

The Troubles with Temporality:

Micropolitics of Performance

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This essay examines the relationship between contemporary performance, temporality, and politics. In recent decades, this relationship has mostly been analyzed through different approaches to the ontology of performance. On one hand, the political strength of performance is strongly related to the specific temporal constellation of its present; on the other, the disappearing presence is continuously challenged with the ways in which performance remains, and how its politics are intrinsically bounded to the traces and documents of the past that performances produce. In this essay, I would like to add an additional insight into the temporal dynamics of the performance, which critically stresses a specific temporal aspect of performance as a political and emancipatory practice. My goal is to show how such an understanding can also divide the temporal aspect of the performance from the materiality of its own event, turning it into an abstract and immaterial political potential, which can also be described as the process of dis-eventualization.

Something interesting is at work in the temporality of the performance practice, which is developing as a liminal practice, both at the border of its own genre and at the limits of its context, constantly resisting various forms of domestication. The performance can be described as a particular temporal rupture, a material implosion of different forces, which is always singular and, in this way, escapes the desire for capture. Its political strength is then closely related to the very specific temporality of the present, which does not get its strength from its disappearing ontology, but rather from the persistent materiality of performance: from the micropolitical rearrangements of different forces. In this sense, performance practice never addresses a specific politics (it would be wrong to speak about oppositional performance in this way, or performance of resistance, etc.), but it is constituted as an inherently political act, because of the temporal rupture created through performance practice. In this sense, we can only ask questions about the politics of performance in such a way that we are also pushing the limits of our thinking about politics itself: there is no concept of politics that would suit the practice of performance, and no performance which would give us a satisfactory answer with respect to its politics.

Such an approach is especially important today, when performance seems to have a very open and self-aware relationship with politics. Politics seems to belong to the genealogy of performance, no matter how we approach its ontology. It also seems that performance has become a problematical, extensible, almost anxious word, used for all kinds of activities and acts that are somehow part of the provocative, subversive, and critical cultural environment. My thesis, then, is that we can observe a specific seizure of performance's political strength today, which operates because of the erasure of the material and sensory quality of its singular political gesture. This exists very much in parallel with the production of sociality in numerous artistic institutions as spaces for the continuous production of relations, and of social and communicative spectacle. Performances are especially welcomed in the programs of contemporary visual art institutions due to their capacity for participatory, communicative, and sensory exchange with the audience. However, one of the problematic consequences of such a shift is a generalization of the performance's temporal gesture and the universalization of the performance's political strength, very often disclosed through the notion of its context. Performances then became examples of macropolitical contexts, which are addressing and reaffirming the existing oppositional politics in various ways. Instead of being singular inventive aesthetic and political practices, which, with their temporal ruptures, are actually establishing politics as a sum of different material forces, they became examples of universalized emancipatory histories. Instead of being antagonistic singular political practices of emancipation, they became part of the genealogy of progressive emancipation. Their temporality belongs to a specific emancipatory genealogy per se, instead of arising from a very particular and specific micropolitical rupture resulting from an intertwinement of many sensorial, spatial, and temporal forces, which are not without very different practical gestures and understandings.

Temporal Condensation

A very good example is the generalization of performances coming from the former Eastern Bloc, which are perceived mostly in terms of their relation to the general geopolitical context of socialism, wherein the inventive poetics and emancipatory politics of the artists seems at once to be similar. The emancipatory genealogy is translated into an oppositional, dissident genealogy, without taking into account the important micropolitical differences of many performance actions coming from the former socialist countries. Another case is a recent "discovery" of the Argentinian visual art and performance of the sixties, along with the canonization of many of the South American performance works as the start of the recent participatory turn in visual arts. Here, I would very much agree with Suely Rolnik, who writes that we can experience in the last decade (with the advance of globalization) how the spell that kept other cultures captive under a dominant culture has been broken, and how it "set to the possibility of elaborating their own experiences, with their own texture."¹ Nevertheless, she

claims, even if the world instituted by hegemonic thought has been destabilized, what has been taken as a general interpretive tool for Latin American artistic practices was mostly a macropolitical tendency: they are discussed in their representational, extensive, ideological frame. Rolnik states that a deep misunderstanding is at work here regarding what constitutes the relation between politics and art, which in turn contributes “to the denial of micropolitical artistic actions, hindering both their recognition and their expansion.”² This conflict, she writes, “extricates from art the micropolitical energy that is immanent to it, and in that case, when politics is introduced within artistic practices it is reduced to the macro-dimension and gives rise to the third figure: the militant artist.”³

I would like to relate this observation to the notion of the temporal potential of the performance, and show how this temporal potential must always be understood in its micropolitical scope. Performance can be thought of namely as an antagonistic knot of various temporal practices, a conglomerate of contradictory forces (human, non-human, spatial, natural, etc.) that constitute the moment of the present and the invention of its political potential. Performance is not a liminal practice because it is an act of the individual subject being subversive of its own context (that is to say, the figure of a militant artist), but because it is a sum of contradictory, complementary, or causally related micro-actions and events that must invent the form for the temporal condensation of actions, moves, energies, materials, and things, and in that way open the creation of performance to the intensity of life. In this temporal rupture, artists are, to use Rolnik’s description, “listening to the intensive reality that spurs them, and this reality can only puncture its boundaries if it is made concrete within the artist poetics.”⁴ A peculiar temporal force is at work here, which can be also described as a conjunction, an increased intensity of micropolitical gestures related to the experience of the body and mobilization of many other material forces in the performance event. In this sense, the focus on reality is increased: the performance gives potential to the environment from which it is also affected, but is never framed in it.

The hegemony at work in the representation of the political performance works on a global scale to separate the performance from this perpetually problematic, partial, material, situated, and embodied force; or, to put it differently, it is abstracting the performance from the singular conjunction of micropolitical forces. Only in that way can performances become commodities and objects of emancipatory politics; they begin to be produced and exchanged as other “immaterial,” flexible and circulating provocative products in capitalism. The politics of performance must somehow extend beyond its singular temporal conjunction to become globally representative and exchangeable—the performance has to endure and adjust its temporal potential in order to be shown globally; however, at the same time, it ceases to exist as a temporal rupture. It

must then detach itself from the complex specificity of the sensation, and with that also divide itself in entirety from the laboring force, or at least hide this force, make it invisible, hide the effort of how it is being done, or hide the effort of its practice.

The outcome of such abstractions are obsessive, grandiose speculative gestures, which are presented as a universalized endurance of liminality, yet paradoxically isolated from any historical, specific, or embodied materiality—from any conjunction of the micropolitics of desire. Such performances (for example, Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*) persist in a purely ocular experience of the gesture of the obsessive, narcissistic, individual—however global—subjectivity. Even if in these performances the effort is shown and even exploited, the very same effort is also metaphysical, immaterial, not at all gendered, sexual, embodied, wounded, partial, or contradictory. Grandiose gestures of the performance are also unbinding the performance from the laboring, sensory, material force and transferring the act into the metaphysical experience; performance becomes an achievement of (artistic) subjectivity in which all the hierarchies are disposed as the sheer achievements of pure presence; the universal immediacy of sharing. The only materiality that still supports the politics of performance is its context. It seems as if the reality of the context would be something unproblematically lying there, only to be addressed with the actions of the political artist. Context, then, works as a kind of tautology: a political context is addressed through a political artist and produces political art. Exactly such a tautology supports the macropolitical dimension of performance politics.⁵

At this point, I would like to show how the politics of performance articulates itself through the micro-practice of the temporal condensation: its source is actually in the temporal intensity of the conglomerate of different sensual, material, and perceptive forces. In that sense, performance is bounded to the present, but at the same time material, concrete, and embodied, not at all a fleeting trace of itself—it is a live act which is affecting and affected by the environment; however, this same environment never limits or contextualizes the force of its invention. I would like to describe this micropolitical conjugation of forces, which has a lot to do with the specific temporal intensity, with the help of the well-known performance work, *Triangle*, staged by Sanja Iveković on the balcony of her apartment in 1979, at a time when Tito, the Yugoslavian president, was parading through Zagreb. In this action, which was simultaneously a formal experiment, Iveković was seated on her balcony, establishing a triangle of communication between herself, Tito's parade in the street below, and the policeman who was observing and guarding the parade from the roof. She was dressed in a T-shirt, on which an inscription ("AMERICA") could be clearly seen, and reading a book by Thomas Bottomore, *Elites and Society*, while pretending to masturbate.

The performance's strength lies not in her commentary on the situation, as if the situation would already exist to be commented upon; instead, the situation is created only with her micro-action. The sensory shift is not evoked with her provocation of the policeman, but with an act of the policeman performing his job and intervening in the event: he eventually rings the bell on her apartment and asks her to move inside. In this act of unwilling, but nevertheless consequent, audience participation necessitated by his own profession, which plays out on the background of the presidential parade (which, of course, goes on undisturbed in the illusory totality of its own historical flow), the temporal potential of the event is disclosed as a knot of live gestures, moves, and actions that continuously disturb the ordered and policed lines between private and public, and with that, shift control of the situation. The parade exists here only as a background performance; the context is an abstract setting, and material action is happening somewhere else: in the space of the artist. Iveković here discloses the specific aesthetic awareness about the moment of forces, actions, moves, gazes, and desires that are affectingly rearranged and pushed toward the aesthetic event in the work by the constructed action of the artist. Only in that sense can the exhibition of the later documents make sense and her narrative support action.

The feminist political aspect of this work does not originate in the challenging of the public and private, because the existing borders were changed with the act. However, there is a peculiar strength in the specific disclosure of the invisible gazes and orders of power which are condensed in the articulation of the temporal event: not only can the anatomy of operation that accompanies the political spectacle be disclosed in its banality, but also the forces of power and rearrangement can be provoked, mocked, and shifted into the private, desirable, relaxed, or everyday gesture. This gesture simultaneously delves deeply into the hypocritical, asexualized temporal autonomy of the totalitarian parade and its distance from desirable emancipatory politics. *Triangle* is a micro-act of strange joy, the sprouting of the private life, which is created through the very specific temporal form at the same time. Or, to articulate this potential of the gesture differently: "Would you rather watch the old leader for the umpteenth time or a young artist masturbating?"⁶ Such temporal bounds between performance and present should be read as an embodied (sexual, sensory, desirable, live) and material act (spatial, bound to objects, with its own physicality and intensity, characterized by density, gravity, and inclination). I would like to unequivocally stress these different aspects of materiality, as I am convinced that it is especially crucial to show how such materiality is constitutive of the temporality of the performance event.

Dis-eventualization of Performance

More than a decade ago, Guillermo Gomez-Peña published a text entitled "In Defense of a Performance Art" (2001), which still can be read as a series of statements about politics of performance: "Our job may be to open up a temporary utopian / dystopian space, a demilitarized zone in which meaningful—radical behavior and progressive thought are hopefully allowed to take place, even if only for the duration of the piece."⁷ In the same text, Gomez-Peña is already describing the dangerous move of performance into the mainstream, which is somehow taking its function away from the performance artists themselves. "A perplexing phenomenon has occurred in the past seven years: the blob of the mainstream has devoured the lingo and imagery of the much touted 'margins'—the thornier and more sharp-edged, the better—and 'performance' has literally turned it into a sexy marketing strategy and pop genre. I call this phenomenon 'the mainstream bizarre.'"⁸ The mainstream bizarre, however, should not only be seen as commodification of performance, but much more as a deeply rooted political problem we have today with radical gestures and political critique, and which demands a reconceptualization of performance's temporal potential. Performance today is fighting against a chain of ghostly apprehensions that often transform the performance as a material practice into the continuous abstraction of procedures, dividing it from its spatial, situational, and micropolitical dynamic, and abstracting it from its contradictory and always partial embodiment, which is painful, contradictory, joyful, wounded, or shared. One of the reasons for this is the global circulation of performance practices that is not only enabled through the focus on performance documentation, the rise of reconstructions, and a general mania for archiving in recent years, but also through changes in the art institutions, which are strongly dedicated to the production of sociability and becoming spaces for the production of events.

Another reason could also be an actual disenchantment with political activity and the impossibility to politically imagine the world yet to come. Performance has to circulate today, but this usually entails its fleeting temporality, the seemingly endless possibility of democratization and expansion of performance forms, experimentation with subjectivity, and the generalization of its emancipatory potential (its macropolitical context). Or, to put it differently, performance has profound problems with politics exactly because it seems to be so inherently political—so inherently characterized to be a political act, an act of liberation, or at least an act of critique. That is why, when thinking about performance and its relation to politics today, one is often unpleasantly caught in the awkward need to differentiate between conservative performance works and progressive ones, between culturally commodified kitsch and radical cultural gestures, between performance celebrities and performance workers, between moralistic testing of politics and complexity of antagonism, between spectacle of participation and autonomy of the spectating.

This unusual need, to make a difference within the practice itself, can be understood as a consequence of the specific institutionalized historical appearance of performance, where performance is understood as a living tradition of emancipatory acts. This is a hegemonic history of performance that is paradoxically about its non-hegemonic character. In that sense, the performance is domesticated—it has become part of the history of performance as the continuous succession of emancipatory histories.

This problem can be observed in various reconstruction attempts in recent decades, which can extend from attempts of domestication and fetishization of the past performance event to the careful rethinking and restaging of peculiar aesthetic propositions and means by which things and events actually manifest. In many reconstruction attempts, we can again observe how domestication of emancipatory history can lead to the invisibility and immateriality of the performance practice: the result is an abstraction of the conjunctive act and its transformation into a representation of politics. What is happening when performance becomes a living tradition of the political act of emancipation can be also compared to what a philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes as “dis-eventualization,” or the act of undoing. He writes about “the global process of dis-eventualization which threatens the very fundamentals of our emancipatory achievements.”⁹ According to him, the society in which we live is continuously deprived of its substance: for example, the normalization of torture, acceptance of surveillance, normalization of the fortress Europe, basic health care, unexceptionableness of racism and sexism, etc. In such a society, an act of undoing is at work and the Event (in that frame, the Event of modernity, or democratization) is retroactively denied.

But what is actually denied when we think about the temporal event of performance? How is the political aspect of performance related to the undoing about which Žižek is writing? Performance is a temporal event because it is a rupture originating from a sum of contingencies, human and non-human alliances, affective tendencies, and common desires. It is a conjunction of collaborative and common practices, temporal modes of working, sensory practices that are always deeply historical, and temporal practices of the common production of subjectivities. Performance is a temporal event, because it is a contingent sum of different materialities, alliances, gestures, and acts. There is nothing inherently political in the performance; nevertheless, its practice is always pushing the limits of what could be political. It is a practice of the temporal equality of acts, which with production of the rupture and temporal condensation of forces is giving occasion to become, to appear. What is then undone nowadays in many performance events is exactly its politics, this liminal quality of the temporal rupture that is transferred into the universal continuity of emancipatory acts. In that sense, performance is somehow robbed of the gravity, intensity, and inclination that affects its own environment and becomes light,

nomadic, fleeting, professional, easy to circulate, exhibit, and contextualize. It is too often approached from a macropolitical perspective, as an example of specific political traditions, geopolitical constellations and contexts. As such, it is being normalized in the history of the universal aspiration for freedom, without any hints of how different practices of liberation can be deeply contradictory and antagonistic. The performance gesture should not be framed through geopolitics of context, but much more related to the contingency of different gestures in a particular temporal moment.

I would like to conclude this essay with another example. In the year 2006, Emil Hrvatin (now known as Janez Janša) made a reconstruction of the notorious Slovenian performance *Pupilija pa pa Pupilo na Pupilcki* from 1969. To avoid that the performance would be repeated as a farce, he also approached it through a careful study of how this performance was actually enacted. In 1969, *Pupilija* was created by a group of amateurs, students, friends, and young poets who knew each other from the student and cultural life in Ljubljana. It was directed by Dušan Jovanovič, who at that time was already a young professional in theater. They created the performance through a chain of childish games, playing with cultural stereotypes, political issues, sexuality, desire, pop culture, etc. Hrvatin created his reconstruction performance in a very specific way, being aware of the fact that, decades later, he was working with professionals, and that every hint of spontaneity would actually appear as a farce. He therefore structured the performance in such a way that it was made professional and skillful: everybody had to be ready to perform all the characters, but the performers were informed which character they would play only at the beginning of each show.

At first sight a technical decision, this is the core of the reconstruction approach, which succeeded in not undoing the original event, but affirming it by making it again. In this way, the performance was not a reconstruction of that what the audience could see (and remember), but of how it is possible that it has been done: the careful rethinking of the ways in which this temporal event came together as the sum of the contingent acts. The decision to change the spontaneity of improvisation and play into a strict task showed deep formal changes in the ways in which performances nowadays are pushing their politics to the limits, exactly because of the ways they are enacted: the political, aesthetic, or cultural context of their laboring force. A similar decision was accepted related to the end of the performance. *Pupilija* caused a huge scandal in the sixties, because at the end of the performance the actors killed a real chicken on the stage. The gaming structure ended with the intervention into the real, with a staging of a ritual that was, of course, very much in the aesthetic atmosphere of that time.

Hrvatín, however, changed this last scene to adapt a voting mechanism, whereby the audience could decide how the performance would end. The audience could choose from three different endings: an explanation of the legal regulations describing how it is possible to kill animals for food, a video reconstruction of the documentation of the chicken's murder, or its actual killing on stage. Most of the time, the audience playfully decided for the third version; however, when the voting was completed, a member from the audience was also invited to perform the act. The most important part of this decision is how it shifts from the ritualistic rupture to the affective dimension of spending time together, showing how the audience group is politically different today—no longer a totality, but a democratic dispersal of individuals.

What this reconstruction also showed is how much performance today depends on procedures, tasks, and the establishment of relations, which also have something to do with the shift in how events are manifested in general. In this sense, the temporal quality is repeated, but it is repeated in a very special way: the original performance from 1969 is not repeated as the unfinished event. Its politics were questioned here as a contingent practice, which must always be re-examined and remade with every performance. It must then be pushed to the limits of its own representability and open itself as a temporal potential of micropolitical practices—a series of conjunctions and temporal intensities that cannot be universalized, but always approached in their temporal singularity.

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1. Suely Rolnik, *Archive Mania*, documenta 13 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishing, 2013), 6.
 2. *Ibid.*, 7.
 3. *Ibid.*, 11.
 4. *Ibid.*, 10.
 5. Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (London: Zero Books, 2015).
 6. Ruth Noack, *Sanja Iveković: Triangle* (London: Afterall Books, 2013).
 7. Gomez-Peña, "In Defense of Performance Art" (2015), http://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm.

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8. Ibid.
 9. Slavoj Žižek, *Event: A Philosophical Journey through a Concept* (London: Penguin Press, 2014).