



Political Reflections on Choreography, Dance and Protest

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Dancing Politics

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PDF, 19 Seiten

What is the lesson politics can draw from dance? In the following I will not so much approach this question by focusing on dance as a genre of fine arts. Of course, as an art form, dance has always been articulated with politics: from the initial moments of ballet at the court of Louis XIV, where it was an intrinsic element of what Habermas called the representational public sphere of the court and a central element in constructing the grandiose public persona of the sovereign, via New York's *Workers' Dance League* with their intriguing slogan: *Dance is a weapon in the revolutionary class struggle*, to the innumerable dance events today driven by more or less radical political intentions. While it would be fascinating to present a political history of dance, this is not going to be my concern. For the start, I would like to approach the question from the opposite angle, from the perspective of politics and the role dance plays within political practices. In other words, this chapter will not be so much concerned with whatever is political in dance as a cultural or artistic genre, but with what might be dance-like in political acting. What happens, we will ask, when today's sovereign, the people, start dancing publicly for reasons of protest? Only after this question has been clarified, I will return to two examples of "dancing politically" that originated from the art field – "East Side Story" by the Croatian artist Igor Grubic, and "How long is now?" by the Israeli performance collective *Public Movement*.

The politics of frivolity

Let us take the following observation as a starting point: In the course of the last protest cycle, largely defined by the actions of the global justice movement and, more recently, the Occupy movement and other radical democratic movements, dancing has become an intrinsic and, indeed, ubiquitous part of protest. It is inseparable from the movement's *protest repertoire*. Where protests occur, as a rule, there will be trucks with sound systems and a crowd of dancing people following them, there will be samba bands or drum bands such as *Rhythms of Resistance*, there will be radical

cheerleaders of whatever gender exercising and waving their pompoms, perhaps there will be soldiers of the *Insurgent Rebel Clown Army* marching and pantomiming. In other words, there is all sorts of performative pomp and circumstances involved in today's political protest. But hasn't this always been the case?

The most famous rhetorical conjunction of politics with dance is attributed, as everyone knows, to the anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance it's not my revolution." This slogan has become protest folklore, endlessly quoted and printed on T-shirts, posters, leaflets and buttons. The appeal of the slogan is all the more remarkable as, indeed, Emma Goldman never said this. In fact, it is possible to trace back the creation of the slogan to the early 1970s. As the feminist writer and activist Alix Kates Shulman, author of a Goldman biography, recounts, she was asked in 1973 by an activist from the anarchist centre at Lower Manhattan's Lafayette Street for a quotable slogan by Emma Goldman.¹ His intention was to print Goldman T-shirts for an upcoming festival at Central Park where the end of the Vietnam War was to be celebrated. Shulman did not provide him with a slogan but referred him to a passage in Emma Goldman's autobiography *Living my Life*. And there, the following episode is reported.

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha [Alexander Berkman], a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. “I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things.” Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world--prisons, persecution, everything.²

There is certainly no literal trace of the slogan to be found in this passage, but one must concede that the slogan wraps up nicely what is Goldman’s main message as a dancing revolutionary: Contrary to the young comrade’s opinion, frivolity – or what is taken to be frivolous, such as excessive dancing – does not hurt *the Cause*. What is more, a Cause that doesn’t accommodate “everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things” is not worth fighting for. Half a century later, the anarchist from Lafayette Street seems to have understood this and condensed the passage of Goldman’s autobiography into a slogan that would spread like a virus.

The gap between Cause and goal

This is a nice story from the good old days of 70s anarchism and Anti-Vietnam protests. Yet it does not in itself provide us with answers to a far-reaching set of questions: Why was the apocryphal quote that successful? Why did it obviously touch at the very core of contemporary activists’ self-understanding? Why, in general, do people seem to long for the articulation of politics with dance? In short: Why is there a real wish for more than simply a politics of dance – a wish for *dancing politically*? There can be no simple answer to these questions, but it appears that the slogan describes something rooted in the very logic of political mobilization. For what is conjured up by the slogan is a particular supplement or excessive element that is

added to a concrete demand or cause. The same logic can be detected in the famous conjunction “Bread and Roses”, another apocryphal slogan that is commonly attributed to workers, mostly women, on strike against the textile industry in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. Even though it is impossible to verify whether or not such a phrase was actually used in the Lawrence strike, the slogan was highly successful as an imaginary focus point for later protests. As in the case of the Goldman slogan, something excessive and non-utilitarian is demanded, even though it remains not entirely clear what precisely these “roses” or these “beautiful, radiant things” actually are. As supplements to a concrete demand, these sublime objects seem to remind us that no protest – perhaps nothing in the world – follows utilitarian considerations only. Certainly, there is always a Cause of protest, which can be more or less concrete (a particular grievance, the lowering of the wages, for instance) or more or less abstract (like exploitation, or alienation in general), and goals or objectives will be formulated to overcome these grievances. But if the goal, should it eventually be attained, does not entirely fill out the lack initially experienced as a Cause of action, there will remain a gap between the Cause of the protest and the object attained. Even if a particular goal is attained, say, if someone like Obama eventually manages to become president of the United States, disappointment is programmed as he will never be able to remove all grievances.

It is the discrepancy between cause and objective that calls for and opens up a space for imaginary supplements to the concreteness of a particular suffering and a particular remedy. This supplement, to the extent that it is by nature excessive – as in the deliberately excessive slogan “We want the whole world!” –, can certainly take on different forms. One of these forms is *violence*, most clearly when a protest transforms into something of the order of a pogrom, or into terror, as in the case of the French Revolution. Another form might be *anxiety*, if the gap between cause and objective is experienced as an unbridgeable abyss. But a more sympathetic form of excess is precisely what Emma Goldman described as “beautiful radiant things”: In short, dance assumes the role of a supplement to Revolution. The subtext of the Goldman phrase can thus be deciphered as follows: Without excessive supplement,

there is no revolution – and instead of terror, violence or anxiety, I, Emma Goldman, opt for dancing.³ So far, Goldman’s theory of dance seems pretty clear, but perhaps not radical enough. Having determined dancing as an *ubiquitous* phenomenon of protest, we might want to push the argument even further. What if dancing, and whatever it stands for in the Goldman case, is not merely a supplement to revolutionary politics, what if something of the order of dance was inscribed *into the very structure of political acting*? In other words, what if political acting had the same structure as dance? What if political acting was not so much about “doing politics”, but about, as it were, *dancing politics*? This might sound like a rather eccentric idea, but interestingly, it has been said before about politics. It is an intrinsic element of Hannah Arendt’s concept of political acting.

Acting as dancing: The joyous ground of politics

Let us, for a moment, revisit Arendt’s highly original and, I would claim, subversive account of political acting that runs counter to most aspects of today’s commonsensical notion of politics (politics as a boring if not dirty business, politicians as a corrupt cast of untouchables, hated by everyone, etc.). According to Arendt, the idea that doing politics is a burden rather than something exciting only came into the world with Christianity. While she agrees that nobody would want to spend his or her whole life in the “light of the public”, a life spent in what she calls the darkness of the private – a life without politics – would be equally deficient. On the contrary, political acting gives a particular quality to life. She therefore comes up with a claim that flies in the face of our accustomed understanding of politics. As she says in an interview about the student protesters of May 68, these students have experienced what in true politics is always experienced: It turned out for them that “*acting is fun*”.⁴

Nothing, as I said, could be further away from our commonsensical notion of today’s politics, but if we consider the significant degree of fun involved in contemporary forms of protest, and if we add Emma Goldman’s defense of frivolity and dance, then

Arendt's claim starts sounding less eccentric. Of course, for some reasons the category of "fun" so far hasn't made it into political thought (which might be side-effect of our sense that theory or philosophy must not have anything to do with fun either), nor is our habitual notion of the political equipped to accommodate it. In a more elevated or sublimated sense this affect was at least present in the demand for "public happiness" during the American revolution, as Arendt reminds us, even though the public character of it got lost in the course of the revolution and the demand for public happiness degenerated into the pursuit of individual happiness. Yet it is the *publicness* of happiness which every human being, according to Arendt, should have experienced at least once in his or her life. But what exactly is the source of such happiness, or how do we have to understand what for Arendt constitutes the public character of acting? At least three criteria can be discerned.

First, happiness emerges from the fact that we can only act *together*, that there is a certain communality involved in all political acting; a communality, though, which at the same time retains the plurality of the political world. This is very close to what Jean-Luc Nancy calls social being, or "being-with", as "being singular plural".⁵

Second, the affect of public happiness is compared by Arendt to the happiness with which we greet the new-born. Hence, at the root of happiness lies the existential condition of *natality*. Yet we should be careful not to interpret this condition in a biological sense: What Arendt refers to with the notion of natality is something more abstract that has the structure of a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility for acting. Acting is premised upon our ability to start something new, upon our condition, as Kant would have said, of spontaneity. And we are able to begin because we are, existentially speaking, beginners: we ourselves were thrown into the world as a new beginning. The political event *par excellence* in which our capacity to begin is actualized is, of course, the revolution. What the revolutionaries experience in the very happiness of their acting is nothing other than their actualized capacity to begin something new.

Third, and with this point we re-approach the conjuncture of politics and dance, acting takes place on the *stage* of the public and is therefore compared by Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, to theatrical acting – an idea for which she draws, of course, on Greek antiquity. For Arendt, the space of acting is “a space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.”⁶ While public space only comes into being wherever men act together, it disappears as soon as they stop acting. For this reason, the space of appearance, the stage of the public, is a precarious and fleeting thing as it only emerges during the moments of acting. These moments might not endure, since political acting is nothing stable nor does it produce anything stable. Arendt stresses the futility, boundlessness and uncertainty with respect to its outcome. Acting, in contrast to the activity of making or fabricating, is not concerned with a particular product or *oeuvre*. If we think of the arts, then a political actor does not play the role of a sculptor who would carve a distinctive work out of stone. Rather, the work of acting, as Arendt puts it, “is embedded in the performance”. And because it is an “end in itself”, the true value of acting can only stem from the *virtuosity* with which we actualize our capacity to act in concert and to start something new, not in the goal we seek to achieve through our action.

It is at this point of her argument that Arendt compares political acting to dancing: “as in the performance of the dancer or play-actor, the ‘product’ is identical with the performing act itself”. In modern societies this idea, which is Aristotelian in particular, disappeared and the Greek value system was inverted. Adam Smith, she observes, “classifies all occupations which rest essentially on performance – such as the military profession, ‘churchmen, lawyers, physicians and opera-singers’ (...) the lowest and most unproductive ‘labour’”. But, as Arendt insists in concluding the argument, “[I]t was precisely these occupations – healing, flute-playing, play-acting – which furnished ancient thinking with examples of the highest and greatest activities of man”.⁷ Here, in the concluding sentence, the example of dance is not taken up again. However, it is telling that in *Vita Activa*, Hannah Arendt’s own translation of

The Human Condition into German, which is slightly more sophisticated than the English original, the same sentence is significantly expanded and dancing is re-introduced into the list: “In diesem von der modernen Gesellschaft ursprünglich so tief verachteten Virtuosität, in den ‘brotlosen’ Künsten des Flötenspielens oder der Tanzens oder des Theaterspielens, hatte antikes Denken einmal die Beispiele und Illustrationen gefunden, an denen es sich die höchsten und größten Möglichkeiten des Menschen vergegenwärtigte.”⁸

From flute-playing to lap-dancing

Let me recapitulate. It turned out that the third criterion of public happiness, of joy or fun in politics, springs from the public display of one’s own virtuosity, in a performance whose end lies in itself. This is why political acting, for Arendt, is structurally the same as dancing.⁹ One might ask whether this is a realistic account of politics. But we must remember that for Arendt realism implies that we confront and phenomenologically describe what she, the pupil of Heidegger’s, considers an existential dimension of acting. Her account is realistic in the sense that it captures an affective dimension all of us experience when acting together in public. And yet, I do think that Arendt’s description of joyful acting, as much as it is validated by the frivolities of contemporary protest, is far from being exhaustive. There are other aspects or dimensions of protest imposing themselves precisely where we find them intrinsically articulated with dancing and frivolity. Let us take as an example a particular instance of dancing protest. This instance occurred at the demonstrations against the G20 meeting in Toronto in the summer of 2010. In terms of dancing “genres” what was performed there was a *lap dance* by two half-naked guys with the riot police as their target. This lap dance was accompanied by the collective chant: “You’re sexy, you’re cute, take off your riot suit”. Although this incident was not all too spectacular, it was spectacular enough to make it into CNN’s coverage of the Toronto protests.¹⁰

This is certainly a case of dancing politics; but even though the protesters seem to have a lot of fun, and even though at least one of the protesters displays a certain degree of virtuosity in lap dancing, it does not seem to fit exactly the Arendtian account of public happiness. To be sure, there is fun involved and togetherness or commonality, but the situation, queer as it is, is confrontational as well. I would go as far as claiming that the lap dance, even if it is considered funny, involves a moment of symbolic violence. This violence may amount to next to nothing, compared to the physical violence unleashed should some authority decide to let loose the robocops. And one may even defend this dance as a legitimate response to police brutality in form of symbolic counter-violence. Yet it is hard to deny that pure and innocent happiness looks differently. Dancing, in this case, is inscribed into the protest vocabulary as a form not simply of frivolity, but of *tactical* frivolity – a particular form of protest that for the first time received attention with the emergence of the so-called *Pink and Silver* block at the demonstration against the World Bank and IMF meeting in Prague in 2000.

The minimal conditions of dancing politically

For this reason we will have to come to terms with the fact that, in order to talk about real life politics, we have to supplement the supplement; that is to say, we have to add to the Arendtian category of public happiness further categories, whether we like these categories or not, that allow for a more precise and comprehensive understanding of political acting. In a quasi-transcendental sense one may speak about the *minimal conditions* of politics, conditions that allow us to discern a political form of dance from its communal form, e.g. a lap dance confronting the riot police from a Milonga in the streets of Buenos Aires. Even though there is no space here to develop a more extensive argument, which I have tried to work out elsewhere, some of these minimal conditions can be detected phenomenologically in the most modest

political activities such as lap-dancing.¹¹ As this very example illustrates, a couple of minimal conditions are met which allow us to use the term politics, even though it will be politics on a very minor scale.

As a first condition, as I hinted at already, these actors do not act out of pure spontaneity (even though, again, actors might think of themselves as highly spontaneous) – they act in a tactically and, perhaps, even strategically concerted and organized way. This is a necessary condition simply for the reason that every political act will face resistance by other political actors, and every actor will act on a terrain entrenched by dissymmetries of power and subordination, which in turn necessitates a strategic approach in order to take on these relations or to find your way around them. This is what, among other things, “tactical frivolity” is about. For the same reason, political activism does have *goals*, contrary to what Arendt says about the difference between acting and fabricating, where the former is supposed to have its end in itself. Nobody would ever start acting politically if it was only for the sake of acting. This is not to contradict everything Arendt said about public happiness, but it is to supplement her account. There is no acting that does not entail, in Arendtian terms, aspects of making or fabricating, i.e. of tactics and strategy.

Second condition: The political actor is never an individual, it is a collective that assembles to stage a protest. A person dancing alone in darkness and in private does not stage a protest.¹² To dance politically, on the other side, means dancing together. But the community established in this way, as heterogeneous as it might be, will never consist of a pure dispersion of singular pluralities, as in Arendt’s conception of acting-together or in Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of singular plural being.

And the reason for this, third condition, is simply that a community of protest can only be established through confrontational means. These means do not have to imply physical violence, but there will always be an aspect of symbolic violence involved. This aspect of symbolic violence is implicated in the very logic of antagonism as it was famously developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹³ Dispersed discursive elements (in my simplistic example: dispersed individuals aspiring to stage a collective protest), that do not share any positive feature, can only

be assembled into a chain of equivalence, Laclau and Mouffe claim, if they share at least a negative feature: a constitutive, though negative outside, something which is taken to constitute a threat to the identity of each and every one these elements. In this sense, the policemen in their riot gear symbolize a much larger threat – eventually ascribed to the state or to global capitalism – that constitutes a precarious unity among groups that, on other accounts and in terms of their positive demands, may not come to much agreement.

It is through this process of antagonism or antagonization, performed through the strategic construction of a collectivity vis-à-vis a negative outside, that a public space is carved out of the social. We may still accept Arendt's seminal point, concerning the performativity of political acting, that such a public sphere only emerges where people start acting together and disappears when they stop acting. But if we supplement the Arendtian account with the category of antagonism as a necessary condition for the establishment of every political togetherness, then it follows that antagonism will also be a necessary condition for the emergence of a public sphere. A public sphere opens wherever the routines, institutions and identities of our social world are touched by antagonism. Again, by saying antagonism we don't have to think of an outright civil war. Antagonism can be performed through peaceful dancing. We may just think of the case of *Reclaim the Streets*, a successful international protest format, particularly in the 1990s, with roots in the English free rave party scene of the late 80s and of the anti-road protest. The initial idea was to turn areas reserved for traffic into a communal public space by staging dance events on the streets. There was sometimes a rather regressive communitarian undercurrent (encapsulated in the fantasy of ruralizing the urban sphere of the city) which, in my view, also undermined the political edge of the movement. Yet in other cases the format was used to stage a clearly political or progressive protest, as in the case of the Viennese *Volxtanz*-Network and their effort, as they called it, at *Soundpolitisierung*, the politicization of sound, with which they demonstrated against the inclusion, in 2000, of Jörg Haider's right wing Freedom Party in the Austrian government.

In all these diverse cases, a similar logic can be determined. A temporary public sphere is created performatively by way of obstructing the sphere of circulation. Every staging of antagonism involves such a blockage, and very similar to the case of a labour strike where the circulation of goods and services is blocked within the economic sphere (or a consumer boycott where the consumption of goods is blocked), in the case of street protest it is the circulation of traffic which is blocked through, in this case, dancing. It is this blockading effect in which we detect a fourth condition for public space to emerge where, before, there was only an urban traffic space.

Embodied protest and protest choreographies

So far, I have outlined four conditions that eventually turn out to be conditions for the creation of every public sphere through protest: strategy, collectivity, conflictuality, and the blockade of streams of circulation. I would like to add a fifth condition which is of particular importance for street protest, even though it may appear self-evident, perhaps even trivial. In street protest, antagonism is enacted, and circulation is blocked, by human bodies. The human body is the most important medium through which a public space is carved out of the social. Of course, this does not always have to occur in form of a militarized collective marching in-sync through the streets. Very often it is precisely the vulnerability of bodies which is used as a performative medium of protest (up to the extreme point where people decide to publicly set themselves on fire). Taking this word of caution into account, we may define street protest as the collective and embodied activity of blocking streams of circulation whereby a line of conflict is drawn through social space. And it is only along such a line of conflict that a public in the true sense of the word emerges. Isn't this line, drawn by demonstrating bodies across a given (in most cases urban) space, the trace of a more or less consciously elaborated choreography? One may just think of the often times carefully planned routes of street demonstrations (and of deviations from these routes through police intervention). We therefore have to differentiate between two dimensions of public protest: the larger protest

choreography by which urban space is refigured through demonstration practices; and the protest politics incorporated by individuals and inscribed into their bodies. These two dimensions of (1) movement choreography and (2) bodily “dance” always go together and can only be differentiated analytically.¹⁴

Dancing violence: Igor Grubic’s East Side Story

Let us try and apply the conceptual apparatus developed above to two particular examples not so much of dancing politics than of political dance. Igor Grubic’s *East Side Story* grew out of the deep distress the Croatian artist experienced when confronted with video material from the Gay Pride parades in Belgrade in 2001 and in Zagreb in 2002. At these parades demonstrators faced not only the most vulgar verbal insults by passers-by, they were even exposed to physical violence by organized neo-fascists. Until today, one may add, Pride parades have been immensely contentious in some Eastern European countries. Sometimes they are simply interdicted by the authorities, sometimes they are violently attacked by those who perceive of themselves as members of a homogenous, “healthy” and, doubtlessly, heterosexual people. In the West, though, these parades, from the very moment of their invention, are famous for having integrated dance into their carnevalesque protest repertoire. In doing so, they have managed to re-capture public visibility in their own non-violent ways; and even though some have criticized increasing commercialization and the loss of political engagement (as it is the case with Berlin’s parade), it cannot be denied that, precisely as *political* demonstrations, Pride parades have been immensely successful.

It is at this point – the function of dancing politically – where Grubic intervened. Being a visual artist himself, he set out to collaborate with dancers and choreographers in order to restage the original protest event. As the folder to the presentation of the piece resulting from this collaboration says: “In a primitive community that brutally reacts to differences, a small group of creative people, resembling a resistance movement, will try to change people’s consciousness through

a dance ritual ...” In the two-channel video installation first shown in the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art, one sees on one side of the room the TV-material of the original events while on the other wall the dancers are projected. What they did was not simply imitating the bodily movements of violent protest. Rather, they dissected the movements and translated the resulting elements into a choreography in which a single dancer may incorporate gestures of both sides, sometimes within a single flow of movement. Then all four dancers would reassemble and, in a more obvious or recognizable way, stage bodily movements that, if only remotely, bring to mind the original clashes.

Some might object that this work has nothing to do with art performance in public space, as it is clearly situated *intra muros*, i.e. within the walls of an art institution. Nevertheless, it remains of interest for two reasons:

First, it should not be seen so much as a political intervention in its own right than as a reflection upon the conditions of protest within a violently anti-gay environment. In this sense, it is quite telling that Grubic approaches the events through the very format that was obviously lacking in the original event (even though one would have expected it in the case of Pride parades): dancing in the “fun” or carnevalesque sense. Of course, it is clear why dance was lacking – there was no reason to dance while under physical attack. But Grubic decided to restage the events precisely by means of that which had remained symptomatically absent. However, by being re-introduced into the picture, dance takes on a completely different meaning. It becomes an expression not of “tactical frivolity”, but of terroristic violence. As I have said, the supplement of protest can take on many different forms, and perhaps there is no political protest without such an affective and bodily supplement. Here it is the *violence* of the counter-protesters which serves as an obscene surplus to *their* Cause (of denying homosexuals public visibility) – a violence sublimated, or deconstructed, by Grubic and the dancers into an artistic form. Therefore, it is more than appropriate that the title of the work, “East Side Story”, refers to a Musical film well-known for its celebrated dance scenes in which, in particular, acts of violence between street gangs were sublimated into a grandiose choreography.

Second, Grubic's quasi-"resistance movement" returned to the public sites where the original events had occurred. Not only was the video taken on the streets of Zagreb and Belgrade, but Grubic decided to have all rehearsals on the spot. Stretching over a period of two months, the choreography was developed right there in the public sphere. The passers-by would thus be confronted with a "temporary monument"¹⁵ supposed to bring back the memories of the TV-images. So, *East Side Story* to some degree *was* a performative intervention into public space. But did it create a public in the political sense?

It goes without saying that a re-enactment is not, and cannot be, "the real thing"; at best, it can initiate a process of reflection which then might again turn into political activation. In this case, the performance in the streets of Zagreb and Belgrade did not fully meet the criteria necessary for a public space in the political sense to emerge: It did not *block* the circulation of traffic; perhaps it slightly distracted it. No *conflict*, as much as I can say, did emerge from the performance, at least no collectivizable conflict (whenever a real conflict occurs, it tends to spread for some time as it can be collectivized, i.e. more and more people start affiliating themselves with the Cause). The dancers, as much as they remained individual dancers even while dancing together, did not generate a collective, but rather a singular plural body (as we will see in the next example, there *is* also the possibility of a more collectivist dancing body). They acted "in concert", as Arendt would have put it, but they did not act as or within a political collective.¹⁶ For this reason, the artists did not – and didn't need to – develop a larger and long-term *strategy* which, nevertheless, would be necessary to achieve the goals a protest movement wishes to achieve. So, subtract all these political dimensions from the performance (strategy, collectivity, conflict, and blockade), and what remains is pure *embodiment*: the bodily re-enactment of a political event from the past which, as bodily re-enactment pure and simple, is not political in itself because it lacks the additional criteria necessary in order to meaningfully speak about politics in the first place.¹⁷

Pre-enacting protest: Public Movement's "How long is now?"

Let us move to the second example in order to see what it takes for an artistic intervention to actually *make the passage* into politics. The double dimension of "dancing politics" through protest – choreography and dance – is reactivated in most performances of the Israeli collective *Public Movement*, founded in 2006 by the dancer and choreographer Dana Yahalomi and the visual artist Omer Krieger (and led by Yahalomi alone since 2011). The name of the group refers, on the one hand, to the ritualized choreographies of a nation state "public" and, on the other, to the political or protest movements of a potential counter-public – in other words: to state choreographies and to protest choreographies. What is of importance is the fact that these choreographies will always be inscribed into the bodily knowledge of individuals. As Yahalomi puts it: "Politics exists within our bodies, as an often dormant knowledge."¹⁸ In their performances, these unconscious incorporations of the state are very often re-assembled into dream-like choreographic sequences. For instance, in their performance "Also Thus!" in 2009, the group staged a fictitious state ritual in front of the fascist architecture of the Berlin Olympia stadium. This ritual, which included mock violence and a car crash or maybe terrorist attack against a car of the type used by German politicians, ended with an Israeli folk dance and the audience joining in. In this *Public Movement* performance, as in some others, a quasi-Zionist occupation takes place of an anti-Jewish or anti-semitic historical setting, a sort of over-writing which, nevertheless, leaves visible the background. However, *Public Movement* do not take an explicit political position, not even a Zionist one. Perhaps one should rather speak about their *deconstruction* of Zionism as the dominant state choreography of Israel. Like in the original Derridean sense, deconstruction involves both an element of destruction and an element of (re-)construction. With obvious reference to the constructive dimension, performances of *Public Movement* have also been described by Yahalomi as "pre-enactments". They do

not imitate an actual event in the past, but engage in the paradoxical enterprise of re-staging an event that has not yet occurred, for instance, a future state that will have implemented the rituals *pre-formed* by *Public Movement*.

Sometimes, these pre-formances, as we may call them, can assume a disruptive rather than a ceremonial quality. In these cases, what is announced by the intervention is not a future state, but, perhaps, a future protest. In their 2006 guerrilla performance *How long is now?*, the group blocked crossroads in Israeli cities by performing a circle dance to a popular Israeli song from the 1970s, *Od lo ahavti dai* (the same song that ended the *Also Thus!* ritual). After having blocked traffic for 2 ½ minutes, the dancers disappear and traffic can continue circulating. To understand this intervention, one has to know that Israeli folkdance does not in the slightest emerge from an age old tradition. Of course, round dances belong to the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean region and south east Europe. Yet, modern Israeli folkdance has its roots in the 1940s when the Israelis were forced to create a new, synthetic culture for heterogeneous groups of immigrants. For this purpose Israeli folkdance did not only integrate choreographic elements of highly diverse traditions, it also became very much part of popular music production. Every new Israeli pop hit is immediately outfitted with a choreography which is then passed on in dancing classes. Thus, folkdance in Israel has nothing to do with *Brauchtum*, as the appalling German term goes, but is better described as an enormous multiplication of fashion dances.

Among these hundreds of songs, *Od lo ahavti dai*, with the accompanying choreography by Yankele Levy (which is relatively simple), has proven to be one of the most popular ones. It is probably because every Israeli child learns the choreography in kindergarten that *Public Movement* chose the song. In this sense, Israel's state choreography is expressed through communal dancing and registered by the bodily knowledge of its citizens. Because it is universal (and individual) knowledge, every passer-by can potentially join in and become part of the circle. By using this dance in order to block the crossroad, a dance symbolizing the

communitarian closure of society (but also, of course, the attempt to gain courage and solidarity within a fundamentally hostile environment) is re-appropriated and used to disturb the public order of this very society.

The passage towards politics

Most of the criteria developed above are thus met. *How long is now?* is a collective and collectivizable action by which a public in the strong sense is curved out of urban space. This is achieved through blocking the circulation of traffic with dancing bodies. And yet, the passage to politics in the strict sense does not occur. Without doubt, the irritation produced by the event has the potential to remind passers-by of the micropolitical inscription of state choreographies in their own individual bodies. Such re-activation of bodily knowledge can have something political, but more in a critical or analytical sense than in the sense of protest politics. And to the extent that it remains an art performance, the meaning and the goal of the intervention can very well remain in the dark for most of its witnesses. In fact, *Public Movement* explicitly say that they do not adhere to the “for/against paradigm” – and this is exactly the point where we realize that a decisive element is missing: an actual *conflict* that would force everyone to position herself on this or the other side of a political antagonism.

In summer 2011 such an antagonism broke out in Israel when tents were being planted in the centre of Tel Aviv and other cities. Starting with the call of a single student, social protests against high living and housing expenses grew to the point where Israel witnessed the largest political demonstration in its history. In the course of the protests, *Public Movement* took up their intervention and offered this format to the protesters. Again and again dozens of activists would assemble on different crossroads in order to block traffic for 2 ½ minutes to the music of *Od lo ahavti dai*. In so doing, they actualized a conflict much wider than simply a clash with angry car drivers. Such a momentary clash referred to the wider line of political conflict drawn by the social protesters all over Israel. By offering the demonstrators a new and easily

collectivizable protest format, the original guerilla performance was turned by *Public Movement* from an artistic intervention into a political one. The latter actualized what was only announced as a future possibility by the former *pre-enactment*. Or, to put it differently, “How long is now?”, danced by the protesters, was not an artistic re-enactment of a political event, as Grubic’s *East Side Story* was. It was, inversely, a political re-enactment of an artistic event.

Of course, this only became possible on the condition that a larger antagonism emerged in society – which was not in the hands of *Public Movement*. We should think of this antagonism as an “objective condition” of protest, not as something that can be produced intentionally.¹⁹ And yet, these “objective conditions” have to be met by activist practices in order for a conflict to pass from the latent to the manifest. If this worked out so well in the case of “How long is now?”, then because the emancipatory potential of Zionist culture, created long ago in the Kibbutzim and watered down to pop cultural folkdance, was re-created within today’s street protest. And if people joined in, then they did because an essential dimension of political acting was addressed: the joyous experience resulting from the virtuosity of the performance as such. As Arendt said: “Acting is fun.” In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, a member of *Public Movement* declared: “We’re going to do some folk dancing, which, first of all, is really fun. And it creates some automatic solidarity between people. Just standing in a circle, holding hands, is the basic gesture of solidarity.”²⁰ One should not underestimate these moments of joy present in demonstrating in solidarity. Today’s forms of radical democratic protest could hardly do without such joy – a joy that opposes the sad assumptions of a political reality without alternative. It is in the dancing of the demonstrators that some of the *jouissance* of embodied democratic action expresses itself.

1 Alix Kates Shulman: “Dances With Feminists”, in *Women’s Review of Books* IX:3 (1991).

2 Emma Goldman: *Living My Life*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo 2008), p. 56.

3 Let me just mention in passing that this is in stark contrast to some of today's theories of *the political*, rather successful ones, that display a sort of juvenile, or rather masculinist fascination not with dancing but with terror and violence. I'm thinking in particular of the work of Slavoj Žižek.

4 I have discussed Arendt's assertion extensively in Oliver Marchart: "Acting Is Fun'. Aktualität und Ambivalenz im Werk Hannah Arendts", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Sonderband 16 (2007): *Hannah Arendt: Verborgene Tradition – Unzeitgemäße Aktualität?*, pp. 349–358.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy: *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

6 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 198–199.

7 Arendt: *The Human Condition*, p. 207.

8 Hannah Arendt: *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* (München and Zürich: Piper, 1992), p. 202.

9 Provided we are talking about dancing-together, dancing in terms of plurality and communality, rather than thinking of a solo performance.

10 Like everything else in the world, this Toronto lap dance can also be found on YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fhGneV6rQg>

11 See chapter 10 on Minimal Politics in Oliver Marchart: *Die politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010); and Oliver Marchart: "Democracy and Minimal Politics: The Political Difference and Its Consequences", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, Fall 2011 (4):, pp. 965–973.

12 This is, by the way what happened to Friedrich Nietzsche, *the* philosopher of dance if there ever was one, when his mind glided into darkness: it is reported that his landlady, concerned about Nietzsche turning mad, glanced through the door in his room where she saw Nietzsche dancing naked.

13 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London and New York: Verso, 1985).

14 One may just think, as examples, of the masculinist militancy of bodies formed into the choreography of a uniformed “black block”; or, on the other end of the scale, of the joyous frivolity of bodies choreographed into a partying Pink and Silver block.

15 Igor Sretenovic: “The Figuration of Resistance”, in *East Side Story*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade 2008, p. 9.

16 Even though some dancers actually were part of the movement, but in this performance they are, first and foremost, *dancers*, not protesters. In their role of artists they acted, at best, *in solidarity* with a political collective and not as part of that collective.

17 Of course, in the usual sense of the term, “East Side Story” is a highly political work. My argument should in no way be understood as a criticism of it. It does not make “East Side Story” less critical, but it leaves it in the art world and does not speak of “politics” where there is none. This is because my whole argument is basically directed against the current inflation of the qualifier “political”. But not every work of art has to be political in a precise sense. To be political should not necessarily make a work better or worse from the perspective of the art field (provided “good” or “bad” should be valid criteria at all, which I doubt), it only makes it better or worse from the perspective of the political field (where, correspondingly, its quality as *art* will be of secondary importance).

18 Interview with Dana Yahalomo, *Kaleidoscope* (forthcoming)

19 Everyone who ever tried to organize a protest knows that it is difficult, if not impossible to predict whether it will work out and people will join in. Sometimes, you organize a demonstration time and again, and nobody shows up. But then, suddenly, the conditions change and the same effort can result in the most massive rally.

20 “Dancing activists block Tel Aviv traffic”,

<http://www.jpost.com/VideoArticles/Video/Article.aspx?id=236147&R=R55>

Aktivismus

Handeln

Jean-Luc Nancy

Revolution

Hannah Arendt

Protest

Occupy Wall Street

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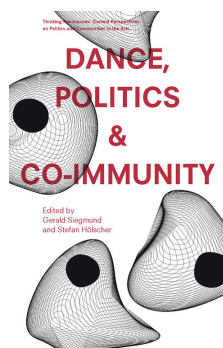
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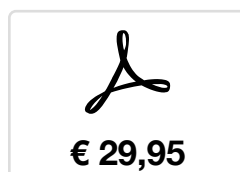


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This volume is dedicated to the question of how dance, both in its historical and in its contemporary manifestations, is intricately linked to conceptualisations of the political. Whereas in this context the term "policy" means the reproduction of hegemonic power relations within already existing institutional structures, politics refers to those practices which question the space of policy as such by inscribing that into its surface which has had no place before. The art of choreography consists in distributing bodies and their relations in space. It is a distribution of parts that within

the field of the visible and the sayable allocates positions to specific bodies. Yet in the confrontation between bodies and their relations, a deframing and dislocating of positions may take place. The essays included in this book are aimed at the multiple connections between politics, community, dance, and globalisation from the perspective of e.g. Dance and Theatre Studies, History, Philosophy, and Sociology.

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