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From being one to being-in-common: political performativity, proxemics, and the joys of provisional unity

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From *Being One* to *Being-in-Common*: Political Performativity, Proxemics, and the Joys of Provisional Unity

Gillian Whiteley

Introduction

Over the last couple of decades or so, ever-expanding digital platforms have offered extensive possibilities for individuals to re-present and curate the actions and interventions of the "performed self." Facilitated by mobile technologies and social media, artists, transnational activists and citizens across the globe have responded creatively to occupations, insurrections, and uprisings as well as smaller-scale local campaigns, sharing tactics and practices. Protests, demonstrations, and interventions have produced a plethora of new forms of collective "political performativity." This interaction of political activism and performance has received sustained critical analysis and the "performative turn" has become endemic across a range of disciplines.

In 2012, Richard Schechner identified the emergence of "performance activism" as a phenomenon which crosses not only geographic but emotional, ideological, political and personal borders, using play and experimentation to effect *new social relations*.[1] Having generated discourses of "performativity" in the 1990s, Judith Butler, in her analysis of Occupy in 2011, subsequently consolidated in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), combined embodied performative acts with radical politics. Moreover, collective political performativity has been documented in a range of recent publications and exhibitions such as Liz McQuiston's *Visual Impact, Creative Dissent in the 21st Century* (2015) and Georges Didi-Huberman's *Uprisings* (2016), staged at the Jeu de Paume in Paris and accompanied by a substantial publication with specially commissioned essays by key theorists including Judith Butler, Antonio Negri, and Jacques Rancière.

But exactly what form of new social relations, or more precisely, what kind of emancipatory political engagement is facilitated by acts of political performativity? What happens subjectively and affectively when individuals come together in collective actions of performative protest and dissent at particular historical and located conjunctures? How, if at all, does a group of dissenting individuals become beings-in-common? And is performance a key element?

To answer these questions, I make some preliminary comments on performance, the performative turn, the discourse of performativity, and its relationship to political activism. I then consider three distinct historically and culturally situated acts of collective political performativity, viewed as "improvisational forms of public assembly" (Butler 2015, 22). Diana Taylor articulates performance as "vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called 'twice-behaved behavior'" (Taylor 2003, 2–3). The selected acts of collective political performativity explored here are "vital acts of transfer"; they share a "repertoire" of practices across place and time. In each case, an agentic image or utterance is produced, circulated and re-enacted or re-iterated elsewhere by strangers congregating in encounters, occupying space, forming transitory improvisational assemblies.

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The three acts will be examined through ontologies of "being plural," addressing the shift from "being singular" to "being-in-common" (Nancy 2000). Acknowledging Lauren Berlant's troubling of utopian perspectives on "commoning" activities, I conclude that public participative modes of performance, in particular, facilitate the development of alternative subjectivities through affective bodily encounters between strangers. Congregations of bodies as vehicles of affectivity (Butler 2015) become encounters of incipient commoning (Stavrides 2016). They produce a provisional unity, resonating with what Jeremy Gilbert refers to as the boundlessness, the "infinite relationality" (Gilbert 2014) of the human condition. There is something irresistible about activities that involve coming together in common endeavour for mutual benefit and in a spirit of co-operation. In an era of radical populist politics of both the right and the left,[2] though, becoming enamoured of provisional alliances needs a dose of skepticism and that needs to be kept in mind through the following sections.

Performance and the "Performative Turn"

Simply and succinctly, Elin Diamond notes that performance has two elements: it is always "a doing" and "a thing done." For her, it encompasses

> certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others or by the watching self . . . and the thing done, the completed event framed in time and space and remembered, misremembered, interpreted and passionately revisited across a pre-existing discursive field. (Diamond 1996, 1)

Diamond's definition is useful, but it confines performance temporally to being a "completed event." Lisa Goodman provides a more fluid interpretation of performance, describing it as an act of embodiment, "translating ideas through physicalisation as well as intellectualisation" (Goodman 2000, 7). However, using the term "performative" as a descriptor offers a further extension to an understanding of performance, enabling an emphasis on performance as an ongoing event, an activity in which something happens through time. It holds the possibility that a performance might oscillate temporally between past, present, and some point yet to come. Performativity allows us to think about performance not only as a "mode" of social activity, but also as an ongoing processual process rather than a completed one.

Now, it almost goes without saying that, hackneyed as the rhetoric of successive "turns" within contemporary critical and arts theory has become, the performative turn has become endemic across a range of disciplines.[3] Although the term is rooted in the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin's earlier theorizing of the "speech act" as a "performative utterance,"[4] Judith Butler played a major role in theorizing the performative in the 1990s (see Butler 1990; Butler 1993; Butler [1988] 1997; Osborne and Segal 1994), leading Diamond to exclaim, "performance discourse and its new theoretical partner—performativity—are dominating critical discussions almost to the point of stupefaction" (Diamond in Goodman and de Gay 2000, 67). Twenty years on, with new digital and social media playing a key role in engendering DIY cultures of performativity, the trope and practices associated with performance are thoroughly embedded in the domain of the visual arts. Within the field of contemporary art practice, "performance art" is no longer a subsidiary niche, exemplified perhaps by the opening of The Tanks at Tate Modern in 2012[5] (billed as the world's first gallery dedicated to performance and live artists): performance art has become part of the experience of the London cultural tourist. In his piece written on its inauguration—"How Performance Art Took Over"—the

Guardian's art critic Adrian Searle remarked that the art of performance had now reached its apogee. Highlighting the proliferation of performance, enactments and immersive installations in contemporary practice, he remarked "performance, in fact, is now where it's at; it's hard to think of much recent art that isn't, at some level, performative. And who cares about genre any more, anyway?" (Searle 2012). Indeed, neither is performativity confined to human activity, as posthumanists (see Barad 2003) and new materialists (see Lange-Berndt 2015; Coole and Frost 2010) underline the agentic properties of materials and objects, and projects such as Gavin Grindon's exhibition *Disobedient Objects*, staged at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Flood and Grindon 2014), demonstrated how objects play a performative role in resistance and revolutionary narratives.

Political Performativity

> Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of *political performativity* that puts livable life at the forefront of politics. (Butler 2015, 18. My italics)

The engagement of "performance art" *with* radical politics has its history, exemplified by the extensive oeuvre of an artist such as Suzanne Lacy who, since the late 1960s, has worked on large-scale collaborative performance–based projects which have explored women's lives and experiences from intersectional perspectives, gender and social class inequalities, race, ethnicity, ageing, violence, rural and urban deprivation and labour (Lacy 1995; Lacy 2010). Indeed, in 2012 the newly opened Tanks chose to re-stage Lacy's *Crystal Quilt*, originally a three-year-long project first presented in 1987 in Minneapolis involving 430 women over the age of 60 sharing their views on growing older. The resulting performance was broadcast live on television and attended by over 3,000 people. In 2012, Lacy re-visited and re-worked the project, inviting hundreds of women over the age of 60 from across the UK who had taken part in significant activist movements and protests from the 1950s to the 1980s. They shared their personal stories in a series of workshops, culminating in the new participatory artwork *Silver Action,* a day-long public live and unscripted performance of staged conversations at the Tanks.

Equally, the sphere of radical politics itself has a long lineage of performative activity in urban and rural settings as its histories of pageants, parades, and processions over centuries are well documented.[6] However, with the recent performance turn in social activism identified by Friedman and Holzman (2014), among others, it is the melding of the two into something we might call "political performativity" that is particularly interesting here. The live-streamed spectacle of marches, processions, demonstrations, occupations and various manifestations can be viewed as not theatre and not simply "life" but powerful performative acts.

These have been galvanized theoretically by Butler's analysis of Occupy's challenge to power through the performative body in "Body Alliance and the Politics of the Street" (Butler 2011) and, more recently, through her book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Butler 2015). Working with Hannah Arendt's ideas on the street as a stage or "space of appearance,"[7] Butler asserts that when bodies congregate, they lay claim to public space and to the demand for a "livable life" and that this, in itself, constitutes a political act. While these acts of "plural action" can have divergent or convergent demands and may not be reducible to a single emancipatory claim, the gathering of gestural moving bodies and their acting in concert amounts to an expression of will: "*the*

assembly is already speaking before it utters any words, that by coming together it is *already* an enactment of a popular will" (Butler 2015, 156–57. Italics in original).

Having established some contextual understandings of what is meant by political performativity, I move on to consider the kinds of performance tactics employed in particular cases, the first being the Dutch Provo which briefly enacted mayhem in public in the mid-1960s as, I argue, a transitory "improvisational form of public assembly" (Butler 2015, 22) and to ask, what kind of politics was produced?



Opening ceremony of the exhibition *Because My Bike Was There* on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, March 19, 1966. The exhibition included photographs of police action during Provo demonstrations a few days before. The opening led to a confrontation with the police when the crowd did not comply with the order to spread. Photograph by Joost Anefo Evers. Dutch National Archives collection, Creative Commons image.

The Dutch Provo: Performative Utterances and Joyous Mayhem

> When the electric clock by the Lutheran Church on the Spui pointed to the zero hour of midnight, the high priest appeared from an alleyway in full pontifical, sometimes daubed with paint, sometimes masked, and began walking magical circles round the Nicotine Demon while his disciples applauded and sang the Ugge-Ugge song. Sometimes there were hundreds listening to his sermons from the pedestal. They handed him paper, which he placed round the Lieverdje and wood, alcohol and matches. (Mulisch 1967, 67)

The White Bicycle Plan of 1966, involving the commandeering and free distribution of bicycles in the city of Amsterdam, was just one of the imaginative initiatives of the short-lived but highly influential movement known as Provo.[8] Between 1965 and 1967, they issued manifestos on squatters' rights and blueprints for social and car-free urban utopias, staged anarchic performances, directed anti-war and anti-Royalist riots in the streets, and created spontaneous happenings and

public spectacles.[9] Presaging the post-Seattle amalgamation of performance and activism, the Provo's political performativity of public pranks, theatrical stunts and a gamut of playful strategies amounted to a politics of unruliness as a form of cultural resistance. Their activities align with Jan Cohen-Cruz's definition of "radical street performance" as that which "potentially creates a bridge between imagined and real action . . . responding directly to events as they occur spontaneously" (Cohen-Cruz 1998, 2).

The Provo's self-organized chants and impromptu slogans—and even the emblematic visual graphic of the "apple sign"—could be described as performative utterances in that they were not only affective but generated countercultural activity and constituted a kind of ramshackle political rhetoric. Provo voicings and acts were rapidly adopted and ritualized by a mass of unrelated strangers in public congregation in Amsterdam. Strangers paraded together singing the "Ugge-Ugge" song or chanting the ritualistic "something must happen," an agitational slogan and call for public participation incanted by the "high priest" Robert Jasper Grootveld. While the flamboyance of the Provo gave it high visibility, simultaneously, it was their *invisibility* which also appealed to youth *en masse*. Frequently appearing from nowhere, it often seemed that maybe Provo did not really exist; perhaps it was merely an "imago" (Fenger and Valkman 1974, 22). With a relatively small core of around thirty or so activists in Amsterdam and no formal membership (de Jong 1970, 14),[10] a key Provo strategy was to utilize transience and contagion, fleetingly bringing strangers together in street acts of mass participation. With no formal vertical or hierarchical structure, the organization was rhizomatic;[11] ideas were spread through the viral motif of the apple image (with the dot representing the "magic centre" of Amsterdam), which frequently appeared overnight, and the use of "whiteness" as a ubiquitous form of insurgent branding. Smoke bombs were a common feature creating a ghostly "smoke-screen" through which people would appear on the streets and evaporate into nothingness.[12] The invisibility of Provo, underlined by the "whiting" out prank they practised, had all the characteristics of an audacious vanishing act, a magic trick.

Provo practices were not just contagious across the Netherlands but also spawned groups across Western Europe, in Scandinavia extending to the Eastern Bloc. They generated temporary assemblies that were active and creative. Pertinently, while they made efficacious use of distributing leaflets and posters (in itself a performative form of pamphleteering), participative performance—bodily encounters, "translating ideas through physicalisation" (see my earlier reference to Goodman 2007, 7)—was absolutely central to their activities.

Provo left a legacy of political performativity, not only in the Netherlands-based Kabouter movement which followed but in the later activities of groups such as the Polish underground protest movement known as the Orange Alternative, characterized by its signature graffiti of an emblematic "dwarf" (Grindon 2014; Kenney 2002; van Duyn 1972). Led by Waldemar Fydrych, the Orange Alternative staged happenings and absurd events, attracting mass participation on the streets from accidental passers-by. In 1988, in alliance with the broader Solidarity movement, it culminated in the manifestation of a mass counterpublic, a spontaneous assembly of ten thousand people processed through Wroclaw wearing orange dwarf hats, in opposition to the Soviet-supported regime.[13]

An analysis of the specific ideas of the Provo suggests that their politics were characteristically disorderly and disruptive, anarchist rather than Marxist, horizontal rather than hierarchical, operating on a series of plateaux, connecting rather than directing. In 2015, the Amsterdam graphic design studio Experimental Jetset referred to them as "part art movement and part political party . . . a

loose collective, consisting of individuals with very different ambitions: subversive agendas, artistic motives, utopian ideas, concrete plans" (Experimental Jetset 2016). Clearly, with an amorphous set of ideas with no consistent line and no organizational structures, Provo was not, nor ever could be a homogenous political movement. Rather, it was a fluid entity which drew on a range of creative strategies: essentially and, notably, without the assistance of web-based media, it brought individuals together in close physical proximity, creating a provisional unity based on performative street action and the generation of spontaneous improvisational assemblies elsewhere.

Standing Up, Standing Beside: Passive Acts of Collective Dissent

> In the moment of uprising, they gather a certain strength or force from one another, from alliance itself, one formed by a shared rejection of the unlivable, emerging now as bodies whose political strength lies in its growing numbers. (Judith Butler in Didi-Huberman 2016, 25)

Provo strategies of creative dissent, melding an unruly politics with cultural activism, interchanging *political performativity* with *performative politics*, continue to resonate.[14] The interchange with contemporary artistic practices has become so embedded that, on occasion, on a superficial reading at least, it is impossible to disentangle the two: exemplified by Jeremy Deller's joy-full *faux* procession, staged at Manchester International Festival in 2009 (Rugoff et al. 2012).[15] Pranksterism, tricksterism and participative forms of play have become *the* commonplace oppositional activity, contagious even, on the streets, across the Internet and in the public sphere with groups such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) and the black bloc countering political hegemonies by staging havoc in the spirit of joyous disobedience. Indeed, the marriage of mass choreographed performance and agitational political protest at the G20 Summit in Hamburg in July 2017, culminating in a joyous explosion of energy and togetherness,[16] was a perfect exemplification of what Martin Patrick has elucidated as the performative and choreographic "reinvention" of public space (Patrick 2011).

Although often associated with it, political performativity is not exclusively applicable to Provo-style activities of physical mayhem and playful praxis in public space: passive acts of togetherness are just as likely to bring about unity of political endeavour. The 1960s witnessed the development of nonviolent acts of mass political protest and civil disobedience which do not involve violence or physical agitation, relying instead solely on the affective power of the coming together of inert bodies that are silent and still. On November 14, 1969, hundreds of supporters lay prone in protest at US involvement in the Vietnam war at the "moratorium" held in Sheep Meadow in New York's Central Park, releasing thousands of black and white balloons (black for those who had died under Nixon and white for those symbolizing those who would die if the war continued). Borrowing from countercultural street theatre,[17] by the mid-1970s the "die-in," essentially, the taking over of a public space by inert bodies as an oppositional act,[18] was part of the established repertoire of protest activities across North American and Europe. In the following decade, the die-in was a staple tactic of women protesting against nuclear weapons at Greenham Common,[19] and it has been adopted to spectacular effect more recently by the Black Lives Matter campaign. At Harvard University in 2015, students staged a mass die-in for precisely 15½ minutes: 4½ to represent the number of hours unarmed Ferguson teenager Michael Brown's body lay on the ground, and an additional 11 minutes to represent the 11 times Eric Garner, the man killed in New York, told police he could not breathe before he suffocated.[20]



Erdem Gündüz, *Duran Adam*, protest performance, Taksim Square, Istanbul, 2013. With kind permission of Erdem Gündüz and Italo Rondinella. Photograph © Italo Rondinella, 2013. www.italorondinella.com

Before moving on to consider the ontology of beings-in-common and querying the nature of the political unity which is produced, I want to highlight one of the most powerful single performative acts of recent times which engaged with histories and currencies of passive political protest: the Turkish choreographer Erdem Gündüz's lone eight-hour *Standing Man* protest on June 18, 2013, in Taksim Square, Istanbul.[21] Following the brutal suppression of the mass protests that had taken place through May and June in Gezi Park, Gündüz stood motionless, staring at the giant portrait of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, a figure admired by the protestors. Initially ignored, he was joined throughout the day by thousands of anti-government protestors in this defiant act of silence in the Square, facing the Atatürk Kültür Merkezi cultural centre, a building due to be demolished under the president's plans to redevelop the Gezi Park area. In this context, the seemingly innocuous act of staring amounted to a political act of dissent.[22] Such a dignified act resonated not only with indigenous cultures of spiritual and religious practices within the region but also with Western genealogies of performance art as endurance. Notably, when interviewed about the event, Gündüz claimed the act as a protest, while emphasizing that the artistic aspect is precisely what made the political statement even possible.

> First of all it was not a performance. It was a protest. It was an individual activity which did not contain any violence within itself. . . . If you cannot perform political actions, you can start performing artistic actions. Because your political actions will be interfered with by the police and you will be beaten by the police, but you can perform an artistic action. (Gündüz interviewed by Banu Beyer and Sarah Maske in Weibel 2014, 586)

His silent vigil in the Square, disseminated through a set of powerful photographic images, went viral on social media, subsequently spreading to other cities in Turkey and beyond. Gündüz's affective moment of drama produced a memorable, iconic tableau which was rapidly re-produced, not just digitally but physically in spontaneous gatherings elsewhere. In his recounting of inactive resistance practices such as lie-ins, die-ins, and public fasts, of the Harvard students and others in the Black Lives Matter campaign, Iqbal notes the uniquely affective significance of this kind of performative form of communication: "The group performance that is the 'die-in' protest attempts to make a distinct *emotional imprint* on the spectator in a way that other communicative forms cannot" (Iqbal 2015. My italics).

Indeed, the *in*action enacted by Gündüz highlights the kind of symbiosis and reciprocity that takes place between embodied political performativity and the *emotional imprint* produced by the image. With circulation, the image becomes agentic, it acts, it "performs" and leads to its physicalization and re-enactment elsewhere by strangers congregating in other performative encounters, occupying space, forming transitory improvisational assemblies elsewhere.

So, bodies come together in acts of political performativity, but what kind of sustained politics can possibly emerge from this? Is there something inherently emancipatory about bodies coming together in public space? What is the potentiality for oppositionality when strangers come together in public proximity?

Being One, Beings-in-Common

> *The plurality of beings is at the foundation* [fondment] *of Being.* A single being is a contradiction in terms. (Nancy 2000, 12. Italics in original)

In addition to Butler's valuable insights into the political implications of bodies coming together discussed earlier, I want to draw on the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose extended essay *Being Singular Plural*, a lengthy philosophical rumination on being, offers pertinent thoughts on the very impossibility of singularity (Nancy 2000). While acknowledging Marx's apprehension of humanity as "social" and Heidegger's association of *being* with *being there*, Nancy supplements this with his claim to be the first to radically thematize *with* as the essential trait of being. Arguing that individual subjectivity can only be grasped "in the simultaneity of togetherness," a key aspect of his thesis is that, rather than *with* standing in addition to some prior being or as some kind of supplementary, it is at the very heart of being. Hence, being *with* is being's "proper plural singular essence" (Nancy 2000, 34). Furthermore, in relation to the arts, he also notes that what really counts is art's capacity to provide "the exposition of an access to an opening" (Nancy 2000, 14). Although his notion of "the arts" is not well-defined, this could be perceived as highlighting the capacity for art practices (including performance) to facilitate "being-in-common" and to open up utopic spaces of possibility and potentiality.

Deceptively, Nancy's dense ontological analysis of togetherness emerges from a deep concern with "the political" and especially with the nature of the distinction between politics and the political, which harks back to his work on this in the 1980s.[23] In a recent examination of how we might theorize artistic collaboration with reference to dance, Rudi Laermans conceptualizes it as "commonalism" and turns from Nancy to the ideas of the Italian autonomist political theorist Paolo Virno (Virno in Laermans 2013), putting forward an explicitly political perspective on what happens

when bodies congregate in public contexts. While there is no space here to elaborate at any length on the complexities of this political term, working with the term "multitude," Virno argues that whereas the concept of "the people" is passive, the multitude is essentially active, creative, and agentic. Virno says rather than dulling the process of individuation (an indirect reference to a common socio-psychological line of argument that the crowd obliterates individual difference), "it radicalizes it . . . the collective of the multitude establishes the feasibility of a non-representational democracy" (Virno 2004, 79).

The concept of the multitude may be helpful in thinking through how terminology informs and shapes political discourse around public assemblies. Equally apt in thinking through what happens when people congregate is Michael Warner's concept of the "counterpublic," which he identifies by a number of key features: it has a self-organizing discourse and is contingent on members' self-activity; it is an act of attention (Warner 2002, 89). Moreover, he gives particular prominence to a counterpublic as "a relation among strangers" remarking: "The development of forms that mediate the immediate theatre of one of 'stranger relationality' must surely be one of the most significant dimensions of modern history" (Warner 2002, 76).

However, there is no guarantee that being-with, identifying with the multitude or counterpublics will *not* generate an oppositional alt-right radicality.[24] The idealistic political assumptions about the coming together of individuals in spontaneous public congregation need to be problematized and further contested. Lauren Berlant's troubling of the ambiguous and contingent nature of collective encounters of "becoming common" is particularly pertinent and enlightening here. Pointedly, in her essay "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times" (Berlant 2016), she expresses suspicion about the current rush to claim acts of "commoning" as uncontestably positive, arguing that there is a preponderance of positivist political fantasizing associated with "being in proximity." As she says,

> Just because we are in the room together does not mean that we belong to the room or each other: belonging is a specific genre of affect, history and political mediation that cannot be presumed and is, indeed, a relation whose evidence and terms are always being contested. (Berlant 2016, 395)

That said, utopian fantasizing, difference and antagonisms do not lead Berlant to abandon the idea of the commons or commoning. Indeed, her work has led her to focus on the terms of transition to the commons and managing being in proximity, referring in passing to Jeremy Gilbert's conceptualization of this as fruitful (Gilbert 2014), she notes that he "adapts Georges [*sic*] Simondon's concept of *provisional unity* or metastability for this matter, allowing us to see transitional structure as a loose convergence that lets collectivity stay bound to the ordinary even as some of its life forms are fraying" (Berlant 2016, 394).

Now, staying with his reflections on collective encounters and his interrogation of the neoliberal assumption that the "isolated, competitive individual is the basic unit of human experience," Gilbert argues that the concept of sociality is a condition of dynamic multiplicity and complex creativity (Gilbert 2014, 93). Drawing on Hannah Arendt's ideas, he articulates what he calls "infinite relationality" as constituting both the condition of possibility and the inherently limiting factor of all human agency (Gilbert 2014, 2139).

> It is precisely the endlessness (boundlessness, infinity) of the meetings (relationality, joyous affect) in which we participate that is the only true index of a freedom that can never simply be "ours." (Gilbert 2014, 3890)

Hence, for me, Gilbert's references to the boundlessness, the infinite relationality of the human condition offer some hope for the value of temporary unity. While collective acts of political performativity may be fugitive in their convergent emancipatory politics, they engender a provisional unity *toward* being-in-common, a foundational ontological state to which individuals are already predisposed.

I end by recounting an anecdote from my own field notes regarding a mass event of political performativity drawn from lived experience. This not only engages with the boundlessness of the human condition to *be-with*, it illustrates a range of elements discussed in this paper: the Durham Miners' Gala may have a superficial semblance of structure, dominated by the organized structures of the trade union and labour movement, but it is saturated with affective carnival, a subordinate disorderly unruly politics, and spontaneous performative utterances.



The Big Meeting, Durham Miners' Gala, July 2017. Photograph by Gillian Whiteley.

The Big Meeting, Durham Miners' Gala, July 2017

> The "true" collective is the shift that turns the heaviness and unbearableness of life into the choice of rising up, into the effort and *joy* of doing it. (Negri in Didi-Huberman 2016, 38. My italics)

We alight from the Unite coach to a chaotic logjam of traffic, deafening human chatter and chanting, the unfurling of banners, stapling of placards and clicking of mobile phones as images are uploaded to Twitter. We expect to join the same kind of mass public gathering as a couple of years ago, but with a crowd of over two hundred thousand, the biggest since the 1960s, its composition feels different this time.[25] Ex-colliery villagers, associated working-class communities and assorted labour and trade union movement organizations are here in droves, but the stage is set for a much broader congregation of bodies: post-Brexit, post-Grenfell, post-general election, the gala is a showcase for a diverse range of oppositional publics who have come together in a popular front across a wide social, ethnic, and class spectrum. Following tradition, the carnivalesque procession of banners, a ramshackle spectacle of performative politics, parades through the town and into the park. The crowd heaves forward to hear lengthy political speeches that are intermittently rousing, poignant, and tedious. At the back of the podium, everyone is packed in close together, bodies touching, looking and listening intently. Behind us, amid this massed hushed spectacle of political performativity, a group of local youths clamber noisily to the top of the helter-skelter and perform a minor irreverent act: they chant "Oh Jeremy Corbyn." After Glastonbury, maybe it was expected, but it's bad timing. Even here, initially, this is received as non-conformist dissent. Nervously, everyone expects someone to shut them up. But they carry on regardless, posing for selfies to post on Facebook.

Since the killing of twelve staff members of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in retaliation for lampooning radical Islam, and the subsequent *riposte* of solidarity, *Je suis Charlie* (McQuiston 2015, 151, 184–86), performative utterances have proliferated across transnational borders and in different geopolitical contexts. Such acts have activated individuals to join up in various forms of alliance, bringing strangers together in Nancy's foundational sense of being-with. However, facilitated by Twitter and social media, the reiteration of *Je suis Charlie* by all and sundry (from politicians of all parties to red carpet celebrities)[26] meant that it quickly became a vacuous statement. Hence, while providing a semblance of being-with, it actually masked difference and did little to reveal the cultural and ethnic complexities of the situation.[27] Doubtless, the Corbyn chant masked a diversity of political differences and class antagonisms but, superficially at least, it motivated some to political action and generated a *provisional*, if fractious, unity across generations and social class.

Concluding Remarks: Becoming Common

In alliance with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "de-territorialisation,"[28] I concur with modes of art that attempt to de-territorialize categories between art, action, and social and political practice. In this vein, Susan Kelly celebrates practices that create "temporary mutant conjunctions and coalitions" (Kanngieser 2011, 129), asserting that it doesn't matter anymore if it's art or life, it's about participants and constituents in performative encounters (Kanngieser 2011, 131–32). Evaluating the efficacy of performative acts in effecting social and political change, though, is complex and fraught with problems. As Berlant suggests, it is as easy to lionize "togetherness" and partner it with anticapitalist oppositionality as it is to be cynical and melancholic: to see, as Schechner puts it, popular carnival inevitably reassigned as entertainment, the decay of festival into "dirty politics" and the "inevitable end to spontaneous communitas" (Schechner in Cohen-Cruz 1998, 205). Or, to focus on neoliberalism's recuperation and commodification of even the most radical multitudinous moments: paradoxically, in a Situationist-style *détournement*,[29] Occupy memorabilia, Standing Man t-shirts, and *Je suis Charlie* merchandise are sold back to us.[30] Indeed, the speed at which (with apologies to Gil Scott-Heron) the revolution will not just be televised, but

monetized, is sometimes staggering.[31] Equally, it's vital to acknowledge that the performative mode is a powerfully affective form of embodied communication, so powerful that the seduction of being-with needs tempering with a critical head. In a period characterized by Begum Firat and Aylin Kuryel as a time of "decentralised struggle," when understanding of "victory" is highly contested (Firat and Kurel 2011, 11–12), the transition of performative encounters from the semblance of a politics to real praxis is the tricky thing. That said, the briefly lived moments of provisional political unity which have been facilitated by performative acts—such as Erdem Gündüz's collective silent protest—should be prized. Joyously, they demonstrate the infinite relationality and boundlessness of the human condition and the potential for beings to *become* common, not merely in terms of physical closeness but as a stepping stone to furthering a kind of politics based on resistance, co-operation, and the development of mutual understanding and compassion for all beings.

Notes

1. Much earlier is Schechner (1993). The origins of "performance activism" are outlined in Friedman and Holzman (2014).

2. On the political opportunities and challenges presented by the current "populist moment," see Chantal Mouffe, 2018.

3. See O'Neill and Wilson's analysis of the rhetoric of "the turn" in O'Neill and Wilson (2010, 11–22).

4. See Austin (1962). Salih notes that, although Butler doesn't directly reference Austin and Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's ideas in his essay "Signature Event Context" (1972), she implicitly draws on them in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and she also refers to them explicitly in an interview in 1993; see Salih, "On Judith Butler and Performativity," available at http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.527.8862&rep=rep1&type=pdf, originally part of Chapters 2 & 3 in Salih (2002).

5. See http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tanks.

6. Reiss (2007) examines the evolution of protest marches and parades with specific case studies.

7. On Arendt, see Salih (2002) at note 3 and Tavani (2013).

8. Van Duyn and the group of anarchists around him adopted the term "provo" from a reference in a doctoral thesis written by Dr. Buikhuizen. An editor's note in *Anarchy 1966* refers to Buikhuizen's comments on Amsterdam's discontented youth, noting that he called them "provocateurs" for the way in which they "pinpricked" authority. When van Duyn's group of anarchists appeared in 1965, they took the name Provo. The editor's note attributes the information to the *Manchester Guardian* of June 18, 1966, but this reference is constantly recounted in contemporaneous and retrospective accounts.

9. Useful sources include van Duyn (1966) and Kempton (2007), which includes an annotated bibliography. Extensive Provo archives are held at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

10. Additionally and more internationally, de Jong lists the following: Robert Jasper Grootveld, Fred Wessels, John van Doorn, Wolf Vostell, Ben Vautier, Simon Vinkenoog, Simon Posthuma, Thom Jaspers, Joop Dielemans, Gerrit Lakmaaker (alias Gerrit de Danser), Marijke Koger.

11. Provo activities spawned "underground" roots in multiple directions, spreading a kind of anarchistic mayhem: they were rhizomatic, in the theoretical sense outlined by Deleuze and Guattari ([1980] 2004).

12. The first issue of *Provo* magazine (which declared "no copyright" to further facilitate the "contagion" of ideas) gave details and diagrams of how to make a white smoke bomb using a pineapple.

13. In turn, their playful tactics of civil disobedience were influential on activists in Ukraine in what was termed the Orange Revolution of 2004. See Popovic 2015.

14. Many examples could be cited, e.g. the Pussy Hats response to Trump.

15. "Joy-full" because Deller's retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 2012 was entitled *Joy in People*.

16. The broadsheet-style newspaper, *Protest Reader*, included a two-page spread entitled "Protest Choreography" which listed a week of performative interventions such as "I'd Rather Dance Plenty than G20" event and another calling participants to a "Night Dance Demonstration." Another broadsheet, *Il Giornale*, produced daily through the G20 summit, was entirely dedicated to previewing and reporting on performative interventions. The spectacular crowd-funded project 1000Gestalten involved hundreds of volunteers from eighty-five cities covered in clay silently walking through the streets in an attempt to awaken people to the "destructive evils of capitalism." See https://1000gestalten.de/en/. There are many reports, images and video clips on the Internet, for example at https://www.designboom.com/art/1000-gestalten-protest-g20-summit-hamburg-07-08-2017/. The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam has an archive collection of ephemera, photographs, and documents: COLL00313 Events G20 Summit Hamburg 2017 Collection.

17. Founded in 1968 by John Fox et al., the British performance collective Welfare State International were profoundly influenced by the work of countercultural theatre groups such as San Francisco Mime Troupe, Bread and Puppets, and those associated with Augusto Boal. The ever-changing group of artists, musicians, writers, engineers, and community participants continued to practise a form of "performance activism" and "political performativity" through to 2006. See Whiteley (2010) and Whiteley (2016).

18. An early example was le Monde à bicyclette "die-in" in 1976, inspired by a news reports of a 1972 Philadelphia protest in which 420 people simulated death to protest against nuclear weapons testing. On the recent history and revival of the practice, see Ross (2015).

19. Greenham Common women staged a "die-in" at the London Stock Exchange to coincide with President Reagan's visit to the UK in 1982 (see Quille 2016); 24 July 1983 women staged a "die-in" in front of politicians, public, and military hardware buyers at the Greenham Air Tattoo (see *Guardian* 2006).

20. Adriano Iqbal reported on this and other Black Lives Matter protests in the student magazine the *Harvard Crimson*.

21. This event, its appropriations and re-enactments were reported widely across the Internet in print, on video, and on social media, e.g. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/18/turkey-standing-man; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8HQxwMQ6B4; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_27OVwEtPs.

22. The Standing Man inspired other activities such as the "Taksim Square Book Club" involving protestors taking up the same stance while reading subversive texts (see McQuiston 2015, 74–75). Interviewed by Banu Beyer and Sarah Maske in 2014, Gündüz asserts that this was a protest and not a performance; nevertheless, he emphasizes that *artistic* action made the political protest possible.

23. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe set up the Centre de Recherches Philosophiques sur la Politique in 1982 as a space for "the *philosophical* questioning of the political" and "the questioning of the philosophical *about* the political" (rua Wall 2013). See also Nancy (2014).

24. On the Alt-Right see Michael (2016).

25. See http://www.durhamminers.org/gala and reports at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-40544096 and https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/08/jeremy-corbyn-helps-draw-record-crowds-to-durham-miners-gala.

26. Within two days of the attack on January 7, 2015, the slogan (first used on Twitter) had become one of the most popular news hashtags in Twitter history and was being hoisted onto banners, stickers, and handmade placards across the world, used in music, print and animated cartoons (e.g., *The Simpsons*).

27. In France, mass performances of the slogan were posited as the fundamental foundation of a new national unity and a renewed patriotic self-confidence, but from the perspective of many Muslims, constituting around 10 percent of the French population, to declare oneself "Charlie" was to affirm a national identity of exclusion. Consequently, it was quickly contested and challenged by rival slogans from Islamist sympathizers from Europe and beyond (McQuiston 2015).

28. Deterritorialization/reterritorialization is understood here as a movement which produces change as well as "a coming undone"; see Parr (2010, 69–72).

29. The familiar Situationist idea and practice—"détournement"—was a deliberate appropriation, alteration or re-contextualization of an existing image, cultural object, practice or commodity, often taking something out of its original context and using it in opposition to the very context that produced it. See "Definitions," in *Internationale Situationniste #1*, 1958, available at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html.

30. See merchandise at http://www.cafepress.co.uk/+occupy+gifts and an RT News report in 2011 on the fast pace of merchandising and marketing of Occupy at https://www.rt.com/usa/occupy-wall-street-revolution-361/.

31. Gil Scott-Heron's much-quoted "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," first recorded in 1970, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnJFhuOWgXg&list=RDqGaoXAwl9kw&index=4. On merchandising and social activism, see Nicholson (2017).

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