

# Performing the Political/Choreographing Bodying-in-Common

## Tags

# the Political

# aesthetic an-archy

# political ontology

# performativity

The core and starting hypothesis that grounds this concept is that *the political (le politique)* signifies the instituting moment of society as the act that compensates for the groundless ground of society, or the supplement for the groundless stature of society, which, as such, withdraws at the very moment it grounds society. The moment of ground, and the moment of actualization/concretization of the ground, which is to say the political (le politique) and politics (la politique), will never be able to fully meet, and as such every politics is destined to failure and disabled to fully realize its promises. This post-foundational political philosophy opposes foundational politics that locate a principle, a substance, identity, sense, destiny, meaning and a ground of the political order that is immune to revision, antagonism and contestation, and that is situated outside society or politics (Claude Lefort, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Roberto Esposito, and Oliver Marchart).

Bringing forth the concept of the political thus amounts to disclosing the ***an-archy*** of the *archē* (being both the origin and end, the beginning and rule, the commencement and commandment) itself, as the breach, the rupture, uncertainty, the disturbance, the displacement, the incommensurability of the being-in-common, the antagonism, the impossibility of solution of its inherent paradox, and the trace of the incommensurable difference, the most distant and foreign with the intimacy of propriety of the *archē*. This *originary an-archy* in the core of the origin of politics, brings to light and 'reminds' the social and political organization of networks of relations, functions, norms, institutions and identities (which to say

politics) of its constitutive finitude dwelling in the very heart of politics or the logic of the political we have inherited as tradition. The *originary an-archy* as an affirmative 'negation' of all parameters of certainty, does not immobilize the politics as an anti-political stance, but opens it towards horizons of differentiation, historicity, temporality and potentiality for becoming-otherwise. The point of departure for retreating the political "is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize . . . This does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be... There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality." (Agamben 1999, p. 43)

The political ontology and the tracing of the essence of the political is, I hypothesize, first and foremost, an ontology of bodies. The concept of community signals nothing more than the mutual exposure and relationality of bodies. The form, the identity and the organisation of the life of a community is thus open and attuned to the ever-changing and plural relations between bodies. The body is only body inasmuch as it is outside itself, permanently, from the very beginning exposed towards its outside. The body is the locus of singularity and subjectivity, and the site where being-in-common discloses itself as bodying-in-common. But a body does not exist as a dump or rough matter waiting to me impinged by its outside and thus brought into being within the grids of cultural signification. Neither does it express its immanent or naturalistic predisposition outside the world shared with others. As much as it is relationally conditioned, it is simultaneously the condition for the world to appear as co-appearing.

Following this logic, I propose setting the aesthetic at the impossible origin and telos, the most improper and disappropriating proprium of the political, as the **aesthetic an-archy** of the *archē*. Reconnecting to a more radical sense of the aesthetic (*aesthesis*) as something rooted in affective, sensorial and bodily experience, I follow the theoretical line that proposes setting the aesthetic as operating at the very base of artistic, cultural and political experience (Rancière 1999, 2004, 2010), whereby the political/ideological and cultural practices instil orders directly on the body, or rather on the continuum of the aesthetic realm (Hewitt 2005). Political ideology and cultural orders are thus conceived as (impossible) performative enactments that mobilise and choreograph the movements, energies, affects, potentialities and impediments of the human body, as well re/distribute and regulate the relations and dispositions of bodies in social spaces (Franko 2002, Grossberg 1992, Williams, Ahmed 2004, 2006). As ways of doing and making, I approach art practices as material reconfigurations of the hegemonic distribution of the

sensible, of the ways of being, doing and seeing, reconfiguring “the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission.” (Rancière)

With these concepts I would like to propose that the institution of community and the social is a *material performative practice*, that is to say *self-organizing, relational, complex and dynamic practice of materialization and bringing into being*, understood as *iterative intra-activity* producing different material configurings of the social/cultural world and bodies (Barad 2003, 2007, Latour 2005).

This turn towards the performative is motivated by the extensive theoretical discussions, artistic experiments in the art practices of the 50’s and 60’s, as well as various performance arts and body arts practices, including the accumulated knowledge from performance and dance studies and contemporary choreographic and dance practices, that open the thinking of the performative as “a constructionist notion of identity as anti-metaphysical, emphatically material and historical, constantly refashioning itself in various contexts and configurations of reception.” (Dolan 1993: 419) What makes the concept of the performative particularly fruitful for thinking about the concept of the political as defined above is its emphasis on understanding the political as always a relational process, that puts all qualities, boundaries, identifications and determinations in motion (Jones 2020). Similarly, I propose setting choreography as critical method for thinking the political. “Because choreography takes as its material the human body and its relation to other human bodies, an examination of social choreographies is particularly suited to a presentation of the ways in which political and aesthetic moments shade into each other...” (Hewitt 2005: 13) Hewitt’s approach to social choreography as rehearsal and “working out and working through of utopian, but nevertheless ‘real’ social relations” (ibid: 17) as much as it inspires my proposals, also differs from my proposal and the implications of and paradoxes inherent in the political.

Probably the most popular and oft-cited example of the intertwining of the political and performance that brings forward the relational, processual, self-referential, and yet predicated on codes, protocols, norms and conventions, others-dependent, public and plural character (by being exposed to the gaze of others with whom we co-appear in speech and action) of both performance and the political, is Hannah Arendt’s argument in the essay “What is Freedom” as follows:

“The performing arts.... Have a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists... need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before they can appear; both need a

publicly organized space for their 'work', and both depend upon others for the performance itself." (Arendt 1960: 154)

She repeats the similar proposal for thinking about the relation between politics and the ephemeral arts, in particular, in the "Human Condition" claiming that: "Politics is a techné, it belongs among the arts, and can be linked to such activities as healing or navigation, where, as in the performance of the dancer or play-actor, the 'product' is identical with the performance act itself." (Arendt 1998: 207)

Instead of repeating the fantasy of metaphysical identitarian foundations, origin and substance, which presupposes the independent existence of reality, the signified and the referent to which linguistic, discursive or embodied acts refer and express, the ontology of the performative brings into view the "effecting (of) an action by issuing the utterance...we do an act.... An action that cannot be performed by other means" (Austin 1975:4). Each performative act, whether linguistic utterance or embodied gesture/action brings into being, enacts, does the social reality it refers to, utters or plays. The performative logic perverts and turns upside-down the logic of cause and effect, in such a way that what appears to be the cause, the origin, substance, essence, self or identity underlying and mobilizing the performative act as its effect, is the very effect of the performative doing and saying. This performative gesture is most paradigmatically enacted in Judith Butler's theory of gender and queer performativity, and her reapplication of the term to bodily rather than acts of speech. As she argues: "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts... through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." (Butler 1988: 519)

This deconstruction of the metaphysical grounds/identity/self/community/proprium enacted by the ontology of the performative derives from the iterative nature of the performative, its citationality across temporal and spatial contexts, its constitutive dependency on contexts, otherness, and relationality as sources of the very im/possibility of meaning, presence, bodies, identity and institution of community. The logic of iteration displaces and opens each performative act towards a time that is not its own, temporality which precedes it, a past that has never been present and that makes its felicitousness (Austin 1975) and success possible (the necessity of citing socially and discursively sanctioned norms, protocols and language games in order to produce its effects and enact what it says/express), on the one hand, describing performativity as a mode of potentiality and utopian longings and transformation (Muñoz 2020),

and on the other hand throwing it into a horizon of the not-yet known. The future temporality is thus always already inscribed in the performative act as a necessary condition for the ideality and identity of its effects/enactments and the reality it brings forth. Henceforth, there is a constitutively inscribed logic of *différance* (Derrida) in the performative, that describes each performative act, whether speech or embodied enactment, towards the undecideability of the future-to-come and spatial otherness. *Différance*, being both differing and deferring, marks the spacing of time and the temporality of spacing as the gap between the signifier and the referent/signified and word and action. It spaces time in the interval between saying and its effects, the gap between utterance and meaning, bodily action and materialization/what comes to matter, and thus opens the possibility for resignifying the locution, for agency, expropriation, material reconfiguration and change (Butler 1997, Barad). As Derrida (1988) argues: “through the possibility of repeating every mark as the same it makes way for an idealization that seems to deliver the full presence of ideal objects,” but, and here is the deconstructive twist of performativity, “this repeatability itself ensures that the full presence of a singularity thus repeated comports in itself the reference to something else, thus rending the full presence that it nevertheless announces. In this way iteration is not simply repetition.” (129)

What makes performativity and the turn towards performing arts, dance and choreography particularly fruitful for understanding and re-envisioning the political is the central importance of embodiment, and the moving, sensing, affecting/affected fleshy body in its relationality to other (both human and non-human) bodies, spaces, times, atmospheres, discourses, architectures, apparatuses, economies, geographies, images and materialities. As Fischer-Lichte has argued (2008), in performance something is happening in-between space, and the spatial relations established through movement and kinesthesia, and interpretative relations between actors/performers and audience are constitutive for *what* happens and comes into being. The performative and vanishing act of the performance brings into being an affective and embodied community of actors and spectators becoming co-actors themselves, whereby what is being favored is the “experience of physicality by all participants and their responses to it, from physiological, affective, energetic, and motor reactions to ensuing intense sensual experiences.” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 22) The performative space of the community established through the complex relationality and the corporal feedback loops “as self-referential, autopoietic system” is a dynamic and transformative space of contagion, infection and transmission of affects, bringing forth experiences of metamorphosis, and sets forward the performance and autopoietic system it enacts as emergent and “fundamentally open, unpredictable process.” (ibid.:39)

This world-making potentiality (Klein and Noeth 2011) of the performative and performance and its entanglement with the political is even more saliently brought to life in dance and choreography. "Choreography interweaves a plurality of very concrete social, political, linguistic, somatic, racial, economic, and aesthetic domains into its own plane of composition." (Lepecki 2012: 155) Instead of representing existing or imagined structures, system or worlds, dance enacts and institutes, by its embodied performative gestures, its organization of movement, relational ensemble and disposition of bodies, worlds, embodied identities/subjectivities, and communities as bodying-in-common, insofar as the 'in' and the 'with' mark the unmarkable extension of the body, its ownmost power in accordance to which it/is touches/touched by/another body, in accordance to which a body relates to another body, and co-appears in a shared world of others/other bodies without whom it would not be itself.

The world enacted and performed in dance, the sociality it brings into being is characterized (precisely as the political I am trying to think of here) by a flickering ontology, ephemerality and vanishing presence that makes its effects, singular and plural, felt afterwards as potentiality and desire for more. The configuration of the reality performed is self-referential and auto-poietic (or rather sym-poietic) since it has no other source of being than the dynamic, complex and open intra-actions of bodies and materialities in-common. As Randy Martin puts it beautifully: "Dance tangibly if momentarily materializes bodies assembled on their own behalf, a social ensemble made by its own means towards its immediate ends. It gathers its public then disperses them suddenly, leaving a sensible residue of what has been and what can only be desired, namely the will to create more. An offering of what we can have together now, a promise manifest immediately of what we might be, dance sets in motion is and ought, it moves into the world pressing our surround to be otherwise, while it figures a taste of what world we might have if it were left to our own creative designs." (Martin 2011:29)

In the same way the political marks the an-archy of the origin, and the abyssal nature of the ground that discloses itself in the moment of grounding and prevents its total closure. By presenting these arguments my intention is not to lead us to the conclusion that the political and dance/choreography dismisses any possibility for grounding, foundations, scenes and staging for the sake of pure ephemerality and movement, and leaves us with an infinite proliferation of differences and suspension over the nothingness of the void at the bottom. On the contrary, the political, by slipping away the firm and fixed foundation of any communitarian and political project, and by bringing forth its contingent and contested nature, as its internal radical difference (and negativity), makes the process of foundation equally necessary although inherently performatively unstable. It is precisely from this "absent ground" and the processual and

relational performance of the political that any political operation of grounding becomes possible and opens us to freedom as the pure potentiality for projection of possibilities and temporal ecstasis, as what simultaneously grounds and un-grounds, brings community and political institution into existence and deprives community from the logic of operativity. In a similar vein, in the field of dance studies, Martin persuasively claims that “choreography and performance constitute precisely this fragile dialectic between political becoming and being, a desire for difference and capacity for realization. (ibid: 32)

Lepecki (2007) reads this undecidability and ambivalence of doing/undoing, making/un/remaking, configuring/reconfiguring, and being/becoming in the choreographic and dance. The choreographic on the one hand represents, considering its historic origins, an apparatus (Deleuze 2006) of capture that organizes, distributes, and prescribes the relationship between senses and sense, perception, movement, capacity and meaning, and is thus tethered to modes of power that organize the field of visibility/invisibility, significance/insignificance, and subordinates the sociality and moving potential of dance to signification and archival full presence. But at the same time this “god-robber-of-bodies” that is the *choreographic decision*, just like the Sovereign and political decision, is grounded/ungrounded on the shattering field of forces and bodies - in - relation, made possible precisely through their relation undecidability in the same brush as it is being impossibilized by their incessant and relentless movements and reconfigurations of the in-between, “the potential of moving relations.” (Cvejic 2004:n.p.) This leads Lepecki to conclude that “the falling back in the capture of the choreographic is its redoing, this falling is the work of dance.” (Lepecki 2007:122)

Bringing into analytical discourse the notion of the political, my hypothesis is that the material-symbolic and foundational power that choreographically institutes a community, and the material-discursive apparatuses (Barad) that performatively materialize the shared world are open to perpetual, antagonistic and dissensual contestation and transformation (Mouffe, Laclau, Rancière). The political introduces the disturbing difference in the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière) and the legitimate / legible sensory experience of the visible, doable, and sayable. It is the dissensual/differential principle which prevents the closure of the community and the distribution of bodies and sensible experience in it on the grounds of a definite principle.

Framing these concepts within the new materialist performative perspective, we can look at the potentials for performative resistances, emerging within the gaps, ruptures, excesses and failures of politics’ performativity, as coming from matter’s and bodies’ own agential unpredictability, relationality,

potentiality, becoming and excessiveness. They open further the critical potential for understanding, enacting and choreographing counter-hegemonic “assemblages that connect multitudinous relations from physical, biological, cultural and abstract realms” (Fox and Alldred), whereby the “affect economies” (Clough) emerging between and among these relations shift and transform social worlds and bodily capacities, orientations, dispositions, feelings and desires.

Examples:

YUGOSLAVIA, HOW IDEOLOGY MOVED OUR COLLECTIVE BODY  
a film by Marta Popivoda:

<https://www.martapopivoda.info/work/yugoslavia-how-ideology-moved-our-collective-body/>

<https://globalvoices.org/2016/04/27/anatomy-of-a-macedonian-colorful-revolution/>

<http://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?sp=61d2df0a600d3be0a687ecd4e767755d557a8feb&lg=en>

<https://www.dorisuhlich.at/en/projects/boom-bodies>

<https://www.dorisuhlich.at/en/projects/more-than-naked>

<https://isabelle-schad.net/spip.php?rubrique46>

<https://www.amazon.com/United-Anger-History-ACT-UP/dp/B00KEOI2HA>

<https://bsf.si/en/movie/staro-in-novo/>

Slavcho Dimitrov

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in  
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