

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM "NON-PERFORMANCE AS METHOD"

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This one day conference, which is part of my 2016 research fellowship at the Research Centre for the Humanities in Athens, Greece, engages with the theme of "(non)performance as method." I have proposed this theme in order to explore the ways in which artistic and cultural practices, by way of their myriad articulations and forms, offer alternative methods and processes for ongoing and potential compositions of social life. More specifically, the conference studies performance practices that work against and through sets of constraints (economic, physical, social, material etc), and the entanglement of historical, contemporary and future cultural modes of political being and (un)becoming. Thus, in addition to an in-depth engagement with examples of certain strategies, actions and enactments, while always emphasizing practice as method and theory made material, we will be grappling with formations of refusal and escape, which is to say, we will be thinking about the questions raised by those performances that refuse to perform in a certain way, that refuse certain calls to perform. Therefore the question of nonperformance as practice also becomes one of collaborating, improvising and living otherwise.

My research seeks to build upon proposed notions of performancescapes, fugitive Athens, and the arts of the possible. Performancescapes is a neologism that, as my thinking around this idea has further developed, now moves toward a notion of non-performance. The idea of non-performance I glean from professor and poet Frederick Charles Moten, who introduced this concept at a talk last year at the MOMA, titled "Blackness and Nonperformance" (Moten 2015).¹

So, first of all, what do I mean by performancescapes? Well, I'm thinking through how this concept may allude to certain spatial and temporal praxes where the labor of performance makes visible the labor of resistant social imagination. How the 'scapes' produced, as well their recording, alter space and time. Here I'm also thinking of Jacques Ranciere's following

statement: "Now we must examine the very terrain of the sensible on which artistic gestures shake up our modes of perception and on which political gestures redefine our capacities for action. I am neither a historian of art nor a philosopher of politics, but I work on this question: What landscape can one describe as the meeting place between artistic practice and political practice?" (Ranciere 2007). In response to this question the theoretical concept of performancescapes sees landscapes of time and place not as apriori fields where capacities for action can take place but as reconfigured and reconstructed landscapes ephemerally generated and formed through artistic political gestures. The term 'performancescapes' also connotes a sense of fugitivity, of escape, where the insistence of performance can be seen as an articulation of a breakout that inexorably materially exists in excess of its performativity, there where the irregular precedes the normative. Thus, the notion of 'performancescapes' concerns both a field as well as improvisations tremoring within and unleashing this field via multiple historical, material and contingent gestures, transgressions, dissonances. I approach these instances and insistences not as simple flight or exit but rather as immersive, transformative border breaching of spaces, structures and signs. The writing of 'performancescapes' itself, in its neologistic awkwardness, attempts to experimentally perform such a breaching of the sensible: a misperforming alterity.

Performancescapes in this sense is about non-institutional actions of instituting related to the contingency of context and conventions, spatial and temporal enactments that alter landscapes through material effects and being, becoming and unbecoming. These acts are ones where fugitivity is conducted in the open and not in secret – performances of fugitivity as explicit – as a collective conspiracy that is to be witnessed. Fugitive insistence is not only a moving to a somewhere else, to new horizons but also the imperative to defend what one already has, a recovery and preservation. We stand with and at Standing Rock, indigenous life, the tapping into embodied memories through improvisation and protection, of performative revitalization and realization.

I am indebted to my teachers who teach me about the fugitive, particularly as expressed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013). As Jack Halberstam writes in his introduction to the book (and I quote and paraphrase him at length below) fugitive planning is mostly about "reaching out to find

connection,” “making common cause with the brokenness of being,” a gesturing to “another place,” “a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness.” But this wildness is not somewhere else. You are always “already in it” as it calls for you. “This call is always a call to dis-order and this disorder or wildness shows up in many places: in jazz, improvisation, in noise.” So when “called to this other place, the wild beyond... we have to give ourselves over to a certain kind of craziness.” This road to the wild beyond is marked “by refusal.” “With the right to refuse what has been refused to you.” A “refusal of the choices offered.” Gayatri Spivak calls this refusal the “first right.” This is always about a refusal to what Moten and Harney term “the call to order.” “Fugitivity is being separate from settling” (Halberstam 2013, 5-11).

In the years 2011 and 2015, as the economic and social fallout in Greece deepens, two artistic occupations take place in Athens. The first at state owned and neglected theatre Empros and the second at the historic café Green park, also state owned and abandoned for years. On both occasions a group of artists, activists and theorists occupied these spaces and inaugurated 10 day programs which included panels, diverse performances and artistic actions. The manifestos released by the groups emphasized the need for a collective aesthetic and discursive self-organized DIY response to the ongoing crisis. The first occupation in 2011 emphasized the need for the taking over the means of production and the second four years later called for joy and politics to emerge in unexpected broken spaces. My research proposal titled ‘Performancescapes: Fugitive Athens and the Arts of the Possible,’ is informed by such efforts and studies various manifestations of experimental performance practices that have emerged during the last few years across the city. In my study I argue that the performances analyzed, including experimental dance, theatre, queer and feminist poetics, migrant contact improvisation groups, and occupied theatres, practices stemming from within and against a background of economic recession and political upheavals, manifest incompletely other ways of being in the world whilst grappling with and commenting on the larger social landscape and tensions of the metropolis. By ‘arts of the possible’ I wish to make clear that throughout my research I approach both the performances studied as well as the notion of fugitivity as political acts. Since politics has famously been described by Otto Bismarck as ‘the art of the possible’ I theorize this notion by thinking through the question of aesthetics, politics and potentiality through a critical engagement with Ranciere’s

description of politics as “the transformation of the sensory fabric of ‘being together’” (Ranciere 2009: 56). Politics here is conceived in aesthetic terms where the inevitable dissensus and conflicts emerging from the meeting of different sensory worlds produce “a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible” (Ranciere 2009: 72)

This research project explores how experiences of precarity unleash new bodily postures and positions, and how the forcible new phases that these improvisations with constraint and possibility practice transformative rights to the city (Lefebvre 1968, Harvey 2008). By studying art and culture in their doing and re-doing, I wish to address the relationship between the aesthetic and political, and alternative modes of action and reception in the production of culture. Against the backdrop of and alongside self-organized, autonomous social movements, a swift rise of the extreme far right, and the historical divisions between socialist and capitalist political ideologies once again brought into sharp relief within the Greek, European, global public sphere, my study seeks to theorize and develop an inclusive heterogeneous understanding of an antagonistic ‘common’ or better still undercommons, where multiple resistances and performances of non-normative presences are manifested through both countering standpoints and shifting and elusive borders. Formed from inside the current crisis, I seek to study the phenomenal rise in experimental performance of the last few years and its relationship to the larger social and political climate. As rearrangements of the world anew, the organizing and disorganizing performances and nonperformances studied live queer politics as multiple arts and activisms of the possible where to imagine and improvise is to imagine and improvise forms of life otherwise.

And yet, I also follow Susan Ruddick when she asks: “How do we fashion a new political imaginary from fragmentary, diffuse and often antagonistic subjects, who may be united in principle against the exigencies of capitalism but diverge in practice, in terms of the sites, strategies and specific natures of their own oppression?” (2010). How do particular sets of constraints and discomfiting encounters constitute improvisations? For as Danielle Goldman writes in her book *I Want to be Ready* improvisations as practices of freedom emerge precisely through states of crampedness and constraint (2010). Can artistic, social and cultural practices offer blueprints for compositions of life otherwise? What still remains possible in the art of the

possible? Engaging with these questions and refusing a nation-state framework we will think through forces of fugitivity, affect, debt, censorship, fragmentary and diffuse desires and activisms, institutions, global flows of capital and art, and the spatial remains, trails and possibilities emanating from within art and social practice, the art of organization, sense, border crossing, thought.

The difficulty here stems out of reified notions of space and time that have come to be naturalized through capitalist mappings, motions, commodities and market flows as well as through a segregating and retreating from the differences we encounter, differences that are in fact socially produced in and by the production of space and time. If, as Lefebvre emphasizes, the urban revolution makes everything urban, even what we understand today as rural, then the question of the city is at one and the same time one about multiplicity, singularity and unboundedness: we can locate difference and alterity but cannot know or say where precise demarcations between them lie. We must attend to overlapping as well as spaces in between: this sensing requires from us a decolonizing of the mind and our practices. Via decolonial border thinking we can approach all cities and perceived spaces in between them as 'transmodern' (Dussel 2012) undoing Eurocentric hierarchies through a 'fractal, poethical and compositional thinking' (da Silva 2016) which problematizes linear thought, Habermas's notion of rational consensus, the public sphere, and the unfinished project of modernity through constructed regimes of cartographic space and time which relegate certain bodies as backward no-bodies, non-citizens. "What is a world?" Pheng Cheah asks in his book of the same title (Cheah 2016). How can the production of art intervene as active power in the conceptualization of the world divided by normative temporal and spatial terms which make a world through capitalist globalization? Following Lefebvre Cheah thinks through how art plays an important role in the temporalization of space, how we produce space/time and in particular how anti-(post)colonial cultural production imagine space as directly lived, how aesthetics shape representational space that counter representations of space, altering temporal and spatial practices through an awareness that one does not inhabit space passively but can actively participate in making it where meanings are constantly reevaluated and revalued in living experience. How are we produced through experience in constant processes of becoming and unbecoming, through a fleeing outwards *into* an acting out with others where questions of being and becoming are

approached as contingent matters of performance rather than resolute ontological categories of existence? These processes can be understood as serial acts of performance because as Andrew Culp points out building on Deleuze and Guattari, there is “no such thing as either man or nature... simply the production of production itself” (Culp 2016, 30). Thus questions of escape and forces of “production of production” cannot be separated from their respective entanglement with motions of becoming and unbecoming which in turn cannot be separated from questions surrounding the performance of labour/the labour of performance. If, as Elizabeth Grosz posits: “Art is where life most readily transforms itself, the zone of indetermination through which all becomings must pass,” then Kirsten Stakemeier’s and Marina Vishmidt’s emphasis on the labour inherent to reproduction, artistic or otherwise, de-romanticizes any easy move to transformation, becoming or escape through art’s zones of indetermination (Grosz 2008, 76, Stakemeier and Vishmidt 2016). In this sense art, which more than any other work can avoid specific ends by remaining simply a means, can nevertheless, as Stakemeier and Vishmidt argue, hardly elude the actual capitalist material conditions of its own reproduction. This observation then points to how if as previously noted Cheah suggests via Lefebvre that we do not merely inhabit space and time passively but can actively participate in making them where meanings are constantly reevaluated and revalued in living experience - this still leaves unasked the quality of the raw materiality of experience and the transient social subjectivity constituted from said experiences.

It is here that I would like to turn to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of a ‘sense of brown,’ a brown commons where different immeasurable and intimately shared forms and experiences of historical dispossession attentively tune in to each other, attend to each other (Munoz 2011). Life and the traces lives give over to us animate the trails and underground vibrations of the brown commons, a brown touching without mastery and foreclosure, a commons of pleasures and the not feeling quite right. It seems to me that a focus on “new pleasures and new worlds” as well as that knowing sense when something doesn’t feel right and the thought it makes possible may open up new possibilities for collectivity (Munoz 2010). Following Ruddick we can ask how a new political imaginary can emerge from difference and difficult encounters as opposed to joyous commonality and an undifferentiated multitude. Ruddick’s approach is an important one because for her new terrains of struggle are at once bound up with questions surrounding the historical and material conditions of necessity, the destabilizing moment of the encounter, and

the politics of affect as collaborative productive forces for thought and action. It is about the necessity of making art because we can change our space and time. It is about solidarity. It is about the hatred for and a refusal of turning certain bodies into consumable objects of pity. It is about how if things are constrained in a different space for others it's also constrained for you. Not because we are the same but because we sense, feel through each other and not for each other in a common yet differentiated brokenness a refusal of this world and displacement as a necessary condition for thought and collective action to take place.

I write here *with* performance art making where through this act I veer away from writing *about* art works as fixed object of study. Rather, the motions of my writing alongside arts' passages seek to escape scholarly conventions by emphasizing the simultaneous co-constitutiveness and dissolution of subjects and objects in their encountering and compositions, and vitally, to the ways in which performance art practices are also always philosophical and theoretical ones. Therefore, following Deleuze and Guattari, my project here is not to "bring these arts to philosophy, but to bring out the philosophy already in them" (Massumi 1987, xiii). I want to think of how certain attempts at fractal thinking, poethics flee outwards *into* an acting out with others. In other words, I think through and with the ways in which performances as co-created compositions are historical and ongoing escaping *processes* produced through, and thus never outside, constant dynamics of performance as simultaneous acts of becoming and unbecoming with others. According to Andrew Culp, for Deleuze "subjects are only interesting when they cast a "line to the outside" – in short, when they stop being subjects (with a double emphasis on 'being' and 'subjects')" (Culp 2016, 28). Such attempts, the infinite acts, imagined and real, of escape from and across those powers that "build walls", the ways in which the desire of fleeing the institution to be with others is bound up to the desire for a dispossession of the self, a dissolution of subjectivity made possible in the act of escaping. Culp, continues "[B]ecoming... has nothing to do with 'subjects developing into more of themselves.' Becoming is really a process of un-becoming. In "undoing the givenness of the given," unbecoming exercises undoing, a process that works to "undo the stabilities of identity, knowledge, location, and being" (Culp 2016, 28). A way out marks a necessary unbecoming into becoming, we must undo in order to do, do so as to undo. As Massumi writes in his prelude to Erin Manning's book *Always More than One*, "Process is process because it is forever deferring its own completion in

the dynamic form of more becoming. Process is always in the process of exceeding itself in its own carrying forward... It is always moving into its own beyond" (Manning 2013, xii). A constant deferral of processes' completion through constant becoming performance is at once an event and limitless process "always more than one" where escape and becoming are articulated as possible through something shareable yet immeasurable.

And this leads back to what is implicit in Ranciere's question: if he is interested in describing the landscape where political and artistic practice meet this presupposes that there is a difference between political gestures and art making and that sometimes they meet. Whether we agree or not this binary does produce some interesting questions: is this division one between means and ends? Is political gesture for Ranciere here an act with a specific function, a specific end? Is art then an activity that has no instrumental ends? Is this a question of communicability and commonality through a new terrain of the sensible? A communicability that is a means without ends would shake up modes of perception and this is why perhaps Ruddick ends her essay on how to engage difference and alterity within our collective creations through Deleuze's writing on the figure of the monstrous scream: an expressive affective force that has no meaning but has value, at once refusal and creation – an affect produced by encounter and how thought emerges from this fear and discomfort with difference.

Let us stay here in the realm of the scream. Where the scream is a social act. Let us stay here, perhaps all silently screaming inside right now, because we know that these questions are far from academic ones. And that even if they were merely academic ones they are still dangerous questions to ask for certain people from certain places. This is about struggle and sometimes it is about the absolute necessity for nonperformance. Non-performance is a legal term used in contract law. When you enter into a contract you are legally obligated to perform your contractual duties—that is, do what you promised to do in the contract. Nonperformance is the failure to fulfill your obligations under a contract. And so to end here with some of Moten's thoughts, what he calls preliminary notes on nonperformance at his talk "Balckness and Nonperformanace." I paraphrase some of these preliminary notes here. Nonperformance is the withdrawal from everything we're supposed to want, that falls under the rubric of the normative. A withdrawal from a very specific understanding from what it is to want in the first place. It is the refusal of a logics of value that both degrades and exploits at the same time. Nonperformance

refuses contracts that are the condition for relation by undoing the subject. An avowed dispossession of subjectivity that refuses to re-state. A dissonance as radical insolvency which resists the power that solves, determines, makes sovereign subjects. Sovereignty is where relation operates. If relation is figured through the logics of contract then art shiftingly reconfigures insovereign social work (Moten 2015).

¹ Moten (2015). Accessed Dec 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByIlg>

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