. 10), and protesters wearing military uniforms. These protests, which identified themselves as ‘peaceful’, would modify the relationship with the police forces chosen to accompany these events. Behaviour involving mutual appreciation between protesters and the police would become common: reciprocal praise, applauding the police, and especially taking photos with the forces of order. In radical opposition to the relationship between the



FIGURE 5

police and participants in the previous demonstrations, the protesters were even allowed to take pictures inside vehicles with police officers. Parades of truckers and motorbikes, which would become constant from 2018, were also present occasionally, as well as complimentary references to the Brazilian Empire.

← 10. The FolhaPress album of the demonstrations from 15 March 2015 is available here: <https://fotografia.folha.uol.com.br/galerias/nova/33420-protestos-de-15-de-marco#foto-441449> [accessed 24 September 2021]. The one from one year later, 13 March 2016, here: <https://fotografia.folha.uol.com.br/galerias/42594-manifestacao-vista-do-alto-pelo-brasil#foto-536027> [accessed 24 September 2021].

← 11. Like many politicians elected in 2018, Bolsonaro used the protests against Dilma Rousseff to increase media visibility. He participated in several demonstrations and was invited to give speeches on the podium. As a controversial character, he was sometimes booed, sometimes applauded.

FIGURE 6



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 7



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10



# The Patria in Football Boots: The Activist Supporter

However, there is a moment when everyone remembers Brazil, when 90 million Brazilians discover Brazil. Here is the miracle of the team. Apart from the left, who think football is the opium of the people, apart from the left, I say, all the other Brazilians gather around the national team. It is thus a pretext, a source of self-esteem. Moreover, each victory compensates the people for the old frustrations, the scars that have never healed. (Rodrigues 1993: 181)

None of the elements described seemed as iconic as the Brazilian football shirt, whether from the CBF (Brazilian Football Confederation) or other versions (Fig. 11). Nelson Rodrigues, a journalist, playwright, and one of the best columnists on Brazilian football, saw the national team, *a seleção*, as a ‘political community’ materialised and corporified in signs which represented ‘the ties of belonging and solidarity which unite their members, despite the conflicts which exist between them’ (Silva 1998: 108). The Brazilian flag, the national anthem, and the team uniform are the symbols used and superimposed during international football competitions. Nationalism is the most apparent recursive theme of the political ideologies that ‘emerge in the game’ and which ‘are part of the game’, according to Flores (1982). In these events, an almost ‘national union’ is achieved ‘around the team representing all Brazilians, defining Brazil as something monolithic and univocally representable’ (Flores 1982: 49). Thus, profoundly present in football are: nationalism — providing the illusion of the nation and erasing divergences and disputes; paternalism — the illusion of just and kind relations between club directors and supporters; and populism — ‘the illusion of the exercise of power’, as the supporter ‘seems to influence



FIGURE 11

the results of the matches through their actions in the stands’ (Flores 1982: 49). However, in football, neither the rules of the game nor the referee, who stands for the highest authority on the pitch, are replaced or eliminated by their actions.

In 2013, Marcelo Falcão, from the reggae-rock group O Rappa, sang the verses, ‘Come to the streets/Because the streets are the largest bleachers in Brazil’ in a commercial for the carmaker Fiat. The country lived a moment of national and international relevance, thanks to the Confederations Cup and the World Cup (Almeida, Barreto, and Cunha 2017). One year later, after a traumatising Brazilian defeat in the Mineirão Stadium and Rousseff’s victory in the elections of the

same year, the protests changed their protagonists and began to massively incorporate the national colours. Months afterwards, Falcão's refrain became the name of Vem Pra Rua (Come to the streets), one of the movements which most organised protests for the impeachment, alongside Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL; Free Movement Brazil) and, to a lesser extent, Revoltados Online (Online Rebels).

It seems possible to describe this type of a protester as a 'supporter'. On the streets, these individuals came to perform the repertoire of actions used in football stadiums: singing the national anthem, dressing in the colours of the Brazilian flag, creating slogans, establishing an adversary team, wielding horns, and chanting war songs. They, thus, restored behaviour outside of their *locus* of origin, incorporating it into the street demonstrations. Roberto Da Matta, one of the anthropologists who most dedicated themselves to thinking about the social function of football in Brazil, has stated that as a great and multivocal event, between sport and art, between business and religion, football is 'a spectacle of great visual and auditive seduction, as well as, as "fans", we are active actors of a spectacle in an open space' (Da Matta 1994: 15). Between an individual and their team, profound symbolic and social ties are established, which create the figure of the 'supporter', 'the one who supports, twists and moves their body for this team to be a winner' (15). For Da Matta, in a reading of the country in the 1980s, but which still seems relevant for our discussion, state and society are only brought together through football (1982).

By appropriating the team uniform, a shirt that amalgamates allegiance to the nationhood, the demonstrators reaffirmed and adjusted the notions of nation and patria, which in turn are not extensively appropriated by the left — constantly attentive to their contradictions and asymmetries. This begs the important question of the capacity of the national symbols for mobilisation, which move collective affections that

are denser than the flags of trade unions, for example, so dear to the political expressiveness of the left.

The left in a general manner, and the Workers' Party in a specific form, is given the place of the opposing team. The street becomes the stadium and the arena for its 'supporters'/citizens, and their repertoires are used in the political confrontation which takes place in the demonstrations: establishing their own field, 'my team is my country', and an antagonistic field, 'the PT', 'the *Petistas*', 'communists', 'the *mortadellas*',<sup>12</sup> 'the reds', since 'my flag will never be red'.<sup>13</sup> In the demonstrations, many performances displayed symbolic violence to the opposing team; the protesters bit or burned *Partido dos Trabalhadores*' flags and carried on the streets decapitated or hanged images of former PT Presidents. These actions were expressive forms of *antipetismo*, a socio-political movement characterised by rejection and hatred of the Party. The country's large media corporations and posts on social networks contributed to the aggressiveness expressed in the streets: 'This cognitive and emotional mechanism had significant implications for recruitment and for the characteristics of the social mobilisation in the impeachment campaign, which assumed the form of a moral crusade, represented in the struggle of good ("us") against evil ("them")' (Tatagiba 2018: 124).

Like in a World Cup final, Brazil stopped during the vote on the continuation of the impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff in the Chamber of Deputies, on Sunday 17 April 2016. Large screens were put up in various parts of the country for each of the adversarial groups. Television channels adapted their regular schedules, especially Globo, which asked football federations to alter the dates of football games to

12. *Mortadella* is an Italian cold cut. This term is pejoratively used to describe left-wing militants. During PT events, a bread and *mortadella* sandwich was usually served to the militants as a low-cost snack.

13. All these expressions were commonly present in posters at the demonstrations.



FIGURE 12

Saturday 16 April (Pacheco 2016). In Brasilia, the Esplanade of Ministries was divided by a metallic wall that separated the two antagonistic fields, those in favour and those opposed to the President's removal (Fig. 12). On this Sunday without football, the Brazilians who were watching the voting on television saw transplanted to the Chamber of Deputies many of the performances and theatrical strategies found in the streets and stadiums: state flags tied around the necks of deputies covering their bodies like capes, the use of confetti, posters saying *'Tchau querida'* (Bye dear) and 'There will be no Coup' (Fig. 13), small 'Pixuleco' puppets, shirts of the Brazilian football team (Fig. 14). Attempts were made to accommodate the symbolic colourimetry of the stadiums/streets on the suits of the deputies in the form of ornaments (scarves and flags), highlighting in their costumes governmental and non-governmental realms. In a ceremony where words *acted* and were



FIGURE 13

performative, in the sense given by Austin (1962), each 'yes' and 'no' decided the destiny of the country, each time they were spoken by the deputies. In the Chamber of Deputies and outside it, each vote was celebrated as a 'goal' in a football game. Just before the uttering of the last vote necessary for concluding the majority favourable to the impeachment, the deputies sang the verses of a well-known Brazilian supporters' chant: 'I am Brazilian with great pride, with great love'.

Many of the votes, both on the left and the right, gained resonance. However, the vote of the then deputy Jair Messias Bolsonaro stood out, since he was accused of praising and making an apology for torture: 'They lost in '64, and they will lose now in 2016. For the family and for the innocence of children in classrooms, which they never had under the PT. Against communism, for our freedom. Against the Forum of



FIGURE 14

São Paulo. In the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the terror of Dilma Rousseff. For the Army of Caxias, for our Armed Forces'<sup>14</sup> (Poder 360 2016). Until this moment, he had addressed himself to the audience in the Congress, in other words, his fellow deputies. In uttering his last words, he turned to the camera transmitting the event and spoke to the viewers: 'For a Brazil above everything and a God above everyone, my vote is yes'. This would become his slogan in the 2018 presidential campaign. The same night, commenting on the event, he summarised the session: 'We have the ball. What is of interest is the Brazil of today, the green and yellow Brazil, ours, of the good people, the real workers, we won the first half: 1–0 to us, ok?'.<sup>15</sup>

As a system, football helps us to understand the intertwining of the players that acted during the impeachment process of former President Rousseff in several instances: the political, judicial, and economic, having the protesters as the representation of the crowd, elevated to the synonym of 'the people'. Kershaw (1997) draws our attention to the synecdoche character of demonstrations, which was particularly used by the press to define the performers/protesters. Demonstrations from the left were also numerous throughout this period (and even after). However, the mainstream media did not designate their protesters as 'the people' but 'allies of Dilma and Lula'. By defining frames and the appearance of the protesters, as well their overexposure, the mainstream media contributed to the definition of 'the people': 'If people are constituted through a complex interplay of performance, image, acoustics, and all the various technologies engaged in those productions, then

14. An infamous torturer, the Colonel in question was the only member of the Brazilian army to be condemned for crimes of torture during the military dictatorship. He was one of the torturers of the former President Dilma Rousseff.

15. The left-wing deputy Jean Wyllys's vote also gained notoriety during the session, in contrast with Bolsonaro's. After voting, Wyllys reacted to Bolsonaro's homophobic offences by spitting on him (Marinho 2016).

"media" is not just reporting who the people claim to be, but media has entered into the very definition of the people' (Butler 2015: 20). The triangulation of focus between the protesters and institutions (judiciary and legislative powers), against the enemies, established an economy of visibility. For the protesters/performers, this regime created the sense of activism, cohesion, and community provided by the demonstrations.

## Performative Platforms: From the Streets to the Networks

Since the *Jornadas de Junho*, but especially since the demonstrations in 2015 to 2016, there can be clearly observed a migration from the performative territory on the streets to the social networks. As contents generate action, engagement, or hate, mobilising another audience in the virtual world, we understand them as performatives (Ertzscheid 2018), as are the platforms that host them. The toxic algorithm structure of Facebook, which was the leading platform used in this period along with YouTube, favours the interaction of users with hate and controversial content. Between the streets and the mobile phones, the content was framed, edited, commented upon, and decontextualised, acquiring new and diverse meanings. What happened on the streets became the 'primary source' for creating GIFs, memes, and short videos, appearing in publications on Facebook and WhatsApp groups discussions.

In this way, social networks operated as a performative sphere where the content could acquire a more expansive dimension than that observed on the streets, as it may be distorted, edited, and replicated (Ladeira 2020), multiplying its audience. The performative strategies of the 'new right' evolved radically on the digital performative platforms.<sup>16</sup>

# God and Family in the Moral Crusade of Brazil's Extreme Right

Reframed on social media, the street performances were restaged in the digital world. They returned in the subsequent demonstrations confirmed, reformulated, or eliminated. In this sense, measuring the success or failure of a demonstration is a crucial point in the networks. How can it be established if a demonstration was really successful or expressive, thereby reiterating the power of confirmation and legitimation? Proof is given *a posteriori*, through documentation, at times, photographic manipulation,<sup>17</sup> and the reaction that the demonstration was able to create on the social networks. Re-framing and modifying documents is central to social networks' functioning: applying photo filters for posting is one banal example of this operation. An event such as a protest proposes a plethora of documents, like photos and videos, that may be potentially used and reframed in the digital sphere.

Thus, the emergence of new political actors during this period, notably coming from the already mentioned movements, such as the MBL and Vem Para a Rua, likewise, the increasing mediatisation of conservative politicians, such as Jair Bolsonaro, was due to the emergence of well-articulated content creation structures, and the strategic and financed use of social media.

The main request that until then promoted some 'unity' in the conservative sectors was achieved with the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016. It was necessary to build new mechanisms to maintain great adherence to the conservative agenda. In this context, one of the themes which most gained support and public visibility in the pre-election years was the defence of religious morality and values associated with the traditional conception of the family. The year 2017 was especially emblematic for the consolidation of these themes in the Brazilian public sphere, as the similar profile of protests gained evidence in various state capitals throughout the country. In common, there was a continuous attempt to censor shows, performances, art exhibitions, or even academic debates by associating these events with practices such as 'paedophilia' and 'zoophilia' or ideas such as 'gender ideology' and 'cultural Marxism'.

Among the examples, we can mention attempts (in some cases successful ones) at censoring exhibitions such as *QueerMuseu* (Porto Alegre/Rio Grande do Sul) and *Faça você mesmo a sua Capela Sistina* (*Make Your Own Sistine Chapel*), by the artist Pedro Moraleida (Belo Horizonte/Minas Gerais); performances and theatre shows such as *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus, Rainha do Céu* (*The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*), written by Jo Clifford and starring by Renata Carvalho;

← 16. The article cited here 'Le corps féminin en performance: Une étude de cas des mouvements #elenão et #elesim' proposes a case study on the political use of women's bodies at the 2018 election campaign and the migration of the performative territory from the streets to the social networks during this period. The relationship between social media and performativity is a vast subject, imbricating diverse discursive arenas and private corporations' financial interests. It is also difficult to establish a global analysis of the Brazilian case, since from 2013 to 2018, for example, the creation of content and its association with different digital platforms took place differently depending on the group. The MBL, for example, created a professional video production structure. However, we may stand that, between 2013 and 2014, different digital strategies were being experienced, and a large audience was also migrating from traditional media to the social networks.

← 17. The publication of photos on social networks is one way of proving its success. In social networks, we may observe diverse photographic strategies searching for the most effective angle of a demonstration. The usual selection favours pictures where a significant number of people are present and where the landscape perspective emphasises this extension.

*La Bête (The Beast)*, by Wagner Schwartz; and *DNA de DAN (DNA of DAN)*, by Maikon K; or even Judith Butler's lecture in Brazil.<sup>18</sup> These protests became emblematic marks for the consolidation of a common conservative social field, which culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro the following year.

Although they occurred in different regions of the country, the protests had similar characteristics regarding their performative-discursive construction. Promoting visibility through a spectacular effect associated with a moral scandal was shown to be one of the most successful strategies of gaining support for these subjects. In addition, this strategy helped to strengthen neoliberal and conservative movements such as the MBL and to advance the candidacy of various politicians for the 2018 elections. As the philosopher Marcia Tiburi (2019) commented, words such as 'child' and 'paedophilia' became devices to produce effects of shock and achieve the 'mental and affective, moral and political manipulation useful for the moment' (para. 43).

The main agendas and slogans associated with the 2017 street protests were not exactly 'new' — they were drawn from a vast history of protests led by conservative movements worldwide. Nevertheless, the unprecedented visibility and adhesion achieved in the period demonstrate that the strategy of associating the progressive field with the idea of 'promiscuity' and 'the apology for homosexuality' was highly effective.<sup>19</sup> In the analysis of the sociologist Richard Miskolci (2018), the

moral crusade pushed by conservative sectors in Brazil was the fruit of a successful alliance between groups who defended neoliberal economics (such as MBL) and 'historical moral entrepreneurs (such as the Catholic Church and followers of evangelical religions)' (12). Miskolci highlights the importance of observing that the so-called conservative 'moral crusade' had been gestated for more than two decades. As an example, he goes back to the genealogy of the term 'gender ideology', created by the Catholic Church, and the phrase 'kit gay', initially spread by politicians who came to power in 2018, such as President Jair Bolsonaro (Miskolci 2018: 5). The development of these agendas in 2017 can be related to practices that have been widely tested among various sectors of Brazilian society. This points to the more systematic nature of this action, in opposition to the supposed spontaneity the protests seemed to project.

## The Theatrical Dimension of Conservative Protests in 2017

In order to understand how the theatrical elements were used to gain visibility and adhesion for conservative agendas in Brazil in 2017, we will analyse two street protests of that year through the concept of 'theatricality'. For Taylor, theatricality 'capture[s] the constructed, all-encompassing sense of performance' (2003: 13). In other words, it 'sustains a scenario, a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end' (13). She understands theatricality as an element of any performance, related to the term 'theatrical scenario' (13–14).

18. In November 2017, the feminist philosopher attended the International Colloquium 'The Ends of Democracy', an event with the participation of other renowned intellectuals in São Paulo.

19. For further references to the relationship between art and censorship under religious allegations in the recent history of Brazil, see: <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/cultura-e-lazer/artes/noticia/2017/09/cancelamento-da-queermuseu-conheca-outros-casos-de-confrontos-entre-arte-e-censura-em-porto-alegre-9894213.html> [accessed 21 November 2021].

Using the example of the ‘colonial encounter’, Taylor highlights that ‘we could also look to scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviours, and potential outcomes’ (28). One of the purposes of these scenarios is to make ‘visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes’ (28). Our decision to use the terms ‘theatricality’ and ‘theatrical scenario’ in this context is related to the purpose of understanding them as planned strategies with a political finality. In many cases, these protests were created to make visible some ‘ghosts’ and ‘stereotypes’ linked to polemical and sensible subjects in Brazil, and to gather attention to emerging politicians.

The first street demonstration that we examined was held in Palácio das Artes Cultural Centre (Belo Horizonte) on distinct dates in October 2017 and involved around four hundred people protesting against the exhibition *Faça você mesmo a sua Capela Sistina (Make Your Own Sistine Chapel)*,<sup>20</sup> by Pedro Moraleida (1977–1999). On 4 October, the then councillor Jair Di Gregório (Progressives Party; PP) posted a video on social networks in which he falsely accused teachers from public schools of bringing students to the exhibition, which had an over-18 classification and presented paintings that referred to Christian symbols and sex (Pró-vida e Família 2017). The video rapidly went viral on social networks and became the primary stimulus for different protests held in front of Palácio das Artes in the following days.

Based on the first action which preceded the protest, it is possible to observe that the transit between the real and virtual space is central to understanding the theatrical nature of these acts. Here the notion

20. Make Your Own Sistine Chapel is a drawing series made in 1997 to 1998, before the suicide of Brazilian artist Pedro Moraleida Bernardes in 1999. Some themes of his artworks are the complexity of questions about religion and the forms of expression of sexuality, linked to the intricacy of the relationship between power, politics, and ideology.

of ‘framing’, discussed by Féral (2015), in dialogue with Erving Goffman, contributes to the understanding of the protests’ adherence strategies. In the context of conservative protests in Brazil, the transposition of the physical to the digital environment (through social network posts) accompanies a framing created by a narrative construction — often organised with false information, which is legitimated by the existence of videos and photos — and, consequently, the idea of transforming the *event into a sign*. This is not an artistic sign, but the construction of a plethora of images charged with fictionality, in which signifiers such as ‘children’, ‘art’, and ‘school’ emerge together to construct a common phantasmagoria related to paedophilia. In the case of the councillor’s video, a soundtrack was also included to create an effect of commotion associated with the supposed denunciation.

After the dissemination of the video, the first wave of protests against the exhibition was called by Leonardo Alvim de Melo, pastor of the Evangelical Community Projeto Viver (Ceprovi). While at the first demonstration (held on 5 October) there were around fifty demonstrators, the following protests had much more significant numbers, with three to four hundred people in each of them. Increasingly theatrical, the protests on 10 and 13 October had more heterogeneous groups, formed by ‘evangelicals, Catholics, groups organised for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, young people from Direita Minas<sup>21</sup> and supporters of Bolsonaro’ (Simões 2017: para. 1). In the posters and slogans, the exhibition was associated with practices such as ‘zoophilia’, ‘paedophilia’, and ‘Christophobia’.

Among the actions observed, the main one was the saying the ‘Our Father’ prayer in front of Palácio das Artes (Rádio Itatiaia 2017).

21. Created in 2016 in Minas Gerais, the movement defends the ‘return to traditional family values’ and ‘economic liberalism’.



FIGURE 15

On their knees, holding candles, crosses, bibles, and an image of the Virgin Mary (as well as mobile phones), the protesters carried out a performance with considerable visual impact on one of the main avenues in the city (Fig. 15). Besides the performance itself, the reaction of progressive sectors contributed to propel and expand the visibility of these protests. Also constructed through symbolic elements (such as the use of duct tape over protesters' mouths to symbolise censorship and silencing), the demonstrations in defence of art, and the critics against censorship attempts, ended drawing even more attention to the initial protests, due to the conflictive dimension that the presence of demonstrators from the progressive field brought to the incident.

An analogous antagonistic scenario appears on 7 November 2017, outside the Sesc Pompeia Cultural Centre in São Paulo, against the



FIGURE 16

participation of the American philosopher Judith Butler in the colloquium 'The Ends of Democracy', organised by the University of São Paulo in conjunction with the University of California. Compared to the demonstration we analysed above, this protest was smaller in numbers — there were around seventy people in total. However, because of the radicality of the confrontation between those who defended and attacked Butler and the high degree of theatricality constructed by the conservative protestors (as well as the importance associated with the name of the US philosopher), the demonstration had great repercussions in the press and social networks, not just in Brazil but also abroad.

In analysing the elements (like posters and objects) present in the protests against Butler's coming to Brazil, one aspect that caught our attention was the heterogeneity of the 'flags' gathered there. In addition



FIGURE 17

to posters most directly related to the reason of the protest, with the phrases ‘Go to Hell’ or those opposed to ‘gender ideology’, criticism was also directed at other targets, whose relationship with Butler was, at the very least, tenuous (Fig. 16 and 17). These ranged from institutions such as the UN and UNESCO to two former presidents from rival parties in Brazilian politics: Lula (PT) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) (Fig. 18). The symbolic miscellany also included flags of Brazil and Israel, clothing and discourses demanding the return of the monarchy in Brazil, protests against Venezuela and Cuba, T-shirts calling for military intervention, as well as the habitual crosses and bibles (Fig. 19).

As the anthropologist Letícia Cesarino (2019) indicates, one of the elements which helps to understand the profound reorganisation in the



FIGURE 18

political and identity fields in Brazil in this period is the notion of the ‘fractal person’. Cesarino notes that one of the most successful aspects of the Bolsonaro campaign in 2018 consisted in exploiting on social networks, and taking advantage of the logic of the latter’s algorithms, an identitarian conception based on an ‘infinite fragmentation of identitarian “pieces” which can be linked and gain scale in [...] chains of equivalence — notably through populist-type representation’ (2019: 548). Although this refers to the digital strategies of *bolsonarismo*, it can be noted that the symbology constellation present in the protests against Butler materialised the ‘potentially interminable chain of equivalencies’ (Laclau 2005: 205) that characterises the so-called ‘populist reason’. According to Laclau (2005), the emergence and expansion of ‘popular identities’ only becomes possible when the heterogeneity of their demands leads to some form of unity through ‘equivalent political articulations’ (229–30).



FIGURE 19

What is observed in the theatricality of symbolic heterogeneity present in the demonstrations against Butler is the effectiveness of the agenda linked to moral and sexual questions in propelling a series of chains of equivalencies indirectly associated with them. The *antipetismo*, linked to the repudiation of international human rights institutions, such as the UN and UNESCO, or even the traditional political class (symbolised by the former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso), were gathered as common enemies against broad and relatively generic categories, such as ‘God’ and ‘Family’. These are signifiers which are still exploited by President Jair Bolsonaro in his governmental slogans and speeches.

In the name of God and the Family, the protests against Judith Butler coming to Brazil had an outcome worthy of the well-known ‘cathartic effect’ associated with the dramatic genre in its most traditional form. In addition to posters with the image of Butler alongside phrases such as ‘Go to Hell’ and ‘No Paedophilia’, the protesters carried a large cloth figure dressed in a bra, a witch’s hat, and the face of the philosopher, which was burned at the end of the protest (TV Estadão 2017). As well as returning to the practices of the Catholic Church during the Inquisition — which calls attention again to the construction of a ‘scenario’ (Taylor 2003) during the protest — the performance explored the strategy of fictionalising adversaries, based on the phantasmatic recreation of its opponents. Not by chance, Butler’s text which reflected on reactions about the visit to Brazil gained the title of the ‘Phantasm of Gender’ (Butler 2017). The phantasmatic dimension was associated with the connections of gender theory with notions such as ‘paedophilia’ or even ‘ideology’.

It is thus possible to infer that the strategic use of theatricality in the 2017 protests helped not only to consolidate the Brazilian conservative field but also to expand its scope. Through the above-cited strategies, the path was opened for the construction of that electoral majority which, in the following year, consecrated Jair Bolsonaro as President of the Republic.

While finishing this essay, we found ourselves facing the expressive convocations for national public protests on 7 September 2021, called by President Jair Bolsonaro. A national holiday, this day celebrates the Brazilian Independence Day from Portugal, and thus a series of civic ceremonies are annually held both by the states and the Federal state. However, this year the traditional military parade was not held in Brasília, the country’s capital, and official ceremonies were reduced because of the pandemic. In their place, various protests were held all over Brazil, convoked and led by the President himself, focusing on anti-democratic agendas, including threats of intervention in the Federal Supreme Court.

Since taking office, Bolsonaro has encouraged and motivated various agglomerations and protests, such as motorbike parades and public appearances holding boxes of chloroquine.<sup>22</sup> In this way, thinking about the recent expressive set of street protests in Brazil, we can observe a fundamental change: until 2018, the prominent supporters of protests from the right were clearly entities and groups such as Vem Para a Rua, MLB, Revoltados On-line, and so many others. Today, the call for and organisation of protests is deliberately carried out by the President of the Republic himself, directing it to his most loyal and fanatical supporters, those willing ‘to die for Brazil’ and defending ‘constitutional military intervention’.

It is not our intention to analyse comprehensively the demonstrations which occurred after the election of Bolsonaro. Nevertheless, it is important to briefly recover them in order to trace an iconographic,

<sup>22</sup> Since the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro defended the use of chloroquine for the treatment of Covid-19. This is a controversial stance, as there is no scientific evidence on the effectiveness of chloroquine for this disease.

performative, and conceptual trajectory of the main symbols which the ‘new right’ (now re-baptised as ‘extreme right’) has imposed in Brazil since 2015. Although a central characteristic of conservative protests is the profusion of diffuse agendas, brought together in ‘equivalent political articulations’ (Laclau 2005) typical of populist-type political strategies, it is possible to trace some dominant tendencies in different periods of the historical trajectory in recent protests in the country.

The first tendency, named under the signifier ‘Patria’, can be identified as the dominant sign of the right-wing demonstrations carried out between 2013 and 2016. Drawing on the typical behaviour of conservative nationalism (in Brazil, exploited, for example, during the Military Dictatorship with slogans such as ‘Brazil: love it or leave it’), the protests became progressively more green and yellow, the colours of the Brazilian flag. In the wake of various types of discontentment within the country, the rhetoric of ‘Patria’ was sufficiently broad to meet a heterogeneity of protests without necessarily having to conform to a specific ideological configuration. In this context, the figure of the protestor/supporter became emblematic for understanding the protests’ theatricality and how the polarisation between the conservative and the progressive sectors was constructed in this period. Even today, the rhetoric of the ‘Patria’ is a central element of the Government’s communication, and all its publicity must contain the phrase ‘Beloved country, Brazil’ (*Pátria Amada, Brasil*).

The second tendency visible in the protests of the period, whose keywords are equally stamped in Bolsonaro’s governmental slogans, emphasised the signifiers ‘God’ and ‘Family’. For these protesters, the country needed to be rescued from the forces that had degenerated it, such as the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, and pursuing common enemies continued to shape unity around their heterogeneous demands. The ‘moral crusade’ — also widely exploited during the Brazilian military dictatorship — appeared highlighted by new concepts, such as ‘gender ideology’.

In this period, the field of the right started to define itself as ‘conservative’ more extensively (Silva 2021) and the artistic and university sectors became targets. The conservative agenda, which historically possessed great capillarity in Brazilian society, was shown to be an essential strategy above all to attract lower-class groups to the right.

Between 2016 and 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was the politician with the greatest popularity among the various presidential candidates associated with the right. With Bolsonaro’s consolidation, the third and ultimate signifier which gained visibility in the symbology of performances and protests was the one associated with ‘Guns’. An emblem of the authoritarian and, at times, fascist dimension of the current presidency, ‘Guns’ represent the violent, patriarchal, openly racist, and homophobic aspects reiterated in the public performances of Jair Bolsonaro. The sign of a gun, performed by his hands, became his election campaign symbol and was acted in many public appearances. In the symbolic constellation of ‘Guns’ is also framed the iconography associated with the military category that accompanies this last axis of symbols associated with the protests of 2013 to 2021.<sup>23</sup> It is important to remember that the military has the largest number of positions in the current Government.

By investigating the constellation of symbols drawn in protests by the Brazilian right, we traced a perspective of the dominant agendas in each period as well as analysed the performances and the theatrical strategies which made these protests so visible in Brazil, culminating in the election of Jair Bolsonaro. The examination of street protests in the period in question through the lenses of theatre and performance studies has shown potential to contribute to the understanding of these demonstrations from a transdisciplinary approach. •

<sup>23</sup>. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro defended the use of chloroquine for the treatment of Covid-19. This is a controversial stance, as there is no scientific evidence on the effectiveness of chloroquine for this disease.

# IMAGES

## FIGURE 1

Protest for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Rio de Janeiro, 13 March 2016. A face-painted protester wearing a typical football supporter outfit. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 2

Right-wing demonstration in São Paulo, Avenida Paulista, 13 March 2016. Face-painted protesters are taking pictures with the Brazilian flag in front of FIESP's *Yellow Duck*. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 3

Protest 'Fora Dilma' ('Out Dilma') in Brasília, 7 September 2015. The inflatable puppets 'Pixuleco' and '1' at the Esplanade of Ministries' lawn. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 4

Protest for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Rio de Janeiro, 15 March 2015. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 5

Protest for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Rio de Janeiro, 13 March 2016. A protester is wearing a prisoner outfit and a mask of former president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. He is also holding a mask of Dilma Rousseff. Inflatable gloves with the colours and symbols of the Brazilian flag amplify his hands. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 6

Right-wing demonstration in São Paulo, Avenida Paulista, 13 March 2016. Protesters' props hanging for sale: inflatable puppets, Brazilian flags, 'Out Dilma' banners, flowers, and a federal policeman's mask. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 7

Right-wing demonstration in São Paulo, Avenida Paulista, 13 March 2016. The FIESP's *Yellow Duck* is in front of the FIESP headquarters at Avenida Paulista. A Brazilian flag salesman is wearing Dilma Rousseff's 'zombie' mask. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 8

Protest for Dilma's Impeachment in Rio de Janeiro, 15 March 2015. Statements written on the posters read: 'Military Intervention Now!', 'A good communist is a dead one', 'Dilma, Maduro, Hugo, Fidel, Cristina, Lula: World's Garbage'. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 9

Protest for the impeachment in Rio de Janeiro, 13 March 2016. A face-painted young man is holding a poster: 'Vote on Bolsonaro 2018'. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 10

Right-wing demonstration in São Paulo, Avenida Paulista, 13 March 2016. A truck with loudspeakers and banners: 'Out Communism', 'No communism', and 'Brazil above all!'. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 11

Protest for Dilma's Impeachment in Rio de Janeiro, 15 March 2015. Face-painted men in yellow and green and the crowd wearing the Brazilian football shirt. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 12

A metal wall splitting the Esplanade of Ministries' lawn with the National Congress at the bottom. On the right side of the picture, there are the protesters for the impeachment of the former president Dilma Rousseff. On the left side, those who were against it. Photograph by Juca Varella, courtesy of Agência Brasil.

## FIGURE 13

Impeachment Vote Deputies, 18 April 2016. The Chamber of Deputies from the perspective of the deputies allied to the government of Dilma Rousseff. The statement on the red poster reads 'Stay Dilma', and we may identify another poster reproducing a torn front cover page of the Brazilian Federal Constitution. The men deputies are wearing neutral or red ties, with red pins from the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 14

The voting session on the continuation of the impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff in the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil. Photograph by Valter Campanato, courtesy of Agência Brasil.

## FIGURE 15

Catholics say the rosary in front of *Palácio das Artes* in a protest against the Moraleida exhibition, 13 October 2017. Screenshot from YouTube channel *Rádio Itatiaia*.

## FIGURE 16

Conservatives protest against the participation of Judith Butler in an event in *Sesc Pompéia Cultural Centre*, São Paulo, 7 November 2017. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 17

Conservatives protest against the participation of Judith Butler in an event in *Sesc Pompéia Cultural Centre*, São Paulo, 7 November 2017. Screenshot from video, courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 18

Conservatives protest against the participation of Judith Butler in an event in *Sesc Pompéia*, 7 November 2017. The posters read 'Less ONU, more Brazil' and 'UNESCO, school of terror'. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURE 19

Conservatives protest against the participation of Judith Butler in an event in *Sesc Pompéia Cultural Centre*, São Paulo, 7 November 2017. Courtesy of Mídia Ninja.

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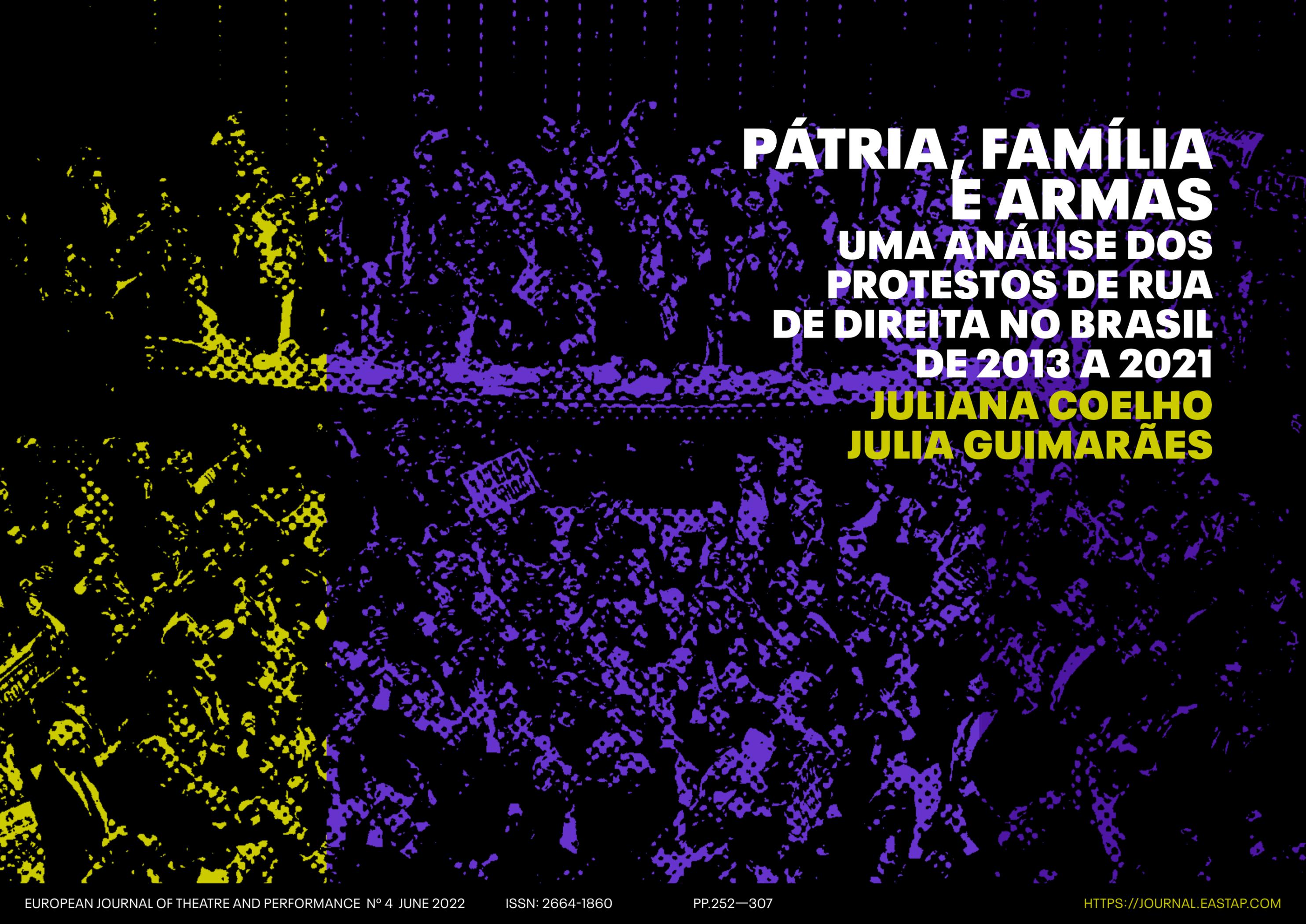
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# **PÁTRIA, FAMÍLIA E ARMAS**

**UMA ANÁLISE DOS  
PROTESTOS DE RUA  
DE DIREITA NO BRASIL  
DE 2013 A 2021**

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## PALAVRAS-CHAVES

extrema-direita, espectadores, manifestações de rua, performance, teatralidade

## KEYWORDS

extreme right, spectatorship, street protests, performance, theatricality

# RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa os diferentes ciclos de manifestações de rua que eclodiram no Brasil a partir de 2013, dando ênfase àqueles que se situam no espectro político da direita, denominada 'nova direita brasileira' e 'extrema-direita'. Através de uma abordagem construída pela aproximação entre política e artes cênicas, identificamos diferentes performances e estratégias teatrais usadas nesses protestos. Esses eventos exerceram um papel central na construção da história recente do país e corroboraram para a consolidação de importantes processos políticos, seja ao atuar na batalha narrativa acerca desses processos, seja ao operar como mecanismo de estímulo à adesão social. Para compreender as funções sociais e ideológicas presentes nesses protestos, investigamos de que modo esses grupos exploraram a teatralidade no intuito de organizar o olhar do espectador. Trata-se de estratégias que projetaram um imaginário simbólico forte e eficaz em torno de pautas conservadoras.

# SUMMARY

This article analyses the different cycles of street demonstrations that arose in Brazil between 2013 and 2021, especially those politically situated on 'the new Brazilian right' and 'the extreme right'. We attempt to identify different performances and theatrical strategies used in these protests through an approach that combines politics and performing arts. These events have played a central role in constructing the country's recent history. They endorsed critical political processes, acted in the discursive battle about these processes, and operated as a mechanism to encourage social adherence to conservative discourse. To understand the social and ideological functions of these protests, we examine how they explored theatricality to organise the spectator's gaze. These theatrical strategies projected strong and effective symbolic images around conservative agendas.

Este artigo tem o intuito de propor uma reflexão mais detida acerca das manifestações de rua do espectro político que se denomina de ‘direita’ no Brasil, a partir de 2013 até 2021. O exercício que nos prestamos aqui é o de analisar o conjunto de símbolos agenciados nessas manifestações, buscando uma compreensão mais aprofundada de seus sentidos e das suas tendências mais fortes, que podem ser interpretados como três ciclos temáticos: ‘Pátria’ (de 2014 a 2016), ‘Deus’ (de 2016 a 2017) e ‘Armas’ (desde 2018). Apresentamos uma divisão porosa entre estes ciclos, uma vez que estas tendências foram identificadas considerando os símbolos mais recorrentes operados pelos manifestantes em cada período. Todos estes temas estiveram constantemente presentes e justapostos ao longo de cada ciclo, no entanto, em cada momento, um ganhou mais proeminência e visibilidade. Se os manifestantes forem vistos como performers, então é preciso considerar seriamente a constelação semiótica proposta por eles. Desta forma, algumas das questões pontuadas por Kershaw (1997) sobre o que podem significar os protestos sociais em períodos de crise e como podem ‘incorporar o seu contexto histórico através da sua localização em tradições identificáveis’ (257) são fundamentais para nós.

No final da década de 70, o Brasil viveu um grande e importante ciclo de protestos inéditos dentro do regime militar,<sup>1</sup> como greves gerais, campanhas pelas eleições diretas (1983 e 1984) e pela promulgação da

1. De 1964 a 1985, as forças militares estabeleceram um regime tutelar no Brasil, impondo gerais eleitos como presidentes e instalando eleições indiretas. A ditadura brasileira serviu de modelo político para outros regimes militares no Cone Sul (Napolitano 2018).

nova Constituição (1988). Os principais protagonistas desses movimentos foram os setores populares e sindical. Nas décadas que se seguiram, a esquerda brasileira dominou o confronto político nas ruas, em grande parte, graças às organizações que possuíam forte capacidade de mobilização, como a Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), a União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE) e o mesmo Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) (Tatagiba 2018: 114). Os anos de governo federal do Partido dos Trabalhadores proporcionaram uma grande institucionalização de diversos atores desses movimentos, desestruturando suas organizações de origem e, ao mesmo tempo, desvinculando esses mesmos atores de suas bases.

Em junho de 2013, despertado por movimentos mais à esquerda do espectro político e desejoso de novas formas de representatividade, um ciclo de protestos de rua eclodiu no Brasil. No entanto, essas Jornadas de Junho<sup>2</sup> também marcaram o início de um período de ampla turbulência política e social no Brasil e a emergência do que se convencionou nomear a ‘nova direita brasileira’ (Pinheiro-Machado e Scalco 2018; Solano, Ortellado, e Moretto 2017). Dos protestos que sucederam às Jornadas de Junho, emergiu um conjunto heterogêneo de forças políticas opostas à presidência de Dilma Rousseff e criou-se uma crise política que contribuiu para o seu *impeachment* e posterior eleição de Jair Bolsonaro.

Como Pierrucci (1987) observou, nos anos que se seguiram ao fim do regime militar, ser e se assumir de ‘direita’ era considerado vergonhoso. A direita não se identificava nesses termos, pois se sentia ofendida ‘com o próprio nome, vítima da infâmia das próprias posições’ (38). Políticos e eleitores achavam difícil de se definir ideologicamente com a direita e evitavam posturas radicais, até mesmo se posicionando mais

à esquerda do espectro político. Entendendo essa direita como internamente diversa, Pierucci apontava que a ‘direita radical’ era o grupo político que mais encobria suas posições, nunca se apresentando como extremistas: ‘No Brasil da transição democrática, para os políticos que dependem da aprovação das urnas, à luz dos cálculos racionais de custos e benefícios certamente não é muito aconselhável confessar-se de direita. Pior ainda de extrema direita’ (Pierucci 1987: 38). A partir de 2014, seus políticos e eleitores passaram a se definir orgulhosamente de ‘direita’ ou ‘liberais’ e se esforçam em aprofundar a fissura ideológica e a oposição ontológica entre eles e os ‘esquerdistas’ e ‘comunistas’.

Ao longo desses recentes anos, as manifestações de rua e suas reverberações nas redes sociais tornaram-se os principais *loci* de reivindicação coletiva, se estabelecendo como territórios de disputa política preferenciais. Esses eventos foram acompanhados pelo desenvolvimento de performances e estratégias teatrais expostas em diferentes espaços, seja nas ruas, nas redes sociais ou no próprio Congresso Nacional. Os diferentes campos políticos têm explorado diversos recursos performativos e teatrais, desde discursos, escolha de objetos, bonecos, efígies, *slogans*, coreografias até imagens icônicas para simbolizar reivindicações em protestos públicos. Dessa forma, essas estratégias têm exercido um papel central na construção da história recente do país, seja ao ajudar a corroborar processos políticos, atuando na batalha narrativa acerca desses processos, seja ao agirem como mecanismos de estímulo à adesão social. O desejo de propor a investigação teórico-prática sobre as performances e teatrais da política contemporânea diz respeito à necessidade de colaborar com a reflexão coletiva acerca do momento sócio-político que vivemos a partir do prisma das Artes, entendendo esta como um campo de criação artística e de produção de conhecimento.

2. As Jornadas de Junho já apontavam para a contestação dos eventos esportivos que seriam sediados no país, como a Copa da Confederações (2013), a Copa do Mundo (2014) e, em menor grau, os Jogos Olímpicos (2016).

# Performatividade/Teatralidade/ Performance/Teatro

Os campos da performatividade e da teatralidade contribuem para construir ângulos específicos de abordagem para entender as principais estratégias teatrais forjadas nos protestos políticos examinados neste artigo. Seguindo Josette Féral (2015), e Féral e Bermingham (2002), a teatralidade é simultaneamente entendida como uma ação que organiza o olhar do espectador e uma instância que propõe uma distância ficcional, sem a qual o espectador poderia intervir no que acontece em cena. A teatralidade também é um processo de auto percepção do espectador enquanto espectador de algo, o reconhecimento de uma clivagem entre a performance e aquele que a observa. Para Elizabeth Burns (1973: 33), a teatralidade existe em ‘qualquer tipo de comportamento percebido ou interpretado por outros e descrito (mentalmente ou explicitamente) em termos teatrais’,<sup>3</sup> e isso é particularmente aplicável aos comportamentos conformados de acordo com convenções que são reconhecidamente teatrais. Sempre política, a teatralidade, para Taylor (2013), ‘ostenta seu artifício, seu caráter construído’, ressaltando a mecânica do espetáculo (41).

A cada manifestação, os performers reativam suas reivindicações ao mesmo tempo que se alinham com uma simbologia já pré-existente. Essa constelação de códigos precisa ser entendida pelos manifestantes e seus espectadores (Kershaw 1997: 270). Desse modo, a teatralidade aqui também envolve uma ‘estilização com dimensões estéticas e auto-referenciais da performance’ (Rai, Gluhovic, Jestrovic e Saward 2021), estabelecendo um conjunto de referências que são constantemente

testadas nas ruas. Nossas análises priorizaram a compreensão dos efeitos da teatralidade nessas manifestações através da análise das simbologias e dos enquadramentos produzidos em cada uma delas. Seguindo também uma ‘dupla leitura’ proposta por Féral (2015: 251), nossa análise considerou as ‘performances’, suas construções de sentido (teatralidade) e os sujeitos políticos envolvidos nela (performatividade).

Em diálogo com o campo dos Estudos da Performance, Taylor (2013) apresenta uma ampliação da análise do fenômeno da performance, transformando-o em um sistema de análise do comportamento expressivo. Para ela, a performance pode ser entendida como atos vitais que transmitem ‘o conhecimento, a memória e um sentido de identidade social por meio do que Richard Schechner denomina “comportamento reiterado”’ (Taylor 2013: 27); como ‘objeto/ processo de análise nos estudos da performance’; como quadro epistemológico e como prática incorporada. Nesse sentido, enquadrados os eventos descritos aqui *como performances*, observando o que está ‘sendo feito’ pelos performers e como eles ‘mostram esse fazer’ na esfera pública dos protestos políticos. As manifestações de rua precisam ser entendidas como performances das quais insurgem uma forma de expressividade simultaneamente individual e coletiva, esteticamente materializada por um conjunto complexo de signos verbais e não-verbais articulados pelos manifestantes / performers. Aqui, as estratégias teatrais referem-se aos agenciamentos desta constelação de elementos que intentam performar um conjunto de demandas, direcionando o olhar do espectador.

Em protestos, os manifestantes partilham o espaço público à medida que incorporam coletivamente as suas reivindicações. Nesses eventos, temos uma performatividade corpórea que requisita não apenas com palavras escritas e faladas (performatividade linguística): ‘a ação corpórea e gestual não deve ser traduzida em linguagem, tanto a ação quanto o gesto significam e falam, tanto como ação quanto como reivindicação;

3. As citações em inglês deste artigo foram traduzidas para o português por nós.

um não pode ser finalmente separado do outro’ (Butler 2011). Em *Corpos em aliança e a política das ruas: notas para uma teoria performativa de assembleia*, Judith Butler (2015) aborda a questão e a necessidade urgente da realização de alianças entre diversas minorias ou populações consideradas descartáveis. Além de se preocupar com a compreensão de como a precariedade opera em regimes de aparição no espaço público, ela também se dedica a pensar como a ideia de ‘povo’ é constituída nesse espaço. A performatividade nesse contexto se relaciona com a possibilidade de aparição no espaço público. Por outro lado, a performatividade corpórea das manifestações observadas neste artigo é guiada por uma lógica de confrontação com um desejo claro de ação direta na sociedade (seja pela remoção da presidente ou pelo cancelamento de artistas e autores). Nessas assembleias da direita, os corpos assumem ‘o acesso pleno e os plenos direitos de aparecimento’ nas ruas (Butler 2018: para. 9). Os exemplos aqui apresentados reiteram a proposta de Butler, uma vez que mostram quais corpos são compreendidos e definidos como ‘o povo’ por diversas estruturas de poder, tais como a polícia e a imprensa.

Dessa forma, as manifestações de rua têm sido entendidas por nós como um território de contínua experimentação, onde performances e estratégias teatrais dos mais diversos grupos políticos são constantemente criadas, testadas e reencenadas, sempre tendo em vista seu impacto ‘virtual’. Cada manifestante pode ser entendido como performer de suas reivindicações, o que nos leva a pensar nas manifestações de rua enquanto performances coletivas. Nelas, a atenção dos ‘espectadores’ é multiplicada ou fragmentada. Por vezes, um ‘palco’ efêmero, como o palanque, o carro de som ou objetos de grande destaque proporcionam uma centralidade de foco a esses eventos. Como veremos, algumas dessas estratégias de captação de foco foram concebidas por profissionais de marketing político e de propaganda e exigem um considerável investimento financeiro.

Uma vez que os manifestantes se apropriam do espaço público de maneira não cotidiana, deliberadamente expressando suas reivindicações ou simplesmente expondo sua revolta, para quem eles direcionam sua performance? Quem seriam seus espectadores finais? As performances parecem ser direcionadas para um público que estaria fora do evento. Mesmo assim, é difícil definir exatamente que público seria este. Nos exemplos apresentados, as performances buscavam instâncias para propagar suas demandas através de sua amplificação, tanto pela cobertura jornalística da imprensa mainstream quanto pelas redes sociais. Nestas últimas, a presença dos manifestantes foi virtualizada por eles mesmos no *Facebook*, enquanto a cobertura da mídia validava e valorizava sua participação nesses eventos.

## As Manifestações durante o Governo de Dilma Rousseff

Desde o início de 2014 e até a realização da Copa do Mundo, diversos protestos aconteceram em todo o país: ‘Se não tiver direitos, não vai ter Copa’ (Barros 2014). Ideologicamente próximas das Jornadas de Junho, essas manifestações confrontavam o então governo do Partido dos Trabalhadores com as incoerências entre a realização de um megaevento como a Copa do Mundo (que seria sucedida pelos Jogos Olímpicos sediados dois anos depois, no Rio de Janeiro) e as melhorias sociais prometidas e não realizadas pela organização dos eventos.

Como em junho de 2013, movimentos organizados da sociedade localizados mais à esquerda do espectro político convocam manifestações pelas redes sociais. Também como no ano anterior, as manifestações são violentamente reprimidas pelas polícias militares dos estados.

Esses dois ciclos de protestos (2013-2014) confrontaram o governo de Dilma Rousseff com insatisfações especialmente relacionadas à precariedade dos serviços públicos das grandes cidades brasileiras e à expressividade do investimento público destinado à realização desses eventos. Nesse momento, a bandeira brasileira e outros elementos que remetessem ao país e aos seus símbolos nacionais eram encontrados pontualmente nas manifestações e identificados a sujeitos muitas vezes neófitos nesses eventos, geralmente sem participação anterior em movimentos sociais. Assim como ocorreu na escala macro-mundial, a ação coletiva era ‘baseada em engajamentos fluidos e personalizados, mediados pela comunicação digital e desconfiados de instituições tradicionais’<sup>4</sup> (Domingues 2019: iv).

Expressão tácita de uma profunda crise de representatividade política, assim como dos limites da política de classes conciliatória dos governos petistas,<sup>5</sup> esse ciclo de protestos tem uma interpretação acadêmica numerosa, multivocal e não consensual. Sem nos ater a essa discussão, tendemos a corroborar com as análises de Tatagiba e Souza (2019) que pontuam que dos protestos de 2013 emergiram tanto setores que reivindicavam a continuação das reformas sociais quanto outros que buscavam restaurar o *status quo* (Tatagiba e Galvão 2019: 65-66).

Ainda em 2014, temos os primeiros protestos do ‘Vem Pra Rua’ que, descontentes com o resultado das eleições, empunhavam faixas ‘Fora PT’. Nos meses que se seguiram até a efetivação do *impeachment* em 2016, as manifestações foram se avolumando e se afeiçoando como os

4. Isso não deve ser entendido de maneira definitiva. Por exemplo, os entrevistados que se denominavam como ‘não-esquerda’ no trabalho de Domingues (2019) tinham todos uma vinculação com o PSDB (Partido Social-Democrata Brasileiro).

5. A política de conciliação de classes promovida pelo PT durante seus mandatos (2002–2005 e 2006–2009 com Lula e 2010–2015 com Rousseff) consistiu na manutenção de uma política econômica neoliberal e na expansão das políticas sociais.



FIGURA 1

mais expressivos protestos da história do país. Nesse ínterim, as investigações da Operação Lava Jato,<sup>6</sup> cujas ações sincronizavam arenas institucionais e extra institucionais, colaboraram com a instalação de um intenso sentimento antipetista na população. Sentimento este que era expressado nas ruas pelos manifestantes através de críticas aos escândalos de corrupção e de apelos urgentes de moralização da política e, paralelamente, era seguido do próprio descrédito nos políticos. Encontramos nessas manifestações<sup>7</sup> algumas reatualizações de ações performativas oriundas de outros ciclos de manifestações anteriores, como a maquiagem nos rostos (Fig. 1), em especial a verde e amarela, reatualizando a performance dos ‘cara-pintadas’, própria do movimento pelo *impeachment* do presidente Fernando Collor em 1992.<sup>8</sup>

O dispositivo cênico dos bonecos infláveis surge, e ganham notoriedade os personagens inanimados ‘Pato da FIESP’ (Fig. 2), ‘Pixuleco’ e ‘Bandilma’ (Fig. 3), esses dois últimos sendo personagens-paródias do ex-presidente Luís Inácio Lula da Silva e da então presidente Dilma Rousseff. Os bonecos infláveis se mostraram estratégias extremamente



FIGURA 2

eficazes de captação do foco fragmentado das manifestações. O ‘Pato da FIESP’, um boneco inflável amarelo de 22 metros, propunha uma ação contestatória aparentemente pacífica e buscava uma interação lúdica com o público. De fato, o Pato Amarelo da FIESP se configurou como uma performance itinerante e estabeleceu um contraponto importante nas manifestações de até então, pautadas pela violência policial. Ele fazia parte de uma campanha ampla e onerosa que englobava outras ações, patrocinada pela Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo (FIESP) e concebida por uma conhecida agência de marketing político, a Prole. Por sua vez, a criação do ‘Pixuleco’ respondia a um problema concreto: entre o fim de 2015 e o início de 2016, o número de manifestantes nas ruas diminuiu consideravelmente. Consequentemente, o publicitário Paulo Gusmão criou o personagem para preencher as ruas (Kaz 2015), substituindo a presença dos manifestantes pelo boneco, que foi reproduzido em diferentes escalas.

6. A operação Lava Jato foi uma grande investigação criminal conduzida pela Polícia Federal do Brasil, localizada em Curitiba. Entre 2014 e 2019, a investigação envolveu membros executivos e empresários de grandes empresas, além de políticos brasileiros: ex-presidentes, deputados federais, senadores e governadores estaduais, incluindo membros do PT.

7. A iconografia das Jornadas de Junho e dos protestos contra a Copa do Mundo é abundante. Nossas principais fontes de análise foram o acervo da Mídia Ninja, dos jornais Folha de S. Paulo, o Estado de S. Paulo, O Tempo e do portal G1.

8. A ação de pintar o rosto com as cores da bandeira brasileira e em preto, acrescentando os *slogans* ‘Fora’ ou ‘Fora Collor’, tornou-se a estratégia expressiva mais icônica dos protestos pelo *impeachment* do ex-presidente Fernando Collor. Em 1989, Fernando Collor de Mello foi o primeiro presidente eleito democraticamente após a ditadura militar. Acusações de corrupção política culminaram na abertura de um processo de *impeachment*, aprovado na Câmara dos Deputados, em setembro de 1992. Collor renunciou à presidência da República, horas antes de ser condenado pelo Senado. Para mais informações, veja: <http://memoria.oglobo.globo.com/fotos/caras-pintadas-contracollor-9430223> [acessado em 24 Set. 2021].



FIGURA 3



FIGURA 4

Pontualmente, observou-se performers usando narizes vermelhos de palhaços (Fig. 4) e máscaras de políticos (Fig. 5, 6 e 7), até mesmo o desnudamento parcial, em *topless*, e total de mulheres, sobretudo nos protestos da Avenida Paulista.<sup>9</sup> Temos também, desde o início desses protestos, iniciativas de pequeno e grande destaque, respectivamente materializadas por cartazes ‘Intervenção Militar Já!’, ‘SOS Army Forces’, ‘Vote Bolsonaro 2018’<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 8 e 9) e carros de som (Fig. 10) e manifestantes portando uniformes militares. Estes protestos, que se pautavam como ‘pacíficos’, foram modificando a relação entre manifestantes e as forças policiais destacadas para acompanhar esses eventos. Dessa forma, tornou-se comum um comportamento de apreciação mútua entre os manifestantes e a polícia: os elogios recíprocos, o bater palmas para os policiais e, principalmente, o ‘tirar foto’ com as forças de ordem. Em oposição radical à relação entre policiais e manifestantes



FIGURA 5

vista nos protestos anteriores, os manifestantes são até mesmo autorizados a fotografar o interior de viaturas junto com os policiais. O desfile de caminhoneiros e de motociclistas, que se tornaram constantes a partir de 2018, também já estavam pontualmente presentes, assim como as referências elogiosas ao Brasil Império, notadamente à sua bandeira.

← 9. No acervo FolhaPress, o álbum das manifestações do dia 15 de março de 2015 pode ser acessado aqui: <https://fotografia.folha.uol.com.br/galerias/nova/33420-protestos-de-15-de-marco#foto-441449> [acessado em 24 Set. 2021]. O álbum da manifestação do dia 13 de março de 2016, aqui: <https://fotografia.folha.uol.com.br/galerias/42594-manifestacao-vista-do-alto-pelo-brasil#foto-536027> [acessado em 24 Set. 2021].

← 10. Como muitos políticos eleitos em 2018, Bolsonaro usou os protestos contra Dilma Rousseff para aumentar sua visibilidade midiática. Ele participou de várias manifestações e foi convidado a discursar no palanque. Como um personagem controverso, ele era algumas vezes vaiado, em outras aplaudido.

FIGURA 6



FIGURA 8



FIGURA 7



FIGURA 9



FIGURA 10



# A Pátria em Chuteiras: O Torcedor Militante

Há um momento, todavia, em que todos se lembram do Brasil, em que 90 milhões de brasileiros descobrem o Brasil. Aí está o milagre do escrete. Fora as esquerdas, que acham o futebol o ópio do povo, fora as esquerdas, dizia eu, todos os outros brasileiros se juntam em torno da seleção. É, então, um pretexto, uma razão de auto-estima. E cada vitória compensa o povo de velhas frustrações, jamais cicatrizadas (Rodrigues 1993: 181).

No entanto, nenhum desses elementos descritos parece ter sido tão icônico como a camisa da seleção brasileira, a da CBF (Confederação Brasileira de Futebol) e suas versões assemelhadas (Fig. 11). Nelson Rodrigues, jornalista, autor teatral e um dos maiores cronistas do futebol brasileiro, entendia a seleção, por ele denominada ‘o escrete’, como a ‘pátria em calções e chuteiras’: essa ‘comunidade política’ materializada e corporificada em signos que representam ‘os laços de pertencimento e solidariedade que unem seus membros, a despeito dos conflitos que existam entre eles’ (Silva 1998: 108). A bandeira do Brasil, o hino nacional e o uniforme da seleção são justamente os símbolos acionados e sobrepostos durante as competições internacionais de futebol. Em termos de temas recursivos das ideologias políticas que ‘surgem no jogo’ e que ‘integram o jogo’, segundo Flores (1982), o nacionalismo seria mais flagrante. Nesses eventos, efetiva-se uma união do país ‘em torno da equipe que estaria representando todos os brasileiros, encarando-se então o Brasil como algo monolítico e univocamente representável’ (Flores 1982: 49). Assim, estariam profundamente presentes no futebol: o nacionalismo — fornecendo a ilusão de nação e apagando divergências e disputas, o paternalismo — a ilusão de relações justas e bondosas



FIGURA 11

entre dirigentes e torcidas, e o populismo — ‘a ilusão de exercício de poder’, uma vez que pela sua atuação na arquibancada, o torcedor ‘parece influir decisivamente no resultados das partidas’ (Flores 1982: 49). No entanto, no futebol, nem as regras do jogo nem o juiz, a autoridade máxima em campo, são substituídos ou eliminados por suas ações.

Em 2013, Marcelo Falcão, do grupo O Rappa cantava ‘Vem pra rua/ Porque a rua é a maior arquibancada do Brasil’ em uma propaganda da montadora FIAT — esta estaria ansiosa para se inserir publicitariamente num momento de tanta relevância nacional e internacional do país, graças às Copas das Confederações e do Mundo (Almeida, Barreto e Cunha 2017). Após uma traumatizante derrota brasileira no

Mineirão e a vitória de Dilma Rousseff nas eleições do mesmo ano, os protestos mudam de protagonistas e passam a incorporar massivamente as cores nacionais.<sup>11</sup> Meses depois o refrão torna-se o nome de um dos movimentos que mais organizaram atos pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff, o ‘Vem Pra Rua’, ao lado do ‘Movimento Brasil Livre’ (MBL) e, em menor instância, os ‘Revoltados Online’.

Parece ser possível pensar nesse manifestante como ‘torcedor’. Nas ruas, ele passa a performar repertórios que só são acionados nas arquibancadas dos estádios de futebol: cantar o hino nacional, vestir as cores da bandeira, criar palavras de luta, estabelecer um time adversário, empunhar cornetas e entoar cantos de guerra. Assim, ele reiterava comportamentos fora de seu *locus* de origem, passando a torná-los próprios das manifestações de rua. Como pontua Roberto Da Matta, um dos antropólogos brasileiros que mais se dedicou a pensar a função social do futebol entre nós: enquanto grande e multivocal evento, entre esporte e arte, entre negócio e religião, o futebol é ‘um espetáculo de grande poder de sedução visual e auditivo, além de, como “torcida”, sermos atores ativos de um espetáculo em espaço aberto’ (Da Matta 1994: 15). Entre um indivíduo e o seu time, estabelecem-se elos sociais e simbólicos profundos, o que cria entre nós a figura do ‘torcedor’, ‘aquele ou aquela que torce, contorna e retorpe o seu corpo para que seu time seja vencedor’ (15), diferenciando-se de outros modelos de seguidores de outras partes do mundo. Para Da Matta, numa leitura do país dos anos 1980, mas que parece ser ainda pertinente para a nossa discussão, Estado e sociedade só teriam sido somados no Brasil através do futebol (Da Matta 1982).

Ao se apropriarem do uniforme da seleção, camisa unificadora da identidade nacional, os manifestantes passaram a reafirmar e a readequar

11. O hino nacional e alguns *slogans* que se inspiraram nele, como ‘o gigante acordou’, já tinham se tornado símbolos emblemáticos em 2013.

coletivamente as noções de nação e pátria, que por sua vez não são intensamente apropriados pela esquerda — sempre atenta às contradições e assimetrias dessas mesmas noções. Uma questão se apresenta é a capacidade de mobilização desses símbolos nacionais que movimentam afetos coletivos mais densos que as bandeiras de organizações sindicais, por exemplo, tão caras à expressividade política da esquerda.

À esquerda, de uma maneira geral, e ao Partido dos Trabalhadores, de maneira específica, é dado o lugar de time adversário. A rua se torna arquibancada e arena para torcedores/ cidadãos, e os repertórios performáticos próprios são acionados na confrontação política que se dá nas ruas: estabelecem um campo próprio ‘meu time é meu país’ e um campo antagônico ‘o PT’, ‘os petistas’, ‘os comunistas’, ‘os mortadelas’,<sup>12</sup> ‘os vermelhos’, uma vez que ‘minha bandeira jamais será vermelha’.<sup>13</sup> Muitas performances das ruas pontuavam-se pela violência simbólica em direção ao time adversário: os manifestantes morderam ou queimaram bandeiras do PT, e levaram para as ruas imagens dos ex-presidentes desse partido enforcados ou decapitados, entre outras. Essas ações foram formas expressivas de antipetismo, um movimento sócio-político caracterizado pela rejeição e ódio àquele partido. As grandes empresas de mídia do país e os postos nas redes sociais contribuíram para a agressividade expressa nas ruas: ‘Essa disposição cognitiva e emocional teve importantes implicações para o recrutamento e para as características da mobilização social no contexto da campanha pelo *impeachment*, que assumiu a forma de uma cruzada moral, representada na luta do bem (o “nós”) contra o mal (“eles”)’ (Tatagiba 2018: 124).

12. Mortadela é um embutido de origem italiana. Este termo é usado pejorativamente para descrever os militantes de esquerda. Durante eventos do PT, um sanduíche de pão e mortadela era normalmente servido aos militantes como lanche de baixo custo.

13. Todas essas expressões estavam reiteradamente presentes em cartazes nas manifestações.



FIGURA 12

Como numa final de Copa do Mundo, o Brasil parou durante a votação pela continuação do processo de *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff na Câmara dos Deputados, no domingo de 17 de abril de 2016. Telões foram montados em diversos locais do país, para cada um dos campos adversários. Os canais de televisão adaptaram suas programações, sobretudo a Rede Globo, que solicitou às federações de futebol dos estados a alteração das datas dos jogos para o sábado (Pacheco 2016). A Esplanada dos Ministérios foi dividida por um muro metálico que separava os dois campos antagônicos, pró e contra a destituição da presidente (Fig. 12). Nesse domingo sem futebol, os brasileiros que acompanharam pela televisão essa votação viram transplantados para a Câmara dos Deputados muitas das performances e teatrais encontradas nas ruas e nos estádios: bandeiras dos estados amarradas ao pescoço cobrindo os corpos como capas; o uso de confetes; de cartazes ‘Tchau



FIGURA 13

querida’, ‘Não vai ter Golpe’ (Fig. 13), ‘Pixulecos’, camisas da seleção brasileira de futebol (Fig. 14). A colorimetria simbólica das ruas tentava se acomodar nos ternos e tailleurs dos deputados e deputadas na forma de adereços (echarpes, lenços e bandeiras), sobrepondo em seus figurinos as instâncias governamentais e não-governamentais. Numa cerimônia onde as palavras *agiram* e foram performativas, no sentido dado por Austin (1962) ao termo, cada ‘sim’ e ‘não’ decidia o destino do país a cada vez que eram proferidos pelos deputados. Na Câmara dos Deputados e fora dela, cada voto era celebrado como um ‘gol’. Instantes antes do pronunciamento do último voto necessário para o prosseguimento do processo de *impeachment*, os deputados cantaram os versos de uma conhecida canção dos torcedores do país: ‘sou brasileiro, com muito orgulho, com muito amor’.



FIGURA 14

Muitos dos votos, tanto à esquerda quanto à direita, ganharam destaque. No entanto, o voto do então deputado Jair Messias Bolsonaro se sobressaiu por ser acusado de perpetrar elogio e apologia à tortura: ‘Perderam em 64 e perderam agora em 2016. Pela família e pela inocência das crianças em salas de aula que o PT nunca teve. Contra o comunismo, pela nossa liberdade. Contra o Foro de São Paulo. Pela memória do Coronel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra,<sup>14</sup> o pavor de Dilma Rousseff. Pelo Exército de Caxias, pelas nossas Forças Armadas’ (Poder 360 2016).

Até esse momento, o deputado se dirige corporalmente à plateia presente no Congresso, isto é, seus colegas deputados. Ao proferir as seguintes palavras, ele se volta para as câmeras que transmitiam o evento e se dirige aos telespectadores: ‘Por um Brasil acima de tudo e por Deus acima de todos, meu voto é sim’. Por fim, este se tornaria o seu *slogan* na campanha presidencial de 2018. Na mesma noite, comentando o placar do evento, ele faz um resumo da sessão: ‘Bola para frente. O que interessa aí é que o Brasil hoje, o Brasil de verde amarelo, nosso, das pessoas de bem, dos trabalhadores de verdade, conquistamos o primeiro tempo: 1 x 0 para nós, tá ok?’<sup>15</sup>

Mais do que uma metáfora, o futebol foi visto aqui como um sistema que nos ajuda a entender o entrelaçamento dos jogadores que atuaram durante o processo de *impeachment* da ex-presidente Rousseff em várias instâncias: política, judicial e econômica, tendo os manifestantes como a representação da multidão elevada ao sinônimo de ‘o povo’. Kershaw (1997) chama atenção para o caráter de sinédoque das manifestações

14. Notório torturador, o coronel em questão foi o único membro do Exército brasileiro a ser condenado por crimes de tortura realizados durante a ditadura militar. Ele foi um dos torturadores da ex-presidente Dilma Rousseff.

15. O voto do deputado de esquerda Jean Wyllys também ganhou notoriedade. Depois de votar, Wyllys reagiu às ofensas homofóbicas proferidas por Bolsonaro cuspiendo em seu rosto (Marinho 2016).

que foi utilizado em particular pela grande imprensa para definir os manifestantes/ performers. Os protestos à esquerda do espectro político também foram numerosos ao longo desse período (e mesmo depois). No entanto, seus manifestantes/ performers não foram designados pela grande mídia como ‘o povo’, mas como ‘aliados de Dilma e Lula’. Ao definir os enquadramentos e as condições de aparecimento dos manifestantes, assim como a sua superexposição, a grande mídia contribuiu para a definição de ‘o povo’: ‘Se o povo é constituído por uma complexa interação entre performance, imagem, acústica e todas as diversas tecnologias envolvidas nessas produções, então a “mídia” não apenas transmite quem o povo afirma ser, mas se inseriu na própria definição de povo’ (Butler 2018: para. 24).

A triangulação do foco entre os manifestantes e as instituições (Poder Judiciário e Legislativo) contra os inimigos estabeleceu uma economia de visibilidade. Para os manifestantes/ performers, esse regime contribuiu para criar o sentimento de coesão, comunidade e ativismo proporcionado pelas manifestações.

## Plataformas Performativas: das Ruas às Redes

Desde as Jornadas de Junho, mas principalmente a partir das manifestações de 2015-2016, o território performativo deslocou-se das ruas para as redes sociais. O que é documentado nas ruas é re-enquadrado e transformado, tornando-se fonte para a criação de *GIFs*, *memes* e vídeos, publicados posteriormente no *Facebook* e nas linhas de discussão dos grupos de *WhatsApp*. É justamente a presença dessa fonte, pertencente à instância do real, do concreto, que favorece a legitimação dos mais diversos discursos. As redes sociais operam como segunda instância

performativa onde os conteúdos adquirem uma dimensão mais importante e radical do que aquela observada nas ruas (Ladeira 2020).

As estratégias teatrais dessa ‘nova direita’ evoluíram do campo performativo das ruas para as plataformas performativas digitais.<sup>16</sup> Recriadas e novamente testadas no mundo digital, elas voltam confirmadas, reformuladas ou eliminadas para as ruas. Nesse sentido, um ponto interessante nessa disputa pelas ruas insere-se na determinação da medida do sucesso ou do fracasso de uma manifestação. Como estabelecer se uma manifestação foi realmente bem-sucedida, expressiva, que levou milhares de pessoas às ruas, reiterando assim seu poder de confirmação e de legitimação? A comprovação se dá *a posteriori*, por meio de documentação, e por vezes manipulação, fotográfica e pela reação que a manifestação vai conseguir suscitar nas redes sociais.<sup>17</sup> Um evento como um protesto produz uma pletora de documentos, como fotos e vídeos, que podem ser potencialmente utilizados e reestruturados na esfera digital.

Assim, o surgimento de novos atores políticos durante este período, provenientes principalmente dos movimentos já mencionados, como o MBL e o ‘Vem Para a Rua’, e a crescente mediatização de políticos conservadores, como Jair Bolsonaro, deveram-se ao surgimento de estruturas bem articuladas de ‘criação de conteúdo’ e ao uso estratégico e financiado das mídias sociais.

16. O artigo aqui citado ‘Le corps féminin en performance: Une étude de cas des mouvements #elenão et #elesim’ propõe um estudo de caso sobre a utilização política dos corpos das mulheres na campanha eleitoral de 2018 e a migração do território performativo das ruas para as redes sociais durante este período. A relação entre redes sociais e performatividade é um tema vasto, que imbrica arenas discursivas diversas e interesses financeiros de empresas privadas. É difícil estabelecer uma análise global do caso brasileiro, uma vez que de 2013 a 2018, a criação de conteúdos e a sua associação a diferentes plataformas digitais teve lugar de forma diferente consoante o grupo. O MBL, por exemplo, criou uma estrutura profissional de produção de vídeos. No entanto, entre 2013 e 2014, é possível afirmar que diferentes estratégias digitais foram experimentadas, assim como um grande público estava migrando dos meios de comunicação tradicionais para as redes sociais.

## Deus e a Família na Cruzada Moral da Extrema Direita Brasileira

Após o processo de *impeachment* da presidente Dilma Rousseff, o principal objetivo que até então promovia algum tipo de ‘unidade’ no setor conservador brasileiro havia sido alcançado. Era preciso construir novos mecanismos que garantissem uma grande adesão popular à agenda conservadora. Nesse contexto, um dos itens da agenda que mais ganhou apoio e visibilidade pública nos anos pré-eleitorais estava relacionado à defesa da moral religiosa e dos valores associados à concepção tradicional de família. O ano de 2017 foi especialmente emblemático para a consolidação desses temas na esfera pública brasileira. O perfil dos protestos se repetiu em diversas capitais do país e, basicamente, consistiu na tentativa de censurar espetáculos, performances, exposições de arte ou mesmo debates acadêmicos a partir da associação desses eventos a práticas como ‘pedofilia’ e ‘zoofilia’ ou de supostas correntes como a da ‘ideologia de gênero’ e a do ‘marxismo cultural’.

Como exemplo, podemos citar as tentativas (em alguns casos, bem-sucedidas) de censura a exposições como o *QueerMuseu* (Porto Alegre/Rio Grande do Sul) e *Faça você mesmo a sua capela Sistina*, do artista Pedro Moraleida (Belo Horizonte/MG); de espetáculos como *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus, Rainha do Céu* (*The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*), escrito por Jo Clifford e com atuação de Renata Carvalho, *La Bête*, de Wagner Schwartz e *DNA de DAN*, de Maikon K; ou à palestra

← 17. A publicação de fotos nas redes sociais é uma forma de comprovar o sucesso de uma manifestação. Nas redes sociais, podemos observar diversas estratégias fotográficas buscando o ângulo mais eficaz. A seleção habitual favorece as fotos onde um número significativo de pessoas está presente e onde a perspectiva da paisagem enfatiza esta extensão.

da filósofa estadunidense Judith Butler no Brasil.<sup>18</sup> Esses protestos tornaram-se marcos emblemáticos para a consolidação de um campo social comum em torno de pautas conservadoras, que culminaram na eleição de Jair Bolsonaro no ano seguinte.

Embora ocorressem em regiões muito distintas do país, as manifestações guardavam características semelhantes também no que tange à sua construção performático-discursiva. A estratégia de promover visibilidade por meio do efeito espetacular associado ao escândalo moral mostrou-se como uma das formas mais eficazes de construir adesão em torno dessas pautas. Além disso, a estratégia ajudou a fortalecer movimentos neoliberais e conservadores como o MBL (Movimento Brasil Livre) e a alavancar a candidatura de diversos políticos para as eleições de 2018. Como comenta a filósofa Marcia Tiburi (2019), palavras como ‘criança’ e ‘pedofilia’ tornaram-se dispositivo para produzir efeitos de choque e, por meio deles, alcançar a ‘manipulação mental e afetiva, moral e política útil ao momento’ (para. 43).

As principais pautas e frases de efeito associadas aos protestos de rua de 2017 não eram exatamente ‘novas’ — trata-se de bandeiras com vasto histórico em episódios de manifestações conservadoras mundo afora — a visibilidade e adesão inéditas alcançadas com esses protestos no período mostraram que a estratégia de associar o campo progressista à ideia de ‘promiscuidade’ e ‘apologia à homossexualidade’ era extremamente eficaz.<sup>19</sup> Na análise do sociólogo Richard Miskolci (2018), a cruzada moral encampada por setores conservadores no Brasil é fruto de uma aliança

bem-sucedida entre grupos que defendiam uma economia neoliberal (como o MBL) e ‘empreendedores morais históricos (como a Igreja Católica e seguidores de religiões evangélicas)’ (12). Miskolci ressalta a importância de se observar que a chamada ‘cruzada moral’ conservadora já vinha sendo gestada há mais de duas décadas. Como exemplo, ele remonta à genealogia do termo ‘ideologia de gênero’, cujos usos originais podem ser atribuídos à Igreja Católica, e ao termo ‘kit gay’, difundido inicialmente por políticos que alcançaram o poder em 2018, como o presidente Jair Bolsonaro (Miskolci 2018: 5). A eclosão dessas pautas no Brasil pré-eleitoral de 2017 pode ser relacionada a práticas que já vinham sendo amplamente testadas junto a diversos setores da sociedade brasileira, o que aponta para o caráter mais sistemático dessa atuação, ao contrário do que a suposta espontaneidade dos protestos parecia projetar.

## A Dimensão Teatral dos Protestos Conservadores em 2017

A fim de compreender de que modo os elementos performativos e teatrais foram usados para garantir visibilidade e adesão às pautas conservadoras no Brasil de 2017, iremos analisar dois protestos de rua ocorridos naquele ano através do conceito de ‘teatralidade’. Para Taylor, a teatralidade capta ‘o sentido construído e abrangente da performance’ (2013: 40). Em outras palavras, ‘comporta um roteiro, uma configuração paradigmática que conta com participantes supostamente ao vivo, estruturados ao redor de um enredo esquemático, com um fim pretendido (apesar de adaptável)’ (40). Ela entende a teatralidade como um elemento de qualquer performance e relacionada ao termo ‘roteiro teatral’ (40).

Usando o exemplo do ‘encontro colonial’, Taylor destaca que ‘poderíamos também ver os roteiros como paradigmas para a construção de sentidos

18. Judith Butler esteve em São Paulo em novembro de 2017 para participar do Colóquio Internacional ‘Os Fins da Democracia’, que contou com a participação de outros intelectuais.

19. Para conhecer outros exemplos da relação entre arte e censura sob alegações religiosas na história recente do Brasil, ver: <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/cultura-e-lazer/artes/noticia/2017/09/cancelamento-da-queermuseu-conheca-outros-casos-de-confrontos-entre-arte-e-censura-em-porto-alegre-9894213.html> [acessado em 21 Nov. 2021].

que estruturam os ambientes sociais, comportamentos e consequências potenciais' (60). Um dos propósitos desses roteiros é tornar visível 'o que já está lá — os fantasmas, as imagens, os estereótipos' (60). Nossa decisão de utilizar os termos 'teatralidade' e 'roteiro teatral' no contexto dos protestos conservadores está relacionada ao propósito de entendê-los como estratégias planejadas com finalidade política. Em muitos casos, esses protestos foram criados para tornar visíveis alguns 'fantasmas' e 'estereótipos' ligados a assuntos polêmicos e sensíveis na esfera pública brasileira e para chamar a atenção junto a políticos emergentes.

O primeiro protesto de rua analisado ocorreu em Belo Horizonte, em distintas datas no mês de outubro de 2017, e reuniu cerca de quatrocentas pessoas que manifestaram contra a exposição 'Faça você mesmo a sua Capela Sistina',<sup>20</sup> de Pedro Moraleida (1977-1999), exibida, naquele período, no centro cultural Palácio das Artes. No dia 4 de outubro, o então vereador Jair Di Gregório (PP – Partido Progressistas) postou um vídeo nas redes sociais no qual acusa falsamente professoras de escolas públicas de Belo Horizonte de levar estudantes à exposição, que tinha classificação para maiores de 18 anos e apresentava pinturas relacionadas a símbolos sexuais e cristãos (Pró-vida e Família 2017). O vídeo rapidamente viralizou nas redes sociais e tornou-se o principal estímulo para os diferentes protestos realizados em frente ao Palácio das Artes nos dias seguintes.

A partir dessa primeira ação que precedeu o protesto, é possível observar que o trânsito entre espaços reais e virtuais é um aspecto central para a compreensão do caráter performativo e teatral desses atos. Aqui, a noção de 'enquadramento', discutida por Féral (2015) em diálogo com Erving Goffman, colabora no entendimento acerca das estratégias

de adesão aos protestos. No contexto dos protestos conservadores no Brasil, a transposição do ambiente físico para o digital (por meio de postagens nas redes sociais) acompanha um enquadramento elaborado tanto por uma construção narrativa — muitas vezes organizada com informações falsas, que, no entanto, são legitimadas pela existência de vídeos e fotos — como, conseqüentemente, pela ideia de transformar o *evento em signo*. Aqui, não se trata de um signo artístico, mas da construção de um imaginário carregado de ficcionalidade, no qual significantes como 'crianças', 'arte' e 'escola' surgem aglutinados de modo a construir uma fantasmagoria comum relacionada ao ato da pedofilia. No caso do vídeo do vereador, havia também a inclusão de trilha sonora para criar um efeito de comoção associado à suposta denúncia.

Após a disseminação do vídeo, a primeira leva de protestos contra a exposição foi convocada por Leonardo Alvim de Melo, pastor da Comunidade Evangélica Projeto Viver (Ceprovi). Se na primeira manifestação (realizada em 5 de outubro) havia cerca de cinquenta manifestantes, os protestos seguintes alcançaram números bem mais expressivos, com a presença de trezentas a quatrocentas pessoas em cada um deles. Cada vez mais teatrais, os protestos dos dias 10 e 13 de outubro já tinham como manifestantes um grupo bem mais heterogêneo, formado por 'evangélicos, católicos, grupos organizados pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff, jovens da Direita Minas<sup>21</sup> e apoiadores de Bolsonaro' (Simões 2017: para. 1). Nos cartazes e nos gritos de protesto, a exposição surgia associada a práticas como a da 'zoofilia', 'pedofilia' e 'cristofobia'.

Dentre as ações observadas nos dois atos, a principal delas foi a ação de rezar o 'Pai Nosso' em frente ao Palácio das Artes (Rádio Itatiaia 2017). De joelhos, carregando velas, cruzeiros, bíblias e uma imagem de Maria

20. 'Faça você mesmo a sua Capela Sistina' é uma série de desenhos feita entre 1997 e 1998 por Pedro Moraleida Bernardes, antes de seu suicídio em 1999. Alguns dos temas de suas obras são: a complexidade das questões religiosas e as formas de expressão da sexualidade, ligadas à complexidade das relações entre poder, política e ideologia.

21. Movimento criado em 2016 no estado de Minas Gerais, defende o 'resgate dos valores familiares tradicionais' e o 'liberalismo econômico'.



FIGURA 15

(além, é claro, de celulares), os manifestantes realizaram uma performance de grande impacto visual em uma das principais avenidas da cidade (Fig. 15). Além da ação performática em si, outro aspecto que colaborou para impulsionar e ampliar a visibilidade deste e de outros protestos do período foi a própria reação dos setores progressistas. Também construídas a partir de elementos simbólicos (como o uso de faixas de interdição na boca dos manifestantes para simbolizar uma situação de censura e silenciamento), as manifestações em defesa da arte e críticas às tentativas de censura acabavam fazendo com que os protestos iniciais chamassem ainda mais atenção, devido à dimensão conflitiva que a presença de manifestantes do campo progressista trazia aos episódios. De fato, como foi visto em diversos protestos do período, a construção de um campo antagônico com os setores progressistas tornou-se outro motor para a adesão social em torno das pautas conservadoras.



FIGURA 16

Foi um roteiro semelhante de antagonismos que se repetiu no dia 07 novembro de 2017 na porta do centro cultural Sesc Pompeia, em São Paulo, motivado pela participação da filósofa estadunidense Judith Butler no colóquio ‘Os Fins da Democracia’, organizado pela Universidade de São Paulo em conjunto com a Universidade da Califórnia. Comparado ao protesto analisado anteriormente, as manifestações pró e contra Butler foram menores — aqui, eram cerca de setenta pessoas no total. Porém, tanto a radicalidade do confronto entre quem defendia e atacava Butler quanto o alto grau de teatralidade construída pelos protestantes conservadores (além, obviamente, da importância internacional associada ao nome da filósofa estadunidense) fizeram com que o protesto tivesse uma grande repercussão na imprensa e nas redes sociais não apenas no Brasil, como também no exterior.

Ao analisar as simbologias presentes nos protestos contra a vinda de Butler ao Brasil, um aspecto que chama atenção é heterogeneidade das



FIGURA 17

‘bandeiras’ aglutinadas ali. Para além dos cartazes mais diretamente relacionados ao motivo do protesto, como os dizeres ‘*Go to Hell*’ ou contrários à ‘ideologia de gênero’, as críticas tinham também outros alvos, cuja relação com Butler era, no mínimo, inusitada (Fig. 16 e 17). Eles iam desde instituições como a ONU e a Unesco até dois dos ex-presidentes de partidos rivais na política brasileira: Lula (PT) e Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) (Fig. 18). A miscelânea simbólica incluía ainda: bandeiras do Brasil e de Israel; vestimentas e discursos que reivindicavam a volta da Monarquia no Brasil; protestos contra Venezuela e Cuba; camisetas com pedidos de intervenção militar; além das habituais cruzeiros e bíblias (Fig. 19).

Como aponta a antropóloga Letícia Cesarino (2019), um dos elementos que ajudam a compreender a profunda reorganização do campo político-identitário no Brasil do período é a noção de ‘pessoa fractal’. Cesarino observou que um dos aspectos mais bem-sucedidos da campanha



FIGURA 18

bolsonarista em 2018 consistiu em explorar, via redes sociais e valendo-se da lógica dos algoritmos, uma concepção identitária junto à sua base que consistia em uma ‘fragmentação infinitesimal de “pedaços” identitários que podem ser articulados e ganhar escala em (...) cadeias de equivalência — notadamente, por meio da representação do tipo populista’ (2019: 548). Embora se referisse às estratégias digitais do *bolsonarismo*, é possível observar que a constelação de simbologias presente nos protestos contra Butler já materializava a ‘cadeia de equivalências potencialmente interminável’ (Laclau 2003: 319) que caracteriza a chamada ‘razão populista’. Para o autor, a emergência e expansão das ‘identidades populares’ (325) só se torna possível quando a heterogeneidade de suas reivindicações é conduzida a alguma forma de unidade através de ‘articulações políticas equivalenciais’ (325).

Sendo assim, o que se observa na teatralidade presente nas manifestações contra Butler é a eficácia da pauta vinculada a questões morais



FIGURA 19

e sexuais para impulsionar uma série de cadeias de equivalências indiretamente associadas a ela. Assim, a pauta ‘anti-PT’, vinculada ao repúdio a instituições internacionais ligadas ao campo dos direitos humanos, como a ONU e a Unesco, ou mesmo à classe política tradicional, simbolizada pelo ex-presidente Fernando Henrique Cardoso, eram reunidas como inimigos comuns diante de categorias amplas e relativamente genéricas, como ‘Deus’ e ‘Família’. Trata-se de significantes que ainda hoje são os mais explorados pelo presidente Jair Bolsonaro em seus discursos e *slogans* de governo.

Em nome de Deus e da Família, os protestos contra a vinda de Judith Butler ao Brasil tiveram um desfecho digno do conhecido ‘efeito catártico’ associado ao gênero dramático em sua forma mais tradicional. Além dos cartazes que traziam a imagem de Butler estampada junto a frases como ‘Go to Hell’ e ‘Pedofilia Não’, os manifestantes carregavam ainda uma grande boneca de pano vestida com sutiã, chapéu de bruxa e com o rosto da filósofa, que foi queimada ao final do protesto (TV Estadão 2017). Além de remeter à prática da Igreja Católica no período da Inquisição — o que chama atenção novamente para a construção de um ‘roteiro’ (Taylor 2013) durante o protesto — a performance também recorria à estratégia de ficcionalizar os adversários a partir da recriação fantasmática de seus alvos. Não por acaso, o texto de Butler que refletia sobre as reações acerca de sua vinda ao Brasil ganhou o título de ‘Fantasma do Gênero’ (Butler 2017). A dimensão de fantasmagoria foi associada ao vínculo de sua teoria de gênero a noções como ‘pedofilia’ ou mesmo ‘ideologia’.

É possível inferir que o uso estratégico da teatralidade nos protestos de 2017 ajudou não apenas a consolidar o campo conservador brasileiro, como também a ampliar o seu alcance. Através das estratégias citadas acima, foi aberto o caminho para a construção daquela maioria eleitoral que, no ano seguinte, consagrou Jair Bolsonaro como presidente da República.

Nos dias que circundam a finalização deste texto, encontramos-nos diante de expressivas convocações para manifestações públicas nacionais para o dia 7 de setembro de 2021, feitas pelo presidente Jair Bolsonaro. Feriado nacional, nessa data comemora-se no país o Dia da Independência do Brasil de Portugal, e, portanto, uma série de cerimônias cívicas são anualmente realizadas tanto nos Estados, como no Distrito Federal. Neste ano, o tradicional desfile militar não aconteceu em Brasília, a capital do país, e as cerimônias oficiais foram reduzidas. No lugar delas, foram realizadas diversas manifestações em todo o Brasil, convocadas e protagonizadas pelo próprio presidente, com foco em pautas antidemocráticas, como ameaças de intervenção no Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF).

Desde a sua investidura, Bolsonaro tem incentivado e motivado aglomerações e manifestações diversas: desfiles de moto, aparições públicas erguendo caixas de cloroquina,<sup>22</sup> por exemplo. Dessa forma, quando pensamos no conjunto expressivo de manifestações de rua no Brasil recente, observamos uma mudança fundamental: até 2018, os principais apoiadores de manifestações do espectro da direita eram claramente entidades e grupos, como o ‘Vem Para a Rua’, MBL, ‘Revolutados On-line’ e tantos outros. O que acontece hoje é a conclamação e a organização de manifestações deliberadamente realizadas pelo próprio presidente da República, que direciona o chamado aos seus apoiadores mais fiéis e fanáticos, dispostos ‘a morrer pelo Brasil’, e que defende constitucionalmente uma intervenção militar.

<sup>22</sup>. Desde o início da pandemia, Bolsonaro defendeu o uso da cloroquina contra o coronavírus. Essa é uma postura controversa, pois não há evidências científicas sobre a eficácia da cloroquina para o tratamento da covid-19.

Embora não seja nossa intenção neste artigo analisar mais detidamente as manifestações ocorridas após as eleições de Bolsonaro, é importante recuperá-las rapidamente aqui a fim de traçar uma trajetória iconográfica, performativa e conceitual acerca das principais pautas que a ‘nova direita’ (agora rebatizada como ‘extrema direita’) tem encampado no Brasil desde 2015. Ainda que uma característica central das manifestações conservadoras seja a profusão de pautas difusas, reunidas em ‘articulações políticas equivalenciais’ (Laclau 2005) típicas das estratégias políticas do tipo populistas, é possível traçar, como mencionamos antes, algumas tendências dominantes em diferentes períodos da trajetória histórica dos protestos recentes no país.

A primeira tendência, que aqui batizamos sob o significante ‘Pátria’, pode ser identificada como o signo dominante das manifestações de direita realizadas entre 2013 e 2016. Recuperando um comportamento típico dos nacionalismos conservadores (no Brasil, explorado, por exemplo, durante a Ditadura Militar com *slogans* como ‘Brasil: ame-o ou deixe-o’), as manifestações foram se tornando progressivamente mais verde-amarelas, cores da bandeira brasileira. Na esteira de diversos descontentamentos com o país — sobretudo por problemas relacionados à corrupção e à crise econômica — a retórica da pátria era ampla o suficiente para reunir uma heterogeneidade de manifestantes sem necessariamente ter que conformar uma feição ideológica específica. Nesse contexto, a figura do manifestante-torcedor (simbolizada pelo uso da camiseta oficial da CBF) tornou-se um emblema não apenas para compreender a teatralidade e performatividade própria desses protestos — que restauram comportamentos oriundos das arquibancadas do futebol —, mas também o modo como a polarização antagônica entre o setor conservador e o setor progressista foi construída nesse período sob uma estética e uma performatividade muito próximas a do espírito de rivalidade das torcidas em torno dos times de futebol. Ainda hoje, a retórica da pátria é elemento central da política de comunicação do governo

e todas as suas peças publicitárias devem conter, necessariamente, a frase ‘Pátria amada, Brasil’.

A segunda tendência visível nas manifestações do período, cujas palavras-chave estão igualmente estampadas nos *slogans* governamentais, enfatiza os significantes ‘Deus’ e ‘Família’. Para os manifestantes de então, o país precisava ser resgatado das forças que o degeneraram, no caso, o Partido dos Trabalhadores. Perseguir inimigos comuns continuou a conformar uma unidade em torno da heterogeneidade de reivindicações da direita brasileira. O roteiro da ‘cruzada moral’ — também explorado amplamente durante a Ditadura Militar brasileira — surge remodelado por novos espectros, como o da ‘ideologia de gênero’. É nesse período que o campo da direita começa a explorar mais ostensivamente o adjetivo ‘conservador’ (Silva 2021), e setores artísticos e universitários tornam-se os novos alvos do momento. A pauta conservadora, que historicamente possui grande capilaridade junto à sociedade brasileira, mostrou-se uma importante estratégia para atrair camadas populares em torno do campo da direita.

Entre 2016-2018, com a consolidação de Jair Bolsonaro como o político que alcança maior popularidade dentre os vários candidatos à presidência associados ao campo da direita, o terceiro e último significante que ganha corpo na simbologia das performances e manifestações do período foi aquele associado às ‘Armas’. Emblema da dimensão autoritária e, por vezes fascista, do atual presidente, as armas representam a face violenta, patriarcal, abertamente racista e homofóbica, reiterada nas performances públicas de Jair Bolsonaro. O gesto mimético de uma arma realizado com as mãos tornou-se seu símbolo de campanha e foi performado em diversas aparições públicas de Bolsonaro. Também enquadrada no contexto da constelação simbólica de ‘Armas’, toda a iconografia associada à categoria militar acompanha esse último eixo de simbologias associadas aos protestos de 2013 a 2021.<sup>23</sup> É importante

frisar que, no atual governo, os militares possuem o maior número de cargos de confiança desde a reabertura democrática.

Ao investigar detalhadamente a constelação de símbolos desenhados nos protestos da direita brasileira, traçamos uma perspectiva das pautas dominantes em cada período, além de compreender as performances e as estratégias teatrais que tornaram esses protestos tão visíveis na esfera pública brasileira e que culminaram na eleição de Jair Bolsonaro à presidência. O exame dos protestos de rua do período em questão sob as lentes do teatro e dos estudos da performance mostrou-se uma prática com potencial de contribuir para a compreensão dessas manifestações a partir de uma abordagem transdisciplinar. •

← 23. É importante mencionar que, nesse período, as manifestações da esquerda também foram numerosas e estabeleceram uma grande tensão nas disputas políticas descritas neste artigo. Desde os protestos contra o impeachment de Dilma Rousseff até os protestos do #elenão contra a eleição de Bolsonaro, as manifestações de esquerda também estiveram bastante presentes desde 2013.

## FIGURA 1

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 13 de março de 2016. Uma manifestante com seu rosto pintado e vestida com um traje típico de torcedores de futebol. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 2

Manifestação da direita em São Paulo, na Avenida Paulista, 13 de março de 2016. Manifestantes com os rostos pintados tiram fotos com a bandeira do Brasil em frente ao 'Pato Amarelo da FIESP'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 3

Protesto 'Fora Dilma' em Brasília, 7 de setembro de 2015. Os bonecos infláveis 'Pixuleco' e 'Bandilma' no gramado da Esplanada dos Ministérios. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 4

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 15 de março de 2015. Um homem de verde e amarelo, com um nariz de palhaço vermelho. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 5

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 13 de março de 2016. Um manifestante está vestido de prisioneiro e usa uma máscara do ex-presidente Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. Ele também carrega uma máscara de Dilma Rousseff. Suas mãos são amplificadas pelas luvas infláveis, com as cores e símbolos da bandeira brasileira. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 6

Manifestação de direita em São Paulo, na Avenida Paulista, 13 de março de 2016. Adereços para os manifestantes pendurados à venda: bonecos infláveis, bandeiras do Brasil, faixas 'Fora Dilma', flores e uma máscara do 'Japonês da Polícia Federal'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 7

Manifestação de direita em São Paulo, na Avenida Paulista, 13 de março de 2016. O 'Pato Amarelo' encontra-se em frente à sede da FIESP, na Avenida Paulista. Um vendedor de bandeiras do Brasil usa uma máscara 'zumbi' de Dilma Rousseff. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 8

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 15 de março de 2015. Escritos nos cartazes: 'Intervenção Militar Já!' e 'Comunista é bom morto', 'Dilma, Maduro, Hugo, Fidel, Cristina, Lula: Lixo do Mundo'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 9

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 13 de março de 2016. Um jovem com a cara pintada segura o cartaz: 'Vote no Bolsonaro 2018'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 10

Manifestação de direita em São Paulo, na Avenida Paulista, 13 de março de 2016. Um carro de som, repleto de faixas, onde se lê: 'Fora Comunismo', 'Comunismo não' e 'Brasil Acima de Tudo!'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 11

Protesto pelo *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff no Rio de Janeiro, 15 de março de 2015. Homens com os rostos pintados de verde e amarelo e uma multidão vestindo camisas da seleção brasileira. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 12

O gramado da Esplanada dos Ministérios foi dividido por um muro metálico tendo o Congresso Nacional ao fundo. No lado direito da imagem, os manifestantes pelo *impeachment* da ex-presidente Dilma Rousseff, e no lado esquerdo, aqueles que eram contra. Fotografia de Juca Varella, cortesia da Agência Brasil.

## FIGURA 13

Votação do *impeachment* na Câmara dos Deputados, 18 de abril de 2016. A Câmara dos Deputados da perspectiva dos aliados do governo de Dilma Rousseff. No cartaz vermelho está escrito 'Fica Dilma' e podemos identificar outro cartaz, com a reprodução de uma capa rasgada da Constituição Federal brasileira. Os deputados usam gravatas neutras ou vermelhas e broches do Partido dos Trabalhadores. Na parte superior da sala, podemos ver também várias câmeras e holofotes. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 14

A sessão de votação pela continuação do processo de *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff na Câmara dos Deputados em Brasília. Fotografia de Valter Campanato. Cortesia da Agência Brasil.

## FIGURA 15

Católicos rezam o terço em frente ao Palácio das Artes em protesto contra a exposição de Pedro Moraleida, no dia 13 de outubro de 2017. Captura de tela do YouTube (canal da Rádio Itatiaia).

## FIGURA 16

Conservadores protestam contra a participação de Judith Butler em um evento no Sesc Pompéia, no dia 7 de novembro de 2017. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 17

Conservadores protestam contra a participação de Judith Butler em um evento no Sesc Pompéia. Escritos nos cartazes: 'Menos ONU, mais Brasil' e 'UNESCO, escola do terror'. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 18

Conservadores protestam contra a participação de Judith Butler em um evento no Sesc Pompéia. Captura de tela a partir de vídeo online. Cortesia da Mídia Ninja.

## FIGURA 19

Conservadores protestam contra a participação de Judith Butler em um evento no Sesc Pompéia. Cortesia: Mídia Ninja.

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**THEATRICAL  
ASSEMBLIES  
AND THEIR  
DISCONTENTS**  
**REPRESENTATION AND  
RESENTMENT IN THE LIGHT  
OF A PANDEMIC**  
**LEON GABRIEL**

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## KEYWORDS

assembly, representation, demonstration, resentment, sharing/division

## MOTS-CLÉS

assemblée, représentation, manifestation, ressentiment, partage

# SUMMARY

This essay analyses the self-proclaimed *Querdenken* (lateral thinking) demonstrations against the Covid-19 politics in Germany. This reactionary movement shares the assumption of certain artistic activist strategies, that political force lies in such assemblies. As a starting point, a comparison between *General Assembly* by Milo Rau (2017) and *Querdenken* is drawn, as both performed a 'storming' of the German parliament. Following up on this comparison, the essay develops the tension between the critique of representation undertaken by (populist) assemblies and the phantasmatic assumption of forming a coherent sovereign through the assembly itself. The argument concludes with an emphasis on sharing and division, and an outlook on what can be learned for theatre and performance: to measure assemblies by how they deal with their inherent complexities, asymmetries, and exclusions.

# RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les manifestations auto-proclamées de *Querdenken* (pensée latérale) contre la politique du Covid-19 en Allemagne. Ce mouvement réactionnaire partage l'hypothèse de certaines stratégies artistiques militantes, selon laquelle il existe une force politique dans les assemblées en tant que telles. Le point de départ est une comparaison entre *General Assembly* de Milo Rau (2017) et *Querdenken*, qui ont tous deux pris d'assaut le parlement allemand. Dans le prolongement de cette comparaison, l'article développe la tension entre la critique de la représentation entreprise par les assemblées (populistes) et l'hypothèse fantasmagorique de former un souverain cohérent à travers l'assemblée elle-même. L'argumentation se termine par un accent sur le partage et la division et une perspective sur ce qui peut être appris pour le théâtre et la performance: mesurer les assemblées par la façon dont elles gèrent leurs complexités, asymétries et exclusions inhérentes.

# Foreplay: Storming Representation

A scene taken from a well-known angle: the *Reichstag* building in Berlin, seat of the German parliament, is in the centre at some distance, its green meadow in front. Then, on command, a group of demonstrators runs towards the building, jeering loudly, some waving flags. The whole thing does not last a minute, the crowd already stops again on the forecourt of the seat of Reichstag, and they dutifully do not enter the blocked stairs of the building. The participants stand around somewhat awkwardly, later there is a rally on the lawn with a concluding concert.

A second scene, this time filmed with a shaky camera, probably via smartphone: a rally already on the forecourt of the Reichstag, driven by a speaker, the crowd storms up the stairs of the building, waving lots of flags, especially the black-white-red *Reichskriegsflagge* (German imperial war flag) and the *Reichsfahnen* (German imperial flag). These pictures later go through the press and around the world (compare “‘Anti-corona’ Extremists Try to Storm German Parliament’ 2020; Bennhold 2020).

# Against the Consensus of Assemblies' Dissensus

In 2017, Swiss theatre director Milo Rau staged the first scene described as the symbolic conclusion of his project *General Assembly* and at the same time as a re-enactment of the Russian Revolution's storming of the Tsar's Winter Palace in 1917 — which actually was itself only a staging by Russian director Nikolaj Evreinov (compare Arns, Chubarov, and Sasse 2017). The second scene described above was not a staging led by a theatre director, but happened in 2020 within one of the major demonstrations of the self-proclaimed *Querdenken* (lateral thinking) movement. *Querdenken* shares similarities with and even worked in part as a role model for other demonstrations against the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures that happened in different parts of the world from March 2020 until today.

These demonstrations have been widely reported by the press as well as the promotion of these movements through platforms such as Facebook, Telegram etc. Especially, *Querdenken* worked on their very own documentation as well as alternative media outlets because the movement sees the press as obedient to governments and thus full of so-called 'fake news'. Hence, the protesters were celebrating a symbolic triumph on their part with the pictures they took during their respective storming of the Reichstag described in the second scene. Now, they had impressive images for their claim to be a true uprising of 'the people' as a whole who supposedly were in open rebellion against the allegedly corrupt and conspiratorial elites of politicians, media, and industry (especially the sectors of technology and big pharma).

What can be learned from these two different but also similar stormings, particularly considering the potential of (theatrical) activism and the role of participants within such forms of political assemblies? The intersection that emerges here between Rau's artistic action and the attempted uprising of *Querdenken*, as well as their differences, are the reason for this essay's exploration of political-theatrical assemblies with their critique of representation in more detail — and I will come back to these two respective stormings. Of course, both events do not show something genuinely new. In the last ten years, many different political movements with public assemblies emerged worldwide: from the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street to the protests at Syntagma Square in Athens at the beginning of the last decade or especially the *School Strike for Climate* beginning in 2019. Accordingly, and with good reason, performative activism and antagonism — often against state-power — have been evaluated as a critical and emancipatory practice within the last years (compare, for example, *geheimagentur*; Schäfer and Tsianos 2016; Fisher and Katsouraki 2017). In the German-speaking context, the theatrical and performative possibilities of assemblies, gatherings, movements, protests, and politics of representation in the light of an ongoing crisis of liberal democracies have also been widely explored by artists such as She She Pop, Schwabinggrad Ballett, Sibylle Peters, Sebastian Matthias, Jonas Staal, and Ligna — just to name a few.

However, Rau's performance and particularly the example of *Querdenken* are brought up here for another reason: the aim of this essay is to scrutinise the assumption that engaged participants of assemblies

would already insofar be political, as they contest the mere spectacle of representational politics. According to this view, the assumed political force of assemblies would therefore lie in their potential as a multitude for direct action and critical engagement — instead of being just bystanders.<sup>1</sup> If protesters perform dissent, then it is also necessary to look at the specific assumptions that fuel such dissent and to lay open goals which it serves. Differently put, dissent is not an end in itself, neither are assemblies. Therefore, this essay will question a specific notion of the relation between assemblies and theatre (as well as performance): a fundamental misunderstanding, according to which theatre seems to be a place of negotiation, of participation, of politics per se *because* it also assembles. This misunderstanding connects very different artistic and activist strategies, for example, the two abovementioned stormings of the Reichstag. The essay also lays out the challenges that derive from the problematic idea, that a public, an audience, or any other assembled group forms ‘a whole’. The aim is to offer a critical exploration of the concept of ‘assembly’ and the problematisation of its all too often simplistic projection on the alleged political potential of theatre.

The essay will first take a short look at the early phase of *Querdenken*, the so-called *Hygienesemonstrationen* (hygiene demonstrations) in front of the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz as it gives an insight into the connection between the critique of representation (and representational sites) as well as the aspirations of populist movements such as *Querdenken*. Then, I will look again at the two stormings on the Reichstag. Following up on this, I will give a deeper insight of the logics and

underlying concepts of *Querdenken* by highlighting three central common assumptions of those involved into it: on liberty, ‘the people’, and on sovereignty. Building on this, the essay comes to its central theoretical point. By analysing Plato’s verdict of teatrocracy, it contradicts the notion that theatre is *sui generis* a place of (political) assembly. Instead, the conclusion and outlook of this essay highlight the aspects of division and asymmetries, in order to think about what can be learned for theatrical and performative assemblies.

This essay focuses on the reactionary demonstrations against the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures and only at the end sheds light on critical, emancipatory movements that also happened during the pandemic, such as Fridays For Future or Black Lives Matter. It would be indeed important to further study those forms of protest and alternative politics that stand for critical positions. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the wave of New Fascist and Third Position movements (as most recently the Trucker’s protest in Canada) as well as the historical background of German Fascism and its theatrical stagings of the masses (compare Annuß 2018), I think it is also crucial to carefully study and understand those movements that one does *not* at all support. Especially because ‘taking the streets and public places’ is a strategy that has been appropriated by reactionary and fascist forces while claiming to be the alleged ‘alternative’ to the parliamentary system.

1. Of course, there are many other aspects that make public gatherings relevant, for example, empowerment, visibility, and agency, but their (academic) valorisation is often linked to an emphasis on the physical presence as opposed to representation (compare Diana Taylor 2020: 7). Even though I value the work of scholars such as Isabell Lorey on political movements, I am critical towards the notion of a ‘presentist democracy’ or ‘Democracy in the Present’ (Lorey 2022) as a way to undergo the dichotomy of representational democracy and assumed immediate presence.

# The Hygiene Demonstrations: A Short Note on the Prehistory of *Querdenken*

The German *Querdenken* demonstrations form very heterogeneous assemblies in which contradictory positions emerge. I will highlight some central motifs of their self-image in the next section of the essay. But no matter how heterogeneous the movement shows itself in detail, there is nothing to sugar-coat about demonstrators who have no problem taking their demands to the streets together with those in favour of openly anti-democratic, racist, and anti-Semitic positions. Wearing Jewish stars that say ‘unvaccinated’, the claim that mouth-nose coverings equate to slave masks, and the titling of the German Infection Protection Act that passed in November 2020 as an ‘Enabling Act’ (as reference to the Enabling Act of 1933 passed by the Nazi party) are only the tip of the iceberg.

The fact that people demonstrate per se, that they disagree with the decisions taken by governments and show this is, first of all, the exercise of an important fundamental right. Demonstrations do not have to be allowed in Germany, they can at most be prohibited for certain reasons. The fact that the publicly visible criticism of the Government formulated by means of demonstrations has been appropriated by *Querdenken* represents ‘a real dilemma for an emancipatory left for which the criticism of state surveillance and control actions was and is constitutive’ (Wulf 2021: 327).<sup>2</sup> Already at the beginning of the pandemic, various

2. If not stated otherwise, all translations from publications in other languages to English are by the author. For a leftist critique of the EU’s ongoing anti-human rights policy against refugees under Coronavirus, see Loick 2020.

critical voices pointed to the alarming increase in power both for the state as well as for pharmaceutical and online corporations, some of them, however, with a rhetoric of overbidding and maximum inaccuracy (more on this in an instant). In the wake of this, some first demonstrations emerged, particularly in front of Berlin’s famous theatre, the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz.

In April 2020, the dramaturges/publishers Anselm Lenz and Hendrik Sodenkamp founded the *Kommunikationsstelle Demokratischer Widerstand* (Democratic Resistance Communication Office) and its weekly newspaper. They mobilised in front of the Volksbühne for the hygiene demonstrations under the hashtag #nichtohneuns (not without us). Very quickly, well-known figures from the German ‘Cross-Front’<sup>3</sup> scene such as Martine Lejeune, Ken Jebsen, and Jürgen Elsässer (Betschka 2021) as well as outspoken anti-Semites such as the Right-wing extremist Nikolai Nerling joined the hygiene demonstrations (compare Piontek 2020).<sup>4</sup> Lenz had already published in the ‘Cross-Front’-leaning portal *RubikonNews* in 2019 (Lenz 2019) which is known for spreading conspiracy ideologies.<sup>5</sup> But nevertheless, Lenz and Sodenkamp themselves were seen as leftists before, coming from the cultural sector. They declared Giorgio Agamben as patron saint of their movement, even editor of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. In their newspaper and blog articles, they referred time and again to the Italian philosopher and his theory of the ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2005). Although Agamben denied being in contact with the publishers (and even of knowing the newspaper),

3. Cross-Front (*Querfront*) is the German version of the so-called ‘Third Position’ fascist movement that sees itself between capitalism and communism as well as beyond a traditional opposition between political Left and Right, instead proclaiming alliances between both.

4. Anti-Semitism is intrinsically linked with conspiracy ideologies, and it plays a constant role within *Querdenken* (compare Balandat, Schreiter, and Seidel-Arpač 2021).

5. The portal also contains the more recent pamphlet, denoted by Lenz (2020) himself as his central text which clearly contains conspiracy ideologies.

it is no surprise that his very own outspoken statements on the Covid-19 policy were taken up. Agamben himself may have mentioned some points worth considering, but made above all sweeping and false generalisations. His mistake ‘in confusing his conception of biopolitics [...] and the material facts of an all too real virus’ was sharply criticised by several of the philosophers who were otherwise close to him such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Roberto Esposito (Castrillón and Marchevsky 2021: 7).<sup>6</sup>

But what exactly is it about the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz being the starting point for these demonstrations? Despite their differences, the Reichstag building and the Volksbühne are comparable as places of representation.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Sodenkamp and Lenz had both been involved in the occupation of the Volksbühne that had happened in 2017 and which turned against Chris Dercon as artistic director and against the city’s housing policies. As a concrete as well as symbolic place, the Volksbühne figures as an important locality where the role of public stages and the call for visibility connect. Unlike the Théâtre de l’Odéon occupied in Paris in 1968, the Volksbühne is a theatre with proletarian rather than bourgeois history. Even if it clearly appealed to a bourgeois audience, the reference to the critical art of the GDR on the one hand and to proletarian culture in general on the other was the cement to the long-transformed working class (think of the slogan

6. Inacceptable were those statements such as the one that the virus would not be dangerous or that university professors who would participate in online teaching are the ‘perfect equivalent of the university teachers who swore allegiance to the fascist regime in 1931’ (Agamben 2020: para. 6). At his worst, he claimed in July 2021 against the political decision to loosen the restrictions of civil rights for those citizens in Italy (and Europe) that are vaccinated and thus against the so-called green pass (the vaccination document): ‘[T]he vaccine is thus being turned into a kind of political-religious symbol designed to discriminate between citizens [...]. The “green pass” turns those without it into virtual yellow star bearers.’ (Agamben 2021: para. 2).

7. On representation as a duality of ‘*vertreten* (“represent”) and *darstellen* (“re-present”)', see Spivak 1988: 276.

‘East’ emblazoned on the roof under its former long-time director Frank Castorf, which Dercon had dismantled). This background, as well as the central location for urban development, were essential factors for the protest at the time to turn against the policy Dercon stood for at the moment of his appointment (Goetz and Laudenbach 2018).

For the protesters at the time, who had come together under the collective *Staub zu Glitzer* (dust to glitter), it was not least about art and its possibilities in an increasingly market-driven city (Graw 2017). However, this was not the case with the hygiene demonstrations. Rather, the struggle against the big picture, the alleged ‘Corona regime’, was and is on its agenda. Although some of today’s actors of *Querdenken* were thus recruited from the former environment of the occupation and the protest against Dercon, the overlaps are rather small. With a view to the early phase of *Querdenken*, it is noticeable that with the hygiene demonstrations an attempt was made to copy a certain appearance and thus dock onto the occupation of the Volksbühne.<sup>8</sup> This theatre also offers the ideal ground for this copy because, in the logic of the struggle against the ‘big whole’, this place, like the Reichstag, can stand for certain practices of representation, which are then to be overcome in favour of a self-representation of ‘the people’. The place of the people’s stage must consequently be taken over to create an assembly that proclaims to be itself direct, in action, and thus fully ‘present’ (instead of only being representational).

8. Hito Steyerl suggested that there is an intrinsic structural connection between the Hygiene demonstrations and certain aesthetic conceptions of German theatre: ‘The birth of the Corona Denier movement open to the right [arises] from the spirit of the transgressive Gesamtkunstwerk.’ (Geiger, Steyerl, Güleç, and Deuflhard 2021).

# Storming the Reichstag: Two Symbolic Strategies

At this point, it is worth looking again at Rau's project and the storming by *Querdenken*. It is one of the special side effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that a new light is shed on many events very quickly and statements age badly within a short time. Of course, Rau could not foresee that there would be another event resembling his staging, but with far more media attention (and with a very different political background). His idea to symbolically link the (staged) storming of the Tsar's seat with the storming of the seat of a functioning parliamentary democracy, of all things, was in my opinion already a rather questionable idea. Its objective is clear: to create *one* impressive artistic image with historical-aesthetic resonance towards *one* other image. But this strategy is somewhat symptomatic of underestimating the politics of images in today's age of social media. Unfortunately, the 'Querdenkers' with their many activists on platforms etc. seemed to have understood today's dynamics of image production better and taken advantage of it.<sup>9</sup> Their attempted storming became all the more effective due to the sheer proliferation of *many* images that all undermined the proclaimed power of the masses. *Querdenken's* claim when storming was not to protest for another kind of representation and other politics within the existing system, but to overthrow the assumed political caste, to take back the Reichstag as 'their' proper house and to abolish the German constitution, the *Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz)* (Kleffner and Meisner 2021). It is specifically this turn against

9. This point also shows an important difference between the logic of a staging coordinated by one 'mastermind' and the one of disseminating many images by many people that are affectively charged.

democratic politics themselves that was long downplayed in the public discussions but became more and more evident in the aftermath of their respective storm on the Reichstag. However, Rau still said in the beginning of September 2020 that the crowd of *Querdenken* should have been 'let in and despair of their own lack of ideas' (Höbel 2020: para. 8). But not even two months later, a group of far-right YouTubers actually invaded the Reichstag building, thanks to the help of some representatives, in order to molest some of the well-known politicians and members of the Government. And, as it is well known, less than four months later, a mob of right-wing terrorists invaded the US Congress.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Rau's proposal proves to have aged very badly.

Both 'stormings' are symbolic politics in that they live from the creation of images and affects.<sup>11</sup> Although they have commonalities, their closeness must not be overinterpreted, nor their strategies confused. Somewhat perplexingly, Rau interprets the reactionary demonstrations as an aesthetic phenomenon, but his artistic projects are supposed to be art that becomes 'real'.<sup>12</sup> It is hence necessary to put some distance between what Rau himself claims about his works and what actually takes place in them. *Querdenken's* assault on the Reichstag and Rau's staging both turn against the kind of representation that this building stands for, but they do so, however, for very different reasons, with very different goals, and ultimately by different means. Rau's action proves

10. In the face of a globally networked Alt-Right, it is possible and plausible that these rioters could have been motivated not only by Donald Trump's speeches but also by the images from Germany.

11. So when Rau formulates that the storm of *Querdenken* 2020 was 'nothing more than a pseudo-political psychodrama' (Höbel 2020, para. 8), the question inevitably arises why this does not apply equally to his own action, especially since his image production has had even less effect in the longer term.

12. This point of view was again underlined by the director after the storming of the US-Capitol, compare Rau 2021.



Participants and spectators of the project *General Assembly* by theatre director Milo Rau stand at some distance in front of the German Reichstag building in Berlin, on 7 November 2017. Their gathering is part of the symbolic storming that Rau staged as a reenactment of the *Storming of the Winter Palace* by Nikolai Evreinov from 1917.

© Daniel Seiffert

## 'The Great Resentment' as a Basis for Populist Movements

to be problematic as it overestimates its activist potential while neglecting its underlying theatrical apparatus. The problem stems from a paradox. In order to become 'real', it must be overplayed as far as possible that anything in the theatre might look like our shared everyday life, but in order to do so, we must forget the aesthetic process behind it — in the case of Rau, his theatrical actions are shaped according to historical references and a dramatisation.<sup>13</sup> Rau's staging of the storming of the Reichstag was meant to be a symbol for a coming politics that itself is generated by theatre as an engaged art that fuels political debates. And even though this aims towards an understanding of art as a political tool, the distance between the artistic-activist representation itself and its point of reference — politics and revolutions — ultimately always remained intact in this action: this is a *symbolic staging* in the sense of an orchestrated depiction of a storming. It is theatre, which is not to be confused with its reference (even if some of the participants and even parts of the press might have mixed up these points). The preservation of this boundary, on the contrary, is by no means discernible among the participants of *Querdenken*. The underlying reasons and goals make a difference that is also important for the consideration of other political assemblies: the staging of the storming within *General Assembly* was concerned with an expansion of the Parliament for the benefit of those who have not been covered by it so far,<sup>14</sup> whereas the *Querdenken* protesters are concerned with a removal of the Parliament or at least the majority of Parliamentarians who are not considered 'on the right side', that is the one of the assumed people as such.

This claim to be the people and the rejection of political representation with its complexities (and of course also its flaws) is not only inherent to *Querdenken*. It lies at the core of various populist movements and was only pushed and fortified due to the pandemic. Whether it is the Brexiteers, the Trump supporters, or the protests of those who trivialise/deny Coronavirus, the reactionary movements of the twenty-first century collect fears of loss, desires for supposed old glory, conspiracy ideologies, plans for overthrow, and, consequently, fantasies of destruction. Eric Fassin has described this bundling of the new reactionary thinking as 'the great resentment' (Fassin 2019: 73–83), increasingly turning out to be a visitation of the neoliberal era. As Wendy Brown adds, resentment channels affects that are fed by the very area that the apologists of neoliberalism have denied, namely the social (2019). Because neoliberalism has seemed to have no alternative on a global scale for more than two decades, Fassin warns against social movements that present themselves as alternatives and use right-wing strategies — for example, in the form of a 'left populism' (Mouffe 2018). Especially the rejection of the 'opposition between left and right' in favour of an 'opposition between "them" and "us"' is dangerous in his eyes (Fassin 2019: 116). As he makes particularly clear in the extended German version of his essay, this has been the case with the French yellow vest's movement (*gilets jaunes*) who denied 'any trade union or political representation' as well as with, for example, the social movements in Italy and Brazil in 2013 that 'have fed the rejection of the system and thus played into the hands of the extreme right' (ibid.: 116–7). The resentment, it seems, aims rather broadly against any complexities — though it might not be completely false in criticising certain institutions or measures, it does so by refusing and rejecting in general.

13. Even to the point of underlaying a dramatic structure, as in *The Congo Tribunal* (2015–present). For this hint and our ongoing discussions on the matters of this essay, I thank Jörn Etzold.

14. Contradictory to this programmatic approach stands at least one important aspect of Rau's concrete selection of observers and deputies for the *General Assembly*: of seven observers, only two were women and only two came from the Global South, both male. Of sixty-four delegates, only eighteen were women.

So, as clearly as there are overlaps and transitions from (petit) bourgeois desires as well as from those of the ‘old centre’ to right-wing and even extreme right-wing ideas, these overlaps are of course not all of the same extent. Despite all the heterogeneity of *Querdenken*, in my view three central demands can be crystallised, which are charged to varying degrees with an anti-democratic (and that usually means also an anti-representative) impetus that can only tentatively be outlined here: the call for freedom, for sovereignty, and for the people. Whereas all three show different degrees of congruence with other political positions, it is their combination that is characteristic for *Querdenken* as well as other reactionary populist movements. And it is the call for sovereignty that links the other two demands: in that logic, citizens should be sovereign in their rights to freedom and property, but at the same time, the nation state should be sovereign in the sense of a unified people.

On the one hand, ‘freedom’ in a common understanding is very often linked to ideas of ownership (freedom as something I *have*, including the concept of self-ownership as prominently formulated by John Locke; Locke 2003: 111), on the other hand, it enables a *removal from the social* or a selective switching on. This becomes clearer in the case of Coronavirus deniers and belittlers than in the case of other calls for freedom, as they are calling for a liberation *from* the social; i.e., from the interdependencies and consequences of cohabitation, but *within* the social (Rebentisch 2016: 9). In contrast and in a critical understanding, freedom means to ‘change both ourselves and the social practices of which we are a part’, a process which in turn ‘is rooted in the immediate experience of self-difference’ (ibid.). Such a self-difference is of course an experience of alienation from a pre-supposed and idealised, autonomous self. Dealing with it therefore means to accept a certain degree of being entangled with other actors and forces, of being exposed and being subjugated to others — without falling into a mere passivity.

Against such a different concept of freedom, the thinking of freedom as property and detachment from the social is subsequently now combined in resentment with that of sovereignty. In liberal democracies, state and individual sovereignty are mostly not in conflict — but, in the pandemic, ‘the isolating state sword and the fortifying private handgun’ clash head-on (von Redecker 2020: 224). If revolutions involve specific modes of relating (Adamczak 2017), the *Querdenken* demonstrations want a relation to the world from their untouched private ‘parcels’ (von Redecker 2020: 225). The call for a different representation as well as the storm against representation and its places show up in the light of this as a call for a closed stage of the sovereign. In performative terms, this means a stage that allows a non-alienated, undisguised appearance seemingly free of social ties. Citizens who see themselves deprived of their sovereignty demand a phantasmatic return to a state sovereign that corresponds with them: as if a public is eager to see a spectacle, where the protagonist (the state) performs his self-possession and serves as a source of identification for each one. In both cases, bodily integrity is proclaimed. The state as a consistent body as well as the individual body have to remain untouched by what is seen as alienating, external forces.

At the same time, one has to take the importance of the claim of ‘the people’ (*das Volk*) into account. Because while calling for a sovereign state, it is also the assembly of engaged participants who each individually see themselves as sovereign and, simultaneously, want to become the protagonist together. In the initial example of the storming of the Reichstag, a collective can be seen of which each participant seeks to manifest his or her freedom from restrictions and social bonds. Furthermore, as a collective, these participants claim to be not just any collective, but *the* people as such that now enter the historical stage, supported by the distribution of their own image via social media.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the participants of *Querdenken* (and similarly, those Trump supporters who stormed the Capitol) aim at an enormous scale of their

own movement — and precisely this also serves, in the greatest possible imprecision, as the famous lowest common denominator: ‘The revolution of *the whole*, however, is only possible if society is imagined as a totality and the universal subject is endowed with a metaphysical guarantee of omnipotence in order to be able to bring about the world-historical rupture at all.’ (Marchart 2010: 294). This large scale of the political call and the turn towards conspiracy ideologies as such might stem from a very simple fact but also a tremendous narcissistic wound. In a pandemic, individual citizens are mainly thrown back to the modern condition that they all are very often reduced to being only a number within a huge population.

As mentioned, the figure of ‘the people’ as a whole offers the guarantee for such a universal subject, even when it is used by *Querdenken* participants not in a *völkisch* (racial) sense, but with reference to their allegedly ‘democratic resistance’.<sup>16</sup> Agamben, who today shares certain affinities with those who are against vaccinations and/or deny Covid-19 (see above), once pointed out the ambiguity of the word ‘people’ (Agamben 2000: 29–36): ‘on the one hand, the totality of the (state) people, on the other hand, the group of the declassed and excluded’ (Marchart 2010: 340).<sup>17</sup> From this, one could now either conclude that the

totality of the (state) people could cover the group of the excluded (which is impossible) or recognise that the ‘democratic sovereign is thus in difference to itself’ (ibid.). The call for the abolition of false representation in favour of ‘real representatives of the people’ is thus nothing other than the desire to overcome the inherent difference as such (which does not mean that every kind of representation and every exercise of it is right per se).

## The Misunderstanding of the (Theatrical) Assembly

Moving away from the closer observation of *Querdenken*, I will further examine the often-proclaimed proximity between theatre and politics. There is a specific notion of the relationship between theatre and assembly that, in my opinion, can be found both in Rau’s project and in parts of the hygiene demonstrations that emerged from the occupation of the Volksbühne. At the core of both, a false but common reversal seems to have taken root: because politics is based on assemblies and because theatre is an assembly par excellence, resembling parliaments in this respect, theatre seems therefore also to be a place of politics, of participation, ‘an agonistic arena in which society can negotiate their conflicts’ (Malzacher 2020: 170), and ‘thus a zone of experimenting with the way democracy can function’ (ibid.: 172).<sup>18</sup> But theatre is not

← 15. As Judith Butler notes: ‘If the people are constituted through a complex interplay of performance, image, acoustics, and all the various technologies engaged in those productions, then “media” is not just reporting who the people claim to be, but media has entered into the very definition of the people’ (Butler 2015: 20). Even though Butler is rather looking here at those gatherings that are evaluated as emancipative from a leftist standpoint, there is no doubt that: ‘Such gatherings are not the same as democracy itself. We cannot point to one provisional and transient gathering and say, “that is democracy in action,” and mean that everything we expect of democracy is emblemized or enacted at such a moment’ (ibid.).

16. It is part of the proclaimed image (to be the resistant and excluded ones) to appropriate symbols and slogans of historically suppressed and wretched groups — for example, by attaching a yellow star.

← 17. This does not mean that there is a ‘good’ former Agamben and a ‘bad’ new one. Different scholars have pointed out, from early on, that Agamben shortens political concepts such as ‘biopolitics’ in a highly problematic way, compare Deuber-Mankowsky 2015.

18. Even though I contradict this generalised standpoint, it is important to highlight the critical explorations into the potentials of theatrical assemblies undertaken by Malzacher’s project *Gesellschaftsspiele: The Art of Assembly* (Malzacher 2021).



Protesters occupy the stairs of the German Reichstag building in Berlin after their attempt to storm in at the end of a demonstration called by far-right and Covid-19 deniers to protest against restrictions related to the new Coronavirus pandemic, on 29 August 2020.

© picture alliance / NurPhoto / Achille Abboud

political as such just because it assembles.<sup>19</sup> I understand as ‘political’ that which works out both the connective and the divisive in order to break up entrenched constellations of the social (Marchart 2010: 293–301). This may well take place by means of assemblies, but this depends on their form, their demands (as heterogeneous as they may be), and their practices. Specific works of theatre, performance, dance, etc. can create a space for the political as conceived in this sense, but it does not simply result from the mere act of gathering. Rather, it requires the working through of one’s own conditions of performing, thus the inherent contradictions and asymmetries. Finally, the specific context to which the assembly relates to is crucial (especially so in the case of artistic interventions).

Paradigmatic for the prominent position that deduces the political potential of performative arts from gathering is what many historians and scholars till today have commonly understood as a central quality of the ancient theatre of the Attic *polis*, especially in its evaluation by post-Socratic philosophy: the recourse to Athens seems not only to offer a founding narrative of theatre and democracy respectively, but also to explain an intrinsic connection between the two.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, it is worth underlining the differences in the understanding of politics then and now. Indeed, in the Platonic dialogues, for example, a proximity of politics and theatrical assembly can be seen again and again: in the *Republic (Politeia)*, for example, Socrates paints a picture of democracy in its state of decay towards tyranny. Central here is the people: ‘The people — those who work with their own hands — are the third class. They take no part in politics and have few possessions, but, when they

are assembled, they are the largest and most powerful class in a democracy.’ (Plato 1997a: 1175) However, it is easy, according to Socrates, to deceive and seduce the people by speeches as well as by actions of skillful self-promoters. Thus, the theatricalisation of politics is depicted as inherent in democracies, as they urge for constant profiling under the gaze of the people instead of a search for deeper truth. It, therefore, also seals democracies’ end, which is why Socrates also sees the ‘poets of tragedy’ as those who ‘praise tyranny’ (Plato 1997a: 1178).

Plato’s condemnation of democracy as a theatrocracy, as articulated not only in the *Politeia* but also in the later *Laws (Nomoi)*, has been commented on many times, especially with regard to the proximity of politics and its theatricalisation. Particularly noteworthy is the rejection of the ‘impudent, bold, excessive freedom of the arts’ supposedly brought about by the dissolution of genres, which first makes the democratic revolution possible, but then makes the decline of democracies inevitable (Rebentisch 2016: 45–6). The arts imitate in the wrong way as they mix, misrepresent, and confuse. This is particularly the fault of the poets who — ‘in their idiotic way’ — ‘did have a natural artistic talent, but they were ignorant of the correct and legitimate standards laid down by the Muse. [...] The result was a total confusion of styles’ (Plato 1997b: 1389). Pushed by the applause of the audience, the poets would create dangerous confusions that for their part gave ‘the ordinary man [...] the arrogance to set himself up as a capable judge. The audiences, once silent, began to use their tongues; they claimed to know what was good and bad in music, and instead of a “musical meritocracy”, a sort of vicious “theatrocracy” arose’ (ibid.).

Theatre that is not based on the principles of the (supposedly) right leads to derailment. Ultimately directed against *mimesis* and representation itself, Plato nevertheless recognises in his dismissal the potential of the crowd. According to Juliane Rebentisch, Plato can indeed

19. Athenian theatre is often interpreted ‘as the philosophical presentation of the political. That is, it appears to us as the “one” presentation of being-together’. But its case rather shows that theatre ‘is neither political nor philosophical at the same time’ (Nancy 2000: 71).

20. For a somewhat undecided position whether this connection between now and then is valid or not, see Barthes 1991: 76.

be read against the grain, thus recognising the crowd as a ‘multitude’ whose divergent judgements are fed by ‘historically variable experience’ — and no longer by ‘the problematic conception that the good is something that we, at least the best of us, can acquire as objective knowledge, the validity of which does not depend on individual experience’ (2016: 48–9). Nevertheless, it seems important that what the multitude does or demands, in the ancient understanding in general and in Plato specifically, is not to be confused with politics in the city-state and certainly not with today’s democracy — an accentuation of the ‘multitude’ cannot serve to absolutise it in favour of a supposed immediacy of the people’s will, but rather to valorise it within political representation, within ‘the separation between the representatives and the represented, the governors and the governed’ and therefore, within ‘relations of power and authority’ (ibid.: 245–6).

Another passage in *Laws* shows how close Plato’s condemnation of teatrocracy is to his understanding of politics, which ultimately cannot be transferred to today’s conditions, and with good reason. If the politics of the orderly *polis* is endangered by theatricalisation qua democracy, it follows that in the ideal state no tragedy poets should be admitted as long as their poetry does not contain ‘doctrines [that] seem the same as or better’ as those of the state constitution itself (Plato 1997b: 1484). Addressed to the poets, the concept of the ideal state is explained as the best ‘representation’ itself:

Most honored guests, we’re tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create. At any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a ‘representation’ of the finest and noblest life—the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same genre, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural powers to ‘produce’ to perfection (of that we’re quite confident). (Plato 1997b: 1484)

According to this, the *polis* consists in the processing of politics, which is not, however, determined by the crowd, but is only ‘correctly’ imitated by the crowd in accordance with a unifying order — in contrast to those imitations that are seen as wrong because they are mixing and alienating. ‘Theatricality demonstrates its subversive power when it forsakes the confines of the *theatron* and begins to wander: when, in short, it separates itself from *theatre*. [...] It is the stability of place and the durability of placing that teatrocracy profoundly disturbs’ (Weber 2004: 37–8). If theatre were really to serve as a model for politics from the understanding articulated by Plato, one would not get more democracy, but a tightly organised state choreography, performed jointly by all its components, which would have to be in the ‘right place’ for the sake of their unity. At the same time, one has to remember that contemporary parliamentary democracies are by no means protected from simply processing politics and thus immunising themselves against its inherent difference-with-itself.

## A Case for Divided Assemblies

As the investigation into Plato’s argument underlines: theatre is not political (and democratic) because an assembly takes place there. Theatre is not the agora<sup>21</sup> and just because a parliament has a certain form of assembly, this does not make the assembly in the theatre a parliament or automatically an environment for testing out democracy.<sup>22</sup>

21. For a critique on the ‘equation of democracy with gathering on the *agora*’, especially by Arendt, see also Schäfer 2016.

22. In the ancient *polis*, the two political and male-coded places of assembly, the agora and the *keramikeion*, were clearly separated from the third public place, the theatre. The latter was the place for what had no place in the rational *polis*: pathos, lament, affects (compare Loraux 1990).

But if theatre cannot be determined per se as a place of political assembly, this by no means implies the *claim* to make theatre a place of negotiation and/or the political should be abandoned. The latter, however, requires an examination of which specific form of assembly is inherent in which theatre and which modes of staging underlie which assemblies. Instead of proclaiming theatrical assemblies as political as such, this essay has highlighted their discontents but also possibilities by taking a closer look at the connection between the protest of *Querdenken* and their turn against representation. There is thus a conceptual connection between theatres as public stages and the call for publicity, in the sense of visibility, but this is based on an assumption about the public that runs the risk of merging the mere taking place in front of many people with the political (which, again, can also be said about the mere ‘processing’ in parliaments that can turn democracies into an empty shell of bureaucracy).

Theatre is often seen as mediation between the realm of the private and that of the public (compare Balme 2014: 25), even though these spheres are not that distinct as they might seem and, thus, I would argue that theatre might rather expose their always existing interrelation. Both realms were elaborated in more detail by Hannah Arendt in particular, but also derived from the ancient *polis* in a thoroughly normative conception. According to Arendt, it is only the space of the public that provides the sphere of the political, which is sharply separated from the private.<sup>23</sup> Through this separation of the political from

<sup>23</sup> However, in the ancient *polis*, only those who are free from the constraints of life (these are assigned to the realm of the private, the *oikos*) have access to the space of the public: wealthy male heads of family in possession of slaves (compare Arendt 1958: 199–207). The problematic side of Arendt’s distinction between the spheres of the public and the private can be seen in her assessment of the US civil rights movement, which is ultimately normatively derived from her own theory and was already widely criticised when it appeared. In particular, the collision of Arendt’s concept of the space of appearance with racist practices of exclusion should be further investigated (compare Arendt 1959; Weissberg 2012).

the private, the specific conditions in which people find themselves and which regulate who can participate in the political are categorised as apolitical or pre-political. However, every public sphere, contrary to its ‘idealised conception [...] is characterised by visibilities and invisibilities’ and ‘the possibilities of (political) participation [are] regulated or restricted’ (Raimondi 2014: 183). Who can participate in the assembly and in which manner is regulated by the form of assembly with its inherent asymmetries.

Already within Arendt’s propositions, elements can be found that subvert the sharp distinction between public and private, helping to understand how any public and any assembly is already in difference to itself. Whereas the concept of the *space of appearance* is otherwise used by Arendt almost equivalently to that of the public sphere, it describes also a political potential outside of the public sphere. But this specific aspect arises only marginally: ‘The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.’ (Arendt 1958: 199)

As part of the human condition, however, human action itself, which always takes place between us, already bears within itself the possibility of the political — and this is what Arendt is concerned with at the core of her argument, not in the sense of normative determinations, but as a condition for the inconclusiveness of the political. It can potentially arise everywhere between everyone, but it is not something stable. The political possibility lies in this in-between-ness, starting with the encounter between each other in action and speech, i.e. through, at the same time, sharing and division (*partage*, compare Nancy 2000: 61). Therefore, an assembly itself cannot be political or apolitical ‘just like that’. It can become political because everything that is shared can

be *politicised*. That which binds the people's gatherings must first be worked out, as any community consists of 'intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places' (Rancière 1998: 137). And from the point of view of theatre studies, it remains to add that every 'scene and every scenic representation [...] is not limited in itself, but (unlocatably) "divided" in itself' (Menke 2018: 209). The phantasmatic sovereignty demanded by the Coronavirus deniers proves to be a reaction towards the narcissistic wounding, that everyone is dependent on each other not only in political appearance, but also in human active and contemplative life in general. It is that which one shares, which therefore divides and connects, albeit along differently distributed preconditions.

## Final Remarks on Critical, Emancipatory Movements

The aggressive protest of *Querdenken* and the media attention quickly pre-empted the topic of demonstrations during the pandemic. All too easily, some critical, emancipatory (left) political forms of assembly can be missed that also took place during the pandemic and which are worth devoting attention to. These are social movements that take into account the relationality of their concerns, raise a voice of solidarity for 'the part of those who have no part' (Rancière 1998: 30), and adapt the form of their protest in the sign of a concern for the possibility of gathering that has been changed under Coronavirus. To mention some examples that took place in Germany at the same time: many of the non-official commemorative gatherings for the victims of the right-wing terrorist, racist, and anti-Semitic attacks in the German cities of Hanau (from 19 February 2020) or Halle (from 9 October 2019) organised by local initiatives and left groups;<sup>24</sup> the demonstrations for the dissolution of refugee camps at the EU's external borders; the Fridays For Future or the Black Lives Matter movements. Unlike *Querdenken*, these initiatives or movements do not claim to be able to speak for all or 'the people' and to be directed against a supposed wholeness (the government defamed as a regime, the world conspiracy, etc.).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>. While in particular these gatherings and manifestations could only take place under the strictest conditions, events by *Querdenken* — as documented many times — were mostly not prevented, despite massive violations of contact restrictions, distance, and mask requirements.

<sup>25</sup>. Fassin proposes replacing 'the people' with 'a politics of publics', i.e. by all means a politics of minorities, but one that is not absorbed in what the state and state affiliation cover (Fassin 2019: 16). He admits that right-wing movements also claim this for themselves — there may well be parts of the *Querdenken* movement that do not see themselves as a 'people' in the sense of an oppressed majority, but as an excluded *part of those who have no part*.

Interestingly, these critical movements that also took place during the pandemic do not turn *against* democratic representation, but rather *towards* parliaments and civil society, in order to point out the flaws of liberal, representational democracies’.

They take into account the asymmetries that permeate the public sphere and their consequences (compare Raunig 2016: 190).<sup>26</sup> They perceive the social as an unstable ground from which it cannot be detached. For example, Black Lives Matter obviously did not take up ‘I can’t breathe’ (uttered by Eric Garner when murdered by police forces in 2014) as a general claim, but as a specific phrase that highlights the death of Black people in racialised societies.<sup>27</sup> When the slogan came up again in 2020 due to the death of George Floyd, it was of course even more relevant in light of the pandemic, but did not change the specific call for justice for Black people. Moreover, it became evident also due to Floyd’s death that, under Coronavirus, Black people are even more exposed to death through the racial and class inequality in the health system (compare Benjamin 2020; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor 2020).<sup>28</sup>

Emancipatory movements challenge representational democracies’ established forms as well as conventional ways of coming together by experimenting with new ways of assembling. Thus, they can be measured by the extent to which they include the form of their protest itself in the protest, how they consider the process, and the manner of assembly itself.

<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, this quality is not given to every left movement as such (as in contrast to the here-critiqued right or Third Position movements). A good counterexample for a left extra-parliamentarian, but at the same time nationalist, populist, and anti-immigrant movement is the now nearly vanquished *Aufstehen* (‘stand up’), initiated and led by the German politician Sahra Wagenknecht as well as the dramaturge Bernd Stegemann in 2018.

<sup>27</sup>. Compare on blackness and breathing, see Fanon 1986: 28.

<sup>28</sup>. Compare on the continuity of the threat to Black people’s breathing, see Thompson 2020; Schade 2020.

Judith Butler has expanded Arendt’s approaches in order to show the political space of appearance as permeated by the private, i.e. the social, i.e. by concrete conditionalities and dependencies. Accordingly, politics and especially political assembly are not a pure sphere, but a sociality. In contrast to a concept of freedom and the associated concept of the subject, which targets individual beings with their property rights, Butler’s proposition insists on ‘vulnerability’. That does not simply mean to be violable, but hints at the basic disposition of openness and relationality that conditions any human subject (Butler 2015: 149).<sup>29</sup> Such a shared foundation is not to be romanticised. Rather, it requires thinking about the vulnerability of those who cannot appear in the concrete assembly — which leads to the question of what form an assembly gives itself in light of its exclusion, so that its shaping becomes part of the political process itself (Menke 2016).

Accordingly, the central question about political assemblies is: who can participate in them and how those who cannot attend, who are absent are accommodated? But as I finally want to highlight, this more general and broader point on the inherent division of assemblies and its politicisation also allows conclusions for assemblies that happen in, with, or through performances and theatre to be drawn. The pandemic makes it painfully tangible what ‘merely’ gathering and meeting can mean. But invocations of uniqueness, ‘live(li)ness’ or co-presence do not help here because they absolutise a supposedly given status of theatre as such. Theatre is rather to be understood in an extended sense as a term for specific references in each case: towards and between different audiences as well as scenic materials (bodies, lights, sounds, etc.) or between humans, animals, plants, gods, stones, and so on. With this potential, scenic arts can experiment, explore the absence of certain forms of

<sup>29</sup>. Butler writes with regard to collective assemblies that in this process the bodies reciprocally are ‘parking’ in the action of the other due to the mediated relationship between each and all subjects (Butler 2015: 9).

assembly in their specificity, and try out new ones, but also look for such assemblies that do not appear in the usual form.<sup>30</sup> The Frankfurt group *andpartnersincrime* (Artistic Director: Eleonora Herder), for example, linked research on the Frankfurt City Parliament with a reflection on digital production and their collective commitment to an artistic-social canteen project for the homeless as part of their production *After the End of the Assembly* (*Nach dem Ende der Versammlung*, 2021). Initially designated as a theatrical tour of the Frankfurt City Hall, the restrictions under Covid-19 for theatres gave path to this new concept.

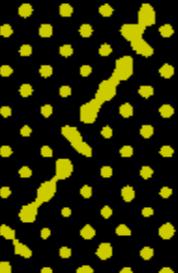
Hence, when it comes to different theatres as particular assembly places and events, it would be necessary to explore which assemblies and their respective stages can accommodate the claim of enabling new and different accesses while being aware of their inherent asymmetries — especially those amongst different spectators that cannot be summarised as a homogenous audience. Instead of storming parliaments or romanticising the familiar without looking at its contradictions, the task remains to find new common references within multiple, overlapping, and contradictory assemblies. •

<sup>30</sup>. On the (banned) gatherings of Black women at the beginning of the twentieth century and a different historiography in the method of 'critical fabulation', see Hartmann 2019: 229–57.

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**PERFORMING  
GENDERED  
DISASTER  
NATIONALISM  
AND ITS  
FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN CHINA  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
YINGJUN WEI**

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## KEYWORDS

Covid-19, feminist activism, disaster nationalism, performativity

## 关键词

新冠疫情, 女权活动, 灾难民族主义, ‘表演性’

# SUMMARY

The essay investigates gendered ‘disaster nationalism’ during Covid-19 which objectified female bodies and strengthened gender performativity in China. It also examines the performative subversive interventions launched by feminist activists. Borrowing Butler’s concept of ‘performativity’, in particular, the performativity of gender, of national identity, and of public assembly, the essay argues that gender and national identities converged in the pandemic, contributing to a Covid-initiated, gendered disaster nationalism in China. This performative nationalism was open to repeated subversive feminist interventions, which the essay argues, had strong performative capacity. The essay first maps out performativity theory in gender studies and its extension to studies of nationalism, particularly of Chinese nationalism, and applies it to the exploitation of female bodies during the pandemic. Further, the essay extends performativity to the analysis of feminist resistance against such exploitation. The essay concludes that performative feminist resistance destabilised the performative constitution of gendered nationalist subjects.

# 摘要

自新冠疫情爆发以来, 多数国家上演了‘民族主义表演’以缓解公众舆论压力。本文聚焦疫情期间的中国的‘性别民族主义表演’, 即性别歧视与民族主义的合流, 及随后的女权表演。借用巴特勒 (Butler) 的‘表演性’ (‘performativity’) 概念, 本文指出, 社交媒体上由话语构成的女权表演挑战了性别民族主义表演的合法性。

# INTRODUCTION

As one of the greatest public health crises in human history, Covid-19 has posted unprecedented challenges to all countries across the globe. In response to the pandemic, leaders in different states around the world adopted militarised rhetoric and metaphors to mobilise citizens and unite the country, which gave rise to a new wave of nationalism, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Across borders, war as a figurative frame has been used consistently. According to the analysis of speeches made by political leaders in twenty countries, including USA, UK, France, Norway, Russia, Bangladesh, and others, seventeen of them adopted war metaphors to describe Covid-19 and their responses (Dada, Ashworth, Bewa, and Dhatt 2021). One example was the speech given by the French President Macron who stated on 16 March 2020 that ‘we are at war, admittedly a health war [...]’ (ibid.). Some of the nationalist and militarised rhetoric had a gendered dimension.

China was certainly not an exception in the rise of nationalism, in particular in gendered terms. As a way to stand up to public scrutiny, the state staged nationalist performance in the disaster context, during which nationalist discourses and disaster discourses intertwined. Such performance featured individual sacrifice for the greater cause, national solidarity, and patriotic sentiment. Female healthcare workers accounted for ninety percent of all workers dispatched to Wuhan, the epicentre of the first outbreak of Covid-19, according to the Shanghai Women's Federation (*Shanghai Fulian*).<sup>1</sup> These female healthcare workers were made to be the major actors in this nationalist performance. Their bodies, in particular, turned into a performance site when their heads were shaved and their self-sacrifice depicted to conform to female gender stereotypes, as evidenced by two hundred and forty-nine audiovisual reports on social media posted by four mainstream media sources from 20 January 2020, when the coronavirus was officially identified by the Chinese authorities, to 8 April 2020, when the Wuhan lockdown was lifted (Feng 2020). Yet unlike performances in previous disasters where the state was the only actor and absolutely owned the narration and performance, the state-led nationalist performance in the Covid-19 pandemic was actively joined by nationalist subjects with their own nationalistic agency on social media whilst simultaneously provoking feminist activists' resistance.

1. Xin Hua Net reported the survey conducted by Shanghai Women's Federation (*Shanghai Fulian*): [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-03/08/c\\_1125679333.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-03/08/c_1125679333.htm) [accessed 23 January 2022].

## Performing Head-Shaving: Butlerian 'Performativity' and Performative Femininity

At the early stage of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, healthcare workers and medical equipment across the country were dispatched to the front line of the epidemic in Wuhan. A group of fourteen female nurses from Gansu Province in north-central China, ready to be dispatched to Wuhan to fight the Covid-19, were filmed having their heads shaved by several male barbers.<sup>2</sup> Though this was claimed to be a voluntary act on the part of the women by their hospital, the Gansu Provincial Maternity and Child-care Hospital, several nurses still shed tears as barbers showed them their just-shaved ponytails. Cameras on the scene zoomed in and documented their grieving faces. Later with shaved heads, the female nurses and their only male colleague, who did not have his head shaved, took a group picture with clenched fists, a gesture to show their commitment and resolution to fight the coronavirus. On the same day, *Gansu Daily*, the local news agency approved by the central Government published an article entitled, 'Having their Beautiful Hair Shaved, They Are Ready for the Battle' (*Jianqu Xiufa, Tamen Zhengzhuangchuzheng*). When scenes of female nurses having their heads shaved were broadcast across China by the state-sponsored media and disseminated on social media, within the act of shaving, be it voluntary or mandatory, gender performativity and disaster nationalism converged.

2. Gansu Daily published the article titled 'Having their Beautiful Hair Shaved, They Are Ready for the Battle' (*Jianqu Xiufa, Tamen Zhengzhuangchufa*) on their website: <http://gansu.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2020/02/16/017354946.shtml> [accessed 23 January 2022].

What is meant by performativity here? I refer to performativity as defined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (2006) to challenge the dominant conceptual frame of gender studies at the time, premised on a division between culturally constructed ‘gender’ and biological ‘sex’. Butler questioned the ontological status of the ‘natural’ sexed body and argued instead that there is only ‘gender’ understood as a ‘performative act’ produced by repeated discourses. These discourses generate the ‘effect’, not a fact, of a naturalised, stable, internal core-sex. Butler used a theatrical metaphor when elaborating on the appearance of substance, that is gender, as ‘a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ (2006: 192). The appearance is created through the repeated, discursively produced, gendered practices in daily life which constrain gender identities to the binary of either masculine or feminine, and sexuality to heterosexuality. The constraining gender reality as such points to the political dimension of Butler’s argument. The concealment of gender’s performative character and the limitation of the performative possibilities to the restrictive binary frame is ‘politically regulated’ (Butler 2006: 189). To become a woman is to fit in the naturalised feminine category and appear the same through ‘practices of discipline and regulation’ (Samuel and Carver 2008: 37). There is a strong link between performativity and discourse. Examples in China include dress codes codified into school regulations to reveal two genders, and repeated media discourses about motherhood and the fragile womanhood of female healthcare workers during the pandemic.

Before applying performativity to this Chinese gender case study, I will review how previous Chinese gender studies gained their theoretical insights from performative theory. Drawing from Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and many others, particularly their ‘implications for how a subject is formed and the political implications of that

formation’ (Hershatter 2020), Butler proposed a performative theory deeply engaged with French feminism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. Therefore, applying the Butlerian performativity to Chinese gender studies requires a solid justification. Performative theory’s unveiling of discursive formation of gender identity and the sexed body has been a useful theoretical and methodological framework for Chinese gender studies scholars. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* has been cited either explicitly or referred to implicitly by scholars in their analysis of the discursive formation of Chinese women and femininity, ranging from the early Republic (Wang 2005), the People’s Republic of China (PRC) under Mao (ibid.), and post-socialist PRC (Rofel 2007). In different historical situations, Chinese women were constructed through narratives formed by ‘men across the political spectrum, as well as smaller but vocal number of women intellectuals and activists’ (Hershatter 2020). The performativity of Chinese women throughout modern history can be drawn from Butler precisely in the following sense ‘to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker’ (2006: 199). Examples include the Maoist ‘iron women’ in the early Republic formulated through the party-state’s discourses surrounding the liberation of Chinese women from families to factories for the socialist construction of a new China (Wang 2005) and the neoliberal feminist discourses articulated by female social media influencers through which economically independent female consumers come into being in a post-socialist China with free market economy (Wu and Dong 2019).

Yet in the so-called ‘afterlife’ of *Gender Trouble* in China, Hershatter (2020) observes that Butler’s ontological challenge of gender as the ‘metaphysics of substance’ (Butler 2006: 30) and their questioning of ‘women as a subject of feminism’ (6) are less compelling to scholars in Chinese gender studies than the substantial gendered concerns. For these scholars, to address gendered concerns specific to Chinese

women in different historical contexts is to admit the existence of gendered subjects. This is a move away from the Butlerian post-structural destabilisation of gender difference to a sociological framework with ‘subject’ and ‘agency’ at its core. The above-mentioned gender case studies bring Chinese women and their gendered concerns to the front stage, i.e., Maoist ‘Woman-as-state-subject’ (Hershatter 2020), and the effort of post-socialist feminists to expand the definition of Chinese women confined in the Maoist scope (Wang 2005), in so doing, ‘reinstantiating’ rather than ‘destabilising’ gender and sex differences (Hershatter 2020). The shift away from Butler’s post-structural focus in the Chinese application of performative theory reflects a debate over ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’. The distinction between the two terms in *Gender Trouble* points to the contradiction of Butler’s theory.

For Butler, ‘performativity’ does not involve subjects performing gendered appearance as there is no ‘interior self’ (1988). Therefore, the capacity for subjects to enact gender is questionable. She argues further: ‘gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice’ (1988: 526). ‘Performance’ mainly appears in Butler’s analysis of drag’s subversive performance destabilising the line between the natural and the fabricated (2006: 189). Yet Butler’s use of performance seems to imply the existence of gendered selves with subjectivity and agency to enact subversive gendered acts. If ‘performative’ is the fabricated character of gender, ‘performativity’ is the process of making the production of a fabricated gendered essence visible. ‘Performance’ is then the act enacted by gendered subjects, their interactions with, more specifically, their conforming to or subverting the gendered norms. For scholars in Chinese feminism, this contradiction seems to better fit the Chinese gender reality. They borrow ‘performativity’ to reveal the discursive formation of gendered subjects, and further examine their subjectivity as different gendered subjects, either ‘women-as-state subjects’, socialist women who contribute to the Chinese modernisation, or

independent female consumers contributing to the rise of the neoliberal market economy in a post-socialist China. In this essay, I use both ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’: ‘performativity’ is used to analyse how Chinese women came into being in what I call, following Zhang (2020), ‘a disaster nationalism’; ‘performance’ is to make clear the subjectivity of gendered subjects, nationalistic subjects, the state, and feminist activists, each with their own agency in constructing discourses that contribute to the performativity, or the de-naturalisation of that performativity, of gendered nationalist subjects.

For this essay, I collected data of the gendered discourses during the pandemic, including state-owned media reports during the SARS epidemic and hashtags on Weibo during Covid-19, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, to analyse the performativity of gendered subjects and its convergence with nationalism. The data also includes feminist discourses on Weibo which de-naturalised the gender binary and made visible the performativity of the gendered nationalist subjects.

The performativity of gender, in this case femininity, is rooted in, and the effect of, the state-sponsored media discourses. At first, the Gansu local news agency dominated the discursive stage by naming these bald female actors in the head-shaving theatre as ‘the most beautiful counter-marching person’ (*zui mei ni xing zhe*). This is a frequently used term in the context of disaster describing healthcare workers, firemen, and military personnel who, unlike ordinary people escaping from the dangerous zone, walk in the opposite direction towards it. Furthermore, instead of broadcasting their professionalism in healthcare, terms emphasising conservative female gender performativity such as ‘mother who feels sorry for not taking her son’ (*Dui Bu Qi Er Zi*), ‘vulnerable’ (*Rou Ruo*) (Feng 2020: 37), ‘angel in the white gown’, and many others emerged in almost all two hundred and forty-nine Weibo posts by four media, including the state-owned People’s Daily (*Ren Min Ri Bao*),

CCTV news (*Yang Shi Xin Wen*), The Beijing News (*Xin Jing Bao*), and The Paper (*Peng Pai Xin Wen*). These various discursive formations of Chinese women in the context of audio-visual propaganda extract direct political benefits from female bodies. Hoping to display healthcare workers' resolution and their 'no regrets' to win victory over the battle against Covid-19, the state expected empathy from the audience and their pride for not only those who were ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause, but also the state's capacity to mobilise healthcare workers from across the country.

The performative femininity produced by the state-sponsored media discourses was in sharp contrast to the lack of substantive support to female healthcare workers. Almost at the same time when bald heads of female nurses became the theatre of gender performativity, the public were exposed to behind-the-scenes stories about female healthcare workers lacking sanitary products, injecting progesterone to delay their periods, working on the frontline ten days after a miscarriage or when nine months pregnant.<sup>3</sup> These struggles and sufferings particularly related to female bodies and sexualities made the shaving-head performance an act of taking part of their bodies away from them and thereby depriving them of their femininity for nationalist and patriotic propaganda.

3. News article entitled 'Nurse in 9-Month Pregnancy Working in the Frontline? Putian Center of Disaster Control Responded' (*Hushi Huaiyun Jiugeyue Haizai Yixian Kangyi? Putian Weijianwei Huiying*): <https://news.china.com/domestic/945/20210918/40054263.html> [accessed 25 January 2022].

## Performative Gendered Disaster Nationalism: The Convergence of National and Gendered Subjects

Differing from the mundane gendered performances in daily life, performative femininity during Covid-19 is a particular instance as it converges with nationalism, which I argue is also performative. The extension of Butler's notion of performativity to the study of nationalism is central to my argument about the construction of Chinese national unity during the Covid-19 pandemic. My main thesis is that gender identity and national identity converged in the pandemic, each reinforcing the other's performativity, and whose convergence contributes to a Covid-initiated gendered nationalism in China. Before unfolding the argument, it is vital to distinguish two slippery terms — 'nation' and 'state'. I borrow Wu's definition in his study of Chinese nationalism: 'Nation is a subjective entity, only existing in the minds of the people who associate themselves with certain culture, history, ethnicity, or all of the above. State, on the other hand, is an objective entity, including the political institution, the sovereign territory, the government, and its leadership' (2007: 478). Rooted in the nation's fight against foreign invasions, nationalism in China has a long history since the 1839 Opium War (Harris 1997; Xu, Kaye, and Zeng 2020). Since the establishment of the sovereign state, the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained its legitimacy 'in fighting for China's independence and prosperity' (Wu 2007: 481). Its legitimacy has been challenged tremendously in the free market economic reform since the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In response to this, CCP launched several state-led campaigns in the 1990s, such as the Patriotic Education Campaign (PEC), to secure its legitimacy (Zhao 2004). Why ‘patriotic’ and not ‘nationalistic’?

Discovering the links between patriotism and Chinese nationalism not only helps us to understand both state-led, top-down nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also justifies the use of nationalism in this essay. Since the old communist ideology about class struggle and communist internationalism had lost its force, the CCP resumed its legitimacy in the new narratives of rapid economic development and the revival of traditional Chinese culture. Zhao (2004) argues that these narratives are highly nationalistic. First, they adopt the nationalist conception that the interests of China outweigh that of other countries (Zhao 2004: 231). Second, they strengthen national unity and pride by linking the party-state with the traditional cultural heritages (210). Zhao, thus, defines Chinese patriotism as a state-led nationalism such as the PEC launched in the name of patriotism and which precisely promotes the concepts of ‘Chinese tradition and history’, ‘territorial integrity’, and ‘national unity’ to ensure ‘loyalty in a population that was otherwise subject to many domestic discontents’ (2004: 9).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the state-led nationalism was evidenced by Xinhua Net reports about China’s ‘achievements from the epidemic prevention’ and ‘unity among Chinese people’ (Yang 2021).<sup>4</sup> It also merges with the grassroots cyber nationalism manifested in nationalistic discourses such as ‘copy homework’ (*chao zuoye*) coined by some internet users and disseminated through hashtags such as

#CopyHeNan’sHomework# (*Lai Chao Henan De Zuoye*) with eight hundred and thirty million views and four hundred and twenty thousand posts and reposts, urging other countries to copy the Chinese model of Covid-19 containment.<sup>5</sup> The present essay explicitly adopts nationalism instead of patriotism because, unlike the SARS-related nationalism, the nationalist discourses during the Covid-19 were not just state-led, but were actively engaged by nationalist subjects.

Such discourses featuring individual sacrifice for the greater cause, national solidarity, and patriotic sentiment have been a common strategy for the CCP in the context of disaster. It can be traced back to every nation-wide crisis facing China. The suppression of SARS in 2003 was dramatised as the ‘People’s War’ (*Renmin Zhanzheng*) as Hu Jintao, the former president, made his appearance on the scene (Fewsmith 2003) and complimented frontier workers as ‘scouts’ (*zhenchabing*) and ‘task forces’ (*tujidui*) in ‘a war without gunfire’ (*meiyou xiaoyan de zhanzheng*) in his visit to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Tianjian, a northern city near Beijing on 1 May 2003.<sup>6</sup> In news articles on *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of CCP, patriotic discourses such as ‘great national spirit’ (Fewsmith 2003: 253) in the ‘war’ against and victory over SARS, and ‘self-sacrificing heroes’ (Xu 2012: 120) were commonplace. The party-state restaged such nationalism in 2008 when the northeast part of Sichuan Province was hit by a 7.9-magnitude earthquake. In what scholars called ‘state rituals’ (Xu 2009: 117), ranging from the national mourning to the Premier’s ‘bodily copresence’ (ibid.) with the victims in Sichuan, ‘a humane touch’ (Zhang 2020: para. 8)

4. News article on Xinhuanet entitled ‘We Are on the Same Boat: A Comprehensive Review of China’s COVID-19 Fight’ (*Tongzhougongji Zhanyiji-Zhongguo kangji Xinguanfeiyang Yiqing Quanjishi*): [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/06/c\\_1126459514.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/06/c_1126459514.htm) [accessed 25 January 2022].

5. Hashtag #CopyHeNan’sHomework# (*Lai Chao Henan De Zuoye*) on Weibo: <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=1> [accessed 25 January 2022].

6. News article entitled ‘Hu Jintao: Fighting a People’s War to Contain and Treat SARS’ (*Hu Jintao: Qunfangqunkong Dayichang Fangzhiyibing De Renmin Zhanzheng*): [https://www.cas.cn/zt/kjzt/fdgc/cs/200305/t20030503\\_1710395.shtml](https://www.cas.cn/zt/kjzt/fdgc/cs/200305/t20030503_1710395.shtml) [accessed 25 January 2022].

was added to the nationalist discourses aimed at national solidarity. The most visible ritual was performed by Wen Jiabao, the former Premier of China who immediately visited the disaster zone, shed tears, and hugged victims in front of the camera. This scene was later broadcast to the whole nation, which gained him nation-wide applause and the title of ‘grandpa’,<sup>7</sup> turning the nation into a corporeal human.

Zhang (2020) defined nationalism in the context of disaster as ‘disaster nationalism’, referring to ‘the particular mode of messaging and emotional mobilisation that the propaganda machine deploys in times of crises’ (para. 3). The national mourning of the death of the whistle-blower, Dr Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, who was detained by the police due to his early warning to his colleagues, is a case in point. Li, who died of Covid-19, stirred a huge backlash on social media and later was officially recognised as a ‘martyr’ (*lie shi*) by the state (Zhang 2020: para. 5). Further easing the public outcry, the police officer was held accountable and the reprimand the police forced Li to sign was revoked. Furthermore, from staging the mobilisation and self-sacrifice of healthcare workers from across the country to launching two virtual social media influencers, these performances that staged national solidarity to win audiences’ empathy and pride for the country would ease public anger and potential social instability. Such disaster nationalism in the Covid-19 pandemic features ‘heroic sacrifices of individuals as well as cohesion of the national community’ and aims to ‘distract attention from structural problems within the system itself persists’ (ibid.).

I take Zhang’s argument about disaster nationalism a step further by arguing that disaster nationalism during Covid-19 consists of not only top-down, state-led nationalism but also grassroots cyber nationalism. Focusing solely on the top-down model risks ignoring the nationalistic agency of citizens, the major *spect-actors* in the nationalist performance. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the party-state has been trying to ally with cyber grassroots nationalism, particularly adopting the playful language of fan culture, taking advantage of the dissemination and interaction capacity of social media to fuel the nationalist sentiment rooted in nationalist subjects online, publishing its own and appropriating user-generated nationalist content online. One example is the state’s construction of a gendered personalised Chinese state, a male idol named Brother Ah Zhong (*A Zhong Gege*) or Brother China, in support of China’s stance in the Hong Kong issue in 2019. The state-owned CCTV News created hashtags on Weibo such as ‘#BrotherAhZhong-HasMoreThan1.4BillionFans#’, with more than fifty million views and fifty-nine thousand posts and reposts (Yang 2021).<sup>8</sup> Following suit with the state, one internet user named ‘Brother Ah Zhong’s Anti-antifan Platform’ (*Ah Zhong Gege Fanhei Zhan*) created more hashtags including ‘FandomGirlsSupportingBrotherAhZhong’ with five hundred and forty million views and three hundred and nineteen thousand posts and reposts to support China against protesters in Hong Kong.<sup>9</sup> The utility of Brother Ah Zhong as a symbolic identity of China was rediscovered in the disaster nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hashtags such as ‘#GoBrotherAhZhongWithBravery#’ (*Ah Zhong Gege Yongganfei*) swept Weibo, highlighting the state’s achievements in fighting Covid-19. Witnessing the rise of fandom culture in line with grassroots

7. News article entitled ‘Wen Jiabao: I Am Concerned about the Earthquake-stricken Area, Particularly the Kids There’ (*Wen Jiabao: Wo Dui Zaiqu Feichang Guanxin, Zui Guaqian De Haishi Haizimen*) in which Wen was called ‘Grandpa Wen’ (*Wen Yeye*): [http://www.gov.cn/zlft/content\\_1246450.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zlft/content_1246450.htm) [accessed 25 January 2022].

8. Hashtag ‘#BrotherAhZhongHasMoreThan1.4BillionFans#’ was created by CCTV News on 17 January 2021: <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=2> [accessed 25 January 2022].

9. Hashtag ‘#FandomGirlsSupportingBrotherAhZhong#’ was created by an internet user named Brother Ah Zhong’s Anti-antifan Platform (*Ah Zhong Gege Fanhei Zhan*): <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=3> [accessed 25 January 2022].

cyber nationalism, the Communist Youth League launched two virtual influencers, the male *Hongqiman* and the female *Jiangshanjiao*, encouraging Chinese people to support these two idols. This case, which I will elaborate in detail in the following section, is a solid example of Covid-initiated gendered nationalism.

Both state-led nationalism and grassroots cyber nationalism have the Butlerian performative quality. Identifying performativity of disaster nationalism is crucial to understanding how actors — the party-state and the nationalist citizens — in disaster nationalism collectively perform the national unity through repeated social media discourses. More importantly, performativity also helps make clear the convergence of two performative identities, nationalist identity and gender identity, and the way they reinforce each other, contributing to what I argue is a performative gendered disaster nationalism.

In his ground-breaking *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (2006: 5) pointed to the imagined nature of nation. He defined nation as ‘an imagined political community’ (6), suggesting national essences are fabricated and constructed through the imaginations of its citizens. Anderson compared gender as one element of subject identity with nationality as the other: ‘in the modern world everyone can, should, will “have” a nationality as he or she “has” a gender’ (8). This imagined nature of nationality, I argue, shares the same ontological ground as Butler’s challenge to the essence of gender and sexed bodies. The subject identities, nationalist and gendered, are both imagined/constructed in the sense that the core/internality/essence/substance/ontological status of them is fabricated, yet appears to be natural, thus making them performative. In fact, many scholars have extended Butler’s notion of performativity to their studies of nationalism. Feldman (2005) analyses how the European nation-state is constituted in repeated legal and diplomatic discourses which ‘reproduce, and are produced by’ binary

oppositions such as ‘citizen/alien, majority/minority [...] domestic/foreign’ (214). Some scholars have also applied performativity to the study of Chinese nationalism. Woronov (2007) drew on Butler’s concept of performativity in her investigation of children’s nationalism in China performed through repeated nationalist practices on a daily basis. She argued that Chinese children’s nationalist agency is ‘constituted as a national subject through repetitive performances of the nation’, i.e. ‘essays and drawings about Macao and Hong Kong returning to the Motherland’ and the ‘Little Red Pioneer Pledge’, which are highly performative in bringing nationalistic children into being through the daily chant: ‘I am a Little Red Pioneer! [...] I will study, work and labour diligently, and that I am prepared to dedicate all my efforts to the cause of communism’ (Woronov 2007: 659).<sup>10</sup>

Nationalist discourses and gendered discourses have long been converged, and so is the case with two performative identities, national identity and gender identity, each reinforcing the other. Female bodies and femininity, in particular, have been historically tied closely to land and nationhood. Scholars have identified two types of gendered nationalism. One is the gendering of the nation. ‘Women as mothers’ of the nation, who are responsible for the nation’s ‘physical, cultural and social reproduction’ (Pettman 1996: 187), is typical of the gendered language of nationhood. Another type is the use of women in the construction of national borders. In war nationalism, female bodies are symbolised as sites for the performance of metaphorical domination, whose safety and honour need to be protected by their sons or fathers from foreign invasion. There is a great risk in such a gendered dimension of nationalism

<sup>10</sup>. The pledge was firstly proposed in 1958 on the Third Plenary Session of the Third Central Committee of The Chinese Youth League (*Zhongguo Gongqingtuan Sanjie Sanzhongquanhui*). It can be found on the Chinese Little Pioneers Constitution (*Zhongguo Shaonian Xianfengdui Zhangcheng*) published on the Chinese Youth League website: [https://qnzz.youth.cn/qkc/202007/t20200727\\_12425625.htm](https://qnzz.youth.cn/qkc/202007/t20200727_12425625.htm) [accessed 22 February 2022].

due to the ‘burden of representation — with women coming to represent national unity and its distinctiveness’ proposed by Yuval-Davis (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020: 436). The gendered nationalism ‘singles women out as the symbolic repository of group identity’ (Kandiyoti, cited in Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020: 436), therefore simplifying gender as a “natural”, essential dichotomous order, based on positioning men and women in hierarchical locations in terms of power, and in so doing, employs a heteronormative vision of gender identities’ (Saresma 2018: 178).

In disaster nationalism during the pandemic, female bodies in Iran were displayed in a masculine manner and appeared ‘de-gendered or even masculinised’ (Tafakori 2021: 4). Female health workers wearing masks which ‘function to masculinise women’ (5) were equated to the male soldiers wearing gas masks during the 1980s war. Though ‘unmaking and redoing’ (6) gender in such a way blurred gender roles, its legitimacy is only conditioned by the nation’s victory over the disaster. Similarly in China, female bodies were also made to be the sites of nationalist performance; yet in so doing, only further confining them to the constraining gender binary frame. Nationalist subjects were produced through discursively generated performative femininity. Performative femininity, such as motherhood, self-sacrifice for a bigger institution, i.e. family or nation, had been used to unite the whole nation in the fight against the pandemic. During the SARS outbreak in 2003, *People’s Daily* published an anonymous heartfelt piece<sup>11</sup> which staged the female medical worker as the heroine fighting against SARS at the expense of her life and the sacrifice of her role as the caretaker of her family. In the convergence of repeated gendered discourses and

nationalist discourses during the SARS epidemic, performative Chinese women in the disaster context came into being.

Performative gendered disaster nationalism reached its peak in the pandemic when the Propaganda Department of CCP’s Youth League launched two virtual social media influencers on their Weibo account (Fig. 1). The same day the video of the bald-headed nurses went viral on social media, Youth League launched a male avatar whose name was *Hongqiman* (Red Flag Flutters Freely), and his female counterpart *Jiangshanjiao* (The Beautiful State) to celebrate the temporary victory against the virus achieved by the nation with the support of Chinese men and women. These two names allude to Mao’s poems which were written in the war against Japanese invasion in 1936. *Hongqiman* and *Jiangshanjiao* thus gained strong patriotic connotations. Appropriating the fan culture, the Youth League personalised itself as gendered ‘virtual idols’ (*xuni ouxiang*) and Chinese citizens as fans of two gendered idols in its very first social media post (Yang 2021: 2). Further, the Youth League called for the public to ‘cheer for’ (*da call*) the idols, a term originated from the Japanese entertainment industry, referring to fans interacting with the performing artists in the concert, i.e. moving their glow sticks and singing together with the artist to show their support.

Drawing on the theory of performativity, I argue that citizens cheering for the virtual idols is a highly performative act, both in nationalist and gendered terms. The act of naming the virtual influencers created performative gender identities for the Youth League, which, unlike the real Youth League whose preaching might generate a negative response, were more personalised, entertaining, and easier for the gendered public to pick and choose according to binary gender roles to support. Moreover, performativity is further solidified through a set of bodily practices peculiar to the digital space such as liking, thumbs-up, following, retweeting, and creating ‘fanart’ (Guo 2020: 195), the creation or

11. News article entitled ‘My Doctor Wife Put Her Life on the Line to Fight SARS’ (*Wo De Qizi Zhandou Zai Zuiqianxian*) published on Henan High People’s Court (*Henan Sheng Gaoji Renmin Fayuan*) <http://www.hncourt.gov.cn/public/detail.php?id=1129> [accessed 25 January 2022].



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FIGURE 1

Two virtual social media influencers launched by the Communist Party's Youth League. Quoting Mao's poem written during the Anti-Japanese War in the 1940s, the post is not only an introduction to *Jiangshanjiao*, the female influencer on the left, and *Hongqiman*, the male one on the right side, but also a call for action to support these two idols of the Youth League. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 5 May 2022]

recreation of the visual or computer-assisted art related to the performance of the idols to attract potential fans (Hou 2020: 16). Through these repeated citations and practices of gendered nationhood in the digital space, citizens exerted their gendered nationalistic agency, and gendered, nationalist subjects came into being and appeared to be natural and stable entities.

# Butlerian Performativity of Digital Public Assembly: Performing Digital Feminist Resistance

Schneider (2018) identified a closer relationship between digital technologies and nationalist ideologies in Chinese networks. A case in point is the marriage between social media and nationalist narratives in the Covid-19 state propaganda (Yan 2020). The state's claim on virtual public space gained its legitimacy not just by censorship, a way to demobilise public assembly targeting the political system and structural problems, but also by the creation of new sites of performance and the appropriation of social media content that has the potential to promote national solidarity (Zhang 2020).

The launch of two virtual social media influencers not only built a performing space for gendered nationalism, but also exposed the performance to feminist resistance. Shortly after the head-shaving episode went viral on Weibo, the state's effort backfired. An article on WeChat,<sup>12</sup> was viewed over one hundred thousand times before it was censored. In the next few hours, articles like these swept across the digital space, through which activists and the public, who advocated against the exploitation of female bodies for nationalist performance, created a new

12. WeChat article entitled 'Please Stop Using Women's Bodies as a Propaganda Tool' (*Qing Tingzhi Shiyong Nvxing Shenti Zuowei Xuanchuan De Gongju*) was censored after its publication (original link: [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/sM5HZ3ITRx\\_BSC5NsnRbMg](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/sM5HZ3ITRx_BSC5NsnRbMg)) and reported by Phoenix News (*Fenghuang Xinwen*): <https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/7u8Qjy4pyjS> [accessed 25 January 2022].

performing space to stage their resistance. In one of the articles on the Zihu media platform,<sup>13</sup> the activist author pointed out the strong connection between shaving heads and its sexist humiliation and cultural implication throughout history, in both China and the West, in reality and in films. The quotation of the article of law in the Qing Dynasty about shaving heads as a punishment, the display of pictures of people whose heads were shaved by the authority in public in the Qing Dynasty, women whose hair was shorn after WWII in Europe, and those who were humiliated as their heads were shaved in films, i.e. *Malèna*, were visually strong resistant acts against the state's performative propaganda. As these articles were gaining more influence across the country, they were all censored. Yet despite the failure, feminist resistance in the digital space recurred in another performing space — the female virtual influencer — already established by the state and challenged its legitimacy.

Drawing on Butlerian performativity in their study of public assembly, I argue that feminist activism against the performative gendered nationalism in the Covid-19 pandemic also has a strong performative quality. It is performative in two ways: first, feminist resistance has a performative capability which brings into being a new space of politics through utterances and acts of resistant assembled bodies; second, it consists of repeated subversive, and most importantly, parodic and satirical interventions which are highly performative.

'Space of appearance' is highly relevant for my argument here. It is a concept referring to the appearance of bodies exposed to precarity in the already established exclusionary 'space of politics'. The concept was

firstly proposed by Arendt (1998) and further elaborated by Butler in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). From performativity of gender to performativity of assembly, Butler keeps challenging ontological pre-given entities, gender in the former case, political beings, in the latter. Butler argues, by making an appearance in the public space, assembled bodies living in precarious conditions expose their 'constitutive exclusions', or 'structuring absence' (2015: 169; Riofrancos 2017). Their very bodily and discursive appearance calls into question the constitution of pre-existing political beings, a public space that only a few are entitled to occupy, and a world that those in vulnerable conditions find unliveable. In this sense, Butler argues that public assembly is performative for it calls into being a more liveable world that is yet to come through utterances, like protest slogans and corporeal resistance. When bodies congregate, act, and speak together, they 'exercise the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law and that can never be fully codified into law' (Butler 2015: 75). In the case of feminist resistance during the Covid-19 pandemic in China, feminist subversive discourses in digital space not only contribute to the rise of a feminist space of politics but are themselves the material support to the fight about by feminist bodies whose counter-narratives were excluded from the space of politics dominated by the nationalist narratives of the state and the nationalist citizens, the only legitimate bodies in the entire performance. The performative exercise of resistant assembly making an appearance that is not yet recognised by the legitimate political beings through feminist utterances is performative. Such performativity is particularly true in the digital world where bodies in virtual form, as non-living entities able to speak, act, agree, and resist, congregate in discursive manner and invoke the space of appearance. The wide circulation and dissemination of the social media posts, discourses, and narratives gives rise to a larger space of appearance that is unimaginable for offline public assemblies. Each post of the resistance, in particular feminist resistance to the state's nationalist performance,

13. Article entitled 'Forced to Have Their Heads Shaved, Liang Wendao: "Female Health Workers During the Menstrual Cycle", Who is Silencing Their Bodily Experiences?' published on Zihu, a Chinese social media platform on 15 March 2020: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/113282539> [accessed 25 January 2022].



FIGURE 2

A Weibo post 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?') using *Jiangshanjiao* to question the lack of sanitary products for female health care workers during the pandemic. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022]

ranging from hundreds of thousands of tweets and retweets on Weibo, likes and reposts of the WeChat articles, connects a greater number of discursive bodies, free from spatial restrictions.

The moment when *Hongqiman* and *Jiangshanjiao* were introduced on Weibo, feminist activists found the outlet to express their anger towards the exploitation of female healthcare workers for nationalist purposes.

These activists soon took over the space of performative gendered nationalism, particularly *Jiangshanjiao*, the female avatar, and reconfigured it into that of repeated satirical feminist interrogations. 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?'), a post questioning gendered nationalist performance, appeared on Weibo a day after the launch of the two avatars. It is a satirical question posed to the nationalist performance which took advantage of females' bodies yet in the meantime failed to provide any substantive support for female healthcare workers on the front lines, i.e. sanitary products (Fig. 2). Shortly after this harsh feminist inquiry, *Jiangshanjiao*, the space of nationalist narratives built by the authority and nationalist citizens, was destabilised and denaturalised by more subversive discourses mimicking the sexism Chinese women encounter on a daily basis (Fig. 3): 'Jiangshanjiao, are you still a virgin?', 'Jiangshanjiao, if your husband abuses you, do the police respond?', 'Jiangshanjiao, do you walk on the street alone at night?', 'Jiangshanjiao, did your parents want another child because you were a girl?', 'Jiangshanjiao, have you had your head shaved?', 'Jiangshanjiao, are you required to inject progesterone?'.<sup>14</sup> Within ten hours, around ten thousand comments like these kept popping up in the comment section before the whole post was censored, turning *Jiangshanjiao* into a site of feminist performance which unveiled sexism in all aspects, from slut-shaming to domestic-violence, sex selection, and sexist nationalist propaganda in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Feminist activists took advantage of the established discursive space through their constant references to *Jiangshanjiao* and drew the already escalating audience's attention to their performance site where

14. These are just a few of the thousands of comments that were posing satirical questions to *Jiangshanjiao*, mimicking what she would have encountered as a woman in the Chinese gender reality. The original Weibo post has been censored but the screenshots of it and the comments can be accessed through: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022].



**FIGURE 3**

Some of the comments below the post read: 'Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?' ('Jiangshanjiao, Ni Lai Yuejing Ma?'), including 'Jiangshanjiao, why are you so close to Hongqiman, does someone name you a whore?', 'Jiangshanjiao, have you already given birth?', 'Jiangshanjiao, will you have better academic performance than boys when you get into high school?', 'Jiangshanjiao, would you go out alone at night?', and many others. Courtesy of China Digital Times.

<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/635845.html> [accessed 25 January 2022]

women's sexist encounters were mimicked and staged. Unable to cope with the huge backlash, the Youth League deleted the social media account of the two virtual influencers five hours after its launch.

Drawing on Butler's metaphor of 'theater of legitimacy' (2015: 85), I argue that the performative feminist resistance calls into question the legitimacy of gendered nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Butler laments that bodies in the public sphere are 'presumptively masculine [...] presumptively free to create, but not itself created' and the feminine is confined within the private sphere (75). Butler further makes a theatrical analogy here: 'when male citizens enter into the public square to debate questions of justice, revenge, war, and emancipation, they take the illuminated public square for granted as the architecturally bounded theatre of their speech' (76). When this theatre is left open to the resistance of 'pre-political' assembled bodies, i.e. the poor, slaves, and women, who are outside the pre-defined legitimate public sphere, such resistance becomes performative. The performativity is both bodily and discursive. Bodily acts were one of two performative strategies of 'Jiangshanjiao feminist activism'. 'How do *bodily acts* become performative?' (Butler 2015: 29), Butler answers this question by highlighting the importance of bodily alliance in expanding the recognition of disenfranchised groups and the space of politics for them. By underscoring 'we' instead of 'I', Butler proposes the plural form of political performativity which involves each individual performance in a collective action. Virtual bodies in alliance, in other words, feminist activists on Weibo, constitute a plural form of performativity. This bodily performativity is even pre-discursive. The fact that these virtual bodies made an appearance in the space of politics which excluded them posed a challenge to the constitution of that pre-established public space. The performative capacity of the bodily appearance calls into question the exclusive nature of the 'theater of legitimacy' (Butler 2015: 85) and 'norms constituting what it means to appear in

public and regulating who is allowed to publicly appear' (Thonhauser 2019: 205). Further, the performative capacity of assembled bodies brings into being new constitutive possibilities of space of politics by making an appearance in the public, reconfiguring the materiality of the space and laying claim to the pre-established theatre of legitimacy. In Butler's words, 'theater is no longer unproblematically housed in public space, since public space now occurs in the midst of another action, one that displaces the power that claims legitimacy precisely by taking over the field of its effects' (2015: 85). Satirical, discursive acts are the other performative strategy of feminists in *Jiangshanjiao* activism. Yang (2021: 3) defined *Jiangshanjiao* activism as political satire, a strategy of digital feminism in China. She differentiated it from the conventional feminist movements: 'the "Jiangshanjiao incident" stands out through its sarcastic narrative against a female character', through 'narrating sexualized sarcasm and insulting femininity' (4). The satirical, discursive act of feminist activists 'attacking' *Jiangshanjiao* is, I argue, a subversive performance. 'Subversive performance' appears in Butler's *Gender Trouble*, mainly in their examination of drag as a subversive performance which '*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*' (2006: 187). In the case of drag, men perform femininity by imitating women or the other way around. In purposefully and repeatedly imitating Chinese women's femininity, feminists in *Jiangshanjiao* activism underlined the misogynistic gendered reality in China. Interrogations of *Jiangshanjiao* destabilised the taken-for-granted subordination of Chinese femininity. Such femininity is defined by their anatomical sex paradoxically as a taboo and a reproductive tool, manifested by interrogations such as '*Jiangshanjiao*, do you get your period?' and '*Jiangshanjiao*, have you already given birth?'. It is also defined by their victimhood in violence against women, domestic and public. Interrogations such as '*Jiangshanjiao*, do you go out alone at night?' imitates the warning facing women which limits their freedom to the domestic, while '*Jiangshanjiao*, if your husband abuses you, do

the police respond?' unveils to the structural ignorance and passivity of the authorities in handling domestic violence.

The link between the theatre of legitimacy and public space faces ontological challenges as public space is only brought into being when assembled bodies act, just as gender identity only comes into being through bodies performing gendered discourses and acts. In the case of Covid-initiated gendered nationalism, the established performing space of nationalist ideology became available to feminist activists in digital space where they reconfigured into their own use the space of politics previously dominated by bodies of the state and the nationalist citizens. When the spotlight of the performative gendered disaster nationalism was put on the heads of female healthcare workers, a virtual public space was established, which then became the site of conflict where the feminist activists who advocated against sexist nationalist propaganda assembled. Their performative capacity, that is, subversive satirical feminist interrogations and content-producing digital practices, brought into being a feminist space of politics, posing a challenge to the space of performative nationalism, the constitution of which was partially based on nationalist use of performative femininity of Chinese women.

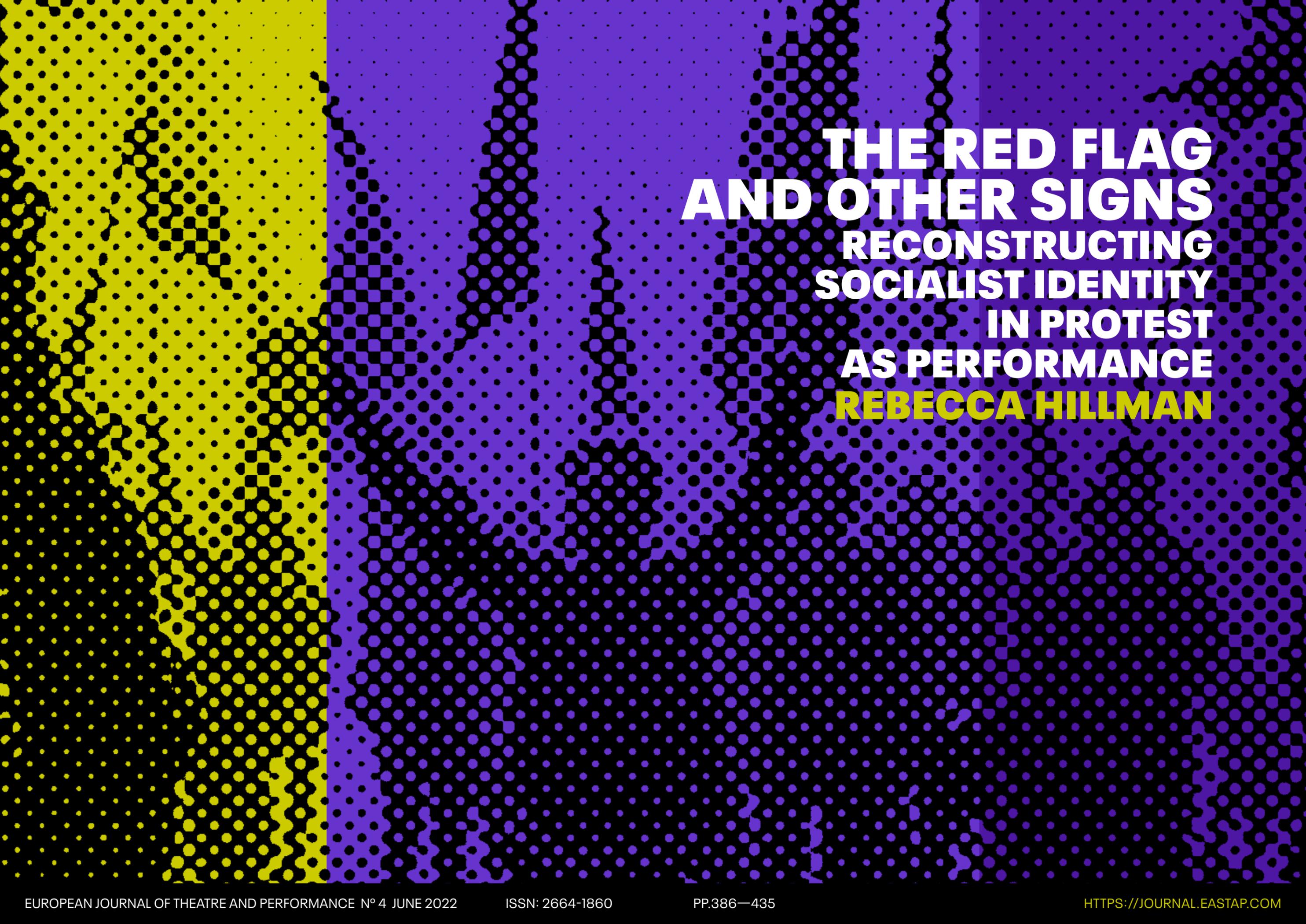
# CONCLUSION

From the performativity of gender, to that of national identity and public assembly, Butler's conceptual frame of performative theory has become a way of thinking that challenges the essentialist status of entities whose constitution remains unchallenged and concealed. Performance is a capacity, a powerful act which is able to destabilise the naturalisation of gender configuration, constitution of national subjects and space of politics. The capacity of Chinese feminists' performance of resistance uncovers the concealment of the naturalisation in the constitution of dominant performative identities or entities, like binary gender oppositions, heteronormativity, nationalist agency, space of politics in China. Unveiling the naturalness of the constitution of these identities brings into being more performative possibilities through subversive discourses, gestures, acts. Following Butler's conceptual frame, this essay argues that gender and national identities are performative, and identifies the performative capacity of subversive feminist resistance in the Covid-initiated gendered disaster nationalism in China which called into question the constraining gender politics upon which nationalist narratives partially relied to produce gendered, nationalist subjects. •

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**THE RED FLAG  
AND OTHER SIGNS  
RECONSTRUCTING  
SOCIALIST IDENTITY  
IN PROTEST  
AS PERFORMANCE  
REBECCA HILLMAN**

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## KEYWORDS

protest, performance, socialism, communism, left political movements

## MOTS-CLÉS

manifestation, performance, socialisme, communisme, mouvements politiques de gauche

# SUMMARY

Obituaries of the Left have been written many times over at least since the 1970s, as faith in socialism as a viable ideology or economic system diminished in the West. The ascent of neoliberal globalisation has meanwhile resulted in a democratic deficit and crisis of representation at the level of lived experience. Political movements of the 1990s and early 2000s commonly eschewed hierarchy and homogeneity in their approach to organisation. As such, the vanguard became the multitude, and the march to power the practice of assembly, decentralisation, direct action, and democratic decision making in temporary autonomous zones. Yet recent years have seen significant reclamations of symbols and practices associated with socialism and communism, specifically. Focusing on the appearance of large red flags between 2015 and 2019 at street protests, political rallies, in community theatre projects, on social media sites, and a revolutionary battleground, the essay analyses what this tells us about contemporary politics.

# RÉSUMÉ

La mort de la gauche a été annoncée à maintes reprises depuis les années 1970 au moins, alors que la croyance dans un socialisme en tant qu'idéologie ou système économique viable dans l'Ouest se diminuait. A même temps, la montée de la mondialisation néolibérale a entraîné un déficit démocratique et une crise de représentation quant à l'expérience vécue, tandis que les mouvances politiques des années 1990 et du début des années 2000 ont fréquemment rejeté les approches organisationnelles hiérarchisées et homogénéisées. À ce titre, l'avant-garde s'est muée en multitude, et en une marche aspirant à alimenter les pratiques de décentralisation des assemblées, d'action directe et de prise de décision démocratique dans les zones temporairement autonomes. Pourtant, les symboles et pratiques de réhabilitation importants ont été, ces dernières années, associés au socialisme et au communisme en particulier. En se focalisant sur l'apparition, entre 2015 et 2019, de grands drapeaux rouges dans les manifestations dans la rue, les rassemblements politiques, les projets de théâtre communautaires, les réseaux sociaux et les champs de bataille révolutionnaires, cet article examine ce que cela révèle au sujet de la politique contemporaine.

In 2015, Member of Parliament (MP) for Islington North and member of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, Jeremy Corbyn, was elected leader of the Labour Party of Great Britain. His election was won on the back of significant campaigning by grassroots party activists (Hillman and Weston 2019). As Leader of the Opposition between 2015 and 2019, Corbyn campaigned on issues with wide popular support that had been outside of the political mainstream for many years, including free access to education and healthcare, regional investment, and re-nationalisation of key industries and transport systems.

Corbyn's policies marked a radical return to the left and to the representation of working-class interests after the party's shift to the political centre, which happened most concertedly between 1994 and 2007 under the leadership of Tony Blair, when the party was rebranded as 'New Labour'. Blair had rewritten elements of the party's constitution, replacing values rooted in its formation from socialist parties and trades unions and replacing aims such as 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange' with the vaguer language of social justice (Bevir 2005). Bloc voting of the labour unions was also revoked at this time, and neoliberal economics were incorporated into parts of the party's policy (Thorpe 2008: 8).

Although Labour gained power during this push for a more modernised, ‘moderate’ party, the socialist base were alienated. However, Corbyn’s leadership brought many back into the fold, as well as a new generation of activists. Despite overwhelmingly negative media coverage of and numerous challenges to his leadership from within the party, membership grew exponentially from one hundred and ninety thousand in May 2015 to more than five hundred and fifty thousand by the end of 2016, making Labour the largest political party in Western Europe (MacAskill 2016). Membership continued to grow until Corbyn stepped down as leader. Corbyn’s unexpected popularity and the activities that manifest to support his leadership became known, and simplified, as ‘Corbynism’. This essay is interested in ambitious initiatives occurring within and in connection with this movement that took advantage of Corbyn’s leadership, not only to create cultural experiences to reach potential voters, but to build a political consciousness that could endure beyond it.

Labour’s increased membership, but also widespread grassroots campaigning, was harnessed after Corbyn’s election in a formalised organisation called Momentum, which operated as both a central organisation closely linked to Labour leadership, and as a few hundred satellite groups that acted largely autonomously in their local areas (Hillman and Weston 2019). Momentum has always been concerned with political culture, and in 2016 it launched *The World Transformed*: a cultural organisation and annual festival that has run alongside the Labour Party Conference ever since, drawing participants from across the country to weeklong programmes of discussions, workshops, performances, screenings, parties, and other social events.

I joined the Labour Party and Momentum in 2015. Over the next four years, a common feature I encountered at many of the political and cultural events I attended, from protests and rallies to community theatre productions and gigs, were large, plain, red flags. In this essay, I apply

Baz Kershaw’s 1997 framework for analysing protest as performance to some of these experiences, to help me question the meaning of the flags in situ.<sup>1</sup> I consider how the flags function within broader histories of the labour movement in the UK, and also how they are indicative of the international reach of the movement and suggest an ideological continuity through diverse contexts.

This analysis of political events as performance and my practice as an activist in the Labour Party and labour movement at this time enables me to uncover political articulations that have been missed by influential theorists writing on contemporary popular protest, who identify democracy as the only remaining ideology, signifier, or methodology through which progressive change is organised. Representative historically of revolution, socialism, and communism, as well as ‘Old Labour’,<sup>2</sup> I argue that the red flags operated in the events I analyse as a nostalgic evocation of worker’s power, whose roots go back to the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799.<sup>3</sup> However, by reading the red flags in relation to other elements that contributed to the overall ‘dramaturgy’ of specific events, the events in relation to one another, and historical and theoretical reference points cited by the activists involved, I argue that the flags were also used to reclaim and popularise histories and ideologies including Soviet era Marxist socialism and Marxism-Leninism specifically.

1. See also Chapter 3 of Kershaw’s 1999 book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, where he develops this framework, as well as arguments that are broadly relevant to this article.

2. ‘Old Labour’ is a term used to describe the traditional identity of the Labour Party and its policies, including nationalisation, redistribution of income and wealth, and to distinguish this phase of the party from the approaches of ‘New Labour’ of the 1990s to the 2000s.

3. This was before the flags accumulated iconic status transnationally as a symbol of socialism and communism in subsequent left-wing revolutions, including the Paris Commune in 1871.

# Analysing Protest as Performance and Accompanying Ideological Frameworks

The essay is structured into three main sections. The first explains why I think it is important to analyse protest as performance in the first place and considers how the analysis of protest has been shaped by postmodern philosophy and modes of political organisation at the turn of the century. It also references Chantal Mouffe's influential thesis on left populism to ask what this brings to the analysis of protest as performance, as well as what it overlooks. The second section describes my experience of participating in the 'red bloc' at anti-austerity protests in 2015 and 2017, and how red flags were choreographed within those protests to create meaning for participants and audiences at a symbolic and affective level. It also considers the significance of red flags that appeared in Rojava and Syria, between these marches. The third section focuses on Manchester Momentum's cultural programme between 2015 and 2019 where red flags framed some of their activities, and describes how red flags were used as props in Salford Community Theatre's 2016 performance of *Love on the Dole*.

Ultimately, the essay suggests that the red flags described are emblematic of an underappreciated paradigm shift, concomitant with the shift that was happening in the Labour Party at this time. I argue that they were part of an effort to manifest, as well as to represent, socialist and communist sensibilities in the twenty-first century, and to signal the possibility of common and positive identification with a cause as a necessary response to neoliberalism. In such a way, the essay contributes new insights into approaches to agency, organisation, and endurance of the Left.

In his article 'Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968–1989', Kershaw develops a methodology that applies a semiotic lens to acts of protest and civil unrest, to make protest legible 'as' performance. By analysing three post-Second World War protests and their reliance on performative dimensions, including symbolism, dramatic dialogue, soundtracks, and satire, he contends that most forms of protest are shaped by 'performative considerations' and that while they often involve spontaneity, they tend to follow 'scripts or scenarios', which are performed for an assumed audience (1997: 260, 274). He also argues that analysing protest through a performance lens 'may reveal dimensions to the action which are relatively opaque to other approaches' (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

Through this 'protest as performance' framework, Kershaw troubles a tendency in mainstream reportage to dismiss civil unrest as simply disorganised, unstructured, or violent (1997: 258). He builds a case for performance analysis to interpret multi-dimensional, unpredictable, and ephemeral acts of protest, whose 'theatrical impulses' usually constitute an 'interweave of actions' incorporating 'changes of direction, tempo, and focus' (ibid.). Furthermore, he contends that 'dramaturgies of protest' once decoded can offer clues to understanding major socio-political change through their negotiation of tradition and innovation in the form of resistance, enabling a 'suggestive description of the links between the politics of state [...] and the ideologies circulating in civil society at

4. As well as Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance* (1999), Jan Cohen-Cruz's book of the previous year *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* offers numerous historical examples of twentieth-century protest and/as political performance.

particular moments in cultural history' (274). For Kershaw, performance analysis may therefore 'discover aspects to protest which resonate with their historical moment in especially telling ways' (260). Moreover, he considers activists' utilisation of performance aesthetics to be powerful, and their analysis pertinent, in highly mediated, late-capitalist multi-party democracies, where 'performance is central to all socio-political processes' and operates as 'a powerful weapon of political conflict' (257).

I adopt Kershaw's framework to analyse the events and images discussed in this essay and their significance. This facilitates close examination of the symbology of the red flags and how they were choreographed into complex performative displays. Like Kershaw, I interpret the dramaturgies of protest I focus on as 'a kind of historical relief map of changing civil desire' at a time of radical social and political change (256–7). I am particularly interested in how the events I examine 'embody their historical context through their location in identifiable traditions' to 'disrupt socio-political expectations and produce new kinds of public discourse' concerning collective power, socialism, and communism, specifically (257). However, while Kershaw focuses on 'street protests' and his three examples of protest involve numerous people in public spaces, in addition to street protests I analyse how the flags function in a scene of protest *within* a community theatre production; a demonstration of international solidarity; and as part of the aesthetics and branding of an influential online forum. The red flags, I argue, connect these apparently disparate sites, through what they articulate politically at a certain point in time.

My thesis departs from Kershaw's in a few other key ways. Firstly, his incentive to explore dramaturgies of protest arguably responds to what Benjamin Arditi identifies as 'a practical acceptance of multiplicity and pluralism' across sectors of the Left since the early 1980s, which contributed to 'a dislodge of progressive thought from strictly Marxist and party-based paradigms of politics' (2003: 310). I also understand

Kershaw's analysis to reflect a connected tendency in theatre and performance studies to move away from the analysis of the kind of politically committed dramatic theatre that had supported organised left movements of the twentieth century, and to refigure the fundamental relationship between performance and the political.<sup>5</sup> However, this essay focuses on political demonstrations and politically committed theatre emerging from the contemporary organised left that recalls signifiers and relational dynamics associated with communist and socialist political systems of the last century.

Secondly, Kershaw observes that the dramaturgy of late twentieth-century protest followed a paradigm shift towards postmodernity and became 'variously detached from any specific political ideology', demonstrating 'as much an expression of difference as of unity' (265). This thesis, which he develops in his 1999 monograph *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, understands the cultural shifts affecting dramaturgies of protest as the same as those that had recently 'rendered traditional forms of "political theatre" redundant', as people '[shook themselves] increasingly free of the metanarratives that had given those forms their meaning and utility' (1997: 274). Kershaw, reflected positively on this at that time, insofar as he interpreted a civil desire that was becoming 'more sophisticated, complex, and multi-faceted' (274). Subsequent analyses have similarly examined performative dimensions of protest in terms of plurality. Judith Butler has considered the political assembly in terms of 'a plurality of bodies who enact their convergent purpose in ways that do not require strict conformity to a single kind of acting, or to a single kind of claim, and who do not together constitute a single kind of subject' (2015: 164). Larry Bogard understands plural and 'transideological' tendencies of protest in the 2000s as effective but also ethical; where hybridity constitutes the

5. See, for example, Kershaw 1999; Howe-Kritzer 2008; Kelleher 2009; and Sekallariidou 1999.

‘sweet spot of artistic activism’, but where ‘Movements that strive for purity — in ideology, form, or action, spawn monsters’ (2016: 61, 43). While I would not describe the protests and performances I analyse here as ‘striving for purity’, I do consider the significance of their distinctly unified aesthetic. Moreover, I do not find this indicative of a monstrous regime and observe its origins in a political movement founded on inclusive organisational processes and principles.

As Arditì implies, a method of political organising and world view embracing plurality also came to define the the alter-globalisation movement, also known as the global-justice movement; a social movement that emerged in the 1990s. The alter-globalisation movement saw ongoing experiments in participatory democracy since the 1960s merge with the *encuentros* of indigenous resistance movements in Latin America, to coordinate an international frontline against rapacious impacts of capitalism on the world’s people, ecology, and environment at the turn of the century (Maeckelbergh 2012: para. 8). Constituted of multiple sites of solidarity and confrontation, the movement saw protests proliferate in every region of the world (Pleyers 2013). Sensitive to the distinctiveness of specific struggles as well as their systemic oppression, this ‘movement of movements’ held the local and global in a delicate balance (Mertes 2004). It embraced commonality in difference, and configured itself primarily along pluralist, horizontalist and prefigurative lines (Maeckelbergh 2009). Explicitly postmodern and anarchistic in tone, alter-globalisation activists fought for ‘unity in diversity’ in ‘a world where many worlds fit’ (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 119, 29). In this mode of political organisation, the vanguard became the multitude, and the march to power the practice of assembly, decentralisation, and democratic decision making in temporary, autonomous zones (Hardt and Negri 2000; Bey 2002).

In line with Kershaw’s observations and Bogad’s concerns, movement activists have often articulated a conscious departure from organised

displays of unification, including those of communist regimes, specifically. For example, Notes From Nowhere describe alter-globalisation movements as operating through a ‘collision of subjectivities’ that replaced ‘one dogma’ or ‘one party line’. ‘There is no single banner we march behind’, they explain, and ‘no little red book’ (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 14). Marianne Maeckelbergh distinguished the movement’s ‘progressive’ approaches from ‘orthodox’ practices of the twentieth century, noting that while movement actors may ‘speak of “revolution” in a general sense, they do not speak of a revolutionary moment’ (Maeckelbergh 2009: 17–8). For Maeckelbergh, processual and creative approaches of global justice movements were no longer ‘cloaked in the language of consequentialist revolutionary strategy’ (Maeckelbergh 2011: para. 45).<sup>6</sup>

Yet, at the same time, long running concerns over the loss of a robust analytical and political metalanguage of the Left,<sup>7</sup> were joined by analyses of the risks of activists’ over-reliance on self-organised networks characterised by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment, as well as a deficit in those movements of collective identity (Dean 2016; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Beyond the barriers to political organisation presented by identity fragmentation and horizontalism, scholars began to examine how a lack of coherent identity or a fetishisation of leaderless networks risk creating anti-ideological vacuums, susceptible to moral and conceptual content of any political persuasion, including fascism (Butler 2015: 182; Nagle 2017: 24).

<sup>6</sup>. Similar perspectives characterised journalistic interpretations of the wave of uprisings between 2011 and 2013. See, for example, Paul Mason on the replacement of traditional working-class structures of political solidarity and organisation by contemporary models that offered greater practical and ideological flexibility (2013a), including online platforms that ‘killed [hierarchical structures] spontaneously’ (2011: para. 11), as millennial activists, having read ‘Foucault rather than Marx’, avoided at all costs the ‘risk [of] creating another 20<sup>th</sup> century’ (2013b).

<sup>7</sup>. See, for example, Jameson 1991; Murphy 2012; Jackson 2010.

Focusing on Western Europe in 2018, Chantal Mouffe went some way to proposing a solution to such concerns. She argued for a counter-populism to undermine the recent gains of the far-right and exploit the political awakening occurring after the financial crisis of 2008, while the neoliberal hegemony was in crisis. This would be done by reinstating and popularising the term ‘left’ to reaffirm partisan positions and by deploying art and culture in the service of the new frontier between ‘the left’, or, to use Mouffe’s preferred term ‘the people’ and ‘the oligarchy’ (76, 84–5). The importance this theory placed on symbols of common struggle also led to the sanctioning of leaders, who would not, Mouffe assured, necessitate a return to authoritarianism (70).

However, Mouffe uses familiar terms to maintain a strategic plural framework to encompass diverse aspirations and to distinguish the ‘populist political frontier’ from the traditional frontier of the left and right, or, ‘the people’ from ‘a homogenous subject in which all the differences are somehow reduced to unity’ (83, 62). She discusses socialism and communism in the past tense, considering them neither productive nor viable in the construction of a contemporary political imaginary or as objectives around which to organise, claiming ‘People do not fight against ‘capitalism’ as an abstract entity because they believe in a ‘law of history’ leading to socialism’ (50). Rather, she suggests, ‘It is always on the basis of concrete situations that they are moved to act’ (ibid.).

She does identify democracy as a crucial signifier in the political imaginary, however, and a point from which people can be mobilised (41). She also argues that ‘It is through the language of democracy that many citizens can articulate their protests’, recalling how, in the 2011 movements of the squares in Greece, the people ‘did not call for “socialism”, but for a “real democracy”’ (41). She claims that since the collapse of the Soviet model many sectors of the left are ‘unable to visualise an alternative to the liberal view of politics other than the revolutionary

one that they have discarded’ (37) and criticises the ‘extreme left’ for an over-attachment to theory and an inability to ‘engage with how people are in reality’, claiming ‘[t]heir anticapitalist rhetoric does not find any echo in the groups whose interests they pretend to represent’ (50).

It is possible to trace an ideological, practical, even dramaturgical inheritance from the alter-globalisation movement to protests since 2008. In 2011, the flavour of the 1990s Reclaim the Streets movement, for example, was detectable around the sound-systems, carnival atmosphere, and occupations of the protests against education cuts in Britain, where global justice veterans passed on legal advice cards and other tactics to first-time protesters (Lunghi and Wheeler 2011). When protesters occupied Times Square in New York, later that year, as well as utilising street art, carnivalesque costume, and music to animate the cause, protesters utilised hand signals and vocal techniques developed by alter-globalisation activists to practice directly democratic decision making within their assemblies. Slogans of movements at this time were often personally inflected (‘I wish my boyfriend was as dirty as your policies’)<sup>8</sup> or they were broad enough to stand not only for people participating in similar protests around the world, but on behalf of almost entire populations (e.g., ‘we the people’ and ‘we are the 99%’).<sup>9</sup> In this way, dramaturgies of these protests align with Mouffe’s strategic plural framework, insofar as individual expression and capacious symbols encompassed diverse aspirations of people who were able to unite over systemic injustice. This galvanised strength, at least symbolically, in numbers.

8. Coral Stoakes’s placard used in the student protests of 2011.

9. ‘We are the 99%’ was a slogan that became synonymous with the Occupy movement, which referred to the vastly increased concentration of wealth among the top 1% of income earners. For an analysis of ‘we are the people’ and the assembly as performative embodiment, see Butler 2015.

## The Red Flag: 'Making Communism Look Cool Again'

However, frustration with a disconnect between spectacular mass protests of this era and organised political resistance was one catalyst for the re-emergence of other ideologies, approaches, and symbols that Mouffe and others have not considered. In the UK, elements of student and anti-capitalist movements joined with sites of political organising of the traditional left, including trade unions and left political parties. Support for socialist policies in the Labour Party was signalled by the reaffiliation of various major trade unions, while the Communist Party of Britain refused to field candidates between 2017 and 2019 (before commencing with one of their biggest electoral campaigns since the early 1980s, when Corbyn stepped down as leader).

Meanwhile, Corbyn's unlikely mandate was supported by a movement steered by significant, often youthful factions who, while not necessarily affiliated to far-left parties, far from being indifferent to the promise of socialism or discarding a revolutionary point of view, actively embraced these ideas as central to their organisational principles. To rebuild the social bases necessary to support a socialist political programme, these activists interrogated creatively, at the level of grassroots activism, theories and practices that examined what 'effective solidarity looks and feels like' and how to achieve it<sup>10</sup> and which called for reconfiguring the affective dimensions of political organising and protest to centre around collectivity and commonality (Dean 2016; Fisher 2014).

Although Mouffe criticises the Left for an over-attachment to theory and a detachment from what is really going on, her analysis overlooks these new, positive articulations of socialism and communism, which were harnessed by activists to answer their crises of precarity, class oppression, material inequality, and the organisational shortcomings of alternative political systems.

In 2015, and then again in 2017, I attended demonstrations organised to protest policies of the Conservative Party Government, whose annual conference was held in Manchester those years. Tens of thousands gathered in the city on each occasion, to march in diverse contingents including trades and student unions, anti-austerity, and environmental organisations, as well as non-affiliated groups (Pidd 2015). In 2015, I was invited to join a particular group called the 'red bloc'. The organisers of this bloc had staged a similar protest at an anti-austerity rally in London earlier that year that I had not attended, but were more ambitious this time, bringing activists together from across the country to create and carry large, red flags. The red bloc was organised with specific reference to the political possibility represented by Corbyn's recent election as Labour Party leader and turned out to be an important meeting place for activists who would go on to organise in the Party over the duration of his leadership, as well as operating as a political symbol and activity in its own right.

As well as an effort to increase numbers, organisers were concerned with achieving a particular vision, and the bloc was choreographed to fulfil clear symbolic intentions. Most of us on the bloc, which in 2015 must have been about 100-people strong, had been contacted a few weeks prior via WhatsApp group message and asked to turn up not only to support the demonstration as a whole, but to 'make a big show of marching in a disciplined bloc'. The message explained the bloc would be 'unaffiliated and unbranded', but that the aim was to 'make the

10. See, for example, Fisher 2014; Gilbert 2018; Milburn 2017.

imagery of socialism/Communism look cool again' (personal communication with bloc organiser, August 2015). Details were given of the number and dimensions of the flags we would carry, the formation we would take, and links to photos and videos of the first incarnation of the bloc earlier that year as a template to follow. The demographic of our intended cast, as well as other elements that would set the tone were also stipulated in the message: 'we'll mobilise a mostly younger crowd' to march to 'a sound system playing post punk etc.'. In due course, details were circulated as to the meeting time and place.

When we finally assembled, towards the front of the bloc people hoisted 30ft x 8ft flagpoles flying large red flags, with numerous smaller red flags brought up the rear (Fig. 1).

In the interest of symmetry and unification, the 8ft flags were not only distributed in terms of the bloc's breadth and depth; people's height and any involvement in the original red bloc earlier that year were also taken into account, with experienced marchers prioritised in terms of flag distribution and responsibility. Once on the move, marshals wearing high-vis jackets gave firm direction to achieve an orderly display, straightening the flanks with spare flagpoles, held horizontally. This task was taken seriously, creating a focused, sombre atmosphere.

Looking out from the bloc towards people on the side lines, I wondered what they made of us. I worried a bit over the confusion I thought I perceived among the anarchists or the nervous glances I thought I saw from broad-church groups like Left Unity and The People's Assembly. Within the bloc, those in the know appeared to get on happily with the task in hand, while I speculated on the experience of demonstrators who, apparently attracted by the red flags, joined the ranks last-minute. I was close to the front of the bloc for a while, near a group who kept straying out of line to find their position repeatedly corrected by high-vis jackets



**FIGURE 1**

Red bloc protest, Manchester, 2015 © Manchester Momentum

or flagpoles. I wondered what they were thinking before they ducked away from the tight-knit display and into the wider march. I thought about what was being achieved and forfeited in our unification.

I remembered my experience of similar self-consciousness and questioning on an anarchist black-bloc some years before. I was curious as to why the red bloc felt as transgressive, if not more so, despite the fact that red bloc members had not dressed to conceal their identities, intimidate, or fight the police. Perhaps this was due to the way the red flag was centred in our performance, whose controversial reference to communist regimes was heightened through the bloc's synchronised and regimented choreography.

Then, as we turned a corner towards the conference centre, red flares were lit, shifting the bloc's mood and formation dramatically (Fig. 2).



**FIGURE 2**  
Red bloc flares, Manchester, 2015  
© Manchester Momentum



**FIGURE 3**

Protesters mount the wall of the old Roman fort at Deansgate, Manchester, 2015

© Red London [www.facebook.com/redlondon17](http://www.facebook.com/redlondon17)

The tight ranks split, as people and flags dispersed in the smoke. Neck-scarves were hoisted over noses and a few red balaclavas flashed among the flares. The bloc marched along Deansgate to the ruins of a Roman fort, where protesters mounted the old wall, flags and fists to the sky (Fig. 3).

Climatic in one sense, breaking the original, clean formation of the bloc in a gesture of immediate, revolutionary desire also felt like a retreat to more familiar territory, aesthetically but also in its performance of civil desire (Kershaw 1997: 256–7). The original formation of the red bloc, rather than organising its protest dramaturgy to signify — and potentially to realise, as black-blocs traditionally have done, viable physical opposition to the arm of the state — represented desire for an organised, indeed orderly, communitarian alternative to the political hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, as well as to an anarchistic or plural assembly.

The reappearance of the red bloc at the 2017 protest, which maintained and diverged from the dramaturgy of the 2015 bloc, offers clues to understanding changes within the Labour Party at that time, and more broadly in British society. The 2017 bloc was considerably bigger, emerging from a stronger and more networked socialist left. Less tightly controlled, it lost the orderliness of 2015 in exchange for a constant flow of people moving in and out of its porous flanks during its long procession through the city. Organisers at the front of the bloc (also a larger group than before) elevated a banner, whose colour scheme, asymmetric typography, and reversed ‘R’s to become the ‘Ya’ or ‘Я’ of the Cyrillic script, reflected the Marxist-Leninist influence within the movement (Fig. 4).

The mood was more relaxed. At the peak of ‘Corbynism’, perhaps this indicated an ability to celebrate, rather than a need to establish or defend, the bloc’s identity. The post-punk soundtrack was this time interspersed with dance tracks whose adapted lyrics created accessible



FIGURE 4

Red bloc banner, Manchester, 2017 © Manchester Momentum

political reference points. GALA’s 1990s single *Freed from Desire* became ‘Corbyn’s on fire — Teresa May is terrified’, before the bloc chorused sweetly in a rendition of The Smiths’ *There is a Light That Never Goes Out* and then raised the red flags even higher to the socialist and traditional Labour Party anthem *The Red Flag*.

Despite the soviet-communist aesthetic of the leading banner, I perceived our observers as warmer this time. I noticed smiles rather than frowns as we passed through the roadside crowds, speculating that this could be in response to our playful, sometimes local soundtrack, which was carried by more voices this time around. Or perhaps it reflected my own journey since 2015, which found me feeling at home somewhere within the party-political system for the first time and aligned politically with a broader community of people than I’d realised existed. Either way, if we consider the 2017 red bloc and its reception as an example



FIGURE 5

Bob Crow Brigade, Rojava, Syria, 2016

© Alexander Norton

of Kershaw’s ‘historical relief map of civil desire’, it makes sense that it contributed to my impression that a socialist movement had developed beyond any expectations in 2015, and that this development had something to do with the way activists were reclaiming ‘identifiable traditions [to] produce new kinds of public discourse’ (256–7).

This interpretation is also supported by other appearances of the red flag between 2015 and 2017 (Fig. 5).

Reminiscent of the 2015 photograph of protesters mounting the roman wall at Deansgate, but taken in a very different context, this photograph depicts the ‘Bob Crow Brigade’: the name a group of British volunteers gave themselves when they joined the Women’s and People’s Defense Units in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in Rojava, Northern Syria.

The ‘Rojava Revolution’ has been supported by socialists and left organisations from around the world, and this image makes the unlikely link between the battleground of Rojava and the 2016 South Western train strike that was underway at that time in the UK. The late Bob Crow, who served as General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Union between 2002 and 2014, was known for his strong leadership and Communist Party membership and remains an influential figure on the left of the UK labour movement. This image, which was circulated on social media before it was picked up by the mainstream press, depicts graffiti, a large red flag, and the Kurdish flag,<sup>11</sup> to imply that while the struggles of the soldiers and train guards are ostensibly remote, they are ideologically connected.

11. The red of the Kurdish flag also symbolises the blood of martyrs who have died for freedom; a meaning associatively shared with the plain red flag, which is also referenced in The Red Flag anthem mentioned in the next paragraph. (The colour red also bears the same significance in many other nation flags.)

The site on which the image first appeared was Red London’s Facebook page. Red London established itself as a Facebook Group in 2015. Accumulating one hundred thousand followers at its peak a few years later, posts on the group page averaged a few hundred responses each. Posts were typically strongly pro-Corbyn, responded to current affairs, and were distinctive for their strong Marxist-Leninist stance and use of Soviet imagery. The group’s politics were held as defiantly as their mockery of other factions was merciless. Their commentary, whether appearing as a meme, a doctored film/photograph/cartoon, archival material, or a combination of these things, could be sharp to the point of predicting political events, including the improbable outcome of various leadership and snap elections within the Labour Party.



FIGURE 6  
Red London Facebook page, 2017  
Photo by author

The red bloc and their flags at Deansgate had featured as Red London’s cover photo shortly after the 2015 Manchester demonstration, and for a few years afterwards, while The Red Flag anthem, itself a reworking of Jim Connoll’s lyrics from 1889, was also reappropriated on the group’s ‘About’ page, to emphasise the connection between the past and the future: ‘*Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer we fight on, proud of our past and sure of our socialist future*’<sup>12</sup>; lyrics that also reclaim the theme of failures of the old Left to project a stronger, more unified future trajectory (Fig. 6).

12. Original song lyrics: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/en/red-flag.htm> [accessed 25 May 2017].

The next section of the essay charts other appearances of the red flag over the next few years, in connection with the same broad movement. I consider theoretical and historical references of the activists who used the flags, to reveal the explicit and self-conscious links they have made between socialist and communist movements of the twentieth century and their own initiatives.

**FIGURE 7**  
Labour rally 2017 © Manchester Momentum

2 METRO Tuesday, January 16, 2018



## Momentum unstoppable as Jezza allies win control

Momentum – the grassroots campaign set up to support Mr Corbyn – mean the party leader's supporters have a clear majority on the NEC for the first time, giving them enormous power to alter the direction of the party. The NEC sets Labour's rules and signs off on disciplinary action. The outcome also strengthens growing fears of deselection among moderate MPs. Mr Corbyn welcomed the results

yesterday and said he looked forward to working with the new committee members. But moderates have warned the NEC not to push through mandatory re-election for all Labour MPs. Emma Reynolds, a former Labour frontbencher, told the BBC such actions would stoke 'division and bitterness' in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Veteran campaigner Mr Lansman,

who gained 65,163 votes, said he was 'really honoured' to represent the almost 600,000 members of the Labour Party. The other new NEC members – Yasmine Dar and Rachel Garnham – also polled more than 60,000 votes. Activist and comedian Eddie Izzard came fourth, with 39,508 votes. He said: 'Despite not being elected, I'll continue to do all I can to campaign for an open and welcoming Labour

Party and to campaign with fellow Labour activists across the country to help Labour win the next election and put Jeremy Corbyn in Downing Street.'

**What's your opinion?**  
Text the word **IEWS** followed by your comment, name and where you live to **65700**.  
Standard network charges apply.

# Making Socialism Appear: Manchester Momentum, the Disco Turn, and Salford Community Theatre

Large red flags provided a striking backdrop to Corbyn's address to the crowd at a Manchester rally in the run up to the snap election in June 2017 (Fig. 7).

The appearance of the red flag at rallies, as well as in song, became associated with Corbyn's leadership and a realignment with the founding purpose of the Labour Party to represent working-class interests.<sup>13</sup> Used as a smear by the right-wing press as much as to celebrate his leadership by elements of the left, it was chosen by some activists on the left of the Party over the red rose, which had replaced the red flag as official Party emblem in 1986.

The flags also found their way onto various stages in community halls, squatted buildings, and arts centres, framing talks by academics, artists, political commentators, and politicians at events organised by Manchester Momentum between 2015 and 2019 (Fig. 8).

For some activists, political culture offered an answer to a loss of socialist culture on the left and the internalisation of individualistic and competitive traits characteristic of neoliberal ideology. Momentum activist

<sup>13</sup> Corbyn's victory party at Westminster, at the closing of the annual party conference, also on the red bloc protests.



**FIGURE 8**  
Momentum public talk, 2018 © Manchester Momentum

and Women's Officer for Northwest Young Labour Beth Redmond cited the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher's damning indictment of a tendency of the UK Left to replace collective and structural concerns with identities that are 'shaped and distorted by capital' (Fisher 2013: para. 32 cited in Redmond 2019a), where 'class has disappeared [and] solidarity is impossible' (Fisher 2013: para. 15). For Fisher, in late capitalism, the Left had moved dangerously close to 'naturalised neoliberalism', where 'the possibility of projecting new futures has diminished' (2014: paras. 7, 4). However, he saw glimmers of hope in learning, or re-learning 'how to build comradeship and solidarity' (para. 1), through feelings of belonging to a political movement. Capitalism, he pointed out, 'hasn't offered anything that competes with that' (para. 22).

Between 2015 and 2019, the Labour Party provided a locus for experimenting with some of these ideas (Milburn 2017). Experiments in 'Acid Corbynism', a term developed from Fisher's concept of 'Acid Communism', drew inspiration from cultural political movements of the 1960s to promote sites of collectivity, creativity, and pleasure, such as parties, festivals, and dance floors; social infrastructure and 'powerful countercultures'; arenas that might offer a glimpse of 'the embryo of postcapitalist collectivity' in 'moments of soundtracked togetherness' (Phull and Stronge 2017). For political theorist Jeremy Gilbert, the alienating individualism of capitalist culture might be overcome on the dancefloor, by 'feelings of collective joy' (2017: para. 19) that would be 'built by people pushing together not pulling apart' (DJ Luke Blackwax quoted in Phull and Stronge 2017: para. 20). These ideas inspired Manchester Momentum to create eclectic social programmes to run alongside their political-education events, designed to attract diverse constituents and bring new members into the Party, as well as to strengthen bonds between long-term members (Hillman and Weston 2019; Redmond, Rose, Weston and Yousif 2018). The suite of activities on offer, to foster a good time and a sense of togetherness, included Italo Disco Nights, karaoke, barbecues, unsociable hours film clubs, socialist football, and rambling in the Peak District, to commemorate the mass trespass of Kinder Scout organised by the Young Communist League in 1932 (Figs. 9 and 10).

The movement's interest in deeper historical initiatives can also be found in formal statements and proposals intended to impact Labour Party policy. In 2018, member of the Young Labour National Committee Max Shanly put forward a proposal for inclusion in Labour's Democracy Review, in which he acknowledged the loss of 'a once vibrant socialist culture that existed in [British] working-class communities' (Shanly 2017: 6). In the proposal, Shanly argued that a retreat from the kind of 'grounded sentiments of collective resistance' built up over



FIGURE 9  
Italo Disco poster, 2018 © Manchester Momentum

generations by the labour movement has meant a critical detachment of party voters and potential activists (ibid.). Marcus Barnett, International Officer for Young Labour, inspired by socialist artists based in Salford in the mid 1900s, made a case for rebuilding ‘ecosystems of socialist culture’, which would ‘weave together youth culture with socialist organisation’ (Barnett 2018: paras. 19, 30). He also observed ‘red bases’ that were appearing at the time, including socialist food and clothing banks, sports and social clubs, and community theatre companies; initiatives that with structural support he believed would have the potential to place ‘popular left wing politics [...] convincingly in a local context’, counteracting ‘demoralization and far-right activism’ and instrumentalising no less than ‘the revival of British socialist politics’ (paras. 29, 32, 35).

Salford Community Theatre can be located in this context. Founded in 2016, the company draw on working-class histories of Salford to make politically relevant plays with a local cast, most of whom have not acted before. In 2019, company members wrote about their work as standing ‘firmly within [the] tradition’ of socialist theatre of the twentieth century, as well as part of a broad cultural and political turn whereby ideas of the radical left had re-entered mainstream political discourse, and, more specifically, the initiative to rebuild the left under Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party (Rose and Weston 2017: para. 2). Supported by the local labour movement, they consider political community theatre like theirs has ‘a powerful role to play’ in the broader struggle of the left, where consciousness raising and ‘bottom up, popular political education will be key’ (para. 17).

Their first production was an adaptation of *Love on the Dole*, a novel by Walter Greenwood about unemployment and impoverishment in Salford and the surrounding area in the 1930s. To dramatise parallels between past and present, the company devised a promenade performance, during



**FIGURE 10**  
Kinder Scout hike, 2018 © Manchester Momentum



**FIGURE 11**  
Salford Community Theatre, street scene from *Love on the Dole*, 2016  
© Colin Armstrong Photography

which, large red flags held by community actors, stewards, and audience members were marched from Islington Mill to Bexley Square (Fig. 11).

In this sequence, Salford Community Theatre sought to loosely recreate the 1931 demonstration against the Means Test that had been led by Salford's National Unemployment Workers Movement (NUWM) and which had culminated in 'The Battle of Bexley Square', involving police brutality and mass arrests (Fig. 12).

Playwright and co-director for the company Sarah Weston has written about how this part of the performance became a 'real demonstration',



**FIGURE 12**  
Salford Community Theatre *Love on the Dole* scene at Bexley Square, 2016  
© Colin Armstrong

as members of the public understood the historical re-enactment as a contemporary demonstration, in some cases responding accordingly by joining the march or unfurling a red flag from an upstairs window as the procession passed by (Weston 2019: 175).

Whereas the red bloc drew on a network of activists to convey through performance a political idea, as part of a larger political demonstration, Salford Community Theatre fostered political activism through the long-term and embedded work of creating a community play and, eventually, brought a political demonstration into being, as part of a theatrical event. In such a way, the activists in each case chose a different route to create political community, with the theatre company taking on the challenging task of building political participation from scratch rather than relying on an existent activist community. In both cases, representation, participation, and performance were key, while the red flags link them as part of the broader project I have been discussing, to ‘make socialism appear’ (Redmond, Rose, Weston and Yousif 2018).

Salford Community Theatre have described how, through theatre, socially engaged subject matter ‘can be felt as well as discussed’ and a world can be brought to life, ‘building space to explore a range of utopian possibilities’ (Rose and Weston 2019: para. 18). Cast members have described the rehearsal process as one of ‘rejecting individualism [...] re-learning collectivity [and having] the basic foundations of socialist society instilled in us’ (Redmond 2019a), while Weston and producer Isaac Rose also describe the theatrical process in terms used in descriptions of Acid Communism, quoted above. They claim theatre can offer the kinds of ‘collective, joyful experiences’ necessary to ‘counter the apathy and individualisation that the current order relies upon’, as well as ‘real, living examples of how we can live and work together [towards] a common goal’ (Rose and Weston 2019: paras. 20, 17, 19).

As though in direct response to Maekelbergh’s pursuit of prefiguration and Mouffe’s dead-end socialist road, Rose and Weston also go on to argue that the Left should adopt community theatre and other cultural projects into the heart of the movement because they constitute ‘a profound example of the world we wish to build’ and ‘strengthen our resolve in the political struggle that will be necessary to build it’; concluding that community plays ‘teach us that socialism is in the end, worth it’ (para. 20).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Many on the left lost faith in the progressive potential, even the possibility, of struggle underpinned by collective aims, objectives, and identities. Radical political writing since the 1980s has often held fast to notions of freedom in autonomy and the absence of a common language, programme, or class-based analysis (Dean 2016: 24–5). Millennial movements have often been conceived in direct contrast with Marxist theories of social change despite the enduring influence of those theories, while unification of intent or form has been equated with oppression by political theorists and performance scholars alike (Hardt and Negri 2004: 86; Bogad 2016). However, the twenty-first century has also seen renewed critical interest in creating collectivity and ways of being together, and even an appreciation of the potential of the political party as a site for both the experimentation and coherence needed to implement change (Dean 2016: 24–5). Some of these ideas have been drawn on recently in mass left movements, whose activists have also cited cultural programmes of communist and labour movements of the twentieth century as inspiration.

This essay has considered alternative performances and processes that have been created to intervene in the isolated and fragmented terrain of neoliberal capitalism, to provide the experience of, as well as to represent, collectivity. It has suggested that while political theory plays catch up, by analysing the aesthetic and dramaturgical dimensions of popular political interventions, ‘a suggestive description of the links between the politics of state [...] and the ideologies circulating in civil society’ can be located (Kershaw 1997: 274). In terms of what these dramaturgies of protest tell us about changing civil desire between 2015 and 2019, the red flags in each of the images above connect diverse situations: from the tightly controlled red bloc to battlements in Rojava; the clean red line at Corbyn’s rally to the procession in *Love on the Dole*. By recalling histories of workers’ struggle and solidarity through the performative present, they construct a symbology of the Left to signify the enduring presence of international socialism. Gilbert described ‘the Corbyn moment’ as an example of ‘a crack in Capitalist Realism [...] through which a flood of pent up postcapitalist desires have burst’ (Milburn 2017: para. 9).

Interestingly, in relation to histories of the global movements traced in the first half of this essay, Shanly described the mass membership of Young Labour under Corbyn as an opportunity for popular mobilisation, which might ‘(bridge) the gap between horizontalist networks and the labour movement’s well-established and traditional hierarchies and internal culture’ (Shanly 2017: 7). Perhaps there are also clues in the perspectives of the actors with the most at stake. Rizgar Dêrik, a Scottish man interviewed about his reasons for volunteering in Rojava, talked about political alienation at home, where he felt anarchist politics was disconnected to the realities of working-class life (O’Riordan 2017). Tommy O’Riordan suggests that economic crisis, austerity politics, precarity, and deepening economic and social division have played an important role in a mass politicisation across Europe, and that this is evidenced across wide ranging phenomena, from volunteers in Rojava to

the unprecedented support for the Labour Party under Corbyn (ibid.). Throughout this essay, I have interpreted the red flags from my own perspective as a movement activist, which offers insight but also creates a reading inevitably coloured by my own political persuasion. Important interpretations of the red flags are yet to be found in the perspectives of other spectators of the protests and images discussed.

In terms of how the reclamation of politics that celebrates collective identity can be read against Kershaw’s equation of sophistication and progress with multiplicity and difference (1997: 265, 274) or against Bogad’s ‘monsters’ (2016, 43), I want to suggest that while we have witnessed a popular, youthful reclamation of political identities associated with ‘grand narratives’ of the early twentieth century — and while the formation of their demonstrations may at times be tightly controlled! — that this ideological shift and attendant choreographies of protest do not necessarily signify an oppressive politics. Founded on socialist principles, each of the groups I have referenced is staunchly anti-fascist, anti-racist, and they are feminist. While frustration with the procedural stumbling blocks of anarchism has inspired new approaches, in my experience the movement and groups I described are propelled by a fundamentally democratic ethos, while their influential organisers include activists previously involved in the alter-globalisation movement whose sensitivity to difference and the beauty of plurality remains intact. More specifically, Momentum aims to organise at the grassroots through initiatives that are community-based, as well as to democratise the Labour Party. The founders of Salford Community Theatre handed the company to the cast of *Love on the Dole* at the end of 2016, playing a supportive rather than directorial role in projects the community wanted to pursue (although came back on board by popular demand in 2019 after a period of inactivity in the company, to direct a new play). In Rojava, soldiers fight to defend an autonomous region founded on the principles of direct democracy, socialism, and feminism.

The red flags I have focused on are loaded with historical significance and steeped in political intent; despite their plainness, they are anything but a blank canvass. While they offer themselves as signifiers to be raised in multiple projects, they celebrate socialist achievements and seek to repair, partly through performative means, a fragmentation of the collective spirit. I hope this essay will create more awareness of this kind of collective praxis, ideology, and power that still often tends to be dismissed through association with the last century. I also hope that by highlighting the way politics becomes visible through the performance of protest and political culture, that theories of political organisation will grow to accommodate practices that have gone under the radar, and consider their implication for the future. •

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# ARTIST IN FOCUS

PHIA MÉNARD  
& COMPAGNIE  
NON NOVA

GUEST EDITORS

STEFANIA LODI RIZZINI

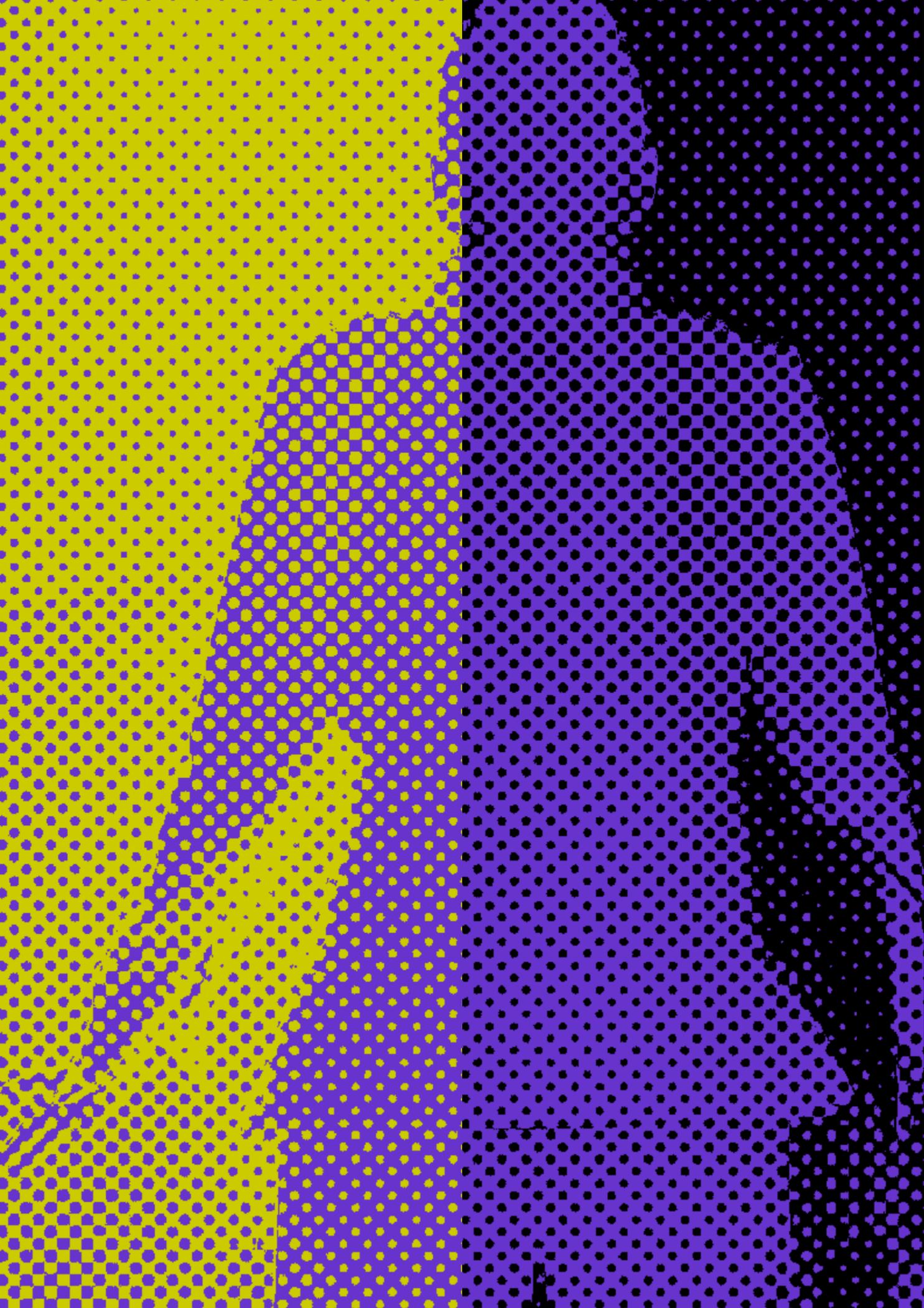
ARMANDO ROTONDI



**LOOKING  
THROUGH  
DARKNESS,  
IN SEARCH  
OF EMPATHY**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PHIA MÉNARD**

**STEFANIA LODI RIZZINI**  
**INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER**  
**ITALY-FRANCE**



Over the past two decades, Phia Ménard has developed a unique personal artistic language with her company *Cie Non Nova*, becoming a reference artist of the French theatre scene. Initially trained in the art of circus as a juggler, in more recent years her work has evolved into a performative practice which is characterised by the constant hybridisation of circus, dance, performance, and theatre. This artistic project takes the name of I.C.E. (*Injonglabilité Complémentaire des Eléments*) (*Complementary Unjugglability of the Elements*). Here the artist evokes a perpetual battle of the performer's body with the elements of nature evoked in her pieces. The series of water (steam), the series of wind, and the series of ice encompass her entire repertoire to the present. Furthermore, transformation and transfiguration are essential notions associated with Ménard's research. In her vision, all the elements acquire a plasticity which blurs the frontiers between the performer's body and the elements evoked. *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (Pour Europe)* (*The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (for Europe)*) is the most recent work of the artist, presented at the 2021 Festival D'Avignon. It represents a further transformation of Ménard's creative process and output whilst maintaining her permanent dialogue with the spectator and their imaginaries.

The following interview documents a dialogue that progressed between Phia Ménard and myself, Stefania Lodi Rizzini, beginning in Vilnius at the EASTAP conference 2021 and culminating in a meeting in Porto during February 2022. This dialogue attempts to understand what *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (For Europe)* means within the broader scale of Ménard's career and her artistic journey, whilst reflecting upon all the elements which nourish her creation of performance and her deep reflection on what it means to be a human being and our coexistence in society.

*In Vilnius, during our meeting for the EASTAP conference, you said that the Covid-19 pandemic had made you aware that, on a personal level, you are addicted to having an unstable life. You also expressed the need to change your relation with the profession. In the last six months, you have returned fully to stage and performance. Have your reflections during the pandemic impacted your work within your multiple roles as director and performer at the head of an important growing company?*

I am a performer, so I will continue to perform on stage. We could list so many artists in the history of art and contemporary times who have continued confronting themselves with the audience while ageing. Moreover, I think that the older you get, the more interesting it becomes to perform on stage. It exposes the fact that exposing yourself and being on stage is not simply an act of veneration of youth, something that we can see often.

I am currently preparing the opera *Les enfants terribles* and one of the singers is in his early seventies. He plays the role of someone who falls in love. When I look at him, I say to myself that you can actually fall in love at seventy years old. This concerns as well how we relate to the essential facts of life. The only certainty we have is death, and very few others. This is something which often annoys us, but we have as well an absolute scientific and absolute real conviction drawn by our perception,

by the body. Therefore, showing an old body, that can still breathe, facing gravitation, being constantly in the feeling and in the necessity of life, convinces me to continue, because I'm not ready to leave the stage.

Afterwards, another question is the need to realise if as an artist you have nothing more to do on stage and what you propose in a dialogue with the spectator is no longer of interest. In that case being on stage is just showing off, and reminds me of the old stars who go on stage just to say 'I am still here'. Here, there is nothing interesting happening. Ultimately, in my opinion, to continue to share a point of view, a certain perspective and insight, I think there is no age limit to doing that.

*In the last twenty-five years you have created a personal artistic language based on hybridisation of different genres and aesthetic forms such as circus, dance, and performance. Every time you are asked for a definition of your work, it seems that you are able to escape any kind of definite label.*

In fact, it is funny, the word for label in French (*étiquette*), if we speak about the label, its meaning is very much linked to the idea of the product. Everything produced is labelled and immediately linked to its market value. I envisage that my multidisciplinary practice makes it difficult to associate or define what I do into any one performing arts genre. In the performing arts, genres are defined based on things such as their precise use of gesture, or use of a text, or acrobatic practices, or singing. So how we define a performance depends upon how its production is linked to different forms of putting the body in action. Theatre has a text and written choreography, and music has a score, for example. Performance encompasses all forms which expose a kind of relationship to the given moment, to the unknown of that given moment. When I look at theatre today, at least text-based theatre, I ask: when does it stop being interesting? I think it stops being interesting when it loses its relationship with the instant, with a given moment. I think about this

new movement of young artists we have in France who work with video, such as Julien Gosselin. How can video ever bring a kind of unexpected immediacy, a possibility of approaching something primal of the theatre representation? Performing live means maintaining a living character. Without live performance, we are left with something without this living character. Live performance also shows a will to keep a relationship to the given moment. We know that in performance everything is played out in that given moment, which is the only real value of performance. Moreover, performance allows you that day, at that moment, to become witness and bear witness to an action while the artist who carries out this action is also in this same relationship of immediacy which can fail, mess up, or become uncertain.

Getting back to the notion of the label, I think that the fact that my work is not easily identifiable with a label is something that I have to continue to defend. I would say that I propose a relationship to living at that given moment of a performance which is also a relationship of empathy. A real relationship of empathy. I am currently defining the dossier for my next creation *Article 13*, and I have come to understand that there is only one subject that I am interested in, and this is violence. Violence interests me because I'm trying to understand why we don't have empathy. What makes us lose empathy so easily? And if I have to be labelled, I will take the label of any genre in search of empathy.

In addition, I am questioning this primal relationship and connection that I feel to a more primitive notion of performance, not drawn from the Greek or European theatre, but from the cave paintings, which brings me back to the notion of living and witnessing. When I look at the Chauvet cave paintings, the lions and fawns scenes, I feel the emotion of the person who drew it, captured in a feeling of fascination and fear. Within these emotions, I feel empathy for humanity. These beautiful animals are stronger than us. We are so weak. Reconsidering the

notion of the label, a label is a market notion and is connected to the art market as a business. This raises the question: can a society exist without a market, without money? Is it possible to imagine a society without submission and therefore a society where empathy is not neglected, and empathy is not a commodity either?

*In Vilnius you said that Covid-19 forced you to question your motivation to continue doing theatre. What are your motivations now? What is nourishing your will to continue doing theatre beyond the research of empathy?*

Maybe Covid made me think about all of the violence that occurred during 2021, with the death of Marion (the performer from *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*)) and the loss of other young people's lives. The evidence of death, especially young people, to me it is intellectually intolerable, I have a real problem with it. I think these reflections also allowed me to clarify a very strong desire and understanding of what I was doing. During the Covid pandemic I worked on the *Trilogy* (*The Trilogy of Immoral Tales – For Europe*). Perhaps the greatest power of the *Trilogy* is that it makes empathy anything but anecdotal. The work provokes empathy and bring us to constantly question: where is our empathy? What makes us lose empathy? Moreover, this means that in this definition, and in this awareness about the object of my research, nowadays I understand more and more that my work is a revolt against violence and that violence cannot be accepted.

If I look at it retrospectively, everything becomes clear. Now I can say that all my pieces call violence into question. By interrogating violence, what does it express? Violence is itself a way of expression that I use on stage, since the scenes and images I show are violent. I think about *P.P.P.*, *Vortex*, *Belle D'Hier* (*Yesterday's Beauty*), *Saison Sèche* — they are all violent. Each time there is an enormous use of violence, but all this violence is there to constantly create and provoke this empathy. In its intent, it's almost re-educational. We have to re-educate ourselves to exist in the

sensitive world. We must embody a sort of counter-message as well to the solicitation we are permanently exposed to be strong, that our society exists only because we are strong, and that strength allowed us to survive and dominate the animal world. But in fact, I ask another question: strong for what and in what? Here strength is a terrible incapacity to consider the other, to consider him or her as an equal. I recently saw Raoul Peck's documentary *Exterminate All the Brutes* which was incredibly interesting and helped me to understand the notion of dominance.

*How do you meet your performers? Do they actively take part in the creative process or are they purely somas? When creating any new work, do you look for specific skills or is the encounter with performers dictated more by chance?*

I think there's more or less all of that. They are somas, that's for sure. What provokes the encounter and how do we meet? The encounter takes place by provoking it. The encounter is provoked, sought out, and, at the end, it always takes place. I don't believe in chance, and I think the meeting with Inga (the leading character of *Temple Père* (*Father Temple*)) is the best example. I knew that the role of dominatrix of *Father Temple*, was made for me, but at the same time I was conscious of the limit I had personally to develop this role, so I had to find a person for this feminine role. That's when I finally met Inga by chance, one evening whilst she was talking with an artist I knew.

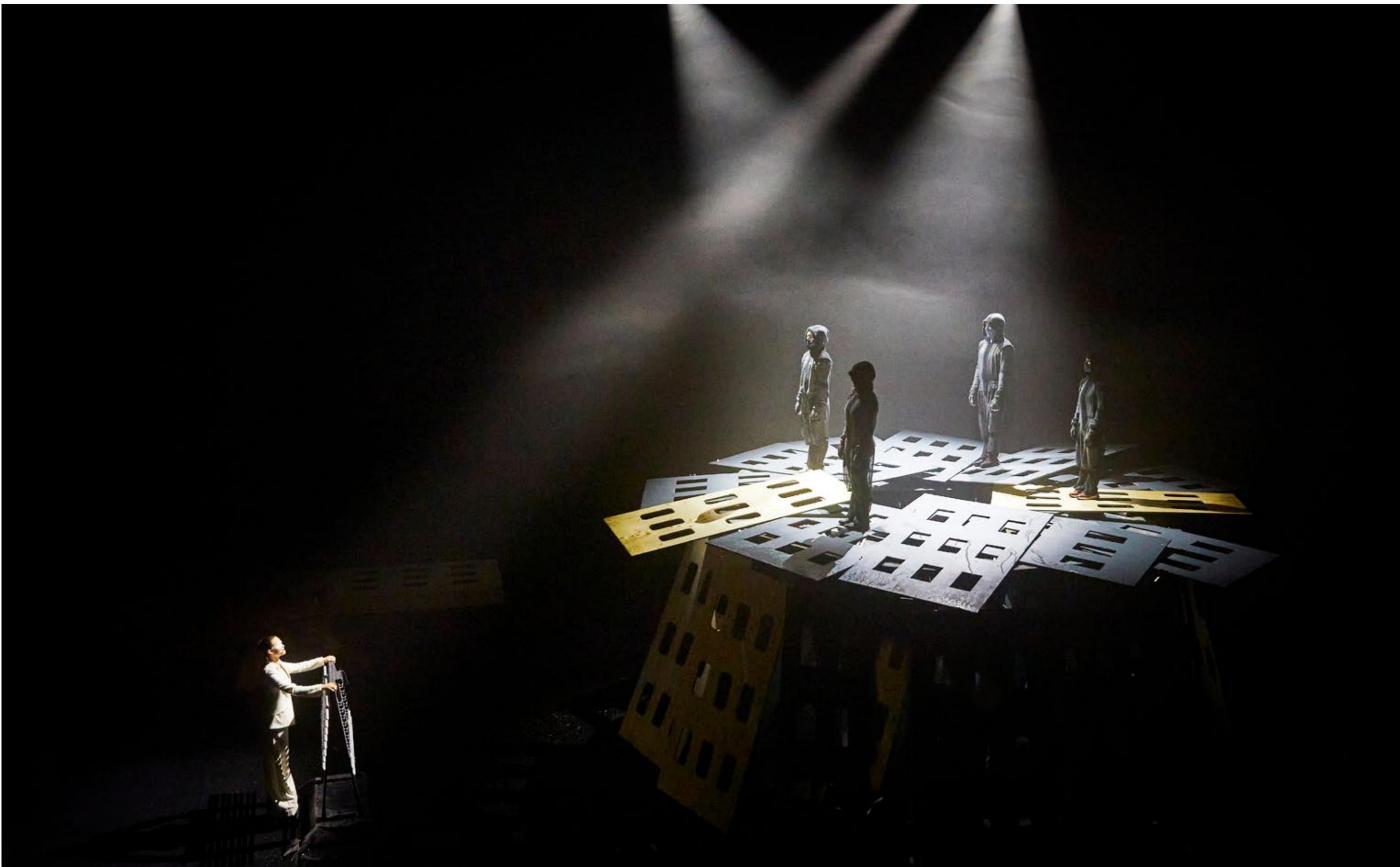
I believe enormously in the encounter and, if I look back, all the people who work in the company come from chains of acquaintances. These encounters are produced by a sort of correspondence and common exploration of artistic research. To me it is a kind of speleology, in the sense that I believe that, in the moment you cross the light of the other speleologist, you may realise that there is the possibility of continuing the path of exploration together. I really believe in that. This desire for encounter finally produces a range of possibilities which will make the

encounter happen at some point. I don't believe at all in the audition thrown in the air, neither in the call for tenders. I don't believe in this market notion... What is an audition? It is an offering to the most dedicated person to come and join a project and perceive him/her in her/his market form. It is a dilemma for me, and I can't consider it. I can only take into account humanity. In meeting each human being there is a part of uncertainty, because I don't know what to expect, but I always hope that the encounter produces something. I really believe in that; I believe much more in meeting someone who will have to work to progress sometimes more or sometimes less than having someone who already has a certain level but who will not advance anything else. A meeting with the latter example would be purely execution.

*You define the performance Temple Père as a sadomasochistic play. Why did you choose a woman as a leading role of this work? In your previous pieces, you dealt with the liberation of women, I am thinking about in the ritual piece Saison Sèche or Belle D'Hier, while in your last creation the seductive and cruel role is given to a woman.*

Recently I've been reading some very interesting discussions and critical papers focusing on this female figure, who is someone who collaborates with power. To me, as a feminist, I can't understand how a woman doesn't recognise herself as a feminist. We have to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be feminist? Why don't women identify themselves as feminists?

If we move on to a sort of malignant opposition: could men call themselves masculinist? Who are those who call themselves masculinists? Those who want to assert their masculinity as a kind of power. Within the feminist issue we should raise the question: what makes us so submissive despite being so numerous? Why even individually are we unable to change society? The answer is patriarchy and ultra-liberalism, the most powerful cocktail, a system that we are not able to change even



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (pour Europe): Temple Père*, 2021  
Performers: Fanny Alvarez, Rémy Balagué, Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, Élise Legros  
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though we are aware of it. The role of women in *Temple Père* speaks to this collaboration in a much broader sense. *Temple Père* is about building a cock/phallus. She builds herself an armory and she keeps speaking about this building as an incredible machine. She takes part in the construction of this machine; therefore, she is part of it.

Ultimately, the problem in society, regarding women and their social representation, is that women are a cog of power, a gear in this society. Women have the power to give birth, an absolute power which is constantly controlled because men do not have it. As I started my dialogue with the performers from *Saison Sèche* and *Belle D'Hier*, I once again raised the question about a subject which is not approached by feminism. Women who have a hetero life practice, who love to make love with men, they live a dilemma because in a relationship with the man, they are looking for their equal but at the same time they want to please and have the pleasure from this relationship. I think this is one of the most crucial questions which is never addressed, which faces us with a real subject of the impossibility of federating women. We are facing a real issue of the impossibility of uniting women. This concerns the role of Inga Huld Hákonardóttir. It allows me to look at the women, those who are collaborating in the patriarchy, those who are really guilty. At the beginning when I was thinking about the role of the dominatrix, I was thinking about the role of Auschwitz camp's guardians, and a book about the notion of witness. I recall a book about the testimony of the women concerning the rape of German women by Russian soldiers entering Berlin at the end of the Second World War. This subject is absolutely taboo, so I was questioning the notion of collaboration. Did they collaborate? How could they? How did they live through this? These are fundamental questions which are never raised.

That is to say, yes, we could change society, but the very subject of feminism would have to be addressed in a much broader way that would

include all the questions that cannot be asked, that is to say, sex and desire, the desire to have children etc. At the end, what is *Temple Père*? It is a session of sadomasochism. It is a contract based on the agreement as defined by Gilles Deleuze. Our social existence is based on a contract where the relationship of submission and domination is accepted by contract, and we are all in this. That's exactly Inga's position, she embodies the role of dominatrix. She has a contract of dominatrix with her slaves, but at the same time, you may also say that she has a contract of submission. What I suggest in the play, this great power is ultraliberalism and patriarchy. By consequence, women stipulate a contract with the ultraliberalism and patriarchal society, and this is a problem for me, something that I am trying to understand.

*Some philosophers affirm that changes occur via the re-appropriation of knowledge? I am thinking about Rosi Braidotti and her notion of maps of intensity and affects. At the same time, knowledge is linked with interests. I am thinking about education systems and how they are disciplined and integrated into society to form the social subject. How can we transform society starting from the re-appropriation of knowledge?*

We have to learn. School is a structure for the functioning of the society. We have to learn what the school doesn't teach us. This is a real issue, ultraliberal and patriarchal: the notion of interest or of stakes. Who owns these things? The stakeholders ('actionnaires') and their existence are exclusively bound to the stakes. In France, we are approaching the presidential elections. The only subject that will never be addressed is: what is the stakeholder for? The stakeholder will always be the one who will only maintain a value that is absolutely abstruse. Recalling Raoul Peck's documentary series, Peck shows very well how the predominance of white and European society constantly functions by dominating other societies by the use of violence, by the inability to extract oneself from this idea of exploitation. I think the big term is exploitation. The school is the

generator of the exploited, which allows exploitation. Maybe I take the position of the artist who constantly refers to the image of the exploited and the exploiters. An artist who takes a stand in all this, who really works and creates and is able to become estranged and at the same time to bear witness of all this. It is a particular position. Today I am aware that I do a bourgeois job, in the sense that I can criticise and at the same time I am given means to do it. The bourgeoisie gives me a space.

When I think back now to the question you asked me about the label, maybe subconsciously I have spent my time trying not to be identified under a label, telling myself I'm not a commodity, holding a real desire to distance myself from this.

*I would like to talk about your relationship with corporeality and the materiality of the body. For years, bodies have been the centre of your exploration. At the beginning of your career, you explored your corporeality and your body on stage yourself, starting from yourself to get to yourself, in a very introspective way. Whereas in the last few years, you created collective pieces focusing mainly on women's bodies. How have your creative work and the associated dynamics changed?*

As you said, my body's journey, my physicality has been built upon two parallel issues concerning identity and writing. I sought to write while seeking to be me; this is the male period, the period of my male transvestitism as I would define it. In all disguises there is a very strong shadow part, a part of impossibility. I was searching for a possible being, a possible living. From the moment I made this act of accepting to transition, to be in a place or site and to understand that this new position I was adopting, that of saying ok, "now I'm a woman", was also opening a huge new drawer. What does it mean? It's a discovery of another inequality in which I can recognise myself. This is at least something that I can experience in a very corporeal way as a woman in a male domi-

nated society. Since then, I can start another form of dialogue, which interests me for my future projects, which is that of sisterhood. We are aware that history is written by the winners. We have to rediscover the incredible hidden history of sisterhood, excavating in history as well. We have to engage in this archeology of sisterhood.

One of the most beautiful things I can say today about corporeality is that I identify with a part of society, whereas before I didn't. This allows me, today, to write pieces like *Saison Sèche*, or other pieces which deal mainly with female bodies, because I want to bear witness from this site, not that of the sufferance. The sufferance is visible, instead I want to bear witness to power and the submission which it implies. I want to bear witness to the fact that in this submission there is a strong state of consciousness which relates once again to this notion of contract. However, as in any contract, there is the possibility to breach the contract. Ultimately, it is necessary to know who has to break it.

*Relating to this journey which you have undertaken to become a minority, I would like to hear your opinion on a very contemporary issue that is important to the theatre world, but also of broader significance. Who is entitled to narrate? Who owns the histories to be told?*

I think this is one of the most difficult subjects. I think it's difficult now because we're back in the time of the sufferance. To me Covid-19 was just a kind of accelerator of something that was already in progress. I think the MeToo movement was a trigger of something that the pandemic came to exacerbate even more. I think we are in a time of pain and sufferance and therefore we need to take account of this and recognise it. That means recognising the pain caused to women, to people of colour, to anyone who is dominated by a white, patriarchal power. This is all clearly in front of us. It is obvious that we cannot escape this need to work on sufferance and the pain.



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Performer: Inga Huld Hákonardóttir  
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This reminds us of the tales of the people killed by the Nazis. At the beginning, nobody believed their testimony. To me, all the sufferings we see today can also be placed upon this spectrum. Today, we still have to talk about violence against women in order to convince society that it is happening and to bear witness to that. Furthermore, we have to recognise our postcolonial heritage because our society and our world is the result of these acts. For instance, climate change. So, there are a lot of issues. Therefore, I think that, for a while, it will be very difficult to speak out about certain subjects without being concerned. Those who are not directly concerned with the subject need to act with humility. It's going to be hard, and I think that we can do very little, because there is a sufferance. Coping with it, society has only one response, the one given by the justice system. However, the justice system does not respond to the uniqueness of the pain, it only responds in general, with a judgement made in relation to an established law. It means that society gives a legal response which is never an empathetic response. Furthermore, society, in its established structure, responds to the sufferance and pain in a distanced way. The distressed person can only find healing within a personal response which can only come from themselves, their capacity, their relationships with their dearest ones, to resolve themselves. If they work on this, they will always resist revenge, and they will work to make society fairer. Let's take, for instance, the example of those feminists who declare that trans people cannot be feminists because they don't have a vagina and they cannot bear children; a very male discourse which situates women once again in their role of giving birth.

I think we are going to live in a period where humility is needed. It may look like a loss of freedom, but perhaps it's the only way, in any case, that we can succeed in easing the pain and sufferance that we have made. If I think about it, it's terrible because I want to be able to deal with all these subjects at once. However, on the other hand, there is an answer to all that, and that is the artist's answer. The artist's answer lies

within their capacity to develop an imagination that will allow them to continue to deal with all these subjects of injury by means of constantly transfiguring, transforming, bringing in another point of view, which will escape the sufferance whilst recalling it.

*Here we can see a point recurrent in your work: your dialogue with the spectator and your research to strike and create a connection with personal imaginaries. This appears to be a fundamental aspect of your creation.*

I recall a sentence by Andrej Tarkovskij who states that not everyone can be an artist, but rather the artist is someone in a society, designated or self-designated, who is able to return their perspective about society to society, and therefore to bear witness to society. The artist is someone who is compelled to step out of the group, to look at it, and to take time to return a vision. It is an extremely important position, someone who bears witness to something which could have the possibility to change society. The artist can't testify from the front, neither can they hold up a mirror because they would only look at themselves. Here you don't look at society, you have to look at yourself in society. So, the only way an artist can look at society and not look at themselves is when the artist is able to deform, transform, anonymise, to enlist all the elements of a construction that only starts from them, as well as permanently reflect on this and ask themselves: how can I speak about this without hurting anyone? How can I talk about this in a way that will touch someone?

In considering these questions, we have to connect with another consciousness and use all the means which connect us all the time, which are in the end very simple: the light, the blur, the movement. These are things that will give a first idea of what a body can be on stage: an illuminated, perceived, isolated body. A body seen and heard walking on a theatre stage is also a body existing in a space which is a site of representation, of transfiguration, and a metaphorical space as well. Finally, there is a powerful

connection with the possibility of the unconscious. Recently speaking about dreams with a dear friend of mine, she made me laugh. She said to me, what is reassuring about the unconscious is the fact that the unconscious is not us, it must be someone else. I think there is something true about this. In fact, the artist is someone who searches the possibility to be someone else, to be all the others. That means that we have to be able to be what we don't want to be. Generally, on stage we are not who we are, otherwise we are there just to show ourselves for the sake of business. We live this strong relation to ourselves to say that we must also be all those who are in the audience that evening, and finally we are, we got to it. Being there we try, continuously, to interrogate the symbols, and that is why I think that theatre, or at least the theatre that I want to practice, is very much linked to the symbol, precisely because symbol constantly lends itself to interpretation and interpretation is a form of the imaginary.

*Symbol is also a reconnection to our past. In Vilnius, you told me that Trilogy was created as a sort of memory of your father's life. So, is the imaginary symbol connected to the notion of memory even within personal memory?*

It's true, *Temple Père* is a kind of tribute. But I think that many of my pieces, such as *Belle D'Hier* also, have these kinds of features. These memory pieces are in fact about submission, conceived once again in a very contractual way, that of a submission accepted because it was better than a form of anarchy. There is also the element of the pride of the submitted, which is the core of my relationship with my father. Although he was a model worker, a blue-collar worker, he never admitted he was submitted. He just recalled that he had no choice. As I remember, when I was young, he brought me to see the boat he worked on, and he was proud. He sometimes complained, but in the end, he always started all over again. In addition, it is funny because, from a very intimate point of view concerning my father, he spent his time writing memoirs, but not personal or intimate memoirs, but rather the memoirs of a labourer,

detailing what he did, what he made, what he learned, and how to do things. It's the memory of submission. The Industrial Revolution created the worker role: the person who gains their place in society through their submission. The submitted worker gives their life to work and therefore accepts that their body is impacted by this submission. Handing down work from father to son was based on a fake idea of protection. What was the pride of the miner, or the metalworker, or the manual labourer, who passes this trade on to their male child? The knowledge of the father that their son will continue their work. This knowledge was never defined as submission. I think this is a theme that I have developed enormously and *Temple Père* talks about this. That is to say, if you read the reviews of the *Trilogy* today, you will never see the names of the four artists who build the tower, you will never see the names of the four artists.

*Temple Père talks about the disappearance of bodies. The bodies of the four performers disappear in fact, embedded in the construction, an effect that is also achieved by the use of lighting.*

Yes. The light here is a form of biography. It's bringing light to something. Finally, there are only these four acrobats who are able to build the tower, so you show that an oppressed population of workers has a specific knowledge, and submission can only exist on people who have such a knowledge. From a psychiatric point of view, if we think about the first studies on wild children — for example, that of Lucien Malson — what knowledge does the French wild child Victor de l'Aveyron<sup>1</sup> possess? He is absolutely incapable of establishing priorities, whereas the submissive worker establishes priorities. This raises the question of freedom.

1. Victor de l'Aveyron was a foundling who lived until the age of twelve in a forest in the central massif area of France. He was born around the end of eighteenth century and his case attracted public attention and the study of anthropologists and was taken as an example by experts to study the nature of humankind. He did not have contact with living beings for all his childhood, he was unable to speak. François Truffaut made a movie based on his story in 1970, called *L'Enfant sauvage*, which renewed his fame.

Victor de l'Aveyron was free, he was totally free. Another question: what is a savage? To be submissive is a state of human consciousness. This suggests that every human being at the moment they accept to be submissive is already in a state of reflection, which is terrible.

*So Trilogy is a memory piece, a sort of architecture of memory?*

Yes, it is a memory. These pieces are also pieces of a memory about the meaning of submission. However, at the same time, it is the memory of a knowledge, and as well my own memory, which is that of having been a boy to whom a knowledge was transmitted, a knowledge of architecture, of construction, and order to build. I would say it is a memory and a transmission, because memory is a transmission. I asked at the beginning what we needed to protect ourselves? At first, it started with a roof, to protect oneself from the sun and the rain. Then you needed walls to protect you from the wind and then you had to find a way to warm up a cold space. And finally, it is perhaps the transmission of a memory of the human being who thinks and reflects on how to adapt, to transform. So, it's a memory of transformation. More specifically, architecture is a relationship to the body. An architecture without a human being does not exist. Architecture is a way of framing a human being and making society exist. Architecture is born with the society. As soon as we no longer live in the cave but decide to set up a place to cultivate and take advantage of what nature gives us to protect the family, that is the birth of architecture. For me, architecture symbolises all this, but to me it is also the space of scenography, the space of the imagination. Architecture is ultimately about questioning the space of the imaginary and, in my work, the pieces are always constructed at the moment that the scenography is drawn for me. At the moment that I begin to draw the scenography, the piece will exist, that means that I have defined the architecture of the piece. My creative process always starts with the stage design, which is an architecture. The process always starts with where the action takes place.

*What is the role of the nude, exposed body in your theatre? With the exception of Saison Sèche and Belle D'Hier, you never used nudity on stage until La Rencontre Interdite (The Forbidden Encounter). Why now?*

It was not a choice! It was an obligation. Something I would say about architectural theatre is that it is necessary for the stage to intrude into the audience space, to be with people. During this period of researching, I was really affected by the fact that I couldn't go on stage and perform. I felt that my body was not necessary. It was a moment like a sort of small death. One week before the premiere, I realised that in the first part I am Athena, but by the third tale it is Phia, I need to be Phia. Phia is an artist, but in this act, it is necessary to be Phia, a woman who acts to destroy the possibility of theatre. This was the period in which we couldn't go on stage. To me it was like the deed of Jan Palak, who burned himself in 1968. He committed suicide. I decided that to commit suicide I needed to be naked. I am just a human and an artist and I say to you if we continue to lock theatre into unimaginative forms then we might die because imagination is necessary to life. Theatre is one of the most important spaces where we can imagine the future and discuss the past. The theatre is in constant discussion, very quietly, with audiences and actors, about very important subjects. It is the basis of all hypotheses about life, monstrosity, and humanity. You can kill on stage, not in society. So, I killed myself on stage in order to not kill myself in reality.

*What are your future plans?*

I am working on a new play, called *Article 13*, with Marion Blondeau. The subject is becoming clearer. *Article 13* refers to the thirteenth *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* article, which states that all human beings have the right to leave their country, to go to another country, and to return to their country. It means that there is no homeland.

So, statelessness is a notion that appeals to me in connection with homeland. Homeland is a word that I hate. I am interested in it because I think that the worst thing and most serious disease is nationalism. In addition, I am affected by the fact that I am European, and I am in a part of the world, Europe, which hardly accepts to share space with others or accommodate immigrants.

I am working with Marion, a young blonde woman, who comes from the east of France and is trained in contemporary and classical dance. Marion decided to move to Senegal to study African dances at the École de Sable, later to study Arabic in Tunisia, later to visit Palestine, and later to travel extensively in Iran. In one go, this young woman can visit all these places. She represents the antithesis of a nationalism and her body dances very well even the African dances. She has an incredible ability to switch from masculine to feminine. I think she is the body of the future, in the sense that you can put walls or barbed wire in front of people, but this woman represents the longing to discovery. What is the difference between Marion and an immigrant who leaves from the deep heart of Africa to come to discover Europe? She can do it. He can't. So, I decided to create a piece where her body is going to be challenged, in a kind of circus piece. She's going to dance, and then she's going to do very dangerous things. She will be constantly challenged. She's going to be constantly undertaking tests and if you add up her tests, you'll have the sum of the journey of a migrant who crosses many borders. Except that for her, you will have empathy because she is white, she is blonde, she is beautiful, because she is so sweet. At the end, I really want to ask the question: why don't we have empathy for others? •





**PHIA MÉNARD**

**THE BODY OF  
CONTESTATION**

**KATIE LAVERS**  
EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY  
AUSTRALIA

**JON BURTT**  
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY  
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Julia Kristeva, in an interview with the highwire artist Philippe Petit (2002), defines contestation as ‘a fundamental version of freedom’ and as a vital motivating force in the student revolts and street protests in Paris in May 1968, which eventually culminated in a nation-wide general strike. She says: ‘One word on everyone’s lips in May ’68 was “contestation”. It expresses a fundamental version of freedom: not freedom to change or to succeed, but freedom “to revolt, to call things into question”’ (12). Kristeva goes on to emphasise that this is not nihilistic but rather, by putting things into question, contestation stops societal values being fixed or frozen and instead they ‘acquire a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life’ with new possibilities emerging for ‘perpetually contestable configurations’ (ibid.).

This essay explores the idea of ‘contestation’, examining it as an important ethos in the development of ‘new’ and ‘contemporary’ circus and also in Phia Ménard’s creative practice. From its very beginnings, new circus contested almost every aspect of traditional circus. French circus scholar Pascal Jacob, writing about new circus, says, ‘Everything which once defined the circus has been called into question, either patiently or with brutality’ (2008: 12). The exact beginning of new circus is disputed by circus scholars but many point to the unrest of 1968 as its germination point, with most of the early new circus companies emerging in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> In new circus, the horse-riding acts, which had been the central element of traditional circus were rejected. Traditional circus had been founded by the ex-cavalryman Philip Astley in London in 1768 (Kwint 2016: 331–48), and daring horse-riding became central to the success of traditional circus, so to discard the horse-riding was radical. Archaos, the anarchic French new circus company, in their rejection of the horses in traditional circus, replaced them using cranes and motorbikes to introduce a new industrial aesthetic to their shows.<sup>2</sup>

New circus also discarded the wild animal acts and the menageries of traditional circus. Other iconic elements were contested or critiqued, including the figure of the Ringmaster in top hat and tails, the circus ring itself, and the centrality of the star performers (Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 55–63). New circus also challenged the hold that the traditional circus families kept over particular circus skills often keeping them a familial secret; for example, the Flying Wallendas with their tightrope walking and the Konyots with horse-riding and acrobatics. The teaching of circus skills was opened to people from outside the circus families and this attracted new people into circus from fields such as dance, theatre, street theatre, puppetry, and music. These people

1. For more information on the historical background, see Maleval 2010.

2. For more information on the historical background, see Mock 2016: 153–70 and Maleval 2016: 50–64.

brought with them fresh ideas and new approaches. Circus began to absorb these influences and began to present elements such as dramaturgy, theatrical lighting, text, costume design, as well as different approaches to the use of music. With France’s year of circus in 2001, and the emergence of many new hybridised forms of circus making, artists and critics started considering new terms such as ‘contemporary circus’. This term had already been introduced in 1996 in a review of Joseph Nadj’s *Le cri du caméléon* (*The Cry of the Chameleon*) but took some time to catch on. The term ‘new circus’ became associated with a very specific twenty- to twenty-five-year period of transformation, whereas contemporary circus touches upon constantly renewable contemporaneity: ‘the contemporary circus is *in its time* meaning that it is happening now, but it is also *of its time*, given that it captures its epoch’s zeitgeist, its essence’ (Leroux 2022: 234).

Phia Ménard, then known as Philippe, originally came to Nantes, France to study microtechnology, but in 1991, at the age of twenty, Ménard was captivated by a performance by the juggler Jérôme Thomas in his show *Extraballe*. This performance integrated theatrical staging and lighting, and new rebound juggling techniques. Ménard decided to change the direction of her<sup>3</sup> life, and in 1994 began studying juggling with Jérôme Thomas, eventually joining ARMO/Compagnie Jérôme Thomas and touring the world as a virtuoso juggler. Jérôme Thomas had been influenced by the American juggler Michael Moschen (particularly known for the contact juggling in the 1986 film *Labyrinth* with David Bowie) and the German juggler Francis Brunn (renowned as one of the best jugglers in the world, exploring contact juggling and juggling while dancing flamenco, and a regular on the Ed Sullivan show). Although Thomas began his career as a juggler in traditional circus and cabaret, he became a major figure in the development of juggling in new and

3. Phia Ménard’s preferred pronouns are she/her.



Phia Ménard  
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then contemporary circus, being part of a generation, who Thomas describes as transforming juggling into a ‘fully-fledged’ art form:

The generation of jugglers before the ‘80s created juggling performances called ‘un numéro’ [an act], each about 10 minutes in length and designed for cabaret or circus spaces. The virtuosos [skills], which demonstrated great agility (dexterity, nimbleness), were presented in succession. Once trained, my generation broke these rules, on the one hand to create longer format juggling performances of 60 to 90 minutes, and, on the other hand, to combine poesy (in the narrative sense), dramaturgy, and new objects with this virtuosity [...It was] a huge revolution [that] transformed juggling into a fully-fledged art. (Thomas quoted in Birmann 2020: para. 3)

Within the innovative forms of juggling in contemporary circus, in spite of the inclusion of dramaturgy, choreography, and theatrical staging and lighting, the focus still remained firmly on virtuosity. This focus on virtuosity is accompanied by the heart-stopping fear of the ‘drop’. The London-based juggler Sean Gandini has spoken about the anxiety surrounding the drop.<sup>4</sup> This fear of the drop is directly explored by Sean Gandini and his co-director Kati Ylä-Hokkala in the Gandini Juggling show *Smashed* (2010) in which the stage is covered with tea-cups and saucers which the jugglers begin picking up, throwing down, and smashing: ‘*Smashed* finishes with ten minutes of furious dropping and breaking everything.’<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the fear of the drop, there is also the constant need to perform higher level tricks and to develop innovative virtuoso tricks that no other juggler can do. The hours of daily practice involved in the main-

4. Sean Gandini (personal communication with Katie Lavers and Jon Burtt, July 2018). See also Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 11–12.

5. Ibid.

tenance of these high-level juggling skills and the need to constantly innovate with new tricks can become extremely stressful. The field of juggling tends to be highly competitive with younger jugglers pressing hard on the heels of the jugglers at the highest level. Ménard describes the pressure of virtuosity as a male juggler saying, ‘I was always questioned about my capacity to do more. To achieve more mind-boggling tricks [...] I got to a moment in my life where I understood that the more we look at the virtuosity of the man I was at the time, the more I understood that I was destroying myself’ (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37). Other top jugglers in contemporary circus felt the same pressure. The juggler Adrian Mondot says, ‘I felt the limits of juggling. This notion of invested time in a subject where, if we look at it mathematically, is an asymptote. We spend more and more time to refine juggling further and further or to maintain a technical ability. Because technical ability is important in circus’ (Mondot quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 43).

As a direct result of this constant demand for increased virtuosity, Mondot contested the need for the actual juggling apparatus to be present at all: ‘I asked myself, “What would happen if we replaced the real juggling balls with virtual juggling balls? I would be able to do something else”’ (Adrien Mondot, personal interview with Louis Patrick Leroux, April 2017, quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 43). Mondot, who was a computer programmer before he studied juggling, describes how the process of replacing the physical juggling apparatus with virtual objects changed his focus to an exploration of the forces at play in juggling:

The actual apparatus always seemed to me like a pretext — you could say a working aid to approaching movement ... our working tool is actually forces for all circus artists: we create with forces ... Gravitational forces, but also muscular forces, the axes of rotations that permit us to do things. The forces that we have in play. For me in the beginning my

focus was the juggling balls, but in fact I am more interested in it being these forces. (Mondot quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 14)

With his collaborator Claire Bardainne, Mondot created a new form of interactive juggling. In the works they have created for their company Adrien M and Claire B, computer generated elements are manipulated by the performer moving through the interactive space to create a new form of virtual juggling. The computer interface itself acts as a form of apparatus allowing the performers, and sometimes audience members, to ‘juggle’ or interact with invisible forces.<sup>6</sup>

Another top juggler and wire walker, Johann Le Guillerm, in his search to move beyond this demand for virtuosity, decided to remove everything from his performance that could traditionally be described as circus: ‘All my practices that might be identified as a traditional circus practice, I removed so I could produce more personal practices, moving from the traditional to the personal’ (Johann Le Guillerm, personal interview with Louis Patrick Leroux, April 2017, quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 32). He now creates sculptural objects that he interacts with, creating a form of practice that is a fusion of contemporary circus with sculpture and installation art.

Sean Gandini’s works with his company Gandini Juggling still focus on the potential of the conventional apparatus of juggling — the balls, clubs, and rings — but he and his collaborator Kati Ylä-Hokkala now create group juggling works which interact with the musical score in a way that is tightly choreographed. The focus is still on high-level juggling, but it is now used with *Siteswap* notation<sup>7</sup> to create sequences

6. See the company Adrien M and Claire B website at <https://www.am-cb.net/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

7. See also Colin Wright and Andrew Lipson (1996) ‘SiteSwaps’, <http://www.juggling.org/help/siteswap/ssintro/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

in which the apparatus often forms a physical realisation of the musical score in three-dimensional space (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 180). The works are often choreographed to minimalist music such as Steve Reich or Philip Glass and become visualisations of the mathematical patterns in the music through the movement of the juggling objects in space. The performers also train in dance and the company often collaborates with dance companies.<sup>8</sup> The interdisciplinary work that emerges is a fusion of contemporary circus with dance. The work moves from having a focus on virtuosity as an end in itself to becoming a unique choreography of bodies and objects in space.<sup>9</sup>

In 1998, facing this same sense of intense pressure, Phia Ménard created her own company, Compagnie Non Nova<sup>10</sup> and began a series of research and development periods to contest this constant demand for virtuosity.

I arrived at a time when the virtuosity that I had been taught and that I maintained brought me back to a much more human and deeper question [...] why go and show yourself in front of an audience? Is it just to make noise, to notice [...] virtuosity? There is something about virtuosity that is very vain. Virtuosity is a form of comparison. And I got to the limit of that. (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 6; Leroux’s translation)

Ménard’s contestation of virtuosity took a particularly vivid and striking performative form with her notion of ‘unjugglability’: ‘The [notion] of

8. These collaborations with dancers and dance companies include *Ephemeral Architecture* co-created with the Royal Ballet dancer/choreographer Ludovic Ondiela, the work *Spring* co-created with the British choreographer Alexander Whitley, working with Dominique Mercy from the Pina Bausch Company in *Smashed*, and *Sigma* co-created with Seeta Patel exploring the fusion of Bharatanatyam dance and juggling.

9. See Gandini Juggling’s website at <https://www.gandinijuggling.com/en/the-company/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

10. See Compagnie Non Nova’s website at <http://www.cienonnova.com> [accessed 7 May 2022].

# MÉNARD: UNJUGGLABILITY AND MATERIALITY

unjugglability came to me and told me that I had to destroy my objects. Virtuosity says nothing' (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 6; Leroux's translation). In an interview we conducted with Ménard, she says that 'the concept of unjugglability emerges in opposition to the notion of jugglability' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37).

The conventional apparatus in traditional Western circus and even now in most contemporary circus usually consists of balls, clubs, and rings. Jugglability for the most part refers to these apparatus, or sometimes objects that are shaped, sized, and weighted in a way that makes them interchangeable with these conventional juggling objects. For example, Gandini Juggling most often uses traditional juggling apparatus but sometimes substitutes objects of a similar shape, size, and weight. In the work *Smashed*, at one point apples are used instead of balls, and the performers stop in the middle of juggling to take a bite out of the apples to show that they are indeed real fruit. The juggler's virtuosity is maintained and performed through the jugglability of these traditionally shaped, sized, and weighted apparatus that they have spent thousands of hours mastering.

Ménard, in her active contestation of virtuosity, introduced the concept of 'unjugglability', choosing to put herself into a situation as a performer in which the objects or apparatus she juggled with could not allow her to display her virtuosity. Her first object of choice was a cactus, which Ménard attempted to juggle with. This created a performance event in which the performer does not exhibit mastery of the material, but instead juggles with an object that demonstrates to the audience that the performer is not able to gain control or mastery of it. Ménard went on to attempt to juggle with heavy tyres. This approach of working with unjugglability demonstrates a very different relationship to objects: 'Paradoxically, the juggler usually masters the object, but I am a juggler who does not master matter, but rather one who follows matter. By this I mean that I must comply with the laws of matter' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 38). This vivid contestation of virtuosity also had the important aim of trying to change how the artist, the juggler, is perceived by the audience. Phia Ménard says it was done partly to contest the notion of the artist as someone who is worshipped or admired. She says, 'I think that the important thing is to bring the onlooker back to the possibility of the artist not being worshipped or admired but above all being human' (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burtt 2019: 37).

With the idea of unjugglability and this vivid contestation of virtuosity, Ménard moves into a new form of circus in which juggling is combined



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *P.P.P.*, 2008  
Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

with approaches and ideas from performance art (also known as live art).<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in the extraordinary solo work *P.P.P. (Position parallèle au plancher)* (*Position Parallel to the Floor*) (2009). *P.P.P.* is a solo show and the work is mediated through Phia Ménard's own body. As Ménard's collaborator Paul B. Precadio writes, the show was 'created when Ménard began taking hormones' (Precadio 2017: para. 3) and relates to Ménard's transformation from male to female which she revealed publicly when this performance premiered. As a work which fuses contemporary circus with performance art, *P.P.P.* not only goes beyond previously accepted limits in the art of juggling, but also in the performance art exploration of the human body in its interactions with ice. This work was not developed to demonstrate virtuosity or to pander to the audience. Arts writer Viktoria Dalborg recalls a meeting with Phia Ménard in which she was told that 'the title *P.P.P.* [was] a reaction to an encounter with a star producer [...] The producer suggested that Ménard created a show to please the audience, "pour plaire au public," which Ménard saw as prostitution. The initials *P.P.P.* were kept as an ironic revenge and symbolic reminder of the type of theatrical forms that [...] Ménard totally repudiates' (Dalborg 2010: 7).<sup>12</sup> Ménard, contesting this notion of pleasing the public, creates a work in which, as the solo performer in the show, she works in close contact with ice, creating from the very beginning of the performance a sense of discomfort, risk, and danger. Dalborg describes the performance of *P.P.P.*:

11. Performance art/live art is problematic to define but can be considered as an investigation of an evolving practice which considers the body of the performer in space and time and works with the historicity of the surrounds and the materiality of the objects in the space.

12. The 5<sup>th</sup> edition of Cirko Helsinki Contemporary Circus Festival, Finnish Circus Information Centre and New Nordic Circus Network continued the project started in June 2009 by Circostrada Network which had been set up to develop and foster critical discussions and reflections among European circus critics. This event had four days of lectures, performances, and artist meetings, and Phia Ménard was one of the artists who participated. This meeting between the critics and the participants took place at the Kiasma Theatre, Helsinki.

Five hundred kilos of ice, distributed over hundreds of ice balls hanging from the ceiling and in crushed form on the stage. A frozen, knitted dress, three upright cabinet freezers and a big block of ice — those are the props and the landscape on stage in the juggler [...] Ménard's and Compagnie Non Nova's *P.P.P.* show. A human being in a fur and a fur cap is sitting, leaning slightly forward, on an ice block, showing [her] back to the audience when we take our seats in Stoa Theatre. The ice is dripping and crackling as it melts. An ice ball suddenly falls from the ceiling and smashes to pieces against the floor. We are from the very beginning put in a vice of fear. (Dalborg 2010: 6)

This emphasis on the actual materiality of the ice on stage is an important aspect of performance art. The German performance artist Joseph Beuys said in an interview with American artist Willoughby Sharp, 'I want to get to the origin of matter, to the thought behind it' (Beuys 1993: 85). In Ménard's performance of *P.P.P.*, there is an emphasis placed on the substance of ice itself. The white stuff on stage is not polystyrene representing ice, as it might be in some theatrical performances, but rather it is real ice with its own materiality. Her work in *P.P.P.* explores the materiality of ice, the thought, and the metaphorical resonances behind the material that she is working with. By juggling with ice, Ménard brings into the art of juggling a mutable apparatus which contests the solidity and the quiddity of the traditional juggling objects.<sup>13</sup> She invites the spectator to engage with her and bring to the performance their own experiences of ice.<sup>14</sup> Through the juggling of the ice and the fundamental transformation of matter as the ice melts,

13. Other jugglers have continued investigating this idea of apparatus being mutable. Juggler Jimmy Gonzalez won the Gold Prize at Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain in 2015 for his piece *D'Argile*, an act in which he juggles with wet clay. See *Jimmy-Gonzalez D'Argile – Jimmy Gonzalez – Clay juggling*, online video recording, Vimeo, 8 February 2018, <https://vimeo.com/254800231> [accessed 7 May 2022].

she invites the spectators to metaphorically contest their ‘fixed and frozen’ societal values and instead to ‘acquire a sense of polyvalence and life’ (Kristeva 2002: 12) in relation to their expectations of how the body before them ‘should’ behave.

The materiality of the ice becomes an essential vital part of the performance. The process of the ice changing throughout the show from a hard and dangerous material and through the process of melting, changing forms, changing states, to water, invites a reading of the performance as a metaphorical journey which embodies and explores Ménard’s own life journey as a transgender artist from male to female, and in the process contests the constrictive gender roles of society. The work explores the pain in her transition and the gender fluidity of the body. Precision in this process is key — this is not the ‘undisciplined body’ (a term sometimes used in connection with Ménard by authors whose first language is not English. In English, the term has a problematic pejorative connotation as being a body without any training, which clearly Ménard’s body is not). Ménard presents instead the highly trained disciplined body working beyond the limits of normal arts disciplines and genres, working with precision, engaging with danger to challenge and contest the limits of her own physicality. For Precadio, this precision relates to agency and the will to change her body through the precise taking of hormones to move from one state to another: ‘she confronts ice as

it moves from its threatening, solid state into one of complete fluidity, juggling 120 balls of ice, each weighing two kilos. As with the taking of hormones, biochemical and material precision is key: a little heavier and the balls of ice would be enough to injure her, a little less and they would too quickly melt’ (Precadio 2017: para. 3).

Ménard chooses to present her own body in the process of transition on stage in all its fragility and vulnerability as a human. As this performance was presented over a period of years, it ultimately became a durational piece with Ménard describing audience members coming back over the years to see the changes taking place in her body (Lodi Rizzini 2021: 79–98).

Phia Ménard wanted to contest the critical, judgemental distance that the audience member maintains in traditional juggling while waiting for the next spectacular trick, or for the ‘drop’:

“I knew that the audience spent most of their time waiting for the moment the balls would fall,” she said. “I didn’t want people to expect virtuosity, I wanted them to empathize with me” (Ménard quoted in Capelle 2018: para. 11). In *P.P.P.*, instead of demonstrating mastery, Ménard sought to contest it by displaying instead her vulnerability and her humanity to evoke human connection and empathy from the audience members. Ménard’s contestation of the critical distance entailed in the relationship with the spectator in traditional juggling takes the form of a desire for a body-to-body connection or empathy through flesh. Instead of a critical eye looking for the performer to drop the juggling props, the use of ice as a shared common experience involves the spectator in a form of performance which engages the audience and the performer person-to-person, through the shared experience of ice in connection with the body or flesh. In an interview we conducted with Ménard, she discusses this shared common experience with the spectator:

← 14. In 1973, Stuart Hall the renowned Jamaican-born British sociologist and cultural theorist presented his paper ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’, which he wrote for the Council of Europe Colloquy which described how meaning was encoded by the producer but received and decoded by the viewer (reader): ‘Before this message can have an “effect” (however defined), or satisfy a “need” or be put to a “use”, it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded. It is this set of de-coded meanings which “have an effect”, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences.’ See Hall in Hall, Hobson, Love, and Willis 1980: 117–21.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Saison Sèche*, 2018  
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

I lie on a bed filled with ice, and automatically, the audience goes, 'brrr!' [she shivers], simply because they feel the cold by projecting themselves into my body. So, they are imagining their own body. That's an important form. The natural elements, from there, will ultimately be the vector for a dialogue between the onlooker and myself or the performer, simply through the body, and no longer through admiration or the intellect. It is a body-to-body relationship through projection.

(Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 38)

In a recent interview, on the 27 December 2021, for the Radio France show Cultural Affairs with Arnaud Laporte, Phia Ménard discusses the nature of art and the artist's vocation. She describes it as a process of shedding and getting rid of all the impositions of society. Ménard says that from the moment 'you understand, in essence, that you haven't been completely formatted by education and society, you start to grasp the role of art. You start realizing to what extent the artist's undertaking is to shed everything society has imposed' (Ménard quoted in Laporte 2021: para. 4; Leroux's translation). This process of shedding, or sloughing off, the impositions of society, is approached through the process of contestation. Ménard sees this process as innately political. She describes 'being in front of an audience as a political act' (Ménard quoted in BNP Paribas 2020: para. 3). This can be seen as 'political' in the sense historian Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey has pointed out was also an effect of the events of 1968: 'The '68 movements broadened [...] the horizon of the political. They detached "politics" and "the political" from the state and its apparatus, and so they created a culture where personal politics [...] became central' (Gilcher-Holtey 2014: 11).

Performing in front of an audience as a transgender woman, especially in France, can in itself be viewed as a political act. In her writing for *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*) on the company website, Ménard quotes Judith Butler:

When I started working, I put a lot of emphasis on gender as if it were a sort of law, and I still think that there are certain actions which, when repeated over time, can create and confirm gender identity. But gender is also a category of analysis through which we can consider essential political concepts such as the distinction between public/private, the public sphere and equality. When we say these political concepts have a gender, we're saying that they have been established from certain gender hypotheses. But gender is also something which we endure, a part of our development. This seems obvious when we think of the way gender is assigned to us not just once, but every single day, in the street, in public institutions, at the heart of medical and legal establishments. (Butler quoted in L'humanité 2014, para. 9)<sup>15</sup>

Laura Capelle, in an interview with Phia Ménard for the *New York Times*, writes:

While the United States has prominent transgender performers, such as Laverne Cox and Trace Lysette, transgender identity is only just entering mainstream consciousness in France. For a long time, Ms. Ménard said, it remained tied to Parisian night life and to a handful of cabaret performers who came of age in the 1960s, like Coccinelle, who died in 2006, and Bambi [...] There are signs of change: A well-known comedian, Océan, recently came out as a transgender man, and a transgender character was introduced in March on 'Plus Belle la Vie', one of France's most popular TV soap operas. Still, Ms. Ménard said, French culture's 'macho' Latin roots led to societal resistance. (Capelle 2018: para. 6)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>. Butler cited by Ménard on the Compagnie Non Nova website <http://www.cienonnova.com/en/portfolio/saison-seche-2/> [accessed 7 May 2022].

<sup>16</sup>. For further commentary on French academia and society in relation to trans people and performers, see Lodi Rizzini 2021.

In the *New York Times* interview, Ménard herself comments on the relationship between danger, desire, transsexuality, and the ice in *P.P.P.*: ‘[...In] *P.P.P.*, in which blocks of ice randomly fell from the ceiling onto the stage, where Ménard stood, exposed. “It struck me: Ice is a material that you look at with desire, yet that you don’t want to touch. It’s the same position as a trans person: They provoke a kind of desire, and at the same time you’re afraid to sleep with them”’ (Ménard quoted in Capelle 2018: para. 12).

In the work *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn* (*The Afternoon of a Foehn*) (2011), Ménard goes further than in *P.P.P.* and actively contests the need for a human presence in the act of juggling: ‘The actual act of juggling itself and the manipulation of the apparatus are presented as having been handed to an external source of energy’ (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 13).<sup>17</sup> In this work, Ménard takes plastic bags and ties them into the shape of small human-like figures. A jet of air lifts them into the air, animates them, and effectively juggles with them, moving them through the space. This work presents the source of energy and the control of the apparatus as having been moved away from the human to a natural force, jets of air, which effectively juggle with the small human-like figures created from the plastic bags. We comment on this in the ‘Apparatus’ chapter of the book *Contemporary Circus* (2019) as follows:

In the same way that Ménard questioned the solidity or unchangeable quiddity of the juggling prop in *P.P.P.*, in *L’après-Midi d’un Foehn* she has moved the performance of control of the juggling pathways away from the human, to external forces to create a new form of juggling. The scene is post-apocalyptic in essence, as the audience

sees the wind juggling with these small twisting human figures fashioned from plastic bags. The visible human control has been removed, and we see non-human forces juggling with apparatus formed from what is left of the human, their non-biodegradable detritus (Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 13).

After these two limit-text<sup>18</sup> works on the art of juggling, namely *P.P.P.* and *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*, Ménard moves into work that contests her newfound reality of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Her works now bring together performance art, dance, and theatre to explore ‘hetero-patriarchal conventions’ through the limits of the performative body in a performance form which takes the notion of contestation as its driving force. The philosopher and queer-theorist Paul B. Precadio, describing the works that Ménard made after 2008, writes: ‘If the first works Ménard made after 2008 explored gender transition as a material, biopolitical process — fighting against ice as one fights against imposed sexual and political identities — the most recent work deepens a critique of hetero-patriarchal conventions and bears witness to a new transfeminist aesthetic’ (Precadio 2017: para. 3). Ménard now mainly creates large-scale group works, but in this scaling up of her performance work, she actively contests the normal *modus operandi* of larger-scale performance companies. She has, for example, rejected the normal approach of auditioning for selecting performers saying, ‘I never organize auditions. So, these are people who know my work, who know my artistic process, and who at some point decide to come of their own accord on the basis that my next step has to be with this woman’ (Ménard quoted in Lavers, Leroux, and Burt 2019: 134).

Ménard also contests the trope of the artist as solitary genius (usually male) by, at every turn, placing great emphasis on the role of her collaborating partners. She often works with the female to male transexual philosopher Paul B. Precadio to collaborate in an exchange of ideas

<sup>17</sup>. See also Mercat de les Flors, *CIE. NON NOVA – L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*, online video recording, Vimeo, 22 July 2016, <https://vimeo.com/175823718> [accessed 7 May 2022].

→ <sup>18</sup>. Limit-text refers to a key work that sets new boundaries in a discipline.

through dialogues and workshops. For the composition and dramaturgy of Compagnie Non Nova shows, Ménard works with a number of different collaborators such as the Co-Artistic Director of Compagnie Non Nova, Claire Massonnet, Jean-Luc Beaujault, and a dramaturgy partner Jonathan Grisset.

Her approach to the content in her newer works has become increasingly feminist. In an interview for *The New York Times*, Ménard talks about the loss of power she has been experiencing now that she is permanently in the body of a woman:

My group shows are political acts. The basis of my work is the body as a political object in society. In every show I write, the body isn't an individual with a personal story, but a political sign: they're female bodies in a patriarchal society. Having had this journey of the body, having experienced power in society first in the body of a man and now in the body of a woman, it's shown me that, in my new condition, I have lost power. (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5)

Ménard now describes herself as 'a feminist warrior': 'While I lived in a man's body, I felt a lot of empathy for the possibilities of feminism out of solidarity, but it was a political hobby. Today, I'm in the permanence of the body, I've become a feminist warrior' (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5).

Two of her group works which actively contest the role of women are *Belle D'Hier* (*Yesterday's Beauty*) and *Saison Sèche* (*Dry Season*). In *Belle D'Hier*, Ménard contests the myth of Prince Charming which has been handed down from generation to generation: 'One day, my daughter, you will be a princess and you will meet (your) Prince Charming' (Ménard n.d.: para. 23). Huge hooded cloaks that have been frozen stand on stage as 'carapaces' of power at the beginning of *Belle D'Hier*, and then slowly begin their gradual disintegration which takes place throughout the show.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *P.P.P.*, 2008  
Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

*Belle D'Hier* explores how the myth of a Prince Charming can be contested and transformed. Ménard writes, 'Let's look at its transformation, the moment the myth collapses, the moment we reject it, the moment we want to smash up its codes and constraints and explode into action. Once we have got over the disillusion and the violence, let's celebrate the breath of life the myth leaves behind when it's gone' (ibid.: para. 14).

In Ménard's work *Saison Sèche*, the cast of seven women are trapped in a claustrophobic space that changes and reconfigures around the women. Laura Capelle for the *New York Times* writes:

Ménard's work 'Saison Sèche' deals with the violence women suffer in patriarchal societies. The cast [are] trapped in a closed white space, under a ceiling that moves up and down without rhyme or reason. 'It's the glass ceiling, and more,' Ms. Ménard said. 'That's what it's like to be permanently under surveillance and reprimanded as soon as an action is deemed objectionable.' (Capelle 2018: para. 5)

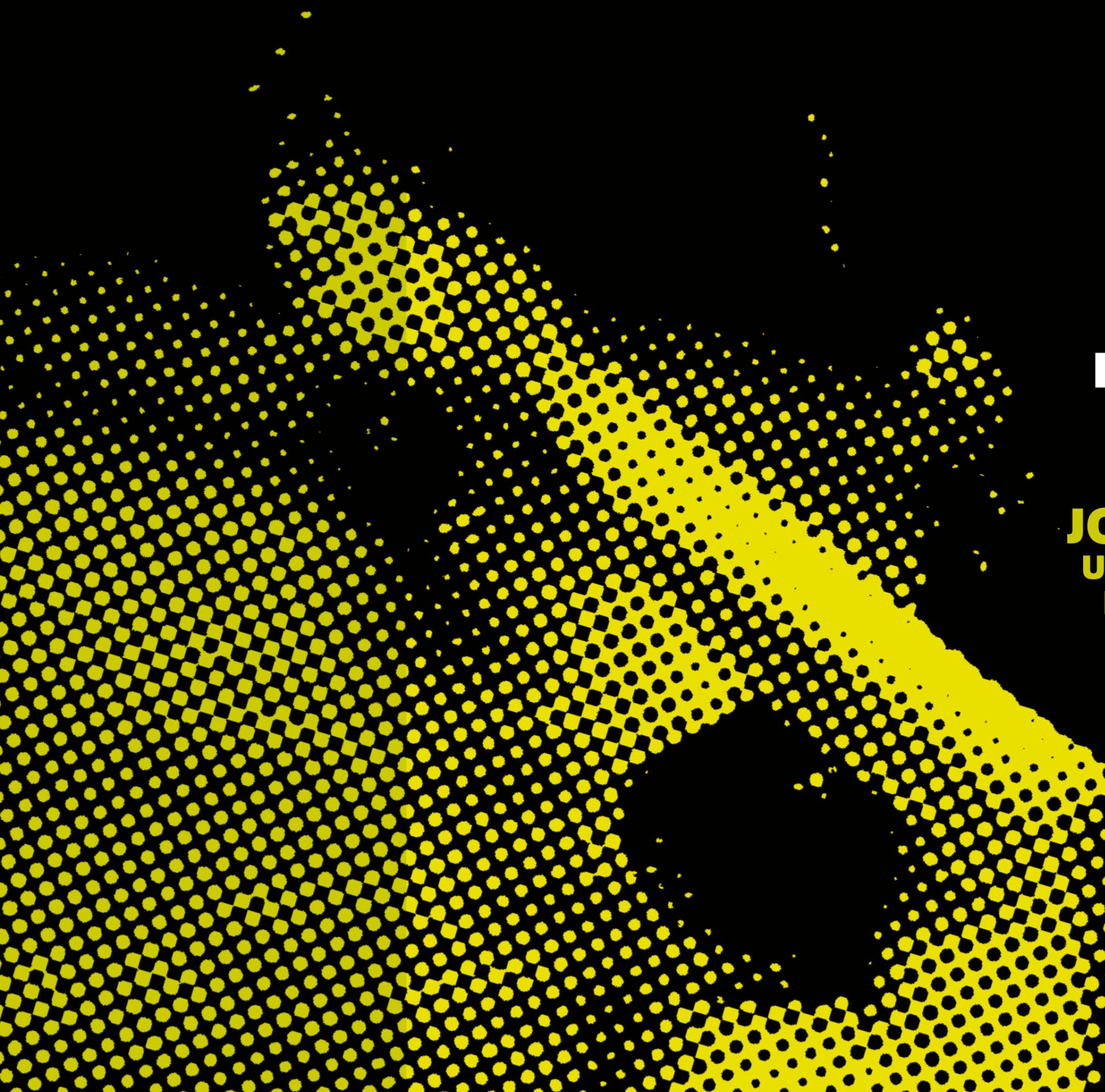
The only way out that seems available is for the figures to take on male personas and gradually transform to become 'drag kings' (ibid.: para. 16). Ménard says about the show *Saison Sèche*: 'Faced with desperate and catastrophic situations in our societies, we as creators have a duty to create worthy and meaningful artistic acts. It might be utopian, but I can't help but dream that *Dry Season* could help topple the patriarchy! That's the mission I've given myself, I'm working on it' (Ménard quoted in Baaziz 2018: para. 5).

Ultimately the driving force behind all Phia Ménard's works is the ethos of contestation which enables her to pose questions not to provide answers but to provoke dialogue offering new ways of seeing things to the spectators. As she writes on Compagnie Non Nova's website:

I am not aiming to give answers concerning the complexity of our lives. I just want to question the imaginative world of each individual and maybe, hopefully open up new dialogue. The pieces I propose are sometimes violent, often hypnotic, always androgynous. [...] I want the shows to be limitless, indignant and provocative, yet without superficially enticing the audience. I simply want them to be clear-cut, palpable, so that I can experience something with you, the spectator. (Ménard n.d.: para. 9) •

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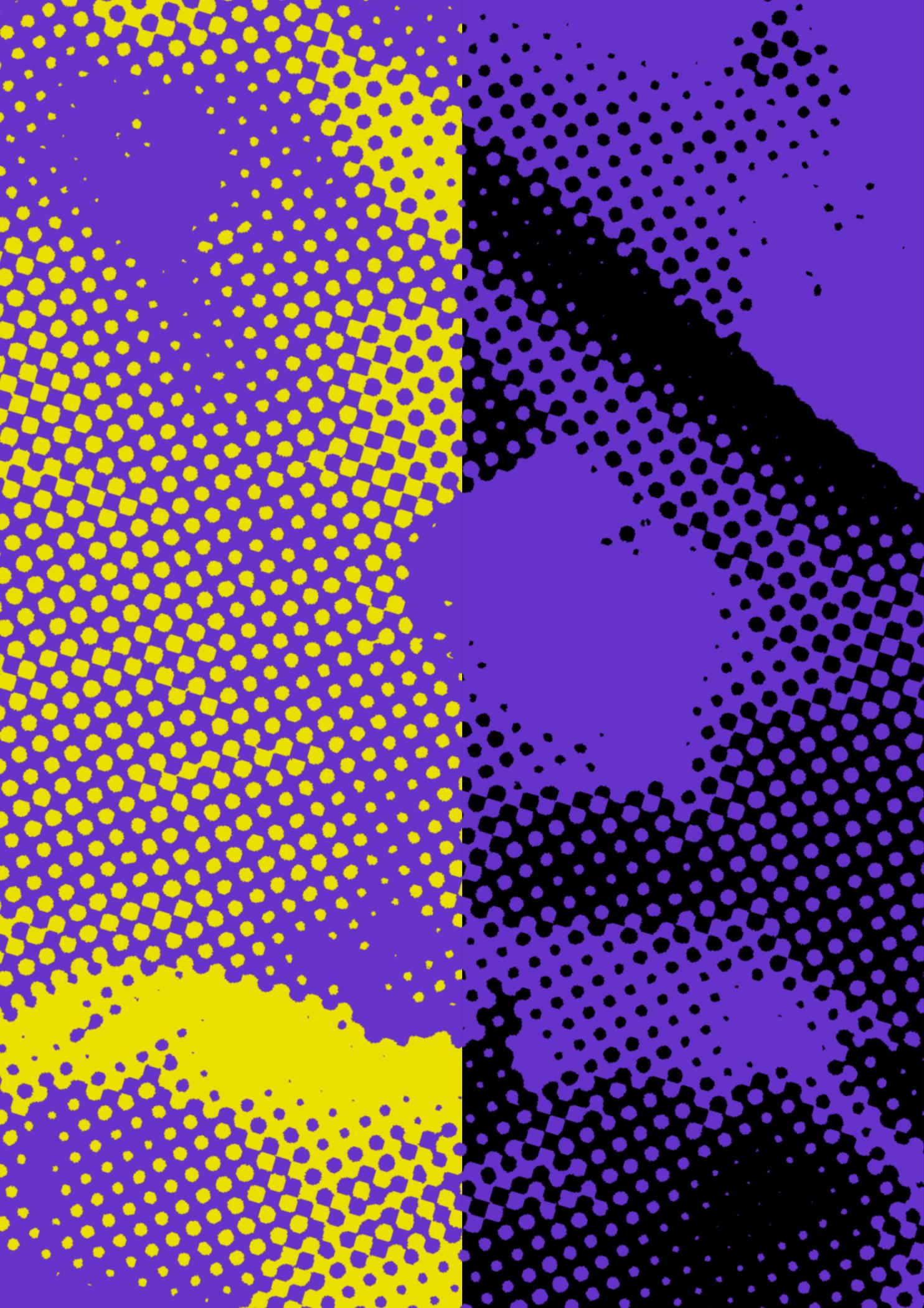
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**PHIA  
MÉNARD'S  
VORTEX**

**BODY AND SKIN,  
PERFORMANCE  
AND FICTION**

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In the landscape of postdramatic theatre, which develops from the refusal of the categories of character and dramatic fiction, the body enjoys a privileged status.<sup>1</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann considers it as the vector of a radical renewal and designates the bodily presence as the place in the theatre where the disappearance of all meaning gives way to a self-sufficient reality: the corporality exposed in its various intensities. According to Lehmann, the shows of Jan Fabre, for example, carry to the extreme a crucial feature of the postdramatic, namely the fact of being a ‘theater of perceptibility’, in that ‘it realizes its own “phenomenology of perception”, marked by an overcoming of the principles of mimesis and fiction’ (2006: 99).

However, many theatre productions labelled as postdramatic (because they are essentially visual and present themselves as performances) retain a fundamental relationship to fiction, even as they apparently renounce being a *mimesis* of human actions. Phia Ménard’s *Vortex* (2011)<sup>2</sup> is one example among others. Its analysis could enlighten us on the functions that fiction can assume in this case. In the context of a very present questioning in Western societies, the political meaning of transgender identity claims could also be clarified, if we approach it from the point of view of the proposed fictional constructions, and more globally of the way fiction can be used in performance.

1. I want to thank Stefania Lodi Rizzini for having drawn my attention to the question of skin, which she addresses about *Vortex* in her thesis, ‘Requestionner le genre: le trans au sein du théâtre de Heather Cassils, Alain Platel, Phia Ménard et Motus’ (2020). Her work aroused in me the desire to pursue her investigation, and to further develop the analysis of *Vortex*, which was initially a small part of my recent book, *Après le vieux jeu: La fiction dans le théâtre contemporain* (2021).

2. Since 2011, Phia Ménard has been regularly touring with *Vortex*; it was in Paris recently (November 2021), at the Théâtre National de la Danse, Chaillot.

# A NARRATIVE IN ACTIONS

Like many other postdramatic shows, Phia Ménard's *Vortex* is without text; but unlike them, it is ultimately very narrative. *Vortex* proposes to the spectator a very clear course to follow: by a series of successive strippings, a body is extracted from its superimposed layers. Subjected to the action of a vertical whirlwind of air (the vortex), it is stripped of its overlapping skins, in successive steps that are so many struggles, in order to free, at the end, the 'troubled', combative, and fragile body of Phia Ménard. The show can be read as an autobiographical story, insofar as it seems to retrace the main stages of Phia Ménard's journey, as a performer and as a person. But it is also a tale of metamorphoses, which dilates the final moment of many fairy tales, the one where the vile or monstrous creature is transformed into a prince or princess.

From the very beginning, on the circular stage ringed by industrial fans, one can see the first figure as the incarnation of the unhappy conformity to the male gender. It is a huge stuffed figure of a man in a suit with dark glasses and white gloves, masked and engulfed in his clothes. Despite his size, despite his monstrous heaviness and slowness, the giant is an Invisible Man: his face covered with white strips immediately evokes the well-known hero of H. G. Wells's novel and the iconic face mask costume of Claude Rains in the 1933 horror classic by James Whale. The Invisible Man painstakingly shapes a human silhouette from a plastic bag, then watches it become, thanks to the wind that inflates it, a small coloured creature that struggles to stand up, then walks on the stage, then dances, and finally flies away, rising and falling with the wind, gradually joined by other small plastic bag creatures

that the man takes out of his pockets. This is the first stage of Ménard's journey: musical, poetic, virtuoso, it is the decisive encounter with the art of juggling, an essential step in Phia Ménard's artistic training.

After a moment of what Ménard calls 'anaesthesia',<sup>3</sup> the puppet-master engages in a brutal hunt: he catches, tramples, lacerates, and throws away his Lilliputian creatures. It is only after having sacrificed the virtuosity of art that artistic maturity may come, with the double choice of the performance and the female gender. The Invisible Man and puppet-master now goes through a series of laborious moults, struggling with and against the wind, to get rid of his successive 'onion layers'. Clothes blown away, he strips off a first black skin, shiny as plastic, in what looks at first like a desperate fight against the grip and grasp of monstrous black snakes. Then it becomes a duel between two mythical creatures: the old black skin swollen by the wind to the dimensions of a giant, and a new white creature, of a thinner, more human but still undetermined form. The mythical black creature is defeated, and the third silhouette opens her belly to pull from it her long red entrails. With the wind rushing through, it becomes an organic enveloping veil, a protective and caressing canopy over the increasingly feminine and slender body. The woman can now extract herself from her last skin, a thin membrane that tears to reveal at last her hair, her face, her breasts, her true skin.

<sup>3</sup>. For Phia Ménard, to anaesthetise the spectators means to oblige them to 'be elsewhere in one's body', to put them in a state to be operated or woken up (Ménard 2018; my translation). In *Vortex*, the Invisible Man is momentarily anaesthetised by the enchanting flight of his creatures; but it makes his own invisibility intolerable, and he then destroys what he has created in order to begin his own rebirth process.

# A BLOOMING OF FICTIONAL FIGURES

It is not necessary to know the biographical event — the chosen transformation by which Philippe Ménard became Phia Ménard — that looms in the background of this performance. For this event is re-lived by the spectator as an experience, thanks to the intensity of the performer's physical engagement, and also thanks to the fictional hinterland that gradually awakens.

The figure at the beginning is a kind of monstrous ogre that can, like any ogre, take on various forms, frightening or liberating — since they will eventually make a woman blossom at the end of the show. Over the course of the metamorphoses, we come across natural images (such as the cocoon, the larva, and the butterfly), but also legendary and artistic ones. The juggling moment with plastic bags can summon the figures of Pygmalion, Gulliver and the Lilliputians, or David fighting against Goliath. The fight to get rid of the black skin suggests the figures of Laocoon or Tiresias facing the snakes, but also *Alien*, or the polluted river of *Chihiro's Journey*; and the duel between the black and the white silhouettes those of the Golem, of the doppelgänger or the evil twin, that Dostoevsky's novels and a number of mythologies have used.

Most of all it is the figure of Marsyas that seems to prevail and give its meaning to the performance. We may not remember this story of the Greek mythology (the musical rivalry between Apollo and the satyr Marsyas, the consecutive victory, and the retaliation of the god who hangs Marsyas to a tree and flays him),<sup>4</sup> but the idea of being flayed alive is strong enough in our fantasy (through medical and artistic

images,<sup>5</sup> horror stories, and so on) to make it work in *Vortex*. In *Le Moi-peau* (1985), Didier Anzieu analyses the legend of Marsyas as a way of encoding that specific reality of the psyche that he calls the 'skin-ego'.<sup>6</sup> He reviews the mythemes (minimal units) of the legend and shows their relationship with the functions of the skin as it appears in the psyche (as a maintaining and unifying envelope for the self). Many echoes of those mythemes can be found in *Vortex*: suspension as the negative version of human verticality (the plastic puppet trying to stand upright after its creation); the skin torn off but whole, as a protective envelope that can come back to life (the swollen, living black skin) and transform an evil fate into a beneficial one (after the duel with the black skin, comes the 'pregnant woman'); the skin as a pierced container that empties its content (the red entrails). And Anzieu finally adds to the legend a last mythical meaning linked to the skin: its destructive power (that we can find in the story of the Tunic of Nessus) can be reversed into a creative power, which consists of 'turning the skin imaginatively inside out like a glove, making the content into a container, the inner space into a key for structuring the outside, the inner feeling into a knowable reality' (1985: 52; my translation) — and this could summarise the whole performance.

The wind is the decisive disruptive element that Phia Ménard introduces into Anzieu's somewhat static vision to make it come alive, to make it tell a story of transformation. When the wind gives life to the plastic bags, they become a skin-container, but which contains emptiness;

← 4. See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2008), among many other ancient sources.

5. The torture of Marsyas was the subject of many paintings, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Guido Reni, Juseppe de Ribera, Luca Giordano, Titian, Rubens, etc.).

6. *The Skin-Ego* is the English translation of *Le Moi-peau* by Didier Anzieu (1985). Anzieu defines the skin-ego 'as a containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible' (1989: 98).

it is a moment of virtuosity and poetry, but based on emptiness — a form without content, like juggling in a way.<sup>7</sup> After the ‘puppet prologue’, this function of the wind (to fill an empty container) returns a last time to give life to the black skin. But in the ‘Marsyas moment’, the wind plays another game: it does not fill but empties the container; it unveils, unrolls, and unwraps the supernumerary skins which cover the core of the body. And it is yet another game that the wind plays with the long red veil: the organic colour, the soft veil that dances around the (now apparent) body can remind us the serpentine dance of Loie Fuller,<sup>8</sup> or the figures that rise in a whirlwind in Tiepolo’s domes, and the numerous paintings of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; they can also remind us the heavy red velvet of the baldachin, in *The Lock* of Fragonard, where the forms of the feminine and masculine sexual attributes can vaguely be guessed in the clutter of the unmade bed. After having been virtuoso, then violent, the wind has now become a way to caress and love the body. The wind was the means to explore the layers of meaning of the skin as a psychic reality, but also to put this reality in motion and make it tell stories.

Introducing her performance,<sup>9</sup> Phia Ménard begins by asking us a rather banal question: beneath how many layers do we hide our true selves to protect them? This question can create the desire to get rid of these layers, at least in the protected cocoon of the theatre. But we are soon led elsewhere and further, by the gripping yet elusive materiality of the action (the fight with the wind), by the blossoming of archetypal and fictional figures, and also by the encircling device of the show. Gathered in a few rows around the circular stage, the public is very close to the performer. We encircle her and she involves us in her research. The object of this research is the body, the ultimate body, the finally true body, and the central questions, re-launched by each moult, become: where is the body finally? And what is the body?

In *Vortex*, the body functions as energy, but it is essentially presented as skin. We first admired the wonders of the skin, only to discover that it can be an empty container (the puppet moment). Then we experienced the labour of delivery, by skinning and emptying the body, in a desperate search of its core. Did we finally find a ‘real’ body? And is Phia Ménard’s final body ‘real’ because it would be free at last of all the layers of fiction that encumbered it? I do not think so. The last image of Phia Ménard’s body is that of a wet, fragile, and exhausted newborn, rather than that of a triumphant self. It does not provide a certain answer to the question ‘where and what is the body?’. This was only one of our possible births.

7. While acknowledging her debt to her training as a juggler, Phia Ménard considers that virtuosity was a mask which she used to escape the questioning of her position as a human being (Ménard 2016, para. 9; my translation).

8. Loie Fuller (1862–1928) was an American dancer who achieved international distinction for her technical innovations in lighting and costume, and her exploration of natural movements; she developed her serpentine dance as a variation on the popular ‘skirt dances’ of her time.

9. See her interview online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljF1MkxwX18> [accessed 4 may 2022].



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Vortex*, 2011  
Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean-Luc Beaujault

At the very end, she is not naked, but she has become ‘touchable’ — and all the more so because she is now addressing us directly, as the exhausted performer that she also is. She tells us about her political struggle. There is no breaking effect, as when an actor steps out of his role: this body, born of the struggle in which we, the spectators, have participated, this body that has created images and fictions, simply speaks out, and the word emerges naturally, as if it were born of this struggle and of these images and fictions as well. Phia Ménard’s final body is ‘real’ because we feel that we could touch it and be touched by it. A ‘real’ body is only what we can touch and be touched by; from the beginning, it is a connected reality, created by relationship. According to Anzieu, our first envelope, essential for the future development of our psyche and consciousness, is mainly a sound and tactile envelope (1985: 159–60). What Winnicott called the caregiver’s ‘holding’ and ‘handling’ of the child’s body (Winnicott 1976: 37–55), along with the music of meaningful sounds, maintains, contains, protects, unifies, informs, and makes it sensitive and capable of love. It is a primary and founding experience, which can be ‘good enough’ or unhappy.

*Vortex* suggests the idea that an artistic form can be a way of re-enacting and re-experiencing it, or at least of reflecting on it. It seems that the performance goes through the various pathological forms (narcissism, aggressive violence, anguish, dissociation) that can result from the deficiencies of the skin-ego, to finally regain its beneficial protection. By turning her skin inside out like a glove, and making the content into a container, Phia Ménard’s *Vortex* succeeds in making her inner space and feeling into a structured and knowable reality. This has been achieved through a performance in which bodily perceptions and fictional images are intimately linked and constantly relaunch each other.

The reading of the many images and fictional figures that appear in *Vortex* is our job. Phia Ménard does not overplay them; they just appear for a brief moment, which we can capture or not. Like the real actor, Ménard reactivates a ‘primitive’ body, not yet subjected to the law of the image; her work is about organising and sharpening bodily sensations. In short, she reminds us that the body is a means of sensitive knowledge — and that it served essentially as such in the first place.

The idea that imagination is not only visual but also involves the sensory-motor system has been reinforced by the discovery by neuroscientists of the mirror neuron mechanism. Namely, the fact that when we watch one of our fellow human beings perform an action, the neurons activated are the same as when we perform this action ourselves. The discovery of mirror neurons makes the conventional division between perception and action obsolete and makes the process of intention-action-understanding an indivisible event. For the theatregoer, the resonance of the performed action is conditioned by the presence or absence of a real intention on the part of the actor (see Sofia 2016: 94–8). In performance, and particularly in *Vortex*, the physical commitment of the performer is equivalent to an extreme form of intention. But this resonance is also sharpened by an ‘attractive ambiguity’ that the actor creates around his action (ibid.). In performance, where the spectator cannot speculate on the character’s intention, this attractive ambiguity is often created by the presence of micro-fictions. In *Vortex*, the different phases of the performer’s struggle give rise to shreds of fiction that we may or may not pick up on, but whose seductive intensity we feel anyway, even unconsciously.

And at this point, we can return to the political issue of gender transition raised at the beginning: should we think of it in terms of a struggle between nature and culture, or in terms of a struggle between two (at least) cultural registers of sexual difference (one of which would be normative and the other dissident)? The shreds of fiction that are offered to us in *Vortex* are so many diverse answers provided by our culture to the question of difference and confusion (inside and between beings, inside and between sexes). By placing their reading in our hands, Phia Ménard leaves us free to choose the answers that resonate most with us — but she reminds us, without words, that they all belong to our common culture. As Paul B. Preciado puts it, ‘our sovereignty is not given to us by birth (it is not identity-based), it is made of a scaffolding of fiction, a kind of social exoskeleton that keeps us alive’ (Preciado 2018: para. 7; my translation).

Actors or performers mobilise the attention by composing their actions so as to intensify the sensory-motor resonance provoked in the spectator. To that scope, actors must refine their own body schema, which is neither conscious nor automatic, but pre-reflexive. They incorporate neuro-motor routines more sophisticated than their daily routines, more ambiguous, more surprising. They thus build themselves, by a specific training, a performative body schema (see Sofia 2016: 94–8).

In his tragic way, Antonin Artaud asked the theatre to be the means of remaking the body: ‘he sought a new anatomy in the theater by demanding a gestural language that could transform the actor’s body into a kind of “animated hieroglyph”’ (Noël 2001: para. 38; my translation). The desire for a new body or a second nature has taken various directions in the theatre, and its history keeps record of them (for example, Stanislavski’s ‘line of physical actions’ or Meyerhold’s bio-mechanics). But it is only in performances like *Vortex* that the idea of remaking one’s body may become ‘real’: because it is both the form and content of the

performance, its means and its meaning. The goal is always to make possible for the spectator the experience of a new world (perceived-acted differently), co-constituted with the actor-performer. But of course, a performance whose subject is the remaking of one’s body is a particularly suited place to highlight and fully realise this co-working — this remaking the body together.

## SHARED SKIN

In *Vortex*, Phia Ménard’s body is a product, an instrument, and a vehicle of fictions. It does not embody anything precisely. It acts in the present, it performs. But while performing, it tells a contemporary story of transformation, and gives birth to legendary images. The spectator thus discovers new uses of very old fictions (one obviously thinks of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*). What was for a long time an imaginary experience (becoming another body) has become real today — without ceasing to be imaginary.

*Vortex* is a physical experience and a visual tale. We relive the stages of a long metamorphosis, where the body suffers as in the labour of childbirth; but, at the same time, we enjoy the thousand imaginary lives of a fictional body. The legendary and the concrete constantly refer to each other: an Assumption is triggered by the fans that line the stage and the plastic material is ‘such stuff as dreams are made on’. Thus, the contours of an encounter, of a contemporary intimacy, take shape. For intimacy, threatened today by what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘liquid life’ (2005), as well as by various forms of narcissistic overexposure, is first and foremost an intersubjective experience. As such, it is the opposite

of privatisation and appropriation. As an experience of otherness, it is a resource and a recourse against the cult of the all-powerful Ego. The intimacy that *Vortex* offers us is of course inserted in the public framework of the theatrical performance. But within this framework, the incompleteness, non-transparency, and fictionality of the self-narrative allow for intimacy. *Vortex* ultimately creates between the performer and the audience something like an artistic shared skin, an exchange of sensations and phantasies.

By focusing on a narrative, *Vortex*, though it is a performative show, demonstrates how fiction and reality are closely entangled. The performative gesture that creates a second reality by unfolding real phenomena reveals shimmers of fiction hidden in their folds. In doing so, it also makes us feel concretely what we know theoretically: that our body is essentially changing, transformable; that it is made of imaginary constructions as well as of inner sensations, outside encounters, and biologic data. And we are reminded that theatre is the place *par excellence* where our bodies can expand, join others, experience imaginary constructions unknown to us, including the most disturbing. •

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**THE BODY  
THREATENED BY  
DARK MATTER IN  
PHIA MENARD'S  
WORK**

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A bird believes that the day rises, sings and flies away in the dark night, deceived by this ‘poisoned ray’.<sup>1</sup> Blinded by the absence of light, his environment becomes hostile to him, hurts him, making him sink. It is with this short story, told in voice-over, after the light is extinguished in the audience, that the show *Les Os Noirs* (*The Black Bones*) (2018) begins.<sup>2</sup> The body of Chloée Sanchez is this bird threatened by the dark matter that devours the stage. During the show, Sanchez performs a solo, while some figures are there at given moments in the performance. I will call these figures ‘scouts’.<sup>3</sup> They open and close the proscenium curtain between each act and have specific functions that I will describe later.

1. Expression used at the beginning of *Les Os Noirs* (2018).

2. The performance is no longer touring.

3. The characters are non-gendered, completely covered with black suits, and hooded. They hold a flashlight in their hands and draw the curtain between each act as one opens or closes the page of a chapter. I will use the term ‘scout’ (*éclaireurs* in French, which also means ‘who hold the light’) to designate these characters, although this is not a word used by Ménard and their function is diversified, as they do not only bring touches of light during the transitions but also participate fully in the darkness of the show.

In Phia Ménard's creations, the use of matter (ice, water, plastic, cardboard...) has *agentivity* (a power of action). It enters the stage and affects the scenic space as well as the bodies. The ice balls falling from the ceiling cool the body of the performer and risk knocking her out in *P.P.P.* (2008). The ice is also fought by the water to better dismantle the myth of the charming prince in *Belle D'Hier (Yesterday's Beauty)* (2015). The dark liquid which infiltrates through the defects in the paternal house destroys the walls in *Saison Sèche (Dry Season)* (2018). The cardboard puts to the test the resistance of Phia Ménard in *Maison Mère (Mother House)* (2017) before being annihilated by the water and hidden by the smoke. The wind animates the figures of *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn (The Afternoon of a Foehn)*<sup>4</sup> (2011). The material is often of elementary origin or serves the architectural construction of the scenography. It is conceived as a play partner. It holds our attention, as a spectator, by its unpredictable, random characteristics. It has a capacity to surprise us, to destabilise the human body and to overflow from our horizon of expectation as well as from the stage frame.

In *Les Os Noirs*, the colour black is manipulated as a material itself. The symbolism and the physical properties associated with this colour are transferred to different materials (fabric, plastic, metal...): blackness invades and swallows other elements or contaminates them; blackness weakens the human presence and hinders access to the body; blackness, which prevents us from seeing, becomes the material of death in action. The materialised black embodies, on the fictional level, the darkness that surrounds the 'suicidal puppet', performed by Chloée

4. The title is a play on words. In French, the music of Claude Debussy to which Phia Ménard refers is called *L'après-Midi d'un faune*. She replaced the term 'faune' (faun) by 'foehn', which means a warm, dry wind that comes from the south. The French pronunciation of both words is very close. In this show, Phia Ménard makes plastic bags dance with the help of a wind tunnel.

Sanchez (Ménard n.d.: para. 3).<sup>5</sup> Materiality and spirituality intertwine to propose a performance that plays with the senses, bringing together the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, reality and fantasy. In this essay, I will investigate how Phia Ménard makes the colour black an active material that threatens the real body of the performer and the fictional body of the 'character'.<sup>6</sup>

In order to act sensorially on the body, blackness is associated with three other elements: wind, light, and space. The first two are apparently immaterial and the last one is more conceptual, but all contribute to different aspects of perception. Schematically, wind relies on tactile or kinesthetic sensation as well as hearing. Light enables vision, and space engenders the apprehension of surfaces and depths. By this multiple alliance, the black ceases to be treated only as a colour — or a 'non-color' (Pastoureau 2016: 11). It is embodied materially, and it confronts the body of the performer. It also bathes it in symbolic references. I will analyse black as a constitutive element of theatre, but also as an invasive one. I will base my analysis on the study of the colour black, its history, its symbolism, as well as the concepts or founding narratives with which it is associated (for example, the association of black with mourning, or with the chaos that precedes the creation of the world). Additionally, I will draw a parallel with black as an element of painters and photographs. All these aspects ultimately construct the action.

5. It should be noted that Ménard is originally trained in circus. The allusion to puppetry is not a coincidence. She usually works with objects or material that she puts in movement. All citations from the description of *Les Os noirs*, provided on the company's website (Ménard n.d.), are my translations.

6. I will use the term 'character', not to refer to a traditional theatrical entity, but to distinguish the figures that emerge in each part from the performer although the fictional fabric is quite thin.



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Belle D'Hier*, 2015  
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# BLACK AND WIND: A BODY OF FLESH TRANSCENDED BY A MORTUARY BREATH

*Les Os Noirs* is part of the cycle of ‘wind plays’, just like *Vortex* or *L’après-Midi D’un Foehn*. In this performance, the wind is as an invisible presence that spectators can feel against their skin but never grasp. The wind evokes the ultimate hint of life, the final death rattle, death, or the memory of the disappeared.<sup>7</sup> The wind animates — from *anima*, life, breath — the piece. It circulates from one act to another and sets the black materials in motion. For Ménard, ‘*Les Os Noirs* is a series of suicides and an accompaniment to the last breath’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 7). Thus, in the opening scene, it is with the wind that black waves of plastic rise. They slowly engulf the performer, whose pale body patiently awaits death. Covered with a black plastic tarpaulin, the stage swells progressively to become a turbulent sea that we can see nibbling one by one at the dancer’s limbs, in almost total darkness. The death of this figure comes slowly, almost cradles the body of the dancer who sinks without a cry. Only the sound of the wind blowing can be heard.

In this initial scene, the colour black is thus associated with the wind in order to make the body float before its complete disappearance. If the wind represents the immaterial or the spiritual as opposed to the bodily, the black is immediately associated with the death and the figure of Thanatos. The historian Michel Pastoureau, who has dedicated a large part of his research to the study of colours, recalls the

7. On Compagnie Non Nova’s website, Ménard writes: ‘They are revenants whose beauty I dig up in the act, I call them “black bones”’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 31).

founding and ambivalent role of black in several cosmogonies or foundation stories. In the Bible, darkness precedes the light that brings life. In the Big Bang theory, the dark matter is also the place of the expansion of the universe. And even if we consider the universe as an infinite thing having no beginning, ‘the founding image of a world made of darkness nevertheless imposes itself. This darkness would be the result of a matter absorbing all the electromagnetic energy that it could receive: a perfectly black world, matrix on one side, terrifying on the other’ (Pastoureau 2016: 35).

Throughout its history, black has alternated between sublimation and demonisation. Since antiquity, several conceptions of black have existed side by side, the most fundamental opposition of which is structured around brilliant black — *niger* in Latin, perceived positively, and matt black, associated with ugliness and dirtiness — *ater* (ibid.: 28). The pejorative dimension of the latter can still be perceived in terms such as ‘atrocious’ which have been derived from it (ibid.). Beyond this tension between sparkling, fertile black and debasing black, this colour becomes that of mourning. The presence of black in clothing is first observed from the second century BC among Roman magistrates (ibid.: 35), before becoming a common practice in Europe from the seventeenth century (ibid.: 135), and whose modalities will be more or less codified depending on the time and place. This association of black with death is found aesthetically in the Romantic and Gothic movements, exploiting the darkness of melancholy and the taste for the macabre. By covering the scene with black materials to evoke suicide and disappearance, Ménard is thus part of a chromatic tradition that is both social and artistic.

But it is not enough to isolate a body on a dark, dimly lit stage to create the feeling of imminent death. If the death of the different ‘characters’ performed by Chloé Sanchez is accepted by them because it is



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *Les Os Noirs*, 2017  
Performer: Chloée Sanchez  
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voluntary, the blackness nevertheless imposes itself as a threatening presence. It does not seem to frighten these characters, but it is constantly preparing to emerge, to take over, to annihilate the fictional body and the real body. To do this, Ménard seeks to provoke a haptic experience, calling upon the kinaesthesia and the tactile sense of the black. The combination of black and wind provokes an intimate and sensorial perception of the performance, notably because the director creates a system of wind circulation that subtly breaks the fourth wall. She explains that she wants to set up ‘a framing and a conditioning of the wind which will pass from one backstage to the other or sometimes directly towards the audience’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 44).

This discreet touching of the audience plunged into the darkness participates in a feeling of presence. The black breath of death slides out of the stage frame to tickle the neck or make the hairs on the skin stand up. And audibly, the wind takes over the scream that we can project, imagine. As the wind howls, the blackness becomes deafening and the still visible skin surface diminishes, the dress is carried away by the waves, a hand reappears before disappearing for good. The black and the wind combine a physical sensation (an impression left on the skin) with a phantasmatic projection, that of death in a sea and a darkest night. This creates a melancholic image (deep sadness, desire of death, Baudelaire’s spleen... etymologically ‘melancholy’ also means ‘black bile’). This image can notably refer to the ‘Ophelia complex’ studied by Gaston Bachelard, the projection of the image of Ophelia’s floating body (in *Hamlet*) on the representations associating water, night, and femininity (1984: 121).

This macabre wind continues to invade the scene in the following sequence, when the dancer’s body, stranded in a nightmarish no-man’s land, awakens. From the stage ground, forms gradually rise, evoking trees with blunt branches. They slowly swell. Imprisoned in this erectile

forest, which can metaphorically evoke sexual violence, the interpreter starts to run. She vainly seeks her way. In a fairy-tale atmosphere, she collapses twice. Her falls trigger a kind of howl that turns into a shrill alarm. It gives the impression that the sound is not external to her but restitutes her intimate perception of the situation. The progressive swelling of this howling forest creates the feeling that it threatens the performer’s body, attacks her. The trees erect themselves in a jerky movement and then remain twisted and pointed. The ‘scouts’, the black-suited figures briefly mentioned in the introduction, are part of this wounding landscape. They roam the stage with sticks or picks that they use to better erect the trees. But they remain invisible to the eyes of the young woman who continues to run, to collide with her environment.

This quest for an impossible path in a forest lit only by a ray of moonlight producing moving shadows evokes *Tom Thumb*. As the wind swells the trees and then lets them soften and fall on the collapsed body of the performer, the character seems out of breath and her breathing is panting. The forest breathes slowly, while the young woman suffocates in her own scream that reverberates and distorts in the stage space. This sensation of suffocation is due to the representation of a feeling of anguish. But it is also induced by the chromatic work carried out by Phia Ménard who explains that ‘saturation is one of the axes of [her] experimentation’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 3). These successive layers of black that are strategically superimposed on stage create different densities of blackness that give the feeling of a dead end, of suffocation. Black is everywhere, and, if it gives depth to some elements, it is to better enclose the body that is caught in its trap. The thin net of light that runs across the scene, overhanging it, makes the forest exist by accentuating its movement. It also creates just the right amount of light to better bring out the black and transform the shadows into new threatening spaces that pursue the performer. As in a three-dimensional painting by Pierre Soulages, Ménard plays with the black textures, their shape

and intensity. The flat, matt black of the shadows brings out the shiny black of the volumes. Here, we can feel how much Ménard is inspired by the art world.

In the second act, the wind takes two main forms. First, it is the monstrous growl of the thing that hides under a black rigid plastic cover. We hear a body, but it remains hidden, and its sound productions are sometimes like a human snoring, sometimes like an animal growl. Under the tarpaulin, which covers the entire stage, sharp blows are struck, provoking a noise of crumpled or brutally stretched plastic. The shape swells or flattens and then moves. It is disturbing because it is audible but invisible. It is stirring under the cover like a cancer that acts inside the body. Ménard speaks of the body of the performer as 'a tumor in the making' (Ménard n.d.: para. 28). The body is here present in the hollow. There is the real body which is hidden under the cover. And there is a more phantasmatic one (parasitic, gangrenous, sick body) which is expressed by the construction of a scenic organism made only of black, of breath, and of sound.

The theatrical device used by Phia Ménard allows us to hear and wonder about the performer's struggle with the plastic cover. As a spectator, however, we only see the agitated surface of the black tarpaulin. The performer's body is completely hidden. Thus, we only see the surface of this struggle and we do not have access to the heart of the action. Then, the black tarpaulin is gradually gathered, as the grunts become more human. A clear break occurs when the face of the dancer emerges, from behind. The scene resembles the sudden awakening from a nightmare or the passage to another dream. The performer finishes folding this immense dark blanket, forming a large, crumpled ball that she deposits on her belly. It looks like an immense weight, preventing her from getting up, leaving her nailed to the ground, moaning. The relationship is reversed: the dark matter is located on the body and shows

this time an external oppression that prevents all human movement. It especially prevents the bipedal posture that distinguishes us from most animals. The body of the dancer is reduced to a swarming thing, crushed by a formless mass. It is reduced to a continuous cry and a permanent pain that prevents humanity from expressing itself. The scene is understood as a mirror of the previous one. Grunts and screams answer each other. The inner fight gives way to the outer one. The surface spread on the stage and hiding the body is replaced by a crumpled ball put on the body.

When a scout removes this insurmountable weight — it is laughable at the same time, since it is only a plastic cover — another black wind takes over. A symbolically violent sequence takes place and 'loads' the body of Chloée Sanchez. The performer is undressed and then dressed by a scout. This scout then pushes her in an infernal round to the rhythm of the *Masquerade Waltz* by Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov. Sanchez then begins a round and dances in a more and more disarticulated way. She adopts an almost puppet-like posture (simple, jerky gestures, and a relaxed body, as if pulled by threads). This recalls, as previously noted, the fact that Phia Ménard comes from circus and usually works with objects and materials that she puts in motion. While the performer turns and repeats her gestures, she imitates a gravelly and masculine voice which gives her orders ('go run, go, we said what, faster than that...'). At other times, she uses a childish but worn-out feminine voice which mumbles politeness ('yes, yes, sorry, thanks, sorry...'). The round breaks a first time, then a second, to allow the dancer to pass thresholds. She clarifies her body state and her gestures when she then starts dancing again. She looks more and more like a doll manipulated by invisible threads. At the third stop, she freezes, looks at the audience, and then jumps out of the window of a white wall set up at the back of the stage with only a square hole open to nothingness. The wall collapses after her jump, producing a wave of air, again accompanied by a howl:

the wind carries the body away. The defenestration literally ends the alienating cycle. It cuts the breath of the performer who exhausts herself turning and spitting out words heard or pronounced, like a traumatic scene replayed in a loop in the memory.

In the third act, the wind turns into the sound and visual echo of a post-apocalyptic scene represented in a purified way. In a white room, lit by a cold light coming from the floor of the room, there is a pile of metallic remains reminiscent of graphite. The thin sheets of crumpled metal are agitated by a continuous breath that produces a high-pitched tinkling sound on contact. This sound is always unpleasant and is once again associated with darkness. From this heap, a humanoid silhouette emerges little by little. This silhouette is difficult to decipher: it is, indeed, covered with this metal which confers an allure of science fiction, like half a robot and half a knight in armour. A new struggle takes place: a body seeks to find its form, its figure, its humanity by removing this layer of noisy dirt which covers it. The pieces that envelop it are torn off one by one like a crust and fall back to the ground. The pile of metallic remains becomes a mass grave, this external skin blending perfectly with the environment from which emerges another body. This second body is reduced, fragile, deformed. It gives the sensation of being burnt. This double is carried by the performer who manages to extract herself from her metallic envelope. She carries it delicately and rests it on the ground, an inanimate thing among others. Only the wind agitates these metaphorical human remains and makes them tinkle. The wind — even the air — combines with the darkness and the sound — breath, grunting, screams, tinkling — to make the scenic environment as a gigantic body that shudders, breathes, or expels its suffering. Becoming a quasi-tactile and constantly audible presence, this black wind circulates from the stage to the audience to give the sensation of an imminent death. It seems ready to cover the body of the character and the performer from one moment to another.

## BLACK AND LIGHT: ON THE TRACKS OF A BODY ALREADY SWALLOWED BY DEATH

The devouring and threatening dimension of dark matter works by saturation. But it also acts thanks to the contrast and the creation of a universe apart from the world. It's a universe in black and white, from which the other colours are excluded. Michel Pastoureau reminds us that black has been considered for several centuries as a 'non-color':

As the white its companion, to which of the remainder it was not always bound, the black had gradually lost its status of color between the end of the Middle Ages and the XVIII<sup>e</sup> century: the appearance of the printing and the engraved image — with the black ink on white paper — had given to these two colors a particular position that the Protestant Reformation initially, the scientific progress then had finished by locating outside the world of the colors. (Pastoureau 2016: 11)

The coloured spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet), elaborated by Isaac Newton around 1665 and 1666, excludes definitively the black. The white remains associated there since the colours compose the white light. The combination of black and white is then built-in opposition to other colours. The very conception of *Les Os Noirs* as 'a series of achrome paintings' testifies to this dualistic heritage (Ménard n.d.: para. 21).

Ménard explains that she sees her performance as ‘photographic and sensory prints’ (ibid.: para. 2). She evokes her ‘need for aestheticism [which] involves reflections, the impression of an image’ (ibid.: para. 2). Specifically, the chromatic strategy adopted is based on the contrast between black and white, the reflection of light, and the scenic exploration of the principle of photographic revelation (the scenes emerge little by little from the black). These scenographic choices are complemented by a relationship to time, also of the order of the instantaneous. Ménard proposes to the spectators to seize fugitive moments. The sequences are mostly built-in crescendos followed by a sharp stop. Meanwhile, she establishes a melancholic feeling via this two-colour universe which can be associated with the notion of past. The white body of the interpreter, who is agitated or revealed by the scene, prints itself on the black. It emerges and stands out, like a white trace on the black matter, giving the sensation of retinal persistence. It is a body that crosses temporalities, still in action, but already swallowed by death. The flashes of light also allow us to see the dark. Symbolically, the light, associated with spirituality, immateriality, even transcendence, is opposed to the black, which is on the side of the body, of materiality, and of its fatal destiny. The body then seems ghostly. This world, all in negative, is always to be understood according to the play of the mirror. What the black environment reveals is the capacity of the body to disappear, to become dark matter too. And when the body is already camouflaged by obscure matters, when it is more object than human — when it melts in the scenography and is situated more on the side of the corpse, of what ceased to embody an identity — it evokes the last suspicion of life, the ultimate material resistance before the passage to the act.

By installing this two-colour universe, Ménard chooses to impact the spectators’ sensoriality to better make them experience the sensation of a threshold, of a definitive passage from one state of body to another. As a complement to the manipulation of the wind, Ménard decides to

play with sensory deprivation. The dark allows a momentary alteration of the sight which, paradoxically, is considered as pertaining to ‘an extreme sensory’.<sup>8</sup> To perceive less in order to better experience, or to perceive differently. The director thus develops a strategy of sensory displacement. She resorts to the haptic sensation and to the apprehension of volumes to experiment the performance under another angle since ‘the manipulated or flying elements [are] textured in the black tones to develop the curiosity of recognition of the matter and their transfigurations’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 45). The black becomes palpable.

This dark matter is the trace of a dead body seized in its ultimate startlement, and it is revealed, literally, by its alliance with the light. It is the reflections of the light which, associated with the sound, make it possible to guess the body under the sheet. It is also the white dress which floats on the surface of the waves which testifies to the disappearance. Finally, it is the scene of the waltzing ‘doll’ that is staged like a Polaroid photograph: the back wall of the stage is bright white, with only a square window looking out onto the dark, and it is in this frame that the performer turns one last time towards the audience by standing on its edge before jumping. The light captures in a fatal flash a series of moments of tilt, hence the comparison that Ménard makes with archaeology:

The form is archaeological. A superimposition of layers whose rebirth we are going to attend according to the excavations. It tears off the ground in search of what preceded it. She identifies what we have become by the exhumation of traces and memories. It is her body that abandons

<sup>8</sup>. The full quotation from which this notion of ‘an extreme sensory’ is taken reads as follows: ‘From the light to the dark, it is through this prism that I conceive the rupture. To enter the dark, to put oneself in the shelter of the light or to extract oneself from the day, as a premise to extract oneself from the world of the living. What I imagine to be of an extreme sensory, a dark poem’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 20).

itself to each new disappearance. We follow her in the reintegration of a distant carnality. Forms reappear, stories in snatches, spectres and glimmers. (Ménard n.d.: para. 24)

The stage, painted in black, underlined by some traces of white, hides the real body of the performer while enhancing her fictive disappearance. Thus, different layers of bodies are superimposed, engaging the spectators to carry out a search. Spectators explore the bodily memory that is staged: the body of Chloée Sanchez acts as a memorial sepulchre of other stories. But they also try to distinguish the symbolic, real, and fictitious bodies nested in each other. The final swallowing is presented as a constant threat. But it is always perceptible, just as the black absorbs colours but reflects light according to the texture that composes it.

## A BLACK SPACE: THE BODY ISOLATED IN A DISPROPORTIONATE ENVIRONMENT

The swallowing achieved by the black matter is fed by the construction of space, with the management of volumes and scales. Like white, black is a colour conducive to projection, imagination, and fantasy. It is the colour of the screens that are then filled with images, but it is also a colour favourable to mythical stories. From the fertile black of the caves — places of rituals and ancestral creation — to the black of the labyrinths sheltering monsters, passing by Hell in all its variations or by the Platonic cave and all the imaginary of the prison or the dungeons (Pastoureau 2016: 22), black is sometimes the space from which one does not return and sometimes the one from which emerge magical beings and things. Ménard generally thinks of her works as Herculean works.<sup>9</sup> She seeks here to ‘bring back a mythical meaning’, through images recalling, for example, the story of Persephone or the image of the woman married to death: ‘She [the character] is the image of virginity that plays with death’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 4).

Despite its performative and non-linear nature, the piece uses more traditional theatrical elements. It is guided by a sense of tragic

<sup>9</sup>. Phia Ménard asks the dancers of *Belle d’Hier* to ‘do the world’s laundry’ and the ones of *Saison Sèche* to ‘destroy the patriarch’s house’ (Phia Ménard, unpublished interview with the author, 2018).

inevitability<sup>10</sup> and is based on immemorial stories of death, war (external or internal), or violence.<sup>11</sup> And it is the size of the space that restores this sensation of a power game, of a superpower that dominates the characters. Phia Ménard speaks of ‘oversized moving black matter’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 22). These materials allow the body to be lost, to give the feeling of its fragility in front of a universe too big for it, as when the body is swallowed up by the waves or covered by the immense tarpaulin. The monochrome or bichrome environment also produces the impression that no way out is possible, as when the performer runs in the middle of the ghostly forest or turns in circles like a music box doll.

The role of the characters I have called ‘scouts’ is also intimately linked to the space and its fatal dimension. They are not only opening and closing each act, but they work as external presences that set up the stage space and create a temporal sequencing. They intervene at rare moments on stage: for example, in the first act, they help some trees to stand up, completing the action of the wind. They completely ignore the performer who does not seem to see them. Then, in act two, they undress the performer, put her in a more childish dress, and push her to initiate her circular movement. They are like manipulators or external forces, mostly unseen by the dancer or indifferent to her drama. They are there to put in place the elements essential to the ultimate outcome and to watch over the character’s fate. Thus, hovering the sense of a higher power, they are the visible cogs (for the spectators) of a gear that goes beyond each character. This gear refers both to the tragic tradition and to the perception of society as a ‘device’ (*dispositif*), a field

10. ‘The act of suicide has always accompanied me, like the hemlock in the pocket of the resistant, without compromise. It follows in our footsteps from the moment it appears to us as a possible way out/ [...] The suicide victim does not need moral, he/she is in the certainty of his/her gesture’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 17).

11. ‘There she is, scattered in the middle of a cold earth, barely out of a trench, searching for her burned limbs, breath as her only link to life’ (Ménard n.d.: para. 29).

of reciprocal influences, as described by Michel Foucault in the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*) ([1976] 1994: 99). These scouts fold and unfold the space of the drama or contribute to its strangeness and sense of perdition. This is notably the case at the end of the first act when a slightly transparent curtain falls and flashlight lights criss-cross it, looking for something or someone. These lights have a magical aspect, they remind us of fireflies carrying hope. But they can also remind us of the light of a doctor’s lamp that sneaks under the eyelid, when he checks if the patient sees and remains conscious. The presences behind the lamps are vaguely distinguishable and form unidentifiable silhouettes in a black space, also confused and blurred.

The creation of these limbos on stage or of these very large spaces, also allows the derealisation the environment, to show the human body itself as a thing, a puppet. Ménard explains having conceived the scenography as a gigantic puppet booth (Ménard n.d.: para. 44). The puppet deals with the notions of animate and inanimate, which, once again, recalls Ménard’s initial training in circus. The body that emerges is thus manipulated by invisible hands, while the size or smallness (the white room in the last act) of the space conditions the states of the body (confinement, isolation, repetition) in a non-naturalistic aesthetic. Since the director is less interested in the cause of the suicide than in the ‘preparation of the act’ (ibid.: para. 18), particular attention is paid to the concrete elements, to the space, to the material, and to the way of using them to manufacture a desired death. The scenography is thought as an organism with a rather mechanical functioning, recalling the image of the clock or the machine regulated by the hands of God which is used by René Descartes in *Le Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on Method*) to evoke the functioning of nature ([1637] 2004: 58): a cause generates an effect, matter induces a device of putting to death, a space generates a bodily state preceding the death.

# CONCLUSION

With *Les Os Noirs*, Phia Ménard creates a framework of aesthetic experimentation around the representation of suicide. She manipulates the wind, the light, and the space as parameters allowing the measurement of the black, to grant it different characteristics. The black is sometimes fluid and spread on the stage like water, sometimes rigid, erectile, all in volume. Shiny (the waves, the metal), matt (the shadows), or highlighted by a contrast (the white wall, the white room), the black traps the body of the performer, imprisons it, hits it, covers it, or makes it seem ridiculously small. As for the fictive body, it seems sometimes assaulted, sometimes soothed by this chromatic universe that reflects its anxieties, its sufferings, or its memories. It summons, at the same time, the notion of mental space and a Romantic heritage based on the parallel between the external landscape and the emotional state of the main character. The use of black as a material allows for both the symbolic play of colour and the working of the senses (hearing, sight, kinaesthetic and tactile sensations) of both the dancer and the spectators. Such use of colour can be seen as the use of a ‘super-stimulus’, as described by Erin Hurley (2010: 24). In his work, Hurley discusses Dion Boucicault’s 1858 staging of *The Poor of New York*, in which the ubiquitous use of red serves to evoke fire and put the spectators in an emotional state of alertness. He also mentions Wassily Kandinsky’s willingness, in his piece *The Yellow Sound*, to feature all-yellow colossi. According to Hurley, Dion Boucicault and Wassily Kandinsky ‘expanded color from a point of punctuation to fill the visual field and, thereby, increased its affective impact’ (ibid.). Phia Ménard updates this ultra-sensorial use of colour by also playing with the borders of non-perception in order to better evoke death. This question of the threshold, to be crossed or not to be crossed, finally allows a treatment of the black as a colour of the passage opening on the possibility of a ritual-intimate, funerary, memorial in *Les Os Noirs*. •

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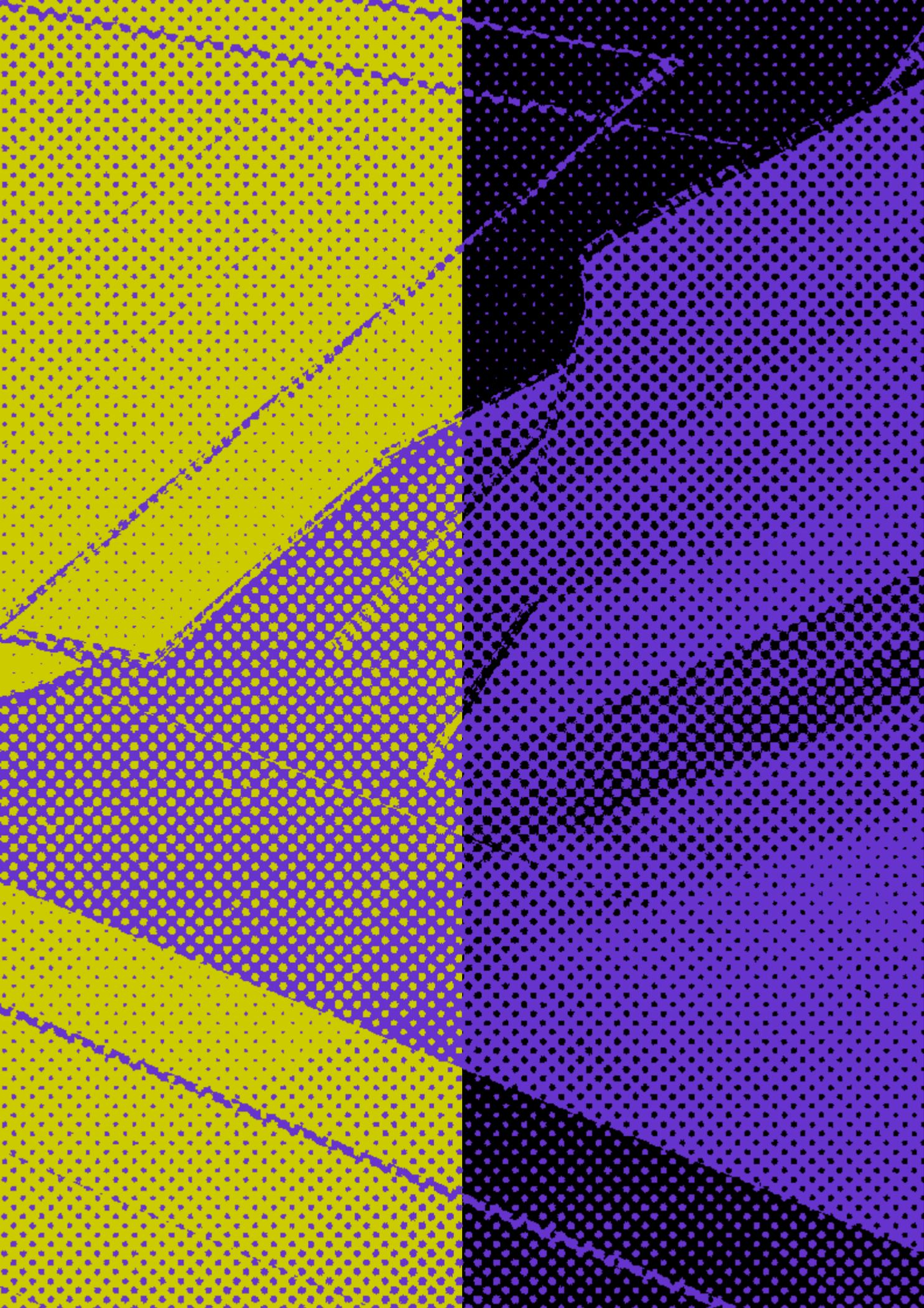


**PHIA MÉNARD**

**ESTABLISHING THE  
RELATIONSHIP OF  
MATTER TO THE  
COSMOS**

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TRANSLATION



In this conversation, collected in January 2022, Phia Ménard looks back at the creation of *Mother House* (2018), the first part of *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (For Europe)*. She places this work in her broader relationship to the elements, and the way they orient her writing and guide her creative process. Meeting at the crossroads of installation and performance art, she summons up new imagery, perspectives, and gestures that shift our foundational myths. It is up to the spectator to accept this invitation and be mesmerised, to embrace the singularity of the rhythms and durations, to let their imagination run free: in other words, to pay attention in another way, more intensely.

# FROM MATTER TO THE COSMOS

*In your work, you cohabit with the elements, and often, in the most literal sense of the word, you face them. How do you approach this relationship with materials?*

It may sound strange, but I think I am very animistic, and I am becoming more and more so. My approach and relationship with matter is almost spiritual. I find myself talking to my plants with joy, delighting in touching their soil. I love having conversations with them — it's like a feeling of the cosmos. But it's a simple relationship. When I started working with ice, I quickly developed a relationship of equals. I wasn't going to be there to control it, but to follow its movements. To consider its presence, its power, which is much stronger than mine. I believe it's the only way to relate to a material nowadays. To surrender to the material and accept what it is, rather than asking it to be what I would like it to be. Any relationship I may have now, I start writing when any kind of matter comes into play, is really a relationship with a partner. And it is a relationship that is more important because it is a common partner. Shared between the audience and I, it brings us together. My approach to using materials keeps bringing me closer, not to virtuosity, but rather to sharing knowledge.

*In what I hear of this relationship with the material partner, there is a kind of negotiation, but also an intention of dialogue, a striving for agreement. However, one has the impression that this negotiation passes through a confrontation. In other words, some sort of struggle to be led in front of the material, which forces you to comply with its intentions. Does this kind of confrontation also reflect your relationship with the elements?*

Yes, for the viewer it seems to be a confrontation. But for me, and at every moment, it is a sharing relationship. If I take the wind, it gives and shares with me an energy, and, at the same time, a trace. All the elements will come to nourish a certain relationship, which is almost an 'animal' relationship. This is also why it is very ritualised. All my relationship with material is within the ritual. This is because it's in the ritual that we pay it the most beautiful tributes, and we assign a value to it again. It is also through ritual that theatre expresses itself. It's in that precise place that I want to summon the relationship to materials. Finally, it's the combination of the matter's energy and my own animality, which knows how to play with the matter. When I look at raptors, they know how to play with the wind and with ascendant currents admirably well. All of this brings me closer to a relationship where I would almost have the desire for matter to be stronger than us. To have this humility, which is perhaps what we are experiencing little by little with global warming. When the wind becomes a storm and can no longer be controlled, we go back to a certain kind of humbleness and, at the same time, fear begins. And it's this fear, perhaps, that will finally lead us to humility.

*Beyond the humility that matter forces you to consent to, what is the larger effect it has on your presence on stage?*

I think my presence is affected in that the viewer sees something that might not exist. For example, one could very well have water on a stage and not consider it at all. We would completely miss out on something that connects us. What does it mean to walk in a space that is soaked? What comes out of it? What smells? What stories? What traces? I think that my enjoyment of the approach to materials is what constantly questions me about what I am. In *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales* (2021), when I think of the end of *Mother House*, when the flood comes, it is certainly one of the most beautiful yet hardest moments. We see several elements of humanity collapsing. We're confronted with the impossibility



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (pour Europe): Maison Mère*, 2021  
Performer: Phia Ménard  
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of looking away, of ignoring the catastrophe, of not wanting to face the catastrophe. It is also impossible not to feel the cold of this material that reflects life, because only the living feels the cold.

*These materials, are they also alive? Coming back to the previous question of animism,<sup>1</sup> is your constant work with materials what allows you to say they're alive?*

Yes, they have a life of their own. Obviously, there is a real gap with the question of life and the question of awareness of life, but of course they live. The water that flows in a certain shape on a stage simply lives because the floor is not necessarily level, the water follows its path. We cannot say that water is inert, principally because it is subject to the laws of gravity, like us. Maybe the most incredible life force is the one that reminds us of gravity. This is perhaps the starting point of my work; the whole process is constantly linked to gravity. If I take *Mother House*, the cardboard Parthenon has a weight, and can only be constructed because there is gravity. That forces me to put the bases that support the building here or there. *Father Temple* is also a constant gravitational challenge. And then, with the last scene of *The Forbidden Encounter*, it's the question of coming down to find a place where gravity is controllable. The paint that I hurl in this scene has an effect only because it falls due to gravity. So, I think that yes, matter lives because it is reactive to a force and reactive to the cosmos. This is where it becomes obvious to me, that relationship is what is alive.

*Has this question of gravity, which is at the heart of The Trilogy, always been so important in your performances, and more broadly in your artistic career?*

<sup>1</sup> In relation to this question, see issue 3 of *Revue Corps-Objet-Image* on 'Ré-animation', to which Phia Ménard contributed. This issue tests the hypothesis that artists re-engage animism and its 'weird' resurgences, disrupting ordinary experiences of our modern naturalism (see Damian 2018).

It always has been. My artistic practice began with juggling, and juggling is an act of defying gravity. I just resonated with that question. The moment I discovered a healthy relationship to my existence was the moment I understood that my body can defy the laws of gravity. The permanent struggle with this force has an incredible transcendence. It was also the first moment when I became aware of this cosmic relationship. Coming from a mostly atheist working class, spirituality was always very distant but at that point it became a spiritual relationship — cosmic — and juggling balls became planets. The expression of the body became a pressing matter. The challenge of balancing the object, not falling, took a bigger scope that is both existential and metaphorical, could be compared to the feeling you have when you play music. The moment you understand the notes and you don't have to look for them anymore, you realise that you are opening a kind of infinity — a cosmos. The relationship that we can establish immediately with a material becomes a cosmos.

## AT THE RISK OF FAILURE: THE UNTAMABLE PART OF ELEMENTS

*I would like to return to the construction of the Parthenon in Mother House. You start with a very confident pace and sharp gestures, perfectly cadenced. Then you begin folding and taping the cardboard. Little by little this mechanism jams. You face forces that destabilise you, that wrestle you. It is clear that this destabilisation is not fake, you do not feign it. How do you deal with this unpredictable and threatening part of the object, that could possibly make you lose all control?*

This is precisely what I'm looking for. In *Vortex* (2011), there is a moment where I dance with my own skin, which is bigger than me and with which I am in a relationship of desire. Except that I don't control this skin. It's the wind that controls it, and it's a form of despair when I see it fade away from me. This is also the moment when it becomes absolutely enjoyable. Finally, you have a real partner. And the viewer sees this partner. In *Mother House*, when the house starts to begin its collapse and needs to be tipped over, you give that house the value of Hercules. You give it symbols, you give it names, you enter the myth. In the same way, when Punk-Athena begins and leads her combat on stage, you lend her the fights of Ulysses in his Odyssey.

*There is all the symbolism that opens this form of combat threatening your mastery and grasp. Concretely, what kind of attention do you call for in these moments?*

I have never been an animal tamer, nor have I ever been a fan of animal taming. However, one day while I was on tour in Russia, I saw an animal tamer at the Moscow circus with two animals that are worst enemies: the tiger and the elephant. I was on the edge of the cage, and what I found quite incredible was that the part left to chance was monstrous. The only thing the tamer could do was to be the little mouse that is there and says from time to time: 'maybe we could do that'; that is, to have the role of mediator. And as a mediator, to accept a certain number of given elements. I think we stand at somewhat the same place. I realise that when I play with a material — and I think this can be found in Johann Le Guillerm's work — we know that something is happening. We accept this something and take it as an event that will allow us to find a new sensation, yet also to discover where the danger is. That is to ask: at what point do we approach risk and danger? And what is the risk, what is the danger? The beauty for me is in all the moments when something fails. You don't necessarily succeed on the first try. You really enter a true personalisation and incarnation of the material.

*You speak of failure. Is there a real risk of failure in the assembly of the Parthenon?*

Yes, it is certain that there are risks: it can tear, it can reopen completely... anything is possible. It is also the limits of this performance that are interesting. I know what would be effective and easy, but I choose not to take it. I want it to be uncertain. It's like an ascension, when you've already climbed to the summit, you take the path, but see something new. That flow wasn't as solid as you thought. You've been through it already, but the second time around, you're not sure if it will hold. Yet something inside you makes you say: 'Of course, I have to take it!'. In *Father Temple*, the path of the four slaves who climb the tower is an extremely treacherous path. It only takes a few misplaced props for it to go wrong. And there we could really talk about danger.

## THE LOGIC OF ANESTHESIA: CAPTURING ATTENTION CHALLENGING IT OVER TIME

*You speak often of 'anaesthesia' to describe the way of seizing the viewer's attention and making them aware of the importance of what is happening. Could you be more specific as to how you achieve this?*

We can take *P.P.P.* (2008), for example, which is the first play where I used this. You would walk into a room that was cold. When you came in, the first thing you saw was a beautiful device with smoking ice spheres hanging from the ceiling. You'd see your friends, you'd look at them, you'd call them, and then at one point one sphere would drop



Phia Ménard / Compagnie Non Nova, *La Trilogie des Contes Immoraux (pour Europe): Maison Mère*, 2021  
Performer: Phia Ménard  
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from the ceiling. The noise would be so loud that everyone would look back at the stage. You'd discover that on this stage, one of the hundred and twenty hanging spheres has fallen to the floor. At that moment, you realise that I am in fact under this ceiling, and the 'anaesthesia' is built up. You suddenly realise and think to yourself: 'Am I going to witness a suicide? What's going on?'

In *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn (The Afternoon of a Foehn)* (2011), in *Vortex* (2011), the process of transforming from plastic bag into a puppet is very long. I often say when I am in *Vortex* that I hear in the bodies of the viewers going: 'I hope that this isn't what she's going to do for the whole show!'. So, the question is: how do we get the viewer to be willing to 'be there'? How do we captivate their attention, as they are a very active in society? So, you have to be able to get their attention, and that's what I'm always working on. It is when I have found the form of their 'anaesthesia' that I begin writing the show. In *Mother House*, the 'anaesthesia' operates from the beginning when the spectator notices that I am there, when they see that I am looking at them. By the time I decide to get up, I have given them enough time to stop and wind down. And when I start to go around the cardboard that covers the floor and stop for a while at each corner of the stage, the audience thinks: 'it's going to be long!'

*Concerning this work on time, waiting, and duration, it participates in affecting the attention of the viewer and creating this effect of 'anaesthesia'. But more broadly speaking, what do these temporal experiences inspire you?*

I think that first of all it is a 'reappropriation'. I mean, the fact of reappropriating temporality and with it, the senses. Today, the times we allow ourselves to focus, to be 'isolated with others', are very rare. There are only a few places that can induce them, and the theatre has that power. The cinema has almost lost it, in the sense that the economic efficiency demanded makes it very rare today to see a film in the way

the director intended it. A few years ago, when Lars Von Trier created *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) with Björk, the rule was that for the first five minutes of the film's screening, the rooms were to remain dark, so that only the music was played. I was lucky enough to see it in an alternative cinema that respected these conditions, but many cinemas never respected them. The artist's proposal to enter this space through sound for five minutes before the slightest image is a proposal to reappropriate one's senses. This is also why I say that temporality is a reappropriation of oneself and of the senses. When you become bored your senses awake. You suddenly start to feel your body. You start hearing your heart, you start to be able to interpret your breath. You become aware of your touch; the slightest noise becomes matter. It's also frightening, the fear of being with yourself. As soon as we have time, we find ourselves.

## CREATION PROCESSES: BETWEEN LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES, MAKING MATERIALS WORK

*We can say that dramaturgy is a way of writing time, arranging actions and durations. During the creative process, how did you come up the dramaturgy of Mother House? Is it the building process that imposed the temporal structure? Did the materials prescribe the logic of actions?*

In fact, it's the exact combination of the principle of assembly, the fragility and weight of the material. During the creation, all the dramaturgy

as well as the way we want to set up the event, comes as required by the material. At first, I thought that a cloud had to appear over the Parthenon during its assembly. It was in testing this idea that we realised that it was more interesting to make smoke go down in the rain. It created a sort of inversion of the image, with an outstanding scenic effect. In dramaturgy, we work simultaneously on the relation to the materials, to the space, and to the sound, which plays a very important part. In *Mother House*, we worked in particular on time-lapse effects, and on the inclusion of the audience in the sound space. All these elements gave birth to the dramaturgy.

*With Mother House, in order to optimise this use of materials, did you consult with builders, model makers, or architects?*

Not at all. We do everything empirically, which is also part of the creative process. When I made the 'Wind Performances',<sup>2</sup> if I had asked an engineer to draw or give me a wind prototype to do my shows, he would certainly have given me an equation. But what would I have done with this equation? Because what interests me the most in an equation, is the human factor. For *Mother House*, when we decided to work with cardboard, we choose to do it in a very rough way. It's always our experimentation that's going to define how I'm going to write. Without that, it's like working with a set. I never want to work on sets. I work on my scenery by asking myself: what is a scenography that will live? My team and I are permanently playing the sorcerers' apprentices. It is also an extremely rewarding phase for us. We have our desires, but like any cook who would like to bring out a taste or achieve a certain shape, failure can happen. So, we analyse, we discuss, and this teamwork feeds our desire to create together, embarking on an adventure without knowing if we will succeed.

2. *Laisse les gondoles à Venise !* (2005), *L'après-Midi D'un Foehn* (2008 for 'Version 1'; 2011), *Vortex* (2011), *Les Os Noirs* (2017).

## 'PERFORMANCE-INSTALLATION': GESTURES AND IMAGERY

*I would like to come back to the expression 'performance-installation' that you have used sometimes. It seems to me to be a fruitful way of naming the decompartmentalisation of the scenic and the plastic arts, going beyond the assigned categories. In what sense do you use this expression, and what does it inspire in you?*

I think it's a way of saying that everything that will be created on stage will not be created beforehand but will be visible to the viewer. This principle of installation immediately refers to the performance, since if it's made under the gaze of the viewer, it cannot be treated like a simple assembly. This is what also supposes that this principle of installation is staged, that it brings the question of dramaturgy and creates a path that leads to a form of story. The viewer will be the custodian, they're the one who will tell the story.

*When you speak of 'installation', is it in the way this term is used in the field of contemporary art?*

It's not exactly from that perspective. If we take *Mother House*, we can say that when the show ends, an installation remains. An installation we could keep. This also means that when we stop, the state of the object and the trace that remains say something.

*In Mother House, there is also the process of installing which tilts the question of installation. What is specific about these installation gestures compared to the gestural grammar that you are used to?*

These gestures are hugely banal. And it's because they are so commonplace that they become interesting to question. All of these small gestures, like pulling on tape that can break, is an opportunity to say: 'how about I pull the tape to see if it moves? Just for fun? What's stopping me from doing this?'. We come to question our docility and what we conform to. It is also because we start from the banal and a very simple gesture that we can begin to mess around. We take a piece of tape we realise that we missed, we roll it into a ball, and inevitably we're filled with desire to throw it.

*The act of installing allows Mother House to summon these ordinary gestures. In other creations, did you already conduct this research on the qualities of a simple gesture?*

I think that in *Mother House* it is the first time that I completely own it. And it was extremely important that this banality was at the service of boredom. The previous plays were always linked to choreography. I think back to Théo Mercier and Steven Michel's project putting together this closet [in *Affordable Solution for Better Living*, 2018], and it's kind of the same thing. You have to get something together. Then you either try to do a Monsieur Hulot-style set-up [in the film by Jacques Tati], and it doesn't end up at all the way you planned so, you add a piece of tape to make it stick. Or you take Athena's style. At the time I decided to embody her, Athena had to do very ordinary things, when everyone is expecting extraordinary things from her. The only thing that comes out of banality is that she cuts the columns with a chainsaw. Suddenly, her warrior side awakens.

*One last word to end this conversation, echoing the initial question about your relationship to the elements: if you were an element, which one would you be?*

Water, because it has the most transformations. •

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**PORTFOLIO**  
**PHIA MÈNARD**  
**& COMPAGNIE**  
**NON NOVA**

**P.P.P., 2008**

Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean Luc Beaujault



# *L'après-midi d'un foehn, 2011*

Performer: Cécile Briand  
© Jean Luc Beaujault



## Vortex, 2011

Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean Luc Beaujault



# Vortex, 2011

Performer: Phia Ménard  
© Jean Luc Beaujault



## **Belle d'Hier, 2015**

Performers: Isabelle Bats, Cécile Cozzolino, Géraldine Pochon, Marlène Rostaing, Jeanne Vallauri  
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# Les Os Noirs, 2017

Performer: Chloée Sanchez  
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# Les Os Noirs, 2017

Performer: Chloée Sanchez  
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## Saison Sèche, 2018

Performers: Marion Blondeau, Anna Gaiotti, Elise Legros,  
Phia Ménard, Marlène Rostaing, Marion Parpirolles,  
Jeanne Vallauri, Amandine Vandroth  
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## Saison Sèche, 2018

Performers: Marion Blondeau, Anna Gaiotti, Elise Legros, Phia Ménard, Marlène Rostaing,  
Marion Parpirolles, Jeanne Vallauri, Amandine Vandroth  
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# Maison Mère, 2017

Performer: Phia Ménard  
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# Maison Mère, 2017

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**LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)**  
***Trilogie Partie 3: La rencontre interdite, 2021***

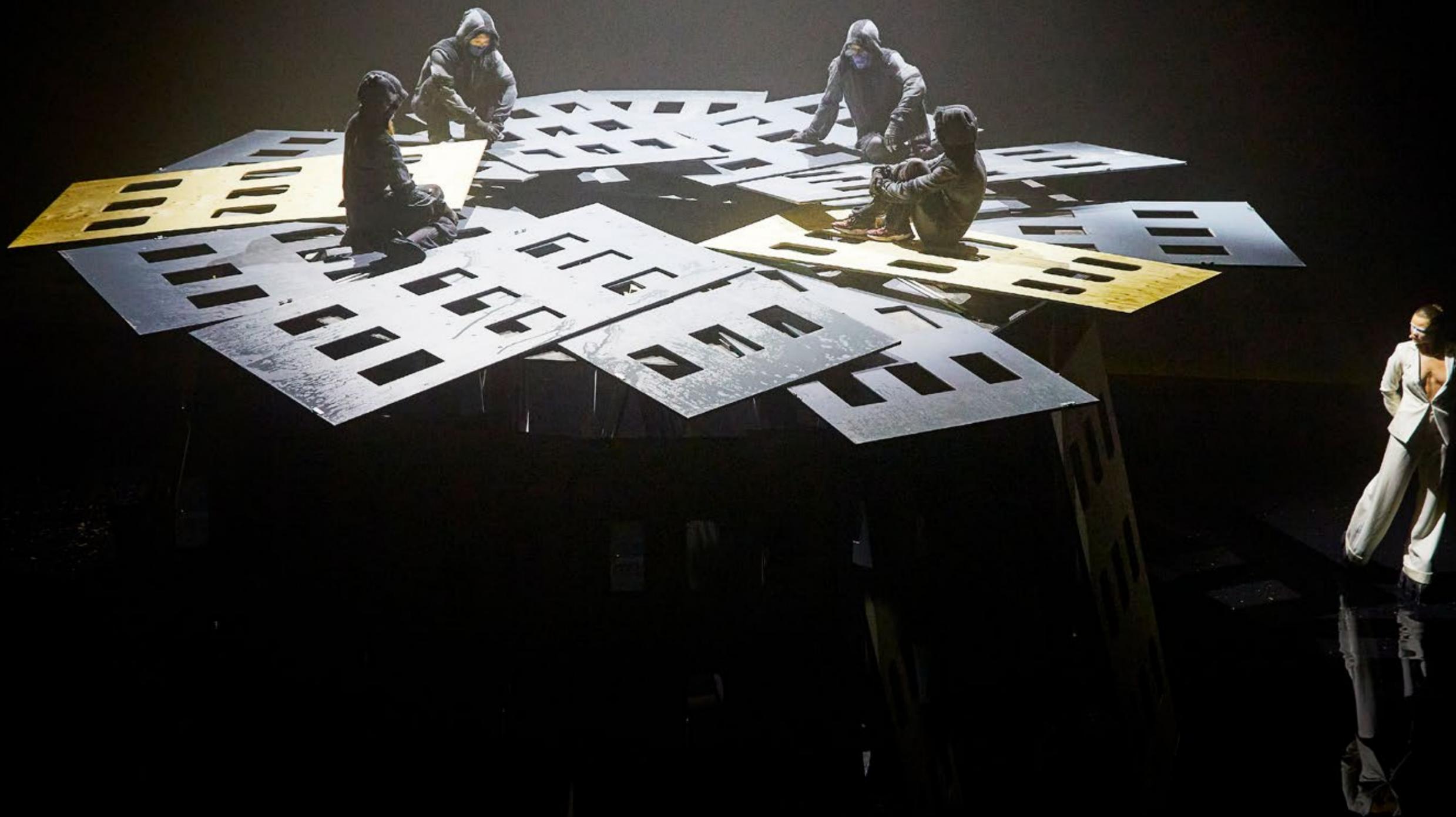
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# LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)

## Trilogie Partie 2: Temple Père, 2021

Perfomers: Fanny Alvarez, Rémy Balagué, Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, Élise Legros  
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# LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)

## *Trilogie Partie 2: Temple Père, 2021*

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**LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)**  
***Trilogie Partie 1: Maison Mère, 2021***

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# LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)

## *Trilogie Partie 2: Temple Père, 2021*

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**LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)**  
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***Trilogie Partie 1: Maison Mère, 2021***

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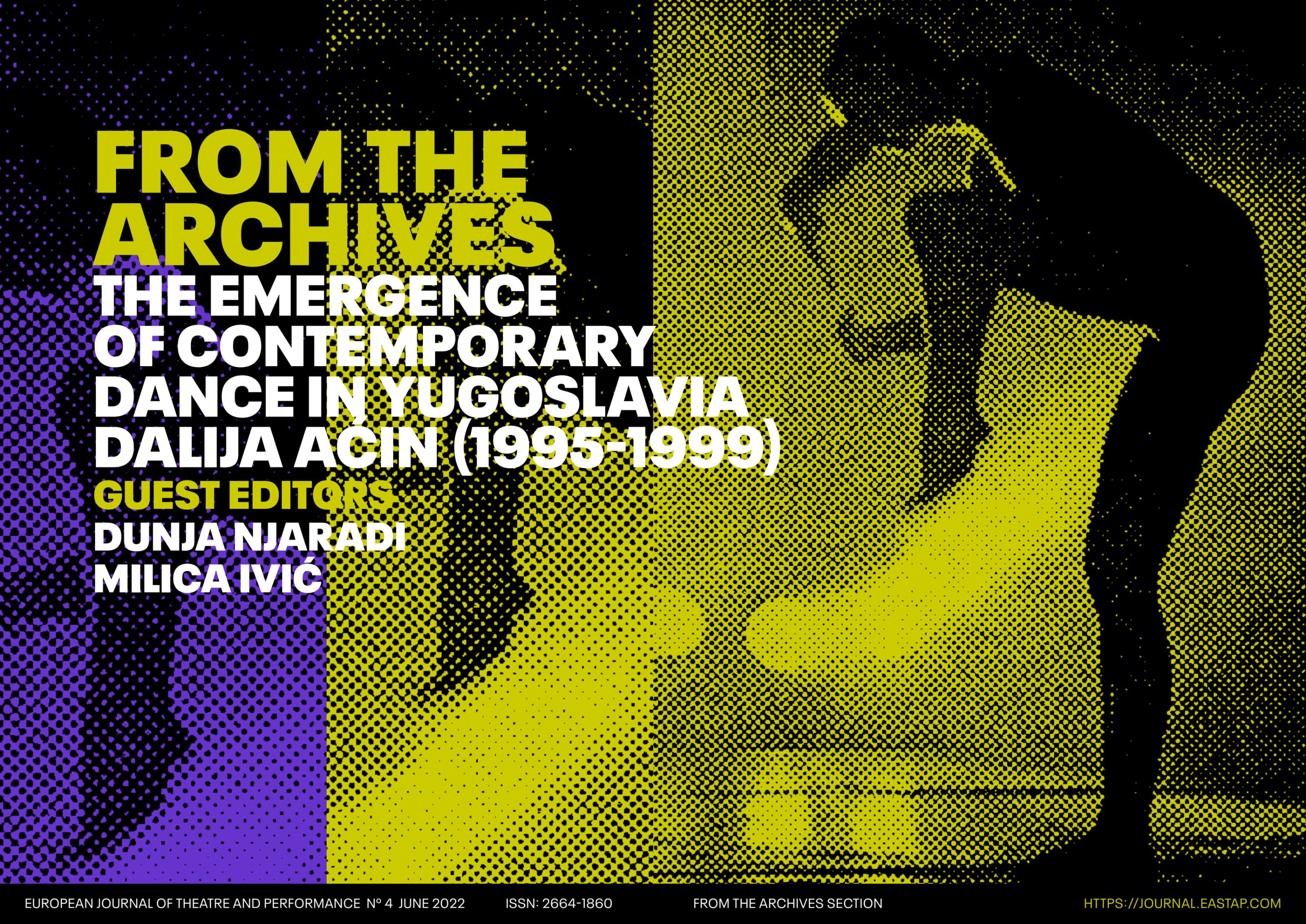


# LA TRILOGIE DES CONTES IMMORAUX (POUR EUROPE)

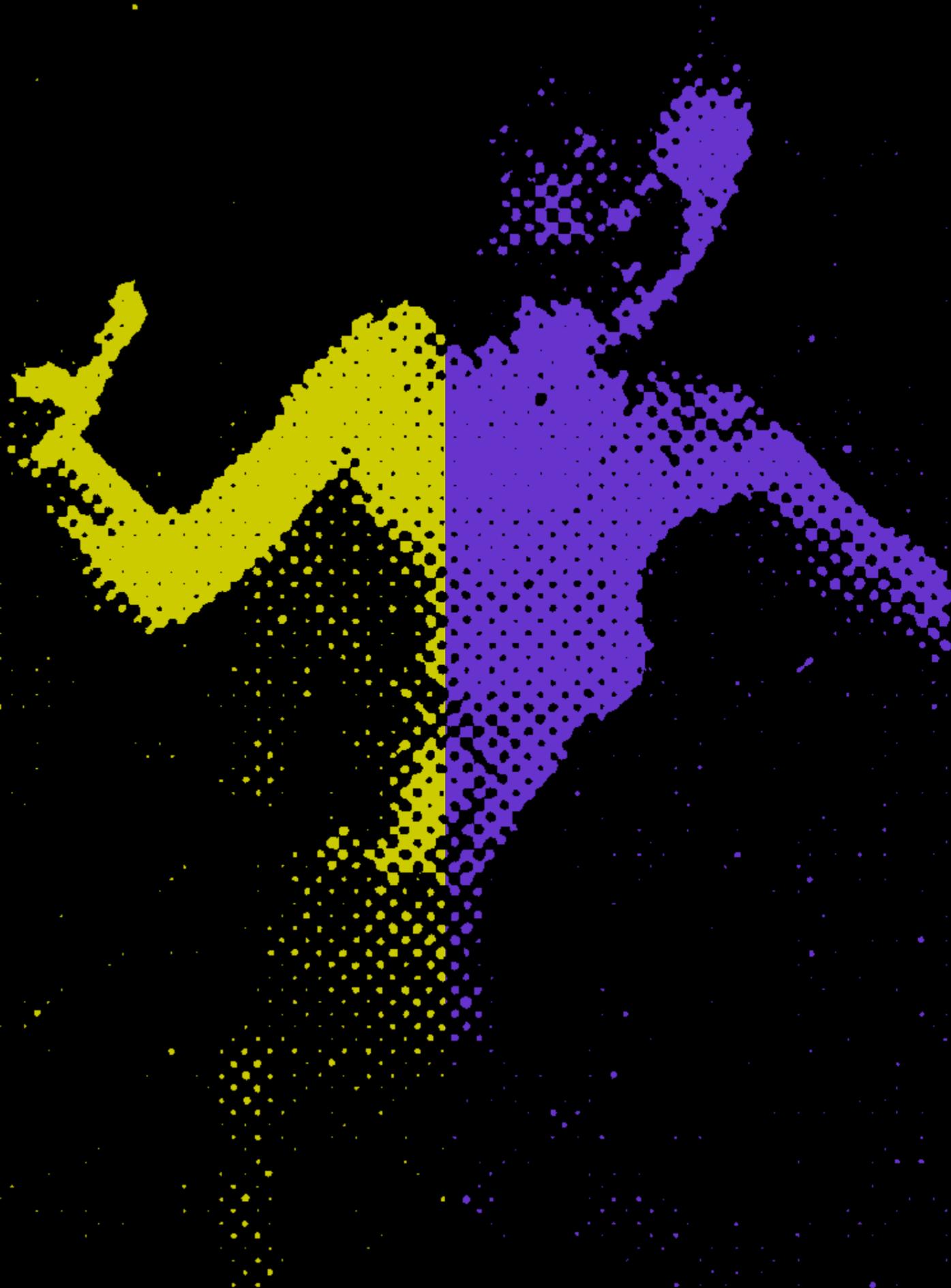
## *Trilogie Partie 2: Temple Père, 2021*

Perfomers: Fanny Alvarez, Rémy Balagué, Inga Huld Hákonardóttir, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, Élise Legros  
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**FROM THE  
ARCHIVES**  
**THE EMERGENCE  
OF CONTEMPORARY  
DANCE IN YUGOSLAVIA  
DALIJA ACIN (1995-1999)**  
**GUEST EDITORS  
DUNJA NJARADI  
MILICA IVIĆ**



# **INTRODUCTION**

## **ON OPENING THE ARCHIVES**

**DUNJA NJARADI**

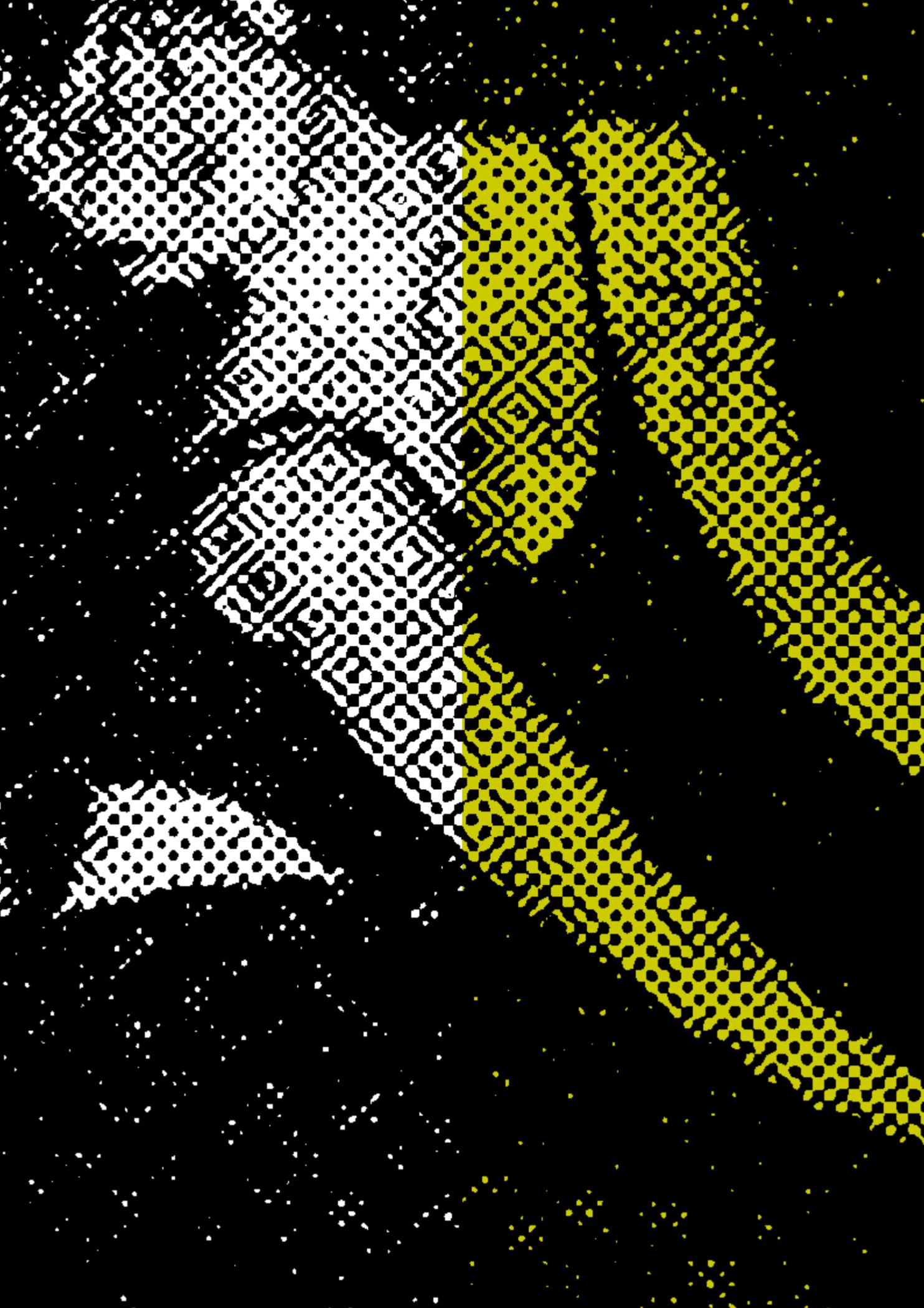
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‘What remains of the culture and the arts of a country that has disappeared from the maps?’, asks Marion Kant in her chapter ‘*Was bleibt? The Politics of East German Dance*’ (2012: 130). Kant raises this question as a dance scholar from former East Germany and, in a devastatingly honest account, she provides her own candid response: nothing. Pointing to the gap in the cultural and historical knowledge on the former socialist East Germany, Kant addresses the (lack of) controversies around certain dance legacies as well as the persistent loss of memory specifically relating to dance in East Germany. She recalls how, immediately after the reunification of Germany, the opening of the archives (that is, the so-called ‘Stasi files’) not only had a tremendous impact on the life and careers of the people who featured in them, but also on the ways in which certain narratives of history were legitimised while others were blatantly erased. In many ways, East Germany was simply obliterated, from memory yet most of all from historiography.

There are certain similarities that connect Kant's grief for her lost country and its legacies with this From the Archives section. Here too we want to open up the archives of a non-existing country, in this case: Yugoslavia. In addition, we similarly aim to raise questions on how specific periods of time tend to be narrated and remembered. Socialist Yugoslavia and its cultural legacies have been erased much like East Germany has lost its place both on the map of Europe and within collective memory. However, our aim is not to open up the archives of socialist Yugoslavia, even though those rich archives have potentially many stories to share. Instead, we intend to provide an entrance into the archives from the time when this country was still in the process of disappearing from the maps. To this end, we wanted to look at dance legacies from the early 1990s, a period marked by horrifying and violent social, political, and cultural circumstances brought about by the Yugoslav wars. The Yugoslav wars refer to the belligerent breakup of the Yugoslav federation (officially called the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), when its constituent republics declared independence due to the prolonged economic crisis fuelled by ethnic tensions. This period starts in 1991, with the outbreak of the war in Croatia from where it spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and runs to the 1999 war on Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Serbia.

It may seem that archives should not be only twenty years old. Indeed, one may rightfully ask whether there is not a lack of historical distance when looking at so-called 'archival' material from a period as early as the 1990s. Even when the distance in time seems short, our choice is informed by the apparent inability by the Serbian public (including its cultural sector) to understand and narrate this period in Serbia and beyond. This amnesia is also reflected in the scarcity of archival documents on theatre and dance of that time. Archives are silent and dancers do not (want to) remember. No one wants to hold on to those years. Consequently, the first question that came up when perusing the

material was where (in time) does the archive actually begin and how could we piece together the puzzle out of the limited material? We were inspired by Patricia Hoffbauer's claim that 'mining the archive to find history is less about recapturing the past than it is about generating future action' (2018: 256). There is a need, similar to the one that Kant identifies, to encapsulate Yugoslav cultural and social legacies both in Serbia and beyond and to address the loss of memory related to the 1990s. However, this is not the only reason for revisiting the archival documents that are available. In the midst of those horrible years that, in theatre life, showed peculiar continuities and some dramatic discontinuities, there was also a contemporary dance being born in Serbia. Socialist Yugoslavia had an impressive legacy of non-verbal (the term used more often in this region) or physical theatre (the term less used) and performance practices, but it was only in the 1990s that, out of these practices and also a bit out of nowhere, a new form of organising movement in space began to emerge through the work of a few individuals paving their way through the scene.

In this From the Archives section, we present a selection of the archival material on the pioneering female dancer Dalija Aćin (formerly Danilović), which is available at the Archive of the History of Belgrade. We chose to focus on Aćin because she offers a glimpse of the birth of contemporary dance in a country that, at that time, was falling apart. Even though today we can easily apply the term contemporary dance to the entire opus of Aćin, even to its beginnings in the 1990s, the archival material shows that back then there was no adequate name for this practice. The three segments of her work that we have singled out from the archives, all related to the years from 1995 to 1999, show three different institutional contexts responsible for the formation of contemporary dance as a separate discipline in Serbia. In all archival documents (programs, posters, newspaper articles), the work of Aćin is described in various terms, such as 'choreographic miniature', 'performance',

‘show’, ‘choreography’, ‘choreo-performance’, ‘research choreographic project’, ‘mono-ballet’, or ‘ambiental dance’. But there is no mention of ‘contemporary dance’. The existing archives do not speak that language. As the early work of Dalija Aćin resonates with the emergence of contemporary dance within Yugoslavia, it also discloses the (im)possibilities of that given moment to name the new dance forms that were piercing through the existing institutionalised fields of theatre and ballet. Based on the scarce archival material as well as our own memories from that time, the novelty of the dance language that Aćin was introducing to the scene came from its impressive dance technique and vigorous virtuosity. This approach was distinctive not only from ballet but also from the existing non-verbal (physical) theatre, which accentuated dramatic expression rather than technical abilities of its dancers. The available sources tell us about dances that are strong, provocative, and daring (Zajcev, ‘Igra Ohrabrenja’: n.p.), but also expressive and technically pure (Krešić 1996), while the dancers are said to be well educated and trained (Zajcev, ‘Plesni eho Šekspira’: n.p.). Reviewers identify and praise the vast technical skills and the space of innovation within those skills. It was also recognised that Aćin’s movement idiom was influenced by contemporary French and Dutch dance schools (Krešić 1996).

The three segments of Aćin’s work that we singled out are: a performance with ballet dancer and choreographer Katarina Slijepčević (*Kolo okolo Kaktusa* and *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*); two pieces performed at FKM — Festival of choreographic miniatures (*Monoview* and *North-West, Coast*); and a third independent choreographic work *Intimus*. The institutional contexts in which they were made possible include KPGT, Bitef theatre, FKM (organised since 1996 by The Serbian Association of ballet artists UBUS within the institution of the National Theatre in Belgrade), and BELEF (Belgrade Summer Festival). These works are particularly interesting because of the sociopolitical reality in which Aćin was developing her choreographic practice. Whereas the first

segment of work is characteristic of the reigning performance aesthetics in Yugoslavia immediately at the outbreak of the war, the third piece *Intimus* was created in collaboration with foreign producers and at a time when the connection to the outside world in a situation of cultural and economic isolation was formative for dancers. The second segment featuring *North-West, Coast* was rehearsed and performed during the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Despite the complicated political, historical, and institutional circumstances, the works in the emerging contemporary dance scene of Serbia surprisingly (or not?) did not refer directly to the surrounding world. They were enclosed in the dancers’ intimate world and would rather focus on poetry, general affects, abstract body language, striking music, etc. This becomes clear from the archival documents. The choreographic works by Katarina Slijepčević and Aćin, for instance, are based on T. S. Eliot’s poems and Shakespeare’s Sonnets. In a review from 1997, *Intimus* is described as a ‘a research attempt to present the inner space and movement within it through movement, where intimacy is independent and dependent on external influences’ (R. K. 1997: 15). *North-West, Coast* was presented at FKM in 1999 and described by Miloš Perić as ‘the play of the female duo. Two players with wet bodies, facing each other, each clinging to their wall, to their shore [...] The original stage solution is dominated by “heavy”, layered and eloquent body language, and the focus of the action seems to be in that vibrant space between two inseparable figures from its shores’ (1999: n.p.). The connecting tissue of all these different works is KPGT, the theatre where Aćin was employed (Stevanović 1997), and where a whole generation of dancers and choreographers gained an opportunity to work and practice in continuity for a few years (yet without any leads or possibilities to be hired anywhere else, even within KPGT).

KPGT theatre remains the biggest blind spot in the complicated cultural history of the country that was falling apart. The theatre was led by Ljubiša Ristić, a minister in the Government of Slobodan Milošević and the President of the political party JUL, led by Milošević's wife Mira Marković. As Milica Ivić and Igor Koruga make clear: 'Ristić has been and still is ostracized from public practices and discourse of the wider art community. However, KPGT allowed young Serbian contemporary dancers to work on their own, to work together and on an equal basis and to work on their own education, all of which later became the core values and working principles in the constitution of the independent dance scene in Belgrade' (2017: 62).

The value of the archival material included in this From the Archives section lies in the fact that it is an unwanted archive: it does not fully belong to the contemporary dance scene — not just because of its undesirable connections with KPGT, but because the scene was not yet formed; and it certainly does not belong to the interest of the official theatre or dance history. Dalija Aćin herself, after playing a crucial role in establishing the independent dance scene in Serbia, relocated to Stockholm in 2011. Since then, she is no longer connected to the development of the contemporary dance scene in Belgrade. The part of dance history we are presenting is not even included in her personal archive. By bringing it to light here, we are trying to find a way to shed light and reflect on dance as an indicator of abrupt social and political transformations generating loss of memory. •

*\*During the work on these archives, while we struggled to justify the focus on the period and work with scarce material the war in Ukraine broke. This affected us. And while new power rhetorics rest on seemingly old Cold War divisions, there is even greater need, we feel, for going through the archives of turbulent times.*

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# DALIJA AĆIN

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All photographs of Dalija Aćin have been reproduced by courtesy of photographer Srđan Mihić.

Article from *Politika Ekspres*, dated 3 November 1999. It reports on the results of the first and second prize of the *Festival of Choreographic Miniatures* (FMK). Dalija Aćin (shown on the right picture) won the second prize. There is no explanation or reflection on the actual performance.

### У БЕОГРАДУ ЗАВРШЕН 3. ФЕСТИВАЛ КОРЕОГРАФСКИХ МИНИЈАТУРА Глас и жирија и публике за Даницу Араповић

На сцени „Раша Плаовић“, у београдском Народном позоришту, одржан је III фестивал кореографских минијатура, на коме је тријумфовала Даница Араповић са нумером „У ишчекивању“.

Ова чланица Театра Т, као и Истер театра, окитила се и главном наградом жирија и наградом публике. Друга награда додељена је Далији Аћин за кореографију „Северозапад, обала“, а трећа Александру Илићу - за „Анализу срца“. Сви лауреати су из Београда, док је специјално признање припало Новосађанима, односно Оливери Ковачевић-Црњански и Милану Лазићу за минијатуру  
М. Ш.



Даница Араповић у својој победничкој минијатури „У ишчекивању“

СНИМИО: С. ЂОРЂЕВИЋ



Другопласирана Далија Аћин („Северозапад, обала“)

Dalija Aćin performing *North-West, Coast*  
at the Festival of Choreographic Miniatures,  
National Theatre, 1999.



Article from the newspaper *ДЕМОКРАТИЈА (Demokratija)*, dated 20 August 1997. On the left, it gives a brief overview of the *Intimus* project; on the right, it describes the *Intimus* performance programme for BELEF (Belgrade Summer Festival) with biographies of choreographer Dalija Danilović and musician Andrej Aćin, who composed the music for the performance. It was after marrying Andrej Aćin that Dalija took the surname Aćin. The article says about the performance:

'Intimus' is research attempt to use real movement in real space to show inner space and movement within it, in which intimacy (intimus) develops independently and dependently of outside influences. Choreography is, in a way, a display of moving intimus and the need for it to stay intact and to retain a measure of equilibrium. Music was created especially for 'Intimus' and is set as a part of inner movement but also as a frame of outer movement. 'Intimus' is a project in becoming and it will continue to develop in a direction of search and questioning the balance of all outer happenings and inner happenings in the individual.

Још један перформанс *ИНТИМУС* БЕЛЕФ-у

# „Интимус“ у настајању

Уз музику коју је специјално за овај пројекат написао Андреј Аћин и одличан костим Бориса Чакширана, БЕЛЕФ је у понедељак представио још једну своју премијеру: „Интимус“ – истраживачки кореографски пројекат Далије Даниловић, у извођењу саме ауторке.



„То је пројекат у настајању. Остаје ми да испитам нивое, различита стања и различите односе. Музика у овом пројекту није пратња, већ равноправна и једнака енергији покрета у простору. Свака интима је различита.

Пројекат „Интимус“ је Далијина трећа кореографија. На овогодишњем, првом Фестивалу кореографских минијатура извела је своју четвороминутну кореографију „Мопо-view“. „Нисам се засигурава класике, играћу и то изравно“, каже Далија, додајући да је тренутно ангажована у КПГТ.

**И. Стевановић**

Article from the newspaper *ПОЛИТИКА* (*Politika*), dated 13 August 1997. On the left is a brief mention of *Intimus*, which is described as 'ambient dance'.

НА БЕЛЕФ-у ДО НЕДЕЉЕ

## У Рексу и Барутани

Концерт групе „Амбросија”, премијера пројекта „Оверлепинг”, „Плави свод у срцу града”, амбијентални плес Аћина и Далије

Сарајевска група „Амбросија” са музичко-сценским хепенингом и позоришним пројекти „Оверлепинг” Ање Суша, Жанка Томића и Дарјана Михајловића, „Крокодилске сузе” групе „Арттерор”, „Плави свод у срцу града” Ере Миливојевића и „Интимус” Андреја Аћина и Далије Даниловић на програму су Београдског летњег фестивала до 18. августа.

Део ансамбла, насловљен „Амбросија зона”, данас ће у биоскопу „Рекс” извести мултимедијални перформанс, под називом „Граница”, а „Амбросија авангард бенд”, такође у „Рексу”, концерт.

Премијера позоришног пројекта „Оверлепинг”, која је на програму данас у 21 час у Барутани, настала је редитељско-глумачким промишљањем и уобличавањем новинарског чланка из „црне хронике” једних дневних новина, истакла је ко-аутор Ања Суша. У представи играју Александра Јанковић, Анастасија Радојковић, Наташа Марковић, Иван Томић, Данијел Сић, Срђан Тимаров и Владимир Маринковић. Пројекат „Крокодилске сузе” би-

ће приказан 16. августа у Барутани.

Прецизно представљен кроз мултимедијални приступ, како у технолошком тако и у уметничком смислу, овај пројекат представља и за аутора и за сам медиј, велики корак у односу на видео инсталације као уметничку форму, речено је на конференцији.

„Плави свод у срцу града” на програму је у недељу, 17. августа, у 21 час, такође у Барутани. Како је истакао аутор Миливојевић, цео пројекат је везан за сахрану, „као најсадржајнији перформанс у коме сви присутни потпуно или делимично саучествују”.

У Барутани ће 18. августа, такође премијерно, бити изведена представа „Интимус” у кореографији и извођењу Далије Даниловић, коју је музички обрадио Андреј Аћин. То је истраживачки покушај да се реалним кретањем у реалном простору представи унутрашњи простор и кретање унутар њега и у коме се интима дешава независно од спољњег утицаја.

(Танјуг)

PREMIJERA BELEF '97

## Poniranje u sopstvenu dušu

„Intimus” u koreografiji i izvođenju Dalije Danilović. Muzika Andrej Aćin. Kostim Boris Čakširan

Mlada, primerno školovana, igrачica i koreograf Dalija Danilović premiјerno je na BELEF-u '97. u kalemegdanskoј Barutani izvela svoj treći koreografski rad „Intimus” (prethodili su koreo-performans „Narandžasti” i plesna minijatura „Monoview”), u kojem je uspeła da igrom minimalističkih, usporenih, a veoma sugestivnih pokreta izrazi vidljivi odjek poniranja u sopstvenu dušu. Ono što se videlo na njenom gotovo okamenjenom licu i očima, a koje su gledale, ali ne i videle, bila je zapitanost, sumnja, nada da se možemo izdvojiti iz objektivnog prostora i vremena u sopstveni, duboko intimni svet, a pri tome ipak zadržati egzistencijalni kontakt sa onim što nas okružuje kao realnost.

U svakoj umetničkoј игри pokret tela se stilizuje, uslođjava ili uprošćava, potencira ili minimalizuje sa određenim koreografskim ciljem. U „Intimusu” Dalije Danilović kompozicija pokreta nije usmerena na spoljni efekat, te svoјom razvojnošću i sporošću iskazuje unutrašnje spokojstvo koje je rezultat svojevrstne meditacije. Igračica, na primer, dugo, po dijagonalu scene potпуно istim pokretima ide ka proscenјumu. To, začudo,



Tema dobro odabrana, igrачki dobro iskazana: Dalija Danilović  
Foto: Miloš Perić

nikako ne deluje monotono. Naprotiv, nabijeno je unutrašnjom emociјom koja raste. Čini se da se svakom kretњom, koja i ne mora uvek biti slikovni odraz unutrašnjih zbivanja, igrачica i koreograf sve više udaljavaju od okruženja objektivnog vremena i prostora. Baš onako kao kada koncentrisani na neki svoj intimni problem, gotovo nesvesno zastanemo u koračanju ulicom, sporo zakoračimo na trotuar ili u izlog ispred sebe gledamo, a ništa ne vidimo – duboko uronjeni

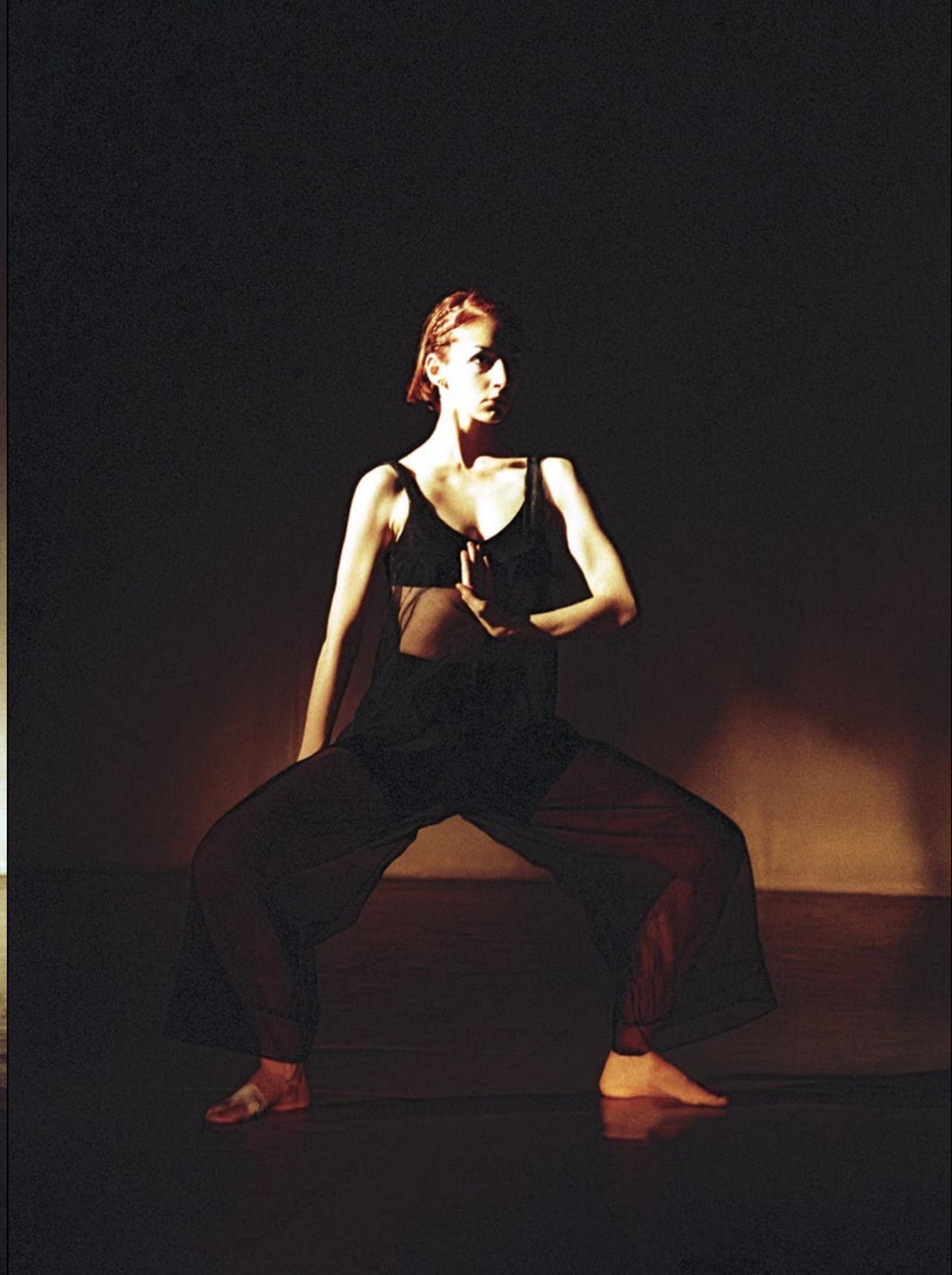
u sopstveno meditiranje.

Kontrapunkt tom intimnom razmišljanju Danilovićeve kroz igru, sudar sa objektivnim spolјnim svetom, odlično iskazuje agresivna muzička partitura Andreja Aćina, koja je komponovana – što nije uobičajeno kada je postavka „Intimusa” već bila oblikovana. Kostim, blago ružičaste boje, jednostavan i savremen, koji je kreirao Boris Čakširan, bio je izraz ženstvenosti i čulosti u ovoj petnaestominutnoj plesnoj minijaturi i jedna od ravnotežnih spona između spolјnjeg i unutrašnjeg bivstvovanja interpretatorke.

Vođen sigurno, teatarski osmišljeno u gradaciji svih elemenata, a posebno osvetljenja, ovaj koreo-projekat Dalije Danilović, u nastajanju, zaista traži svoj nastavak i proširenje. Jer, nije čest slučaj da se mono plesna predstava prati sa toliko interesovanja i da se po njenom završetku žali što nije duže trajala. Očigledno je tema dobro odabrana i igrачki dobro iskazana, jer traganje za ravnotežom između sopstvenog intimnog sveta i realnosti koja nas okružuje jeste, u to ne treba nikog posebno ubedivati, premisa egzistencije savremenika.

Milica Zajcev

Dalija Aćin, performance unknown.



БАЛЕТ  
Плесна  
авангарда

„Магбет-децембар“ и „Шекспир-сонети“,  
КПГТ, Стара шоћорана, Београд

*Ирена Крешић*

Наше нове младе играчке трупе „позоришта у оснивању“, пионери Плесног и кореографског центра при КПГТ-у у старој фабрици шећера, још нису стасали у ЈУ-авангардни театар плеса, мада нам својим премијерним изласком у оквиру „Шекспир-Феста 96“ за то пружају искрену наду. Две плесне трупе, Александре Јелић-Јојић и Катарине Стојков-Слјепчевић, заједно са директором КПГТ-а Љубишом Ристићем, више од шест месеци трагају за својим програмом и стилским одређењем „шећерног балета“ и његовог репертоара, као и сталног места на домаћој играчкој сцени.

дбина. У њему је играчко тело представљено без душе, бескринно, бестрасно, чак и ако је покренуто страсти-ма. Својим плесом и игром оно излази „из понора... мада рађање до којег долази није лако“ („Магбет-децембар“). А у снажним кореографским секвенцама „страх од неизвесности, унутрашње борбе, и кризи измучене душе... визуализују своје доживљаје из стварног живота („Шекспир-сонети“).

Изведени балети „Фабрик-арта“ КПГТ-а по својој форми су силет неповезаних играчких слика, приказања, без драматуршког реда и поретка, са плесом бруталних, агресивних и физички нестилизованних кретања: трчањем, скакањем, падањем, ваљањем, верањем, цедонапљивим осећањима, са електронском, минималистичком музиком „разбијајућег“ звука страних и домаћих аутора: Мирослав Миша Савић, Вук Куленовић, Варткес Баронијан („Шекспир-сонети“), са неподошљивим флуоросцентним светлом које се пали и гаси, са костимима из мемљивог фондуса...

„Магбет-децембар“ у кореографији

Балетске трупе КПГТ-а представиле су се са два пројекта: „Магбет-децембар“ (А. Јелић-Јојић) и „Шекспир-сонети“ (К. Стојков-Слјепчевић). Са жељом да се уздигну из сфере аматеризма у уметничку, професионалну савремену игру, следећи савремене играчке моделе француске и холандске играчке школе, далеко су кренуле од познатог задатка игре да забави и увесели публику, или евентуално побољша њен укус за класичан балет. Они пре припадају оним малобројним истраживачима и експериментаторима у откривању новог домаћег лека за сузбијање естетике „класичара“ и „непревазиђене лепоте сјајних и раскошних балета“ дворова 18. и 19. века.

„Фабрик-арт“, позориште прљавих подрума, напуштених магацина, празних фабрика, натуралисти ког и експресионистичког уметничког израза, какав је и нови балет КПГТ-а, не поседује „лепшаву лакоћу, поетичну лепоту и нежну романтичарску музику“. Он је суров, директан кореографски опис људских осећања и су-

Александре Јелић-Јојић деловало је естетски и стилски недовршено. Шест играча, међу којима се издвајају Чарни Ђерић и Весна Мирковић, могу пружити и више, по својим физичким и уметничким способностима (мада су сви аматери), од онога са чиме је наш модерни балет почињао у време Маге Магазиновић.

Кореограф Катарина Стојков-Слјепчевић у играчком вајању свог виђења Шекспира, са шест професионалних балерина, лутала је између бити или не бити кореодрама или само, што би било логичније, једноставни сонетни играчки приказ „којим је Шекспир отворио своје срце“. Јасног стилског одређења, физички неописивог, у грађењу модерног плеса, неопходно је да се креће у правцу борбе за квалитет његовог израза, као и технике саме игре (брзина, снага, флуидност тела).

Изражајна и технички чиста игра Исидоре Станишић и Далије Даниловић, била је поздрављена бурним аплаузом младе београдске публике, поклоником чисте и апстрактне игре.



ШОК ТЕРАПИЈА: „ШЕКСПИР-СОНЕТИ“

An article from the newspaper *NIN*, dated 27 September 1996. It deals with Dalija's engagement with KPGT, the theatre where she was employed, and her work with choreographer Katarina Slijepčević. It is a review written by Irena Krešić of two KPGT performances: *Šekspir Soneti* and *Magbet Decembar*. The review gives a better glimpse of the different and new style of movement that these two performances presented on stage and the shocking impact it had on the audience, who were left wondering whether this could be contemporary dance. The dancing bodies are described as brutal and aggressive, and movement as 'non-stylized' with lots of jumping and falling. The reviewer remarks that KPGT choreographers and dancers are rare experimenters 'in search for the cure for the classical ballet aesthetics'. In this review, dancers Isidora Stanišić and Dalija Danilović are singled out for their superb performance.



# BOOK REVIEWS

**EDITORS**

**VALENTINA TEMUSSI**

**MARIA JOÃO BRILHANTE**

**MILIJIA GLUHOVIĆ**

**ARMANDO ROTONDI**

**THÉÂTRON  
VERSO UNA MEDILOGIA  
DEL TEATRO E DELLA  
PERFORMANCE**

**THEÁTRON  
TOWARDS A MEDIOLGY OF  
THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE**

**VINCENZO DEL GAUDIO**

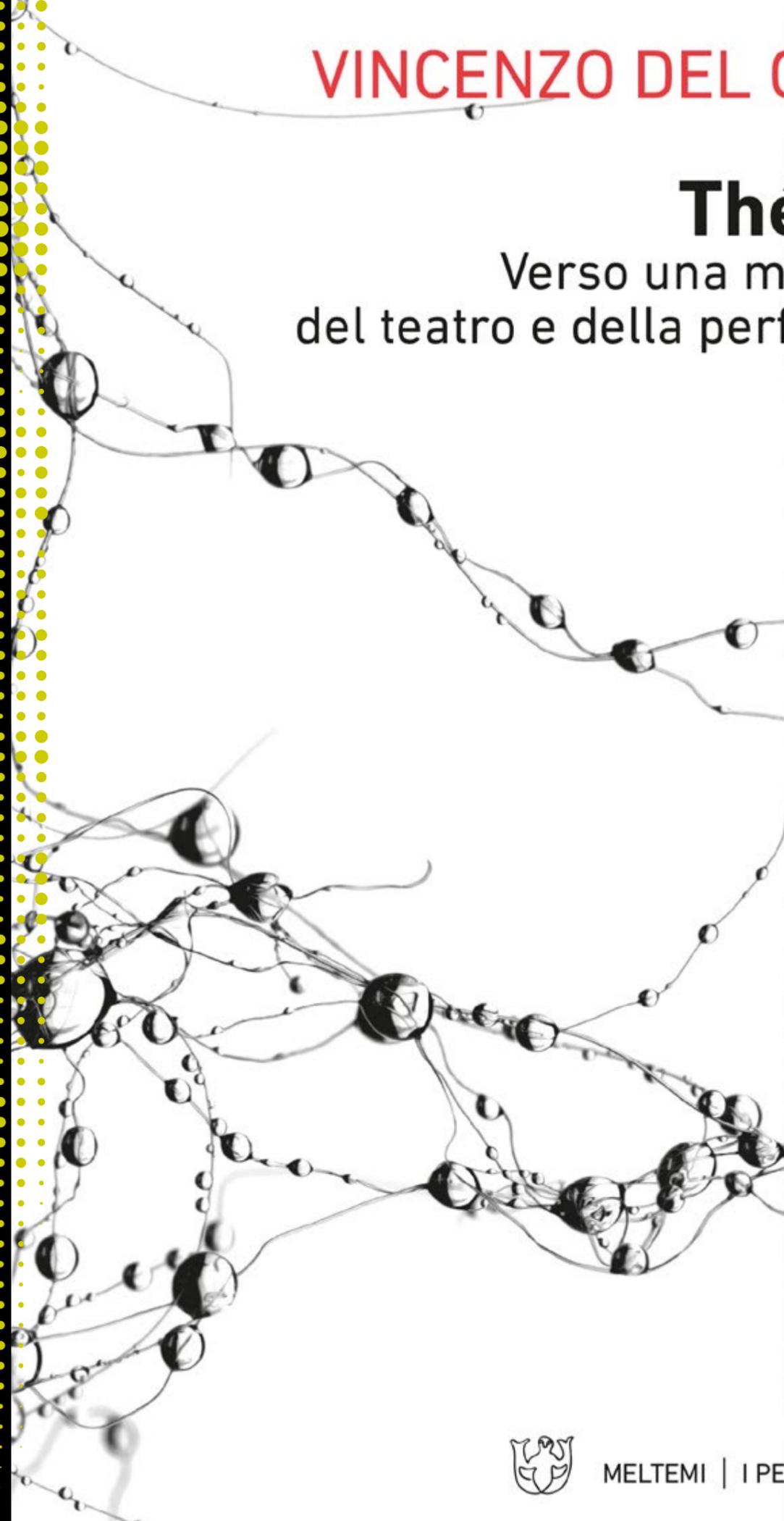
Rome: Meltemi, 2020, 2016 pp.  
ISBN: 9788855193252 (paperback)

**review by  
ARMANDO ROTONDI**

Institute of the Arts Barcelona, Spain

VINCENZO DEL GAUDIO

**Théatron**  
Verso una mediologia  
del teatro e della performance



MELTEMI | I PESCATORI DI PERLE

# Without

any doubt, within the wider context of performing arts studies in Italy, Vincenzo Del Gaudio can be ascribed to that group of scholars of reference in the field of theatre, new media, and digital. It is a group that also includes, but is not limited to, figures such as Antonio Pizzo, Fabrizio Deriu, Alfonso Amendola, Annamaria Monteverdi, and others. A sociologist by education, but with a clear interest and expertise in the field of performing arts, Del Gaudio has long been engaged in the investigation of theatre as a medium in relation to other media. This was already evident in the previous volume by Del Gaudio, edited together with the afore-mentioned Alfonso Amendola, *Teatro e immaginari digitali: Saggi di mediologia dello spettacolo multimediale (Theatre and Digital Imageries: Essays on Multimedia Performance Medi-ology, 2018)*. In this collective publication, the attention of the editors was focused on the semantic plexus that holds the theatre together with the new digital media, investigating the topic according to two parallel and complementary trajectories of research: a media-archaeological perspective and a sociological one.

In the following *Théatron: Verso una mediologia del teatro e della performance (Theátron: Towards a Mediology of Theatre and Performance, Meltemi 2020)*, authored solely by Del Gaudio, the author proceeds in a similar way, certainly considering the media-archaeological and sociological element, but broadening his analysis. He questions specific points that represent the different cores of the book. First, in the long and reasoned introduction, Del Gaudio looks — in a sort of crescendo — at the relationships between theatre and mediology, then at those between theatre, sociology, and mediology, and finally at the possible interaction between sociology and mediology of digital theatre. It is a precise investigation that builds step by step by addition of a necessary

literature review that — from Georg Simmel, György Lukács, and Walter Benjamin — arrives, through Schechner and others, to today, considering and overcoming some of the seminal studies on the relationship between theatre and mediology. This includes the works on the German *Medienphilosophie*, as variously proposed and investigated by Friedrich Kittler, Deiter Teichert or by Mike Sandbothe and Ludwig Nagl. The approach is multidisciplinary and it could not be otherwise: philosophy, mediology, sociology, and purely theatrical studies intersect and create a necessary dialectic. And it is in this context that the theoretical works by Alberto Abruzzese, for example, go parallelly with those by Raymond Williams.

In the next section, Chapter I, Del Gaudio carefully observes ‘theater as a medium’ phenomenon, tracing a path that takes into account the thoughts of Simmel, Ortega y Gasset, Benjamin and, of course, Marshall McLuhan. In this specific section, the work is highly theoretical and Del Gaudio does not yet consider specific case studies in theatre, but he successfully tries to give those tools in order to then understand those theatre productions that will be investigated in the following chapters. Thus, for example, he summarises three intuitions of Ortega y Gasset on the theatre: 1. as a space of continuous remediation; 2. on how the stage device produces images that are in continuity with other media forms; 3. finally, considering that the theatre has the logical structure of the metaphor as its operative basis.

From Chapter II, ‘Verso una mediologia del teatro (digitale)’, Del Gaudio’s analysis becomes more practically specific from the beginning, and it is aimed at case studies and examples that can now be read through the frameworks previously given. This is clear from the very *incipit* of the chapter, in which the author immediately dwells on Robert Lepage’s work, *Les aiguilles et l’opium (Needles and Opium)*, to introduce the discourse on intermedial dramaturgy and how dramaturgy is at the centre

of many debates on intermediality. From this point on, there are many artists and productions taken into consideration, both from Italy and internationally. Just to name a few artists and titles: *Underground: Roberta nel metrò* (*Underground: Roberta in the metro*, 2019) by Cuocolo-Bosetti company or, in the part dedicated to ‘Remediation’ and ‘Radical mediation’, to the works with androids by Hirata Oriza and the Seinendan Theater Company, or, later on in the book, the productions by Romeo Castellucci, Thomas Ostermeier, Nicola Vicidomini, The Blast Theory, and others. With the same great number of details, examples, and theory, Del Gaudio focuses, in the fourth chapter, on ‘liveness’, first of all outlining its forms, concept, and parameters. Similarly, there are here many case studies and, if only few criticisms may be made of the volume, on the issue of the spectatorial/audience experience the approach could have widened even more by taking into consideration elements of experiential marketing — I think, for example, to the realms of experience — which can tell us so much about theatre experience, albeit it is as an approach that comes from the world of economics. In the last chapter, media archeology returns, almost at the end of a discourse that, in a circular manner, Del Gaudio had already begun elsewhere.

Finally, *Théatron: Verso una mediologia del teatro e della performance* is an important, dense, and intense volume, with a very broad but clear theoretical framework — also accompanied by an excellent bibliography — and a reading of several theatrical cases. On this last point, it is possible to make a second small criticism in wishing for a more complete teatrography at the end of the book. In any case, it is certainly an essential work in the Italian debate on theatre and new media. ●

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*Teatro e immaginari digitali: Saggi di mediologia dello spettacolo multimediale* (Mediglia: Gechi)

# POPULAR MUSIC THEATRE UNDER SOCIALISM OPRETTAS AND MUSICALS IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES 1945 TO 1990

**WOLFGANG JANSEN (ed.)**

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Wolfgang Jansen (Ed.)

## Popular Music Theatre under Socialism

Operettas and Musicals  
in the Eastern European States  
1945 to 1990

POPULÄRE KULTUR UND MUSIK

30

WAXMANN

**In 2017,** nearly thirty years after The Cold War, leading theatre historian Dr. Wolfgang Jansen met with a number of colleagues to present at a symposium entitled 'Popular Music Theatre under Socialism: Operettas and Musicals in the Eastern European States 1945 to 1990'. Prior to the rise of communism, Eastern European states were known for producing some of the greatest music theatre of the modern age but little was known about the development of operettas and musicals that took place within the Eastern Bloc between 1945 and 1990. The symposium set out to address the lacuna in the research. Taking its name directly from the symposium, *Popular Music Theatre under Socialism* documents and collates the contributions, discussions, and findings from this event. Divided into autonomous sections, the volume highlights six European States under investigation: Soviet Union, Hungary, German Democratic Republic (GDR), Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Rumania (Romania). The fourteen prominent researchers who contributed to this body of work offer broad historical discussions juxtaposed with unique case studies of productions and works within their corresponding state.

The volume provides a captivating insight into a period of political appropriation where operettas and music theatre were very much created under the social and ideological conditions of the Eastern European Countries. During the period, 'Governments standardized and institutionalized all performing arts (vaudeville genres like puppet theatres, folk dancing, etc.) across Eastern Europe' (p. 23), recognising 'theatre

as a particularly important medium for positive social changes' (p. 19). Despite the thematic exploration of transnational ideology, each section highlights unique distinctions (aesthetic, compositional, etc.) of the respective state. Whilst references to Marxist-Leninist state doctrines were obvious across the majority of states, the research into the influence of the capitalist West and the development of musical theatre, particularly in the GDR, is fascinating. Despite the threat of 'dangerous cosmopolitanism and the pernicious American influence' (p. 210), composers and producers from Eastern European states began to reflect or even import productions from America and the Western Bloc. This progressive shift would lead to an estrangement from the Eastern European sound in favour of those from the West. Contributor and editor, Dr. Wolfgang Jansen, examines this development perfectly in his epilogue:

It became apparent that there was an enormous pent-up demand for American musicals. As early as the first half of 1990, *My Fair Lady* alone saw twenty new productions, not to mention revivals. [...] Comecon dissolved, the economic infrastructures, also in theatre life, collapsed, the formerly state-owned publishing houses were privatized, new contracts had to be concluded with the authors of the stage works all over, and the previously comparatively inexpensive works from Eastern Europe had to be paid for on terms similar to those of the Western titles. The international nature of the repertoire collapsed as well. The theatres sought to assimilate very quickly to the conditions in Western Germany. [...] Since then, new musicals from Eastern Europe have become an exception on the German stages. (p. 163)

*Popular Music Theatre under Socialism* represents a milestone in Eastern European studies of popular music theatre. It celebrates the research of an expert group of academics who share a passion for scholarly and professional engagement with Eastern European theatre history. Each contributor has managed to source reviews, musical excerpts, pic-

tures, and news articles that supplement and support the research perfectly. The research itself has been investigated through both academic and editorial sources which are provided in the footnotes of each section. What is particularly noteworthy and markedly the first of its kind is the 'Show Index' which collates hundreds of productions that took place during the forty-five-year socialist period.

Whilst there is no denying that the content and subject matter of this publication is dense and contains numerous typographical errors, there is little to criticise. This is an important publication, not only because it highlights a period of theatre history that has remained shrouded in obscurity, but also because it provides fascinating cultural context to a forty-five-year period that shaped and continues to influence modern history. The wider impact that this volume will have on European musicology and Eastern Europe's music theatre identity should be celebrated. ●

# THE METHUEN DRAMA HANDBOOK OF INTERCULTURALISM AND PERFORMANCE

DAPHNE P. LEI, CHARLOTTE McIVOR (eds.)

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020, 260 pp.

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## THE METHUEN DRAMA HANDBOOK OF INTERCULTURALISM AND PERFORMANCE

EDITED BY DAPHNE P. LEI & CHARLOTTE MCIVOR

## **The Methuen** *Drama Handbook of Interculturalism and*

*Performance*, co-edited by Daphne P. Lei and Charlotte McIvor foregrounds the necessity of engaging in the contemporary period with the productive and much contested intercultural practice and theory. Approaching interculturalism as an 'unstable and turbulent process' (p. 3), the anthology's key strength is its horizontal span with analytical engagement of a wide array of performance practices ranging from theatre (popular and otherwise), dance, performance art interventions, and puppetry, from diverging geographies, through the lens of interculturalism. Terming these practices as 'minoritarian' tendencies, the 'unseen/unheard/unspoken/unfelt territories' (p. 2), Lei argues that interculturalism could be understood through the ecological metaphor of 'movements of the ocean' and that it is a conscious attempt at 'modelling a new oceanic ecosystem' of interculturalism 'worked out over time from below' (p. 3).

The anthology is organised in four Parts, each part framed by the editors through a larger thematic concern. Part One with essays by Marcus Tan, Arnab Banerji, and Emily Sahakian offers a critical re-evaluation of 'Hegemonic Intercultural Theatre' while Part Two, consisting of essays by Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, Diana Looser, and Roaa Ali, in differing ways, attempts to move beyond the assumed centrality of West in defining intercultural encounters. Part Three with the essays of Jennifer Goodlander, Angeline Young, and Sansan Kwan problematises complexities of intercultural collaboration in the contemporary, centring subjective experiences in manifold ways, while Part Four, through the essays of

Ketu Katrak, Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, and Min Tian, brings into ambit the challenges and possible limits of the current theoretical discourse of interculturalism from different perspectives. Although there is a big corpus of academic scholarship on interculturalism, essays in the volume critically engage with the widely differing scholarship on interculturalism that has come out in the last two decades, especially the works by Ric Knowles (2010), Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014), Leo Cabranes Grant (2016), Royona Mitra (2015), and the editors' own previous individual works (Lei, 2011; McIvor 2016). Problematising identifications articulated on the basis of territorially bounded conceptions and staticity, the essays foreground processes of interculturalism that are always and already at work in the society. For instance, Diana Looser, drawing on Cabranes-Grant, highlights that 'hybridity is a source of the intercultural' (p. 79), and, in the case of the understudied indigenous Pacific cultures, that 'roots lead back to routes and forward into routes again' (p. 78).

While there have been arguments that the term intercultural needs to be replaced (Bharucha 1992; Fischer-Lichte 2014), the editors re-situate the potentialities of the term by offering a mapping of existing intercultural theory in three waves. The chapter 'Annotated Bibliography', written by McIvor and Justine Nakase, terms them as the first wave of 'Emergence and Backlash' in the 1970s to 1990s (preceded by 'Winds', the wide range of modernist experimentations), the second wave of 'Consolidation', and the third wave of 'Other Interculturalism' in the last decade. The editors need to be credited for their openness because even as they themselves place the present anthology in the third wave, it does also stir up 'the sediments of both old and new debates' (McIvor 2020: 255) rather than simply settling them. Further, even as the editors themselves argue in support of a third wave of intercultural theory that according to them has an affirmative political value, the anthology resists offering a singular perspective, with some essays even offering challenges and counter-points to the editors' definition of interculturalism.

Lei clarifies that ‘time is both forward-moving and repetitive, governed by regulative rhythms but also yielding surprises’ (p. 9), and McIvor in the ‘Conclusion’ self-critically notes the possible centrality of ‘Global north/Western academy’ in defining even this discourse of interculturalism. Yet, thinking from a site such as India, one wonders whether the overarching frame of ‘progressive’ waves of theory in fact impedes conceptualisation of interculturalism in differing spatio-temporalities in their historical valences. These essays indeed highlight the unresolved tensions of ascribing foundational moments as well as imagining a space outside of the West. Min Tian’s essay in the volume extends his earlier critique of interculturalism by critically analysing the theoretical armature of what is seen as the new (wave of) interculturalism, foregrounding how it is ‘haunted’ by the old. Critiquing the ‘utopian dimension’ in theorising new interculturalism, Tian considers these intercultural practices, at best, an inversion of Western hegemony without fundamentally transforming the ‘mechanism of intercultural displacement’ (p. 194). Marcus Tan takes forward his earlier work on sonic interculturalism by focussing on Peter Brook’s latest production *The Battlefield* (2015) to highlight the issue of displacement in the process of adaptation. While *The Battlefield* is a short seventy-minute performance based on the epic Mahabharata, Tan forcefully argues that it can only be seen in its relation to the earlier production *The Mahabharata* and is ‘a means of monumentalizing memory and search for reputational immortality’ by Peter Brook (p. 24). Tan isolates specificity of accents and rhythms in *The Battlefield*, stressing how a careful listening reveals the reified and contradictory status of the claims of universality made by the intercultural performance. Thereby, Tan challenges the post-identitarian claims as well as affirmatory perspective of ‘interweaving performance cultures’ arguing that it ‘does little to engage with the materialities of race (and culture) as received, perceived, and *heard* by spectators’ (p. 16). Tan’s analysis also raises the unresolved methodological problem of how to mark the (authentic) source in the case of an intercultural adaptation.

For instance, this manifests in his analysis of the special space accorded to Sanskrit language as the source to which the adaptation can be compared, highlighting how sound, meaning, and energy are intrinsically connected in Sanskrit. Yet this irrevocable linkage of Mahabharata to Sanskrit and claims of Sanskrit as being ‘divine’, “‘elevated”, spiritual’ (p. 20) overlooks the basis of such claims in hegemonic Brahminist discourse. Arnab Banerji, on the other hand, foregrounds appropriation of the West from the space of India by analysing the conceptualisation of Third Theatre (one that desired to fuse the rural and the urban) by the iconic Bengali playwright and director Badal Sircar. While Sircar is often treated as a prominent figure in history of political theatre in India, Banerji focuses on Sircar’s intercultural connections, especially associations with Richard Schechner, Judith Malina, and Julian Beck, arguing that the inspiration of Third Theatre is in fact similar to ‘Western quest for the pure or universal’ (p. 52) and that Sircar’s disconnect from the rural India made his intervention ineffectual. Sircar’s practices and ideas, especially plays such as *Spartacus* based on Howard Fast’s novel or writings on political theatre, have had a wide circulation as part of radical political practice and imagination in different parts of India, and the lens of interculturalism indeed is an important one to complicate and possibly de-iconise Sircar. Banerji does indicate a longer history of theatrical exchanges implicated in the vibrant practices of the Indian People’s Theatre Association. Yet, the history and complexity of the theatrical/performance exchanges based on internationalism of Left is unfortunately completely elided in the author’s analysis with the polemical and unsubstantiated statement that ‘IPTA brand of theatre was essentially a foreign import repackaged for consumption in India’ (p. 48). Emily Sahakian, brings in another perspective by focussing on Maryse Condé’s performative engagement in the play *An tan revolisyon (In the Time of Revolution: 1989)* with Ariane Mnouchkine’s *1789*, opening out the possibility of re-evaluation of both the women artists beyond what she calls the constructed binary

of 'postcolonial-intercultural' (p. 39). Sahakian brings into view interculturalism through the effect of 'creolization' that challenges the normative history and conceptualisation of both interculturalism as well as revolution. One could see a similar problematisation of interculturalism in its relation to other discourses in the essays of Roaa Ali and Lisa Jackson-Schebetta. Highlighting interlinked discourses of power, Ali posits the intercultural as an idea and practice that foregrounds contestations in opposition to the state-driven discourse of multiculturalism, while Jackson-Schebetta marks the potentiality of *interculturalidad* in opposition to the normative category of interculturalism espoused by the European Union, where *interculturalidad* is fuelled by 'restorative justice' (p. 210).

The book is an essential read for research on interculturalism as it maps the emergent scholarship as well under-explored practices and sites of interculturalism in the contemporary. The reader is able to not only engage with these distinct perspectives in their specificities but the book invites readers to place them as conversation with each other. •

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# PERFORMANCES DO TEMPO ESPIRALAR POÉTICAS DO CORPO-TELA

PERFORMANCES OF SPIRAL TIME  
POETICS OF THE BODY-SCREEN

**LEDA MARIA MARTINS**

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Performances

do

poéticas do corpo-tela

Leda Maria Martins



## **The poet**

and essayist Leda Maria Martins, Professor of art and literature at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, is a standard in thinking on performance, race, and colonialism in Brazil. In her doctoral research at the University of California, Berkeley, she came into contact with North American performance studies. She later met Diana Taylor and Richard Schechner, from New York University, with whom she established a fruitful dialogue that continues to this day.

Dedicating herself to the study of cultural performance in the field defined by these scholars, in her work she redimensions the dances, songs, and performative rituals of the Afro-Brazilian tradition in an approach that is not only theoretical but also living. Leda is an activist for the civil rights of black populations and was trained in an artistic environment of music, songs, dance, and oral narratives. She permeates her conceptual definitions with figures of speech that expand thinking on the various performative manifestations of Afro-descendant cultures, a special focus of *Performances do tempo espiralar*.

In the technique of the composition of the book, 'the hyperbolic turn of the word' and the 'paradigm of excess' (p. 101) explain the hybrid cultural mixture behind this original thinker of Afro-Brazilian culture. In addition to bringing the metaphorical resonance of the concepts presented, these ideas on occasions open out to certain linguistic twists which may divert the reader from the subject addressed. And here the spiral of time that is the theme of the work also appears.

The core idea of the study is that temporality and experience are not expressed only in the discursive dimension but also in the living body in which immemorial knowledge is imprinted and is made explicit in gesture, movement, choreography, skin surface, and vocality.

In line with the arguments of Diana Taylor (2003) and Rebecca Schneider (2011), Leda Martins observes that the network of knowledge passed on in the script of the body and the orality of the African subject contrasts with the writing of the coloniser, which works as a power strategy aimed at excluding and dominating colonised peoples. The legitimation of the domain of writing was the fundamental instrument of Eurocentric thinking to disqualify the epistemic and mnemonic systems that favoured performance as a way of fixing and expanding epistemological, historical, and sensorial repertoires.

Leda Martins develops and diversifies the theme in seven chapters/compositions complemented by a final synthesis, in which, aided by original concepts, she analyses black cultural performances. Operating notions such as crossroads, *oralitura* (*oraliture*), body-screen and, especially, spiral time, deepen the mapping of Afro-descendant cultural practices, which are considered embodied worldviews and reserves of memory.

One of the key concepts is that of spiralling time, which is associated with the memorial corporeality experienced in movements that challenge the temporal linearity which is characteristic of Eurocentric thinking. Allowing for reversibility, dilation, discontinuity, and the simultaneous presence of past, present, and future, this curved temporality is analysed by African philosophies such as the Congolese Bunseki Fu-Kiau, rarely cited by Western theorists. Also present in myths and poetry, this concept is materialised in forward and backward procedures which embody a dynamic circuit of memory, made possible by the transit between multiple temporalities.

Always referring to the perception of the African world, Leda Martins states that spiralling time is the privileged space of the ancestors. According to this conception, they do not die but rather survive in a transcendent dimension and take part in the broad family lineage that brings together the African and their descendants in communities of belonging and mutual help. The ancestors return in the performances of Candomblé centres, called 'terreiros', and in the various festivities and songs that function as ways of making African memory present in Brazilian territory. Some funeral rites such as the *Descorção dos Reinados* (*Decoronation of the Reigns*), for example, are fundamental stages in the transformation of the predecessor into an ancestor and preferred ways of transferring vital energy to the collectivity. Thus, in the spiral of memory, in the beating of the drums, and the rhythm of the feet firmly planted on the earth, 'the divinities, the ancestors and the driving forces gravitate' (p. 91).

In this line of argument, Martins emphasises that Afro-descendant cultural modes challenge Western memory devices, such as books, writings, and musical scores. She recalls that they favour other forms of mnemonic preservation, which are completed in voice and corporeality. In order to describe them, she elaborates the concept of *oralitura* (*oraliture*), which encompasses a complex texture of oral and bodily performances able to project cosmic visions. Knowledge is transmitted and recreated in memory environments made up of mnemonic reserves that magnetise the body with sounds, vocals, gestures, and scripts which can transform it into a screen-body, which can transmit repertoires and bring together memories. Ritual performances such as Congado, Umbanda, Candomblé, and Capoeira are thus privileged places of memorial transmission, projecting true performative syntheses that make ancestral knowledge present.

This is the case of *Reinados* (*Reigns*), situated at the crossroads between Catholic religiosity and African theology, whose symbolic, liturgical,

and myth-poetic structure is intended to restore a cosmogonic plot in which African philosophical principles are reprocessed and inscribed in Brazilian ethnic and cultural formation. In one of the most interesting passages in the book, Martins recovers one of these narratives of origin, the rescue of the image of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, patron saint of the black race, from the waters of the sea. After several attempts by white masters to save the saint, it was the enslaved Blacks who managed to rescue her. The subversion of the social order that the narrative disseminates by reversing the position of power between whites and Blacks is evident, and this is undoubtedly a form of social and cultural resistance that foreshadows the revolts of the slaves and the formation of *quilombos*, settlements of runaway slaves, as from the seventeenth century in Brazil.

In her penultimate composition, Leda Martins addresses the dramaturgical and scenic practices of current Brazilian theatre produced by black collectives, playwrights, performers, and theatre directors, who stage various aspects of the historical experience of the Afro-descendant population. In fact, black theatre experiments have advanced in the contemporary Brazilian scene, especially in the last decade, and with them the high political voltage fuelled by the strong black movement for civil rights and against structural racism. Perhaps the wealth and breadth of the creations justify the impression that the author does not deepen the analysis, restricting herself to a panorama. And the limitations of this chapter make it difficult to delve deeper into complex theatrical performances such as those created by the theater company *Teatro dos Narradores* (*Narrators' Theatre*) or by playwright Grace Passô, just to give two examples. In any case, this book is a synthetic and necessary mapping of the diversity of manifestations of black collectives, which are undoubtedly beacons of Afro-Brazilian culture today. •

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**CRUOR**

**JEAN-LUC NANCY**

Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2021, 126 pp.  
ISBN: 9 782718 610207 (paperback)

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**Cruor**



Galilée

## En *Cruor*,

Nancy vuelve al cuerpo, desde su crudeza, y al sentido corporal de nuestra existencia 'en-común'. En esta publicación póstuma (Nancy finaliza el texto días antes de su deceso) se despliega el pensamiento nancyiniano con alusiones a conceptos y obras anteriores. Esta publicación incluye 'Nostalgie du père', conferencia en el coloquio/webinar *Massenpsychologie* (2021) donde se desarrollan ideas expuestas en páginas previas.

*Cruor* parte del replanteamiento del sentido de cuerpo en *Corpus* (1992) donde el cuerpo en tanto que extensión se describe como 'ex-peausition', una exposición como espaciamento 'entre-les-corps' (p. 11). Esta vez, Nancy toma el vocablo 'cruor' del latín: mientras *sanguis* hace referencia a la sangre que circula, *cruor* refiere a la sangre que se derrama fuera y se coagula. Así mismo, Nancy retoma la pregunta sobre el 'cru' de Derrida en *Circonfession* (1991), un sentido de 'crudo' que presupone de algún modo la supresión de toda mediación, cierta forma o fuerza de rechazo a un 'entre'. Además, la sonoridad de 'cru' permite percibir cierta herida que toca lo más íntimo, lo más vivo, así como lo más muerto, como en la fluidez de la sangre, se da vida y muerte. 'Cruor' enfatiza, de este modo, lo crudo, la crudeza y la crueldad, el dentro-fuera desde un 'corps-à-corps', la relación en y desde la crudeza, la violencia, la corporalidad existencial expuesta, la vida y la muerte, 'la vie la mort' en alusión al seminario de Derrida donde se toma la muerte como posibilidad de vida y no como oposición a ésta (pp. 12, 95).

A través de la circulación sanguínea, de un latido cada vez nuevo, de un volver sobre sí que siempre es un 'todavía no ha tenido lugar', un dentro/fuera, una in/ex-piración con la que se da la circulación misma, Nancy ilustra nuestra existencia corporal como el devenir constante de un sinfín de interrelaciones, la vida junto la muerte, la pausa y la repetición, la intermitencia. Un cuerpo descrito desde el ritmo, los latidos y las pulsaciones, desde la repetición como un siempre nuevo, un empezar de nuevo a cada instante, pues 'la repetición hace un cuerpo' (p. 55). El cuerpo y nuestra existencia corporal como una insistencia en su expansión, un cuerpo que se forma, se repite, insiste, persiste, persevera. Y el cuerpo como unidad plural, singular pluralidad, en perpetuo cambio, transformación, transición, mutación.

La forma-cuerpo es la expansión, la exposición, dice Nancy, la piel que ofrece, se da, se abre y permite la permeabilidad de un afuera. Cuerpos respectivos y recíprocos. De este modo, plantea el concepto de una *matrix*, la posibilidad de transformación, el origen sin principio ni causa, expansión que siempre parece haber empezado, dado lugar. Expansión y exposición, afectación y permeabilidad, cuerpos que se dan, devienen y configuran en dinámica relación, en incesante redefinición.

Con influencias psicoanalíticas y referencias a las pulsiones freudianas, analiza el *Soi*, el *Toi*, el *Moi*, el *Soi* con relación a un *Ça* que siendo origen nunca tuvo origen, y al *Soi* con relación al *Soi/Même*. Y en esta reflexividad relacional, plantea el sentido de 'ex-citare' como un salir a comparecer, como la fuerza de abertura misma de un cuerpo, liberado de un afuera y expuesto a rencuentros.

La palabra y el lenguaje toma importancia en esta interrelación corpórea. Nancy nos habla del mito como palabra pronunciada, como pulsiones, palabras 'pulsivas', latentes, que se conjugan para componer nuestras relaciones, configurando un *cosmos* de valores, *cosmos* como disposición

receptiva de valores en-común. La sangre es el primer material de la ficción, y ‘la palabra es la sangre que circula entre los cuerpos, que toca e impulsa el ritmo, los latidos del otro’ (p. 62). El lenguaje a través de la poesía abre la posibilidad de sentido que no a la significación, pues el sentido viene dado como otro, como alteración en sí mismo.

También describe el sacrificio cuando la sangre se derrama fuera y *sanguis* deviene *cruor*, otra substancia. El sacrificio parte de la posibilidad de tomar a otro como yo-mismo o parte de mí. En el sacrificio se toma la sangre (vida y sentido) del otro como la propia, sintiendo así el palpito de la sangre original. El sacrificio como primera forma de comparación en comunidad.

Con la misma raíz que ‘cru’ y ‘cruor’, la crudeza y la crueldad son aquí relevantes. Se alude al amor cristiano que surge como reacción a un reino de violencia, pues la agresividad también es constitutiva al ser humano. Y frente a la crudeza, *ágape* como posibilidad de acogida, de coexistencia, espacio de ‘composibilidades’, y la *phillia* subyacente a la política griega como conjunción de *eros* y *cosmos*.

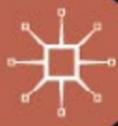
En *Cruor*, se vuelve a la idea del en-común, como aquello que configura nuestra existencia, que nos con-figura. Un ‘en-común’ que no señala el *zoon politikon* aristotélico, sino algo más esencial, nuestra existencia abocada al mundo, al otro, a la otredad; dada por, en y desde el otro. Nos plantea la configuración de un mundo, un *cosmos*, en-común. Un en-común que no refiere tampoco a lo que nos es común, como algo que podamos definir, sino a la relación que nos constituye, a la relación con el otro que nos con-figura y que con-figuramos a cada instante, a la relación como condición ontológica.

Un en-común corpóreo y lingüístico, de cuerpo y *logos*, *mythos* y *logos*, reencuentros donde emerge la posibilidad de sentido desde lo incierto

y lo improbable, y que a la vez evidencia nuestra insignificancia desde su crudeza, desde la crueldad, así como desde el *ágape*, *eros* y *thanatos*, y que enfatiza y visibiliza nuestra vulnerabilidad ontológica.

La vulnerabilidad subyace en todo el texto y filosofía nancyniana, y en el sentido de *cruauté*. La crudeza presupone un estado de abertura, la relación, la afectación y el en-común, y nos permite pensar nuestra condición existencial desde una corporalidad que en esta ocasión va más allá de la extensión como *ex-peuasition* y que considera la violencia, la destrucción, la muerte, y, en definitiva, la relación constitutiva y nuestra vulnerabilidad.

Nancy deja tras *Cruor* y su deceso, su pensamiento que lejos de agotarse sigue estimulando, cuestionando y replanteando el sentido de nuestra existencia colectiva desde lo en-común, desde nuestra corporalidad y vulnerabilidad ontológica; fuerza a una mirada crítica y política, a una reflexividad que escapa de categorizaciones, y que desde su planteamiento ontológico apunta a ámbitos políticos, éticos y estéticos. Pensar el cuerpo y la escena desde Nancy, es en sí mismo un ejercicio *político*. ●



# **CHOREOGRAPHING AGONISM**

## **POLITICS, STRATEGIES AND PERFORMANCES OF THE LEFT**

**GORAN PETROVIĆ-LOTINA**

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ISBN: 978-3-030-79445-3 (hardback)

**review by**  
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# Choreographing Agonism

Politics, Strategies and  
Performances of the Left

Goran Petrović-Lotina

palgrave  
macmillan

## There's

a utopic ideal permeating Petrović-Lotina's *Choreographing Agonism* that is also belied by a fundamental pragmatism. Central to the volume is a belief that performance practices hold the power to challenge dominant, hegemonic politics and aid audience members — and therefore the public — in 'contest[ing] existing politics and contribute to the constitution of much more democratic forms of living together' (p. 2). Contrasting this idealism, however, is Petrović-Lotina's dissatisfaction with the (in)ability of performance studies as a theoretical field to have provided (so far) what he deems a satisfactory theoretical horizon for the intersection between politics and performance. This dissatisfaction then extends to the (in)ability for activist strategies of withdrawal (by which he means protest actions that stand in direct opposition to — and therefore outside of and not actively engaging with — institutions of power) to successfully implement and affect political change. Instead, Petrović-Lotina looks to contemporary performance art for ways of engaging proactively with institutions in order to successfully affect transformation.

Published by Palgrave Macmillan, *Choreographing Agonism* builds upon politico-philosophical debates around performance and activism, utilising the critical frameworks of agonism, post-Marxist discourse theory, conflict, and hegemony. Over nine chapters, Petrović-Lotina interweaves theories from a wide variety of philosophical and political scholars in a way that centres different forms of tension within a political and performative framework. His exploration of Chantal Mouffe

and Ernesto LaClau's understanding of agonism, for example, includes an advocacy for such discursive strategies to prevail over pre-existing strategies of antagonism in forms of protest. Similarly, he applies Jacques Rancière's understanding of the mutual dependency of art and politics to Antonio Gramsci's use of the term 'praxis' to mean a political struggle against capitalism through strategies of engagement to highlight how we can — and should — turn to performance to find new strategies of political encounter. To do this, he focuses on contemporary performance art in Western Europe, drawing a line between dance-like choreographic practices and what he sees as organisational choreography within the structure of protest movements.

In this sense, Petrović-Lotina's main argument is inspired by, and in constant conversation with, activist tactics and strategies of contesting institutions that enforce neoliberal hegemony. The outcome of this is an attempt to, as phrased by the author, (re)articulate new ways of living together — although who is living together or involved in such rearticulation (and therefore, who is excluded from such political process) is unclear. His overview of what he calls horizontally choreographed activist movements — activist groups that function without an overarching hierarchy, such as the global Occupy protest movement of 2011 — allows the reader to understand them as critical responses to what Petrović-Lotina sees as a recent crisis in representational democracy. However, he sees such activist strategies manifest as moments of withdrawal; when protestors oppose dominant institutions, they refuse to meaningfully engage with them, hence 'withdrawing' from a possible dialogue. He therefore critiques the efficacy of such movements, positing that protests such as the 2011 global Occupy movement or the 2016 French employment-law focussed movement *Nuit debout*, actually enabled a strengthening of global neoliberal policies. In effect, if one withdraws from a dialogue with certain institutions (with an intention to affect change) such institutions will continue their work unabated.

Throughout the first four chapters, Petrović-Lotina argues that it is through engagement, rather than through strategies of avoidance and rupture, that activism — and performance — can affect change, allowing ‘the protestors to confront, deconstruct and rearticulate a dominant political order from within and articulate it in an alternative way’ (p. 36).

With such a fertile ground for exploration within political theatre practice, however, Petrović-Lotina’s focus on how such strategies interact with performance practice is limited to a small number of examples of performance art chiefly shared across the repertoire of France-based Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides, Brussels-based Norwegian choreographer Mette Edvardsen, and the Berlin theatre company Rimini-Protokoll. Most of this discussion focuses on the work of choreographer Mette Edvardsen, including beautifully written descriptions of the performances that make up the artist’s trilogy of works *Black* (2011), *No Title* (2014), and *We to Be* (2015). Through detailing how Edvardsen develops a methodology over the course of these works that is focussed on compelling the audience to collectively (re)imagine presence through absence (and sometimes, as in the case of *We To Be* – in which Edvardsen reads a performance into being onto a blank stage from within the audience – collectively imagine whole productions), Petrović-Lotina develops an understanding of how the tension between presence and absence, and the dramatisation of symbolic actions, can affect the audience to (literally or imaginatively) see things differently.

Whilst Petrović-Lotina argues that all art contains a political dimension, it is unclear how these non-explicitly political examples can effectively and measurably aid in the ‘quest for the construction of an alternative order of politics’ (p. 150). The main question whilst reading Petrović-Lotina’s argument then becomes one of access and exclusion. Who, for instance, is accessing these works? What audience demographics are able to engage in the alternative thinking with Mette Edvardsen,

and what financial, access-driven, or class-based restrictions are in place that limit such inclusion? Additionally, what ‘tools’ do audiences already need in order to be able to fully (and critically) engage with such pieces in a meaningful way? If, as Petrović-Lotina argues, such work enables audiences to imagine alternative realities and, effectively, reconstruct politics, who is able to take part in, and who is excluded from, such reconstruction? The author advocates for actual, major strategic change in regard to how politically minded performance makers and activists engage with institutions of power. However, the mainly theoretical focus coupled with largely ‘high-brow’ examples that mostly exclude an overtly political stance limits both the application of this framework onto actual performance practice as well as the demographics included in an intended political restructuring.

However, in the final section of Chapter 9, Petrović-Lotina offers a tantalising glimpse towards how his argument can be used to understand more explicitly participatory and accessible political performance work when he applies the totality of his theoretical framework to German company Rimini Protokoll’s *100% City/Brussels* (2014). As Petrović-Lotina describes, through engaging with one hundred ‘real, ordinary people’ from Brussels as cast/participants within the creation and performance of the work, Rimini Protokoll illustrate the ‘eternal tension between the multitude of human associations’ (p. 159) by including one hundred people ‘on stage split into different groups in order to simulate different associations based on age, nationality, or neighbourhood’ (p. 159). This choreographic grouping extends to opinions offered by the participants about subjects as various as the EU to gay rights — with participants/performers reorganising their position onstage to reflect their opinion on the subject at hand. Importantly, Petrović-Lotina offers a particular insight in regards to how such a performance can illustrate alternative political outcomes, stating that when ‘those who decided not to vote [...] were asked to leave the stage, they were left to observe how the rest

[...] made decisions about issues that might have been of concern to them, too' (p. 159); a tangible and blunt example of how such performance practice can enable and encourage audiences (and participants in this case) to imagine alternative political engagement.

*Choreographing Agonism* is a unique and timely addition to the intersecting fields of politico-philosophical thought and performance studies, offering new interdisciplinary connections between structures of thought underscored by a passionate political impulse. However, the question, at the end of this volume, remains; how can we move beyond a limited — and admittedly cerebral — audience's *imagined* political alternatives and into actual, tangible, accessible, and inclusive change? •

# BRECHT AND TRAGEDY RADICALISM, TRADITIONALISM, ERISTICS

**MARTIN REVERMANN**

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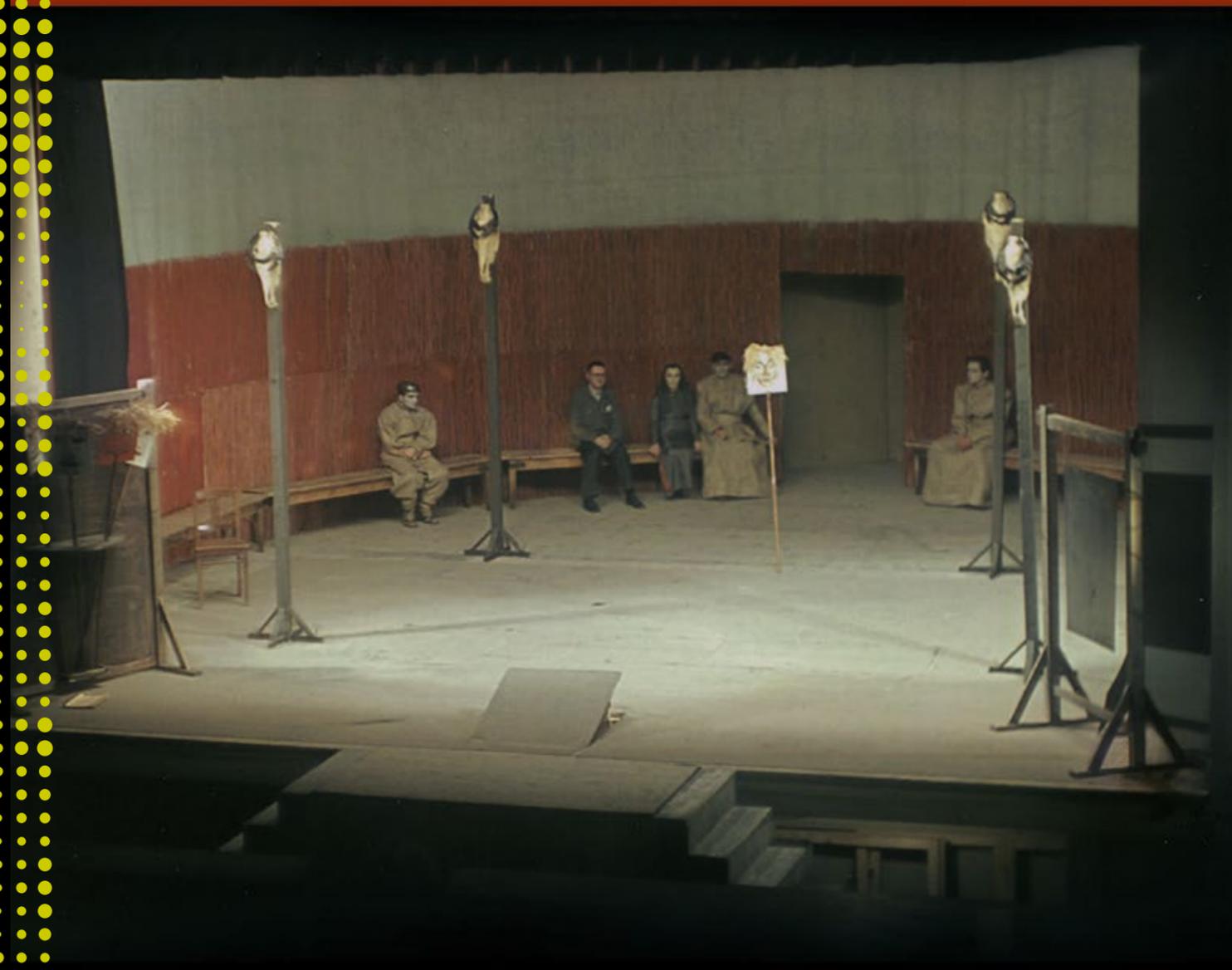
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Martin Revermann

## Brecht and Tragedy

Radicalism, Traditionalism, Eristics

## Martin

Revermann's new book *Brecht and Tragedy: Radicalism, Traditionalism, Eristics* revisits Bertolt Brecht's adaptations and negotiations of the Greek tragic idiom, arguing that the innovations, including some of the bard's most famous strategies such as the notion of *Verfremdung* — making the familiar strange — do not so much come from the avant-garde to which he very much belonged, but from deep dramatic tradition. Revermann is the scholar of Classics whose writings on Greek tragedians and Aristophanes have made the world of Ancient Greek theatre come alive. In his study of Brecht's utilisation of tragedy, Revermann again brings a fresh perspective, this time to the reading of Brecht, successfully navigating the intersections of theatre and performance studies with that of Classics.

Revermann does not attempt to deprive Brecht of his role in shaping radical avant-garde tendencies, but rather points out that Brecht's radicalism could not be fully understood without his traditionalism. To explore this paradoxical duality, he zooms in on a particular moment in Brecht's opus; his ground-breaking 1948 translation/adaptation *The Antigone of Sophocles* that also served as a basis for his first model book the *Antigonemodell* published in 1949. Revermann's book deploys a double lens interpreting Brecht's adaptations and dramaturgy through the tragic idiom, while simultaneously offering an innovative reading of the Classics through Brecht — through both perspectives the familiar routes of scholarly interpretation have been made strange.

Greek tragedy is not only seen here as a dramaturgical intersection of radicalism and tradition, but also as an important conceptual framework that allows for a genealogical exploration of Brecht's negotiations of the tragic idiom. In the opening chapter, Revermann demonstrates how Brecht's point about Aristotelian tragedy as a realm of unalterable faith — of no true human agency — is not so much rooted in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but rather in German idealism, the works of Schiller and Jessner's famous 1929 staging of *Oedipus*. In the first part of the book, entitled 'Point of Contact 1948', Revermann uses Brecht's notion of non-Aristotelian theatre — the paradigmatic backdrop in opposition to which the dramatist situates his work — to understand the genealogy of Brecht's reworking of the tragic idiom. He foregrounds the point that Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre does not refer merely to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but that it lumps together various forms of tragedy and the tragic, as Brecht positions his work against the backdrop of the Western canon.

The second part of the book, 'Positionings', explores the genealogy of Brechtian tragic idiom while contextualising his work within a wider artistic topography of other 'classic' traditions, including Asian theatre, Shakespeare, Schiller, and Naturalism. However, this part also explores Brecht's tragic idiom in relation to comedy. The final part, 'Comparatist Explorations', uses analogy as a hermeneutical tool to interrogate genealogical connections to tragedy in Brecht's wider opus, including elements of tragedy in *Mother Courage*, 'the view from below' in *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Good Person of Szechwan* as a form of anti-tragedy, and *Life of Galileo* as involving a tragic hero. This approach allows for consideration of a wider thematic scope and of the ways in which Brecht's work engages with issues of gender and motherhood, ritual and sacrifice, heroism and justice, divinity and parody.

The book also makes an argument for a comparative and interdisciplinary study of Brecht and tragedy, foregrounding the pressure of the

dramatist to re-invent the tragic form so that it is able to speak to contemporary socio-political complexities in relevant, provocative and at the same time entertaining ways. Hence, the material itself, shaped through its intertextual and intertheatrical links and webs, invites a comparatist approach. Through such approach, Revermann hopes to de-automatise superfluous invocations of Brechtian theatre and invite a deeper, more complex, engagement with this legacy. The other goal of this study is to re-poeticise Brecht by exploring various dimensions of his art form — from the intertextual and metatheatrical to the materiality and craft of theatre making. This is, however, by no means an attempt to depoliticise Brecht by reducing the analysis to the aesthetic and formal dimensions of his work, but rather to foreground the inextricable link between aesthetics and politics, showing — as the Russian Formalist scholar Victor Shklovsky (who, like Brecht, was interested in the capacity of art to make the familiar strange) pointed out — that form is content.

This is a valuable, erudite, and inspiring study of Brecht and tragedy that does not so much dispel the idea of Brecht as avant-garde innovator but confirms what Brecht himself pointed out in the spirit of a true radical traditionalist (the paradox that Revermann also highlights): ‘Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes, in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new’ (Brecht 1977: 82). This point could be understood as describing a dialectical process — the concept of dialectics being especially pertinent and well-studied in regard to Brecht. Revermann offers another term, which is also in the book’s title, ‘eristics’, arguing that the term has a capacity to illuminate the specific nature of Brecht’s polemical attitude to the Greeks and aspirations as a dramatist. Turning to the etymology of the word, Revermann demonstrates its inherent duality — linking both to the

words ‘eros’ denoting ‘desire’ and ‘eris’ meaning ‘strife’. Hence, Brecht’s strife with the Greeks has an uncanny double in his desire to reinvent the big form to speak to the big issues. In that sense, eristics is viewed as linked to the dialectics of Brecht’s modes of representation and reception whereby ‘the new comes from the old’ and ‘that is why it is new’.

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**TEMPO PERSO**  
**DANZA E COREOGRAFIA**  
**DELLO STARE FERMI**

LOST TIME

DANCE AND CHOREOGRAPHY OF STILLNESS

**STEFANO TOMASSINI**

Milano: Scalpendi editore, 2020, 144 pp.

ISBN: 979-12-5955-012-5 (paperback)

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Stefano Tomassini

**TEMPO PERSO**

DANZA E COREOGRAFIA DELLO STARE FERMI



## Stefano

Tomassini's *Tempo perso* presents a poetic approach to his study about stillness in dance considered as a political statement. Attention is focused on how immobility is choreographed to strike the observer and how this apparent nothing permits the reading of the powerful decision behind it, similarly as, throughout history, a 'sit-in' has been sometimes considered more effective than a protest march. The essay considers a wide number of examples of sit-ins performed in the modern dance field, under diverse circumstances. Some pages are entirely dedicated to photographs, capturing a variety of extents of movement from some of the main art works supporting this study.

The text is structured into an introduction and three chapters composing the body; these are in turn divided into sections titled by quotations or allusions referring to the dance pieces analysed. The choice of naming the first section of the introduction 'Capolinea', which is to say 'Terminus'<sup>1</sup> suggesting the idea of an ending point as motionless as death and ruins, could be considered subversive. Together with the last segment of the concluding chapter, called 'Remembrance of the Future', these two titles somehow deconstruct the common linear perception of time, preparing the reader for an experience out of the ordinary. The first series of quotes is also an invitation to alternative views on the notion of time and movement, immediately donating the image of an absence of movement that implies an invisible charge of energy: a hibernation during which it seems like nothing is happening, meanwhile the whole system is at work to gather necessary forces for the imminent awakening.

1. All translations are by the author.

The author seeks to investigate the underground movement. He is keen to understand what comes before and beyond the image of an immobile dancer, examining the choice to display stillness while there still is an ongoing blood flow, neural activity, air exchange, and cellular motion in action; lively fretting in the core of that body, silently burning like lava. The latter being a very dear theme to the quoted choreographer Roberto Zappalà, among the many other internationally known artists Tomassini refers to throughout all chapters. In fact, each one opens with a list of the main dance works that are going to be analysed within. It follows a collection of quotes, which sensitively bring the reader into specific moods and atmospheres, in order to establish the subsequent themes. The pieces of art are wisely compared in their revolutionary visions and arrangements to corresponding rule-breaking messages of innovation in other fields, varying among literature, philosophy, music, architecture, economics; all of these matters are treated with knowledge of specific and technical language. On the other hand, the author prioritises a poetic style to the full respect of syntax and, at times, his lyrical form results in obscure semantics.

The introduction is based on reconsidering the concepts of dust, emptiness, left-overs, recognising their unavoidable existence, therefore their undeniable necessity and value. All of the unseen movement intrinsic in everything in this Universe might be invisible but still vital for progress, the same way as the whole busy motion backstage is fundamental for the show to succeed, even though the audience does not witness it nor directly praise it. The stance of the dancers in the wings is powerfully named 'the reverse of the pose' (p. 13) on the grounds that they are protected from the view of the spectator hence they perform the wait within a range of movements that totally differ from those shown at the same time on stage just few steps away. In this emblematic image, the energy of immobility becomes infinite potentiality of movement, as observed in modernist dance (p. 15), which develops together with humans' evolution in the direction of the need to find individuality and a personal pace.

In the first pages, already a vast selection of various sources can be appreciated, even though the reasons whether texts are quoted in original language or not, and whether a translation is produced at all, are often unclear, leaving a sense of incoherency in addition to lack of precision in specifying where the presented translations are coming from. However, the introduction is thematically relevant in contemporary social studies. The modern human being can hardly recognise the importance of stillness and its unavoidable role in life: still and slow are boring, in a world where news, information, and pastimes are offered at finger-tapping speed. The average human is not patient enough and not attentive enough (Burkeman 2015: para. 4) to take a closer look and perceive the multiple things happening inside the stillness of a tree trunk, even though each and every tiny thing in there is essential for the very same human existence. The whole process of redemption of the concept of ruin, refusing the rhythms of modernity, is extended throughout the second chapter to the conception of death, particularly with the examination of *Requiem pour L.* (p. 94).

The body of the text initially deals with the inseparability of the space-time system, focusing on revolutionary management of space in choreography and on the distortion of the audience's perception of time given by the combination of innovative geometry and stillness. The new dimension proposed by postmodern urban architecture and its evolution allows dancers into unexplored limits. Tomassini takes into account specifically the influence of this renewal on the blind spots of society, where the rebellion against conformity is alive (p. 57), and focuses on artists who take advantage of their power of expressing socio-economic models and community by means of space-time warp through placement, '*adynamia*' (p. 84). Breaking the rules of what is expected from a dance piece, the planned inactivity stands for aesthetic political resistance to homogenisation, as well as strategy to rethink chronological time against the worship of profit (p. 87). Particularly the works investigated

in the last chapter are strongly supportive of researching an individuality that correlates with coexistence and brotherhood, inviting the viewer to fight for sexual independency in order to become free critical thinkers entitled to personal political choices.

In general, the book encourages the reader to notice the many ways for a small detail, expressed through strong imposition of the unusual and the unexpected, to make a big difference and become meaningful in a world invaded by a great fuss of movement. The study presents multiple choreographies from modern dance history and the way in which they manipulate the spectator's perception of space and time, in order to bring to the surface questions and doubts about borders, linearity of time, individual choices, and freedom. Examinations of the art works seek to reconsider concepts such as mistake or defeat, the acceptance of death and weaknesses, and the liberation of exposing emotions and bodies in contrast to some extent of warning from the excess of rationality.

Viewing the choice of stillness in dance as a form of political rebellion, an additional inspection can be considered on the correlation with the spectator deciding to go and sit (or stand) to watch the performance. The dancer expresses an assertion, the value of which only exists in presence of someone being influenced by it, as Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre completes its function by leaving the audience saying 'That's great art; nothing obvious in it' (Brecht 1964: 71). The witnesses of the act with their will to participate in the performative event ensure the opening of a communicative channel, which at first sight might seem unilateral, whereas it creates the sparkle for a multi-dimensional motion of reward, comments, suggestions, new ideas, inspiration.

Concluding, if critics in the 1990s assumed 'the choices of immobility [...] as fatal consequences of reduced motor skills' (p. 30), Tomassini allows for the readaption of that vision: firstly, he demonstrates that

a choice that appears to be meaningless or simple can conceal strong reasons and challenges; secondly, he suggests that immobility is rich of infinite motion, as well as emptiness nowadays doesn't imply absence as it is 'by no means a simple empty space' (Ray 1991: 205). •

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**UMA CURADORIA  
DA FALTA  
O SERVIÇO ACARTE  
DA FUNDAÇÃO  
CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN  
1984-1989**

**A CURATORSHIP OF LACK  
THE ACARTE DEPARTMENT OF THE  
CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION 1984-1989**

**ANA BIGOTTE VIEIRA**

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ANA BIGOTTE VIEIRA

UMA  
CURADORIA

UMA CURADORIA  
DA FALTA

O SERVIÇO ACARTE  
DA FUNDAÇÃO  
CALOUSTE  
GULBENKIAN  
1984 - 1989

DA FALTA  
1984-1989

## The 1980s

in Portugal are something of a forgotten decade in artistic and critical terms. Located between the post-revolutionary 1970s and the globalised, mediatised 1990s, they have tended to be viewed either as not political enough compared to the 1970s or not international enough compared to the 1990s. Critical writing in the performing arts has also rarely focused on the history of cultural institutions, preferring to concentrate instead on biographies of key individuals or histories of significant companies. For both these reasons, Ana Bigotte Vieira's detailed account of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's ACARTE department from the mid-1980s to the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall is a welcome addition to the historiography of Portuguese performance.

The ACARTE (Animation, Artistic Creation, and Education for Art) department, under the visionary leadership of Madalena de Azeredo Perdigão, was established in 1984 and came to an end in 2002. Perdigão died in 1989, which helps to explain why this volume ends in this year, for she was a fundamental figure in shaping the objectives of the organisation. However, unlike many cultural institutions, ACARTE did not end because it had failed or run out of steam, but because it was considered to have achieved its aims and to have become a model for other cultural institutions in Portugal. This gives a sense of the importance of the organisation and, in particular, of the *Encontros ACARTE* (ACARTE international festivals or cycles) which began in 1987 and became regular features of the Service's work. These events brought to Portugal such important figures as Pina Bausch, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jan Fabre. They created a greater awareness of what was happening in

European culture and the specific contribution of Portuguese artists to that culture. As the book makes clear in a chapter dedicated to the *Nova Dança Portuguesa* (New Portuguese Dance) movement, this movement was very much a creation of ACARTE's regular new dance/theatre programming. It brought to Portugal work by choreographers such as Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and promoted new Portuguese choreographers such as Francisco Camacho and Vera Mantero. The internationalisation of Portuguese contemporary dance and performance would quite simply not have occurred without this continued support from ACARTE.

Bigotte Vieira adopts a prismatic approach to the Department that observes its work from different angles. The introductory chapter emphasises the multiple temporalities and geographies that intersect in the work of ACARTE, combining elements of the education for art movement of the 1970s, the incipient entrepreneurship of the 1980s, and the European focus of the 1990s. Then follows an analysis of the social, political, and artistic changes ushered in during the 1980s in Portugal, including (post)modern biopolitics, the extension of capitalist consumerism, and political integration into the European Economic Community in 1986. There are also chapters on the legacy of the forty-eight-year Portuguese dictatorship (1926–1974) in Portuguese cultural life as well as a chapter on the architecture of the buildings in which the Service was located, which included a separate pavilion for work with children.

The specific chapters on the work of the Department include a year-by-year account of their varied and often interdisciplinary work and an analysis of their overall objectives that Bigotte Vieira frames in terms of a curatorship of lack. This notion of lack is taken from the work of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2010) and applied here to discuss the ways in which ACARTE defined itself as much by what it was not going to do as what it aimed to do, by what was not yet present or was no longer present. Crucially, ACARTE did not aim to fill the supposed lack

of Portugal's 'backwardness', 'semi-peripheral' economic and cultural status, and years of political insularity, but to foreground and explore the contours of this lack in a radical attempt to be simultaneously local, national, and European. Indeed, in an intriguing comment which is not developed further, Bigotte Vieira suggests the possible resignification of pejorative terms like 'backwardness' and 'periphery' which imply only one linear model of cultural progress. She replaces them with terms such as 'motor', 'advantage', or simply 'condition' (p. 74) which emphasize the historical and geographical construction of notions of culture and do not reinforce geo-political hierarchies between supposedly advanced and backward nations.

The volume details clearly the effects of the performative turn during this period and applies the lens of the more recent transition from notions of programming to notions of curatorship to the work of the Department. The performative and discursive characteristics of the Service's work are foregrounded in the programme statements for specific events and in the curatorial framing of the different artistic cycles. Archive documents and photographs aid the reader in bringing to life the work of the Service. The volume also illustrates how controversies over ACARTE invitations and events revealed, for instance, the growing importance of visual and dance theatre over text-based theatre during this period. Occasionally, the structure of the chapters is confusing. The Section on the Architecture of Culture, for instance, moves from a discussion of cultural politics to the legacy of the dictatorship to a discussion of the construction of the Modern Art Museum (Centro de Arte Moderna, CAM) in a way that does not link these different developments. Yet the book in general is an important guide to a highly influential department. It illustrates how, despite being located within a private institution, ACARTE became a model for public artistic institutions in its attempt to make art part of the commons, all the way from childhood to adulthood. ●

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