

Activism and Spectatorship

Guest Editors: Pieter Verstraete, Agata Łuksza

In the last decade, the roles and shapes of activist performance in the public sphere have changed. Besides tactical repertoires of protest (Tilly 1978) and guerrilla theatre (Berg 1965/Davis 1966) which inherently have performative efficacy, organic forms of collective protest have developed in tandem with social movements and civil societies. These collective protests have themselves born theatrical and performative aspects. We argue that this enhanced social *response-ability* (Diprose 2004; Ridout 2009; Farrier 2011) requires more comprehensive ethnographic, comparative and historical perspectives in order to reveal how activism can shape unarticulated urban subjectivities ('antagonistic subjectivation') and generate cross-cultural and interrelational practices of 'dissensus' (Rancière 1999; Ziarek 2001). We believe it is vital to ask about the particular genealogies of diverse audiences, publics, counterpublics, and assemblies, and to inquire into the variety of ways in which the media of theatre and theatricality have been engaged in forging specific groups and communities.

In contemporary aesthetic approaches to protest, a turn to festivalization, often in terms of a 'Bakhtinian carnivalesque', may thwart critical understandings of real biopolitics (Kershaw 1997), as well as complex local and national historical legacies on which theatricalized and performative forms of activism may build. Even more so in pandemic times, media coverage and social media have a key role to play in framing current paradoxes embedded in performative dissent, including the precarity of the body ('I can't breathe'), a growing artistic precariat, and different kinds of physical, discursive, and epistemic violence. Simultaneously, our current networked society implicates an emergent translocal spectatorship way beyond the new 'aesthetic of responsibility' (Lehmann 2006; Rai & Reinelt 2014) of our contemporary theatre ecosystems.

In order to fully understand the new modalities of a more ubiquitous *spect-actorship* (Boal [1979] 2000) in social protest, we should like to broaden the scope of theatre and performance studies beyond the preoccupation with the artist as individual or as part of a theatre collective (Colleran and Spencer 1998). The aim is to comprehend the various ways in which dramaturgies of resistance are socially engineered, how new forms of communal spectatorship are shaped, and how counter-public networks function. More than ever, transnational flows of ideas and forms, often supported by digital platforms, inspire the spread of new grassroots civil society movements, and distant onlookers on political events.

These developments call for urgent comparative and historical investigations that chart the bearings of these multiple forms of activist performativity on new forms of spectatorship and engagement, as well as global theatre and performance studies. Considering to what extent theatricality addresses a ‘commensurability of spectating to civil society’ (Davis 2003), effecting a critical stance whilst influencing the public sphere, we have to pose questions about the liberating potential of a multipositionality as well as the risks of a ‘theatrocracy’ (Weber 2004). Equally, we need radically to rethink how different forms of social protest advance visions of a ‘performative democracy’ (Matynia 2009) through urban pockets for uninhibited expressions of political agency, possibility, and positionality.

It seems necessary then, on the one hand, to look back at the role of theatre, whether real or imagined, against the background of social upheavals, civil movements, riots, revolutions, and rebellions; and to reflect on how it might have served particular political and social interests of contemporary and future generations, especially as a site of resistance and a source of counter-hegemonic activism (Butsch 2008, Ravel 1999, Sauter 2000). On the other hand, the historical processes of taming the unruliness of the theatrical audience (Heim 2016, Kennedy 2009), which Baz Kershaw recognizes as theatre’s ‘increasing capitulation to near-fascistic forces’ (2001), also demand our urgent investigation.

In this special themed journal issue, we invite scholars and artists from around the globe to think through practical concepts of performance activism to address compelling current issues and relevant historical cases. We especially welcome contributions that critically reappraise earlier scholarship with the aim of contextualizing today’s protest cultures and reflecting on interconnections between political philosophies and performative practices. We are also interested in contributions that elaborate concepts of protest and activism in order to enhance

theatre and performance methodologies, including analytical, historical, and comparative approaches, modes of situated ethics as a research method, as well as cross-cultural and inter-societal perspectives beyond a methodological Eurocentrism.

Indicative topics to be addressed might include, but are not limited to:

- artistic and civic engagement, DIY, responsibility, antagonism, oppositional aesthetics;
- post- and counter-memory after occupations, counter-hegemony, sustainability;
- strategies of endurance, presence, exposure, visibility; sousveillance and vigilance;
- (state) repression; censorship, coercion; violence, vulnerability, risk, and precarity;
- theatricality of protest, political performativity, theatre and street riots, insurrection;
- politics of public space, spatial citizenship, identity places, digital and environmental activism;
- voicing political subjectivities, collective vs individual agency; role of exilic artists;
- commons and communalism, 'multitude', audience/spectatorship as collective experience;
- impact of 'political springs', global justice and radical democracy on theatre discourses.

Proposal submissions:

- Proposals should be written in UK English, in MS Word format and be between 600 and 700 words. Please include a brief bio (max. 100 words) in your proposal submission and send it by email to the guest editors (see contacts below) by **24 May 2021**. Proposals must be based on original, unpublished work not under consideration for publication elsewhere.
- Proposals should specify in which language the article will be submitted. The journal is open to articles written in the language of the author's preference, but please note that for all articles written in languages other than English contributors will be asked to secure professional proof-reading. Authors may also choose to publish their article in more than one language.
- If your proposal is accepted, you will be invited to submit a first draft of your article by **6 September 2021**. The maximum length of the final article should not exceed 9000 words (including abstract in English and in at least one additional language, references, author bio, etc.). Submitted articles will undergo a double-blind peer-review process by two anonymous experts.
- For more information on the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, please visit: <https://journal.eastap.com>.

Schedule:

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