



Not beyond, but in the Heart of Society

Events dedicated to the Body's Agency.

By Elisabeth Nehring

Along the lines of 'Intervene and Participate' questions were raised under different circumstances as to the limits and possibilities of becoming involved in social processes, shaping them, participating and intervening in them. The body's external, socio-political "room for action" (in the figurative and literal sense) was up for debate here.

The lab 'Choreography, Protest, Public Sphere' could be counted as the core and highlight of this series, in which sociologists, scholars and artists spoke on and discussed the new vocabulary of protest, current forms, structures and choreographies of demonstration cultures and – vice versa – the possible dimensions of artistic actions and performances.

Choreography of Protest

The sociologist Oliver Marchart opened the panel initiated and moderated by the dance scholar Gabriele Klein and choreographer Martin Nachbar with the proposition that discussions on the theme of 'art and protest' always end in misunderstandings – with which he was not to be proven right in this case, but with which he already aligned the attentive audience to the tensions evidently inherent to this field.

Based on questions of how protest is organised today (as opposed to an unfortunately not more closely defined "earlier"), how and where people make preparations, meet, discuss, and employ their bodies, Marchart worked out not only the "conflict" but also the "collective body" as a central criterion of protest. Bodily presence, as opposed to (insufficient) virtual presence, is the precondition of true protest movements, on the one hand, while this always results in forfeiting absolute individuality in the frame of mass protest movements, on the other. Every individual action becomes a collective event; as an example, Marchart mentioned the act of self-immolation, which became the initial spark of the Arab Spring in Tunisia.

The sociologist Vassilis Tsianos, co-founder of Kanak Attak, emphasised the difference between "mass" and "collective" and the currently perceivable "transformation of mass to collective". The recent protest actions, in his interpretation, become the "expression of a general crisis of representative democracy" – with which Tsianos generalised the phenomenon of international protest and again attributed a representative status to it.

The journalist, performer and sociologist Margarita Tsomou also placed the focus of her considerations on the changes in the most recent protest actions. The observation that the body is a means of resistance is not new. What is new, however, are those of its formations, gestures and arrangements – in short, the entire choreography. While in (again not more closely defined) "earlier times" demonstrators marched in linear formations with raised fists, the demonstrators today gather to circular dances – for which there are sufficient examples on YouTube: current pictures of demonstrators in Athens or Istanbul forming dancing circles in the streets – often precisely at the moment in which police attacks begin, water guns are used and thick clouds of tear gas spread. Protective circles instead of open lines, folk dance instead of flight – that could be the short formula. But Margarita Tsomou was also concerned with establishing "communality instead of pure representation". For, in contrast to comparable situations, *the* people knew that the media were banned from the place of events; they danced not for the view from the outside, for the eye of the camera and thus for representational

purposes, but exclusively for the creation and reinforcement of “communality” (and one ought to add: a momentary communality). In this manner, the gathering becomes a “cypher for ‘democratic desire’” for Tsomou, symbolically standing for the longing for (true) democracy.

Choreography as Protest

Vassilis Tsianos, Martin Nachbar and Oliver Marchart found examples of the possibilities of social intervention and the expression of aesthetic actions, i.e., the (open or sub-acute) protest potential of movement and choreography. Nachbar spoke about his artistic production ‘The Walk’ in which not only walking becomes an intensified, bodily experience, but urban space is also (newly) constituted by the bodies present. Tsianos presented a work by the Hamburg-based director Sylvi Kretschmar that makes decelerated walking a form of protest (against the gentrification of St. Pauli) and turns the performative act into an aestheticised social intervention beyond ritualised leftist forms of protest. The most complex example was presented by Marchart: the Israeli performance group Public Movement which not only interrupts traffic with spontaneous, short folk dances to well-known pop songs in the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but also involves harmless passers-by in the event, thus undermining the ideological (Zionist) foundation of the dances and songs in a subversive way. That the border between spontaneous desire for participation and subtle political subversion is kept in a balance here and both aspects are additionally catered to in a satisfactory manner, was not worked out clear enough, though. That was why the subsequent discussion on the meaning and function of folk dances always stressed the original apolitical aspect – which in face of the diverse ideological appropriations of folk dances (not only in Israel but also in Turkey or Hungary, for example) appears as an extreme simplification. What must be added, however, is that there are crucial differences between the highly reflective dealing with the Zionist heritage of folk dances by a group like Public Movement and the spontaneous gatherings to traditional circular dances in face of state violence at demonstrations.

That within the frame of current subcultural resistance practices lines and frontal situations are being replaced by circles and dance marches and thus representation by spontaneous articulation, that ‘doing’ is more important than ‘showing’ and that the actor is gaining greater significance in relation to the recipient – these propositions prompted accusations of social romanticism from the audience (surprisingly alert for a Sunday morning), above all against outspoken and disputatious Margarita Tsomou; nevertheless – or perhaps precisely for this reason – this lab was extremely inspiring and suitable for triggering further considerations.

The Atypical Body

Another connection between public protest, corporeality and society was made by the British playwright and dramaturge Kaite O’Reilly in her lecture on ‘Framing the Atypical Body’. Her video examples of civil rights protests by disabled persons who chain themselves in English trains and are carried away by police officers show a high degree of individuality, instead of a general collectivisation of protest, but also its performative sides. ‘Disability as Performance’ – Kaite O’Reilly provided several examples, among others, when she cited the internal perception of a wheelchair user: “When I get on the bus, the performance begins. The ramp comes down, all eyes are on me, everyone is looking at me.” To *perform* appears as the logical consequence, for only in this way is it possible to control the gazes (that are cast upon one anyway). And that, in turn, corresponds precisely with the ‘Act of Empowerment’ (in this case, to be more precise, self-empowerment) that was also at issue in other contexts, e.g., the event on ‘Bodies of Dance in Arab Cultures’.

Particularly insightful in O’Reilly’s lecture was the aspect of speaking, or of a sometimes ambiguous but often highly complex terminology, that is moreover constantly changing and expanding. The degree to which this discourse has progressed in England, for example, is already revealed in the choice of concepts and their still lacking translation: So-called “disability politics”, for which there is no catchy equivalent in German, have introduced the friendly term “differently abled bodies”, but many people with handicaps insist on the term “disability” to draw attention to the social and political components of handicaps – and that is what “disability politics” are concerned with, according to

O'Reilly: People with disabilities are perceived as suppressed and as victims of prejudices and physical barriers. Disability is not a bodily phenomenon but a social construct revealing the values, biases and fears of a society.

Control of perspectives vs. change of perspectives

O'Reilly's questions of which cultural ideas and values determine our way of viewing the "body beyond the norm", of who actually administrates the definitions of concepts such as "normality" or "beyond the norm" and thus controls the perspectives, turned out to in a certain respect resemble the political and media-critical statements made in the large-scale lab 'dé-position', in which artists and theorists of various disciplines reflected on the interrelations of the individual body, radical social change and political awakening. As in "disability politics" concepts are permanently invented and then discarded again. This event which took place in two three-hour sessions (and is impossible to summarise due to its diversity) regarded choreography "as a movement of continuous repositioning". And like "disability politics" demands a constant assessment, questioning and readjustments of its own (content-related, structural and linguistic) perspective on its subject matter, the participants of 'dé-position' also understood their motto as a call to "give up one's own position" in order to achieve a physical and discursive 'change in perspective as the precondition for understanding'.

Almost all events in the frame of 'Intervene/Participate' showed that contemporary dance in the broadest sense deserves all critical and committed attention. Not only on account of its still precarious situation, but above all due to the broad range of socially relevant questions that are reflected, displayed, magnified – and occasionally triggered – by it.