

“People Are Missing.” And What Can Performance Do?

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Abstract:

Traveling through the spaces of political actions and performing arts of the 2010s, mostly in Western European countries, *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe* looks into a new phase of relationships between these two fields. Asking about the potential of performance to embody the experience of politicality, the book provokes the discussion about alternative modes of participation in politics when artists’ and audiences’ imagination becomes a vehicle to overcome political predicament on the road to democracy.

Und was kann Performance dagegen tun?

German Abstract:

A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe unternimmt eine Reise durch die, vor allem westeuropäischen, Räume politischer Aktionen und der darstellenden Kunst in den 2010er Jahren und untersucht eine neue Phase der Beziehungen zwischen diesen beiden Bereichen. Indem es nach dem Potenzial der Performance zur Verkörperung von Erfahrungen des Politischen fragt, provoziert das Buch auch eine Diskussion über alternative Formen der politischen Teilhabe, bei der die Vorstellungskraft von Künstlern und Publikum zu einem Vehikel wird, um politische Dilemmata auf dem Weg zur Demokratie zu überwinden.

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Vujanović, Ana and Livia Andrea Piazza (eds.). *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe*. Berlin: B_Books, 2019. 256 pages, 20,00 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-942214-29-2.

The collection entitled *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe* edited by Ana Vujanović and Livia Andrea Piazza includes the contributions of eleven authors who present a vision of a new political dimension of performance as a response to the reconfiguration of the political sphere in countries of the West. In the “Introduction: People are missing,” the editors briefly describe the historical background of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor (from Ancient Greece to modern times,) pointing out the significant contributions of such artists and theoreticians as Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Peggy Phelan, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, Paolo Virno, and others. The ideas of Hannah Arendt play a special role in the study. Decades ago, the philosopher suggested thinking of performing arts and politics together, as both these spheres need the audience and publicity as the principal conditions for the action. Nevertheless, the editors suppose that Arendt's approach should be reformulated due to the different character of the Athenian model of direct democracy, which is the basis for the philosopher's arguments, and the mode of representative democracy in modern Western society. According to Vujanović and Piazza, the public space is no longer destined for politicians exclusively. The second part of the introduction's title – “the people are missing” – seems to be referring to the decision-making process. Therein, they point out that performing arts remain the only space where democracy as a practice of “a live gathering of the people” is still possible as “the political power of performance lies in its live social situation in public” (p. 11). This statement might sound controversial, but the book's itinerary holds the promise articulated by its editors.

The publication consists of three parts that allow readers to move from the investigations of political actions as performative practices to some specific aspects of live arts that extend the meaning of politicality. The first part, titled “What is people's gathering to democracy?” opens with the essay “The Power of the Presentist-Performative: On Current Democracy Movements”

by Isabell Lorey, who explores the character of Western protest movements of the 2010s (e.g. Occupy Wall Street or the 15-M movement in Spain) in terms of performative practices as it emerges at the moment of the gathering of bodies that “is not a state, but a process” (p. 28). According to Lorey, this process is characterized by the people's presence (instead of their representation) that signifies a shift to a *presentist democracy*.

Bojana Cvejic (“The Procedural, the Prescriptive and the Prefigurative Performance: Some Reflections on the Question of Time of Political Action”) focuses on three models of the temporality (mentioned in the title) of grassroots political actions. Investigating the context of Central and Eastern Europe where performing arts are often attacked by right-wing governments, Bojana Kunst (“Performance, Institutions, and Gatherings: Between Democratic and Technocratic European Cultural Space”) reveals the micropolitical potential of performance as “expressions for alternative ways of living” (p. 71). The rejection of such arts declares, as Kunst supposes, that the process of transition in some Central and Eastern countries failed, as “it formed new political subjects, not democratic ones but ones which are constituted around the erasure of democratic” (p. 65).

The next part, “The New Politicality of Performance: The Time of Gathering, (Re)Creative Labour and the Domestic,” presents the essays of Ana Vujanović (“Performances that Matter: From Public Sphere to Creative Labour”), Giulia Palladini (“On Coexisting, Mending and Imagining: Notes on the Domesticity of Performance”), Livia Andrea Piazza (“Performance and Liveness: A Politics of the Meantime”) and Valeria Graziano (“Recreation at Stake”) which articulate the correlation between the modes of production of neoliberal capitalism and performance. According to Vujanović, such a focus – that understands performance not only in terms of politics, but instead “as a model of production” – allows us “to grasp its political dimension” (p. 88). Despite the limitations of performance as political action, Vujanović supposes that it works not only as “a litmus test measuring how democratic our democratic society is” (p. 101) but as a vehicle to shift the modes of production. Giulia Palladini explores the dimension of domesticity in the performance, which, as she supposes, re-articulates and transgresses politics as it refers to that space where discrimination (e.g., from the viewpoint of labor and gender) exists in a more obvious way. Livia Andrea Piazza considers the category of time as one of the symbols of modernization and a primary category for live arts from the perspectives of both individual and collective experiences. Valeria Graziano investigates recreation industries as a grassroots form

of cultural production aimed at shattering the domination of creative-economies discourse as “one of the many tricks” (p. 153) of capitalism.

The final part, “Radiation Patterns of Performance,” focuses on space, darkness, and forms of spectatorships. Florian Malzacher (“Theatre as Assembly: Spheres of Radical Imagination and Pragmatic Utopias”) problematizes the concept of assembly, speaking about it not as a space of agreement, rather as a battlefield where the conflict among the participants should lead to consensus. Goran Sergej Pristaš (“The View from Matter”) explores the spectator's gaze and the specific function of darkness in performing arts. Developing the spectator's role as a co-creator, Silvia Bottiroli (“An Undecidable Object Heading Elsewhere”) proposes the term of aesthetic *undecidability* that appears at the moment of overlapping of imagination, the performance and the realm. She points out that an undecidable object can produce a form of spectatorships as “a radical democracy, democracy of bodies and gazes, presents and memories, expectation and promises” (p. 225) that extends the understanding of democracy as the co-existence of singularities who have “no ‘common’ present” (p. 223).

The research design has a special meaning. Instead of standard white pages, two colors of paper are used. Most of the essays are printed on pale pink paper. Only the introduction and “A live gathering dictionary” as a particular contribution of Stina Nyberg are on grey. Such a pattern creates a visual dramaturgy that supports the editors' idea of the book as an “imaginary journey” (p. 15). What might be missed in this publication is detailed information about the contributors that would allow readers to see their expertise in the field. As the authors argue on specific examples and their own experience (as scholars, curators, artists, cultural workers), the applied character of the study provides valuable insight for scholars, performers, grassroots activists, and other readers interested in the topic.

The value of this publication is that by carefully mapping the basic approaches and concepts of the field, the authors propose their own concepts and visions that not only problematize the dimensions of the political and performative. Instead, it extends the sense of politicality to demonstrate the potential of imagination to intervene in social and political spaces. Despite the Western-oriented character of the research, the proposed approaches can be applied to analyze other contexts beyond the EU borders. At the same time, as Bojana Kunst argues, it questions

the differentiation of democracy within Europe that contributes to current debates about the political future of the continent.