

## Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Rancière, and the Twenty-First-Century Spectator

Susanne Shawyer

American playwright Ayad Akhtar (2017) recently argued that the antidote to new media technologies is live theatre, in which individuals form communities of witness in a “relationship unmediated by the contemporary disembodied screen.” Akhtar notes that audience members’ heartbeats can synchronize in response to live performance, and that this physiological effect produces a collective theatrical experience. He asserts that this represents a powerful resistance to new media’s project of monetizing individual economic behaviour; in other words, live theatre transforms consumers into participant-spectators and creates community, thereby resisting the isolation of the neoliberal economic subject. Akhtar offers a seductive picture of theatrical activism. Merely attending theatre or watching a performance in a group could be an anti-capitalist act, one that requires no labour of spectators beyond their presence in a collective live experience.

Akhtar’s essay was shared widely across my social media feeds by theatre artists and performance scholars eager to embrace his utopian vision of theatrical participant-spectators who only need to witness together to effect change. Yet as I read Akhtar’s argument on my own “disembodied screen,” I was skeptical. Forming an audience community through physiological reaction seems too simple an activist response to the complex reality of neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century. The utopian moment he describes lacks intentionality and engagement beyond the theatrical. It is no utopian performative, defined by Jill Dolan as a theatrical moment of hopeful collectivity that draws attention to structural inequities, gestures to different possibilities, and can “critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm” (2005, 7). It does not represent Bertolt Brecht’s dialectical theatre where the “juxtaposition of narrative or ‘epic’ elements with the dramatic action forces the spectator to adopt an active, critical role by comparing and evaluating the different pieces of information” (Bradley 2006, 5). Instead, Akhtar’s collective moment of resistance begins, and ends, in the theatre. It offers no tools for ideological critique and encourages no political action outside of the shared experience. Nevertheless, his essay raises questions about the responsibility and role of the activist theatre spectator, especially in a contemporary neoliberal context. How does an activist spectator use the theatrical experience to resist, and perhaps re-imagine, dominant norms? What is necessary to transform a neoliberal individual consumer of theatre into a theatrical participant-spectator? How can individuals participate in theatrical activism under neoliberalism?

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism refers to late-twentieth-century economic policies of deregulation, free trade, privatization, and reduced state involvement in the economy, accompanied by an ideological emphasis on individual freedoms. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework

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**Susanne Shawyer** is a dramaturg and assistant professor of theatre history at Elon University, where she serves as coordinator of the Drama and Theatre Studies interdisciplinary program. Her published work explores the dramaturgy of protest, intersections of modern theatre theory and political performance, and the history of applied theatre.

characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005, 2). This definition emerges from Chicago School theories of economic liberalism; however, as Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse point out, neoliberalism is a widely used and contested term, employed in various ways in economic, political, and social theory (2009, 153).

This essay focuses on neoliberalism as ideology: a system of ideas that frame individual freedom rather than collective responsibility as a fundamental social value. Of particular interest is the effect of this ideology on the theatrical spectator as political activist. There is a clear tension between neoliberalism’s emphasis on individual freedoms and the collective mindset necessary for political activism. Neoliberalism’s focus on the individual, many scholars argue, produces a weakening of political critiques of systematic oppressions. For example, Henry A. Giroux argues “a neoliberalism that embraces commercial rather than civic values, private rather than public interests, and financial incentives rather than ethical concerns” discards the collective responsibility to fight racial injustice in favour of individual interests (2003, 195–96). Likewise, Harvey posits that there is a fundamental incompatibility between community-oriented social justice values and individually oriented freedoms under neoliberalism (2005, 41). Although Akhtar does not explicitly cite neoliberalism in his essay, he articulates some of these same concerns when he mourns “the collapse of a vision of collective well-being” (2017). Moreover, feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes that “questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systematic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience” (2013, 971). When neoliberalism privileges the individual over the collective, the result is a loss of civic values, an obscuring of systematic oppressions, and a devaluing of collective experiences. This presents a problem for the activist theatrical spectator, who uses the communal experience of theatre as a catalyst for resistance.

In this essay, I argue for a new understanding of the activist theatrical spectator who responds to the tension between individualism and collectivity that neoliberal ideology creates. I propose the “emancipated spect-actor,” a twenty-first-century spectator and theatre-maker who negotiates this tension by means of individual interpretive aesthetic acts that offer collective alternative realities. Akhtar (2017) suggests that a physiological response in a community of witness is a resistant act, but the emancipated spect-actor does more than just physiologically respond to theatrical representation; they re-imagine representations and share their imaginative proposals with others. As a participant-spectator—both audience and artist—the emancipated spect-actor is a hybrid. As my portmanteau indicates, the emancipated spect-actor combines two different notions of the participant-spectator: the concept of the spect-actor drawn from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed applied theatre practice, and the idea of the emancipated spectator from the political and aesthetic theories of French philosopher Jacques Rancière.

In the following, I first situate Boal’s notion of the spect-actor within the larger context of his Theatre of the Oppressed practice; then I locate Rancière’s idea of the emancipated spectator as part of his theoretical argument that politics is an aesthetic act. Next, I read Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice through Rancière’s philosophy to compare how each type of participant-spectator interacts with ideology by disrupting representational norms. As I draw on Boal’s characterization of theatrical activism as working within the subjunctive mood, I posit the emancipated spect-actor as a combined Boalian-Rancièrian theatrical activist, focused on exploring creative possibilities, who individually responds to the world with aesthetic and political propositions to the collective. Finally, I argue that Emma Sulkowicz, the Columbia University student whose

2014–2015 durational performance *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* critiqued institutional responses to sexual assault, offers a practical example of emancipated spect-actorship in action.

Although Boal and Rancière both explore aesthetics, politics, and spectatorship, they represent two radically different approaches to theatrical activism: Boal's theory of the spect-actor originated in mid-century Latin American liberation struggles, whereas Rancière's aesthetic theory of politics emerges from contemporary Continental post-Marxist philosophy. Considering the two together and finding points of connection is a dialectical process, a theoretical exercise engaged in paradox and contradiction. As feminist media scholars Hester Baer, Carrie Smith-Prei, and Maria Stehle note, the neoliberal self exists in a "paradoxical space defined by prescriptive normativity, on the one hand, and the ideology of choice, on the other," and activist art can get swept into "cycles of resistance and consumption, meaning making and undoing, action and reaction" (2016, 3). But the emancipated spect-actor takes advantage of the contradictory possibilities of this paradoxical space to resolve social justice values and individual freedoms. They take deliberate aesthetic action that points out structural inequities and calls forth communal experience. They offer hope—and a practical model of twenty-first-century theatrical activism for resisting neoliberalism.

### **Theatre of the Oppressed and the Spect-actor**

In the past decades, Theatre of the Oppressed has spread around the globe as one of the most recognized applied theatre forms. Ever since Brazilian actor and activist Augusto Boal originally theorized in *Theatre of the Oppressed* a radical participatory theatre in which spectators become actively engaged in the performance as actors or as directors of the dramatic action, his work has been taken up and developed by theatres, activists, and educators interested in social and political change. For example, Vancouver's Headlines Theatre used for over thirty years a Theatre of the Oppressed-based approach to engage community dialogue on topics such as poverty, racism, and sustainability, while Theatre of the Oppressed NYC currently uses Boal's Forum Theatre method to explore issues of inequality and human rights. Theatre of the Oppressed techniques are also widely taught at colleges and universities as warm-ups, acting exercises, and as part of theatre for social change classes.

Although Theatre of the Oppressed emerged from activist theatre work with farmers and workers in Brazil and Peru, Boal throughout his career adapted his practices and theories for changing contexts and geographies. For example, in *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal acknowledged the difficulty of translating his method, created for opposing systems of dictatorship in Latin America, to modern European democracies. Accustomed to "working with concrete, visible oppressions," he felt frustrated by privileged people who named things like isolation or a feeling of purposelessness as oppressions (Boal 1995, 8). In response, he created the Theatre of the Oppressed therapy method Rainbow of Desire, which focuses on individuals rather than a collective. This individual approach was critiqued by practitioners who felt it did little to resist structural oppressions (Davis and O'Sullivan 2000). As a reaction to the "individualist bias that became common in the practice of Theatre of the Oppressed," Boal then created Legislative Theatre, which broadens the examination of oppressions beyond the individual to engage in structural analysis, and then investigated Aesthetics of the Oppressed as a method of transforming lived reality using artistic explorations by marginalized and oppressed people (Santos 2019, 195). As the growth of his practice into various forms of theatrical political engagement demonstrates, Boal negotiated the communal and individual

into a developing, changing theory of political aesthetics that responds to particular moments and realities.

At the root of this expansive project is the notion of the spect-actor, the participant-spectator who seizes the means of theatrical production. The spect-actor, as opposed to the spectator, participates in the dramatic action in *Theatre of the Oppressed*: they might take on the protagonist's role, test out a variety of solutions to political problems, or alter the course of the drama. Brazilian playwright and director Sérgio de Carvalho describes "political activation by the negation of the social condition of 'spectator'" as the "fundamental principle" of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2019, 88); likewise the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed* argue that the concept of the spect-actor is "one of the core interventions" of Boal's work (Howe, Boal, and Soeiro 2019, 1). In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal contends that passive spectators who have delegated power to dramatic characters can be transformed into active political subjects when they become spect-actors (Boal [1979] 1985, 122). By possessing the means of theatrical production, spect-actors are able to represent their own experiences of the world. By participating in creative production and telling their own stories as protagonists in the dramatic action, spect-actors can challenge dominant representational norms. Boal writes that "when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place" (Boal 1995, 7). The spect-actor is therefore a unique political actor, although their political interventions occur within the collaborative and collective framework of a creative theatrical process.

The concept of the spect-actor carries within it a contradiction of sorts: a collective theatrical experience is required for the individual to become a unique political actor. Contradiction is at the heart of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a praxis rooted in dialectical materialism. When the spect-actor participates in the dramatic action by offering their own story or making changes informed by their experience in the world, it is meant to question the authority of dominant voices and give agency to the oppressed or marginalized spect-actor. Yet as Dani Snyder-Young argues in *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change*, spect-actors don't always work toward liberatory or progressive ends. Because their dramatic choices stem from their experiences and understandings of the world, which may or may not be progressive, spect-actors may replicate without critique familiar dominant norms (Snyder-Young 2013, 42–43).

Theatre scholar Philip Auslander also criticizes what he sees as a fundamental contradiction in Boal's concept of the spect-actor: it is premised on the self-consciousness of the individual spect-actor, who engages with personal experiences for a similarly self-conscious audience of spect-actors as a way to explore and critique structural, ideological experiences (1994, 125). Like Snyder-Young, Auslander points out that the spect-actor cannot be assumed to be ideologically neutral. As spect-actors test different ideological positions in the laboratory that is theatre, they "cannot exist outside ideology," but only choose among "different ideological masks" (131). These contradictions—between the individual and the collective, between the personal and the ideological, between theory and practice—are one reason that Boal frequently questioned and re-invented *Theatre of the Oppressed* in different historical and geographical contexts. "The greatness of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* project," writes Carvalho, "stems from its ability to mobilize contradictions" and to engage the dialectic between theory and practice (2019, 86). This dialectical tension opens a space for the continual re-invention of the spect-actor, and a comparison to Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator.

## Rancière's Emancipated Spectator

Boal's theory of the spect-actor was grounded in his theatrical practice as a playwright and director for the Teatro de Arena de São Paulo and developed from his experiences working to improve literacy in Peru and to end poverty in Brazil. He named his techniques Theatre of the Oppressed partly as a nod to the liberatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), but also to emphasize the importance of the struggle against oppression and inequality. Theatre of the Oppressed therefore aligns with other progressive movements that work toward equality as an end goal. But for contemporary political philosopher Jacques Rancière, equality is the starting point, not the end goal, of democratic action. He starts with the idea that all individuals are equal because we all have the capacity to think and the capacity to speak our thoughts, for example through communication like speech or art or theatre. As philosopher Peter Hallward explains: "Rancière's most basic assumption is very simple: everyone thinks, everyone speaks" (2005, 26).

Nevertheless, human societies are fundamentally unequal because only some types of people are authorized to think, and only some types of people are afforded the authority to speak their thoughts. Even though our neoliberal capitalist democracies promise equal opportunity, individual choice, and individual rights, Rancière points out that in actuality certain speakers or communicators are favoured above others, and certain types of speech or communication are privileged. Contemporary social media provides one example of the promise of individual choice repudiated by an unequal authority to speak. Social media promises free opportunity to express oneself, but at the price of privacy, personal information, and directed advertising. Social media also privileges some speech and speakers over others, as women like Leslie Jones and Anita Sarkeesian have discovered as the targets of sexist and racist attacks. Feminist media critic Sarkeesian regularly receives threats of rape and death due to her online critiques of sexism in video games (Poland 2016, 147–48; O'Leary 2012); and in 2016 harassers flooded the Twitter and personal website of comedienne Leslie Jones with violent, racist, and sexist imagery after her turn in the film *Ghostbusters* (Izadi 2016; Lawson 2018). For Rancière, there can be no democracy in a society where only some voices are authorized to speak and to be visible (the oppressors) while other voices are dismissed (the oppressed).

Because of his focus on intellectual equality, Rancière rejects any political theatre founded on the idea that passive spectators must become active spectator-participants. These theatres, he argues, are based on a premise of inequality: the assumption that "to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (Rancière [2009] 2011, 2). For Rancière, political theatres rooted in the idea that passive spectators must become active spectator-participants are inherently flawed, as they rely on a pedagogical movement from ignorance to knowledge facilitated either by the author or the performers (8). In Rancière's intellectually equal worldview, every spectator already has the capacity to think and speak—"she observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her" (13). In his model, the spectator creates and interprets, as does the author or actor or the playwright or the designer. This is the emancipated spectator, an individual who uses their ability to think and communicate to observe, learn, and act in the world. "We do not have to transform spectators in actors," he argues, because "every spectator is already an actor in her story" (17). Spectators, actors, technicians, ushers, and passersby are already engaged, thinking, and active as unique and intellectually equal individuals. In his theory, the emancipated spectator does not need to control the means of theatrical production,

because they have the intellectual equality to interpret and challenge the theatrical representations they encounter. Even though they may exist in an undemocratic world that privileges the ideologies of some groups over others, the intellectual equality of the emancipated spectator nevertheless offers the possibility that they may recognize and resist ideology by means of spectating, comparing, and interpreting.

Boal and Rancière offer two different understandings of activist spectatorship, emerging from two very different contexts. Boal's spect-actor developed from theatrical practice that was part of revolutionary struggles in Latin America; his spect-actor controls the means of theatrical production and acts within a collective creative experience to challenge dominant norms. In contrast, Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator emerged from his elite education in Continental philosophy under Louis Althusser at Paris's *École normale supérieure*; his emancipated spectator represents a theoretical idea of an activist individually responsible for ideological critique even if they do not control the theatrical representation. When comparing Boal and Rancière, director and scholar Rustom Bharucha finds Rancière's arguments unconvincing because they are not grounded in theatrical practice like Boal's; he argues that "the absence of any engagement with the materiality of oppression today makes [Rancière's] opposition far too embedded within a predominantly postmodern rhetoric and stylistics" (Mackey and Fisher 2011, 370). Moreover, Bharucha points to Rancière's position as a philosopher, rather than a theatre artist, when he writes that there "is no evidence that Rancière has engaged beyond the European metropolis with actual practice in the rough hinterlands of applied theatre" (371).

Bharucha's suspicion of theory detached from practice echoes a common critique of contemporary philosophy as too removed from material reality. For example, Mohanty argues that "radical theory can in fact become a commodity to be consumed; no longer seen as a product of activist scholarship or connected to emancipatory knowledge, it can circulate as a sign of prestige in an elitist, neoliberal landscape" (2013, 971). When comparing Boal's praxis and Rancière's philosophy, Bharucha finds Rancière wanting; in contrast, French theatre scholar Olivier Neveux uses Rancière's theory of intellectual equality to critique what he sees as the under-theorized inequalities in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Like Auslander and Snyder-Young, Neveux notes that *Theatre of the Oppressed* cannot exist outside ideology; he argues that because Boal assumes that his techniques are neutral, and does not recognize the inherent inequality embedded within them, *Theatre of the Oppressed* can never be truly emancipatory (2014, 198). Both Bharucha and Neveux use the uneasy relationship between the emancipated spectator and the spect-actor, and between theory and practice, as a springboard for critique: the former to call out Rancière's intellectual elitism and the latter to question Boal's naiveté.

Despite the contradictions between theory and practice, their two quite different understandings of active spectatorship, and scholarly criticism that their theories of spectatorship do not go far enough, Boal's work and Rancière's theory do agree that there is a fundamental connection between politics and aesthetics. As Brazilian scholars Pedro Augusto Boal Costa Gomes and Josaida de Oliveira Gondar point out, politics and aesthetics are deeply intertwined for both Boal and Rancière (2015, 202). They argue that because Rancière understands politics as an aesthetic process, an ongoing disagreement with representational norms, *Theatre of the Oppressed* participates in Rancièrian politics by using theatrical representations to question, test, and challenge these norms (203). Gomes and Gondar acknowledge the different approaches of Boal and Rancière, but reconcile them through their similar focus on the aesthetic dimension of politics. Considering politics as an aesthetic and creative process can bring the spect-actor and the emancipated spectator together.

## Politics and Aesthetics

For both Boal and Rancière, politics and aesthetics are inseparable. Rancière argues that aesthetic acts can be political acts if they reconfigure how dominant ideologies represent the world. He uses the term “police” to signify the systems that govern ways of speaking, systems which determine whose speech and which types of speech are privileged (Rancière 1999, 28–29). This does not specifically refer to the people tasked with regulating law and order but rather the more general structures that identify subjects and determine if and where they are authorized to speak, to be visible, to have rights, and to be included in the community (28–29). Here Rancière follows Louis Althusser, who argues that this authority is constructed through Ideological State Apparatuses such as communication, culture, education, religion, and family that promote, legitimize, and regulate the ideology of the ruling class ([1971] 2014, 245). Because it determines who can speak and what can be spoken, the police function governs representation. The police organize our perceptions of the sensible—the world we experience through thought, speech, and the senses—through “the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying” (Rancière 1999, 29).

But if we have radical equality—if we all can think and all can speak—we all also have the capacity to disagree with the police and the police’s representation of the world. Alex Means explains that in Rancière’s philosophy, “aesthetics are what are proper to the field of politics; that is, they constitute the fields of appearances and utterances which make up the political community” (2011, 1091). Philosopher Jean-Philippe Deranty similarly notes that for Rancière, “art accomplishes the same task as politics, namely to reorganize the accepted perceptions of reality” (2003, 137). Rancièrian politics is the aesthetic action of disagreeing with and offering alternatives to the police’s representation of the sensible.

Boal’s spect-actor also takes exception to what appears to be the “‘normal’ order of things” and offers alternatives (Rancière [2010] 2013, 35). By controlling the means of theatrical production, the spect-actor has an opportunity to make visible the concerns of marginalized communities that were previously invisible in an oppressive system of power. For Rancière, this is the core of politics: *dissensus*, “the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen” in the existing police representation (38). Dissensus is an aesthetic act that reshapes social and political space. It shares similarities with Brecht’s alienation effect, which “consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (Brecht 1964, 143). But dissensus goes further. For Rancière, it is not enough for the oppressed just to be heard, seen, or to offer transformative representations of their society; they must be heard as authorized speakers whose speech represents a redefined society. In other words, aesthetic acts must not only call attention to the oppressions of police representation but also change them. They must be performative.

Boal famously called Theatre of the Oppressed an “ensaio da revolução,” most often translated into English as a “rehearsal of revolution” (Augusto Boal Institute 2019; Boal [1979] 1985, 141). On the one hand, “rehearsal” suggests that the practice maintains a theatrical frame that insulates its aesthetic work from concrete political action. One critique of political theatre such as Theatre of the Oppressed is that its theatrical frame prevents real world efficacy. Snyder-Young notes that political theatre is bound by its theatrical, and ultimately fictitious, frame. She writes that while aesthetic practices like Theatre of the Oppressed take place in spaces of metaphor and expressivity, “the

drama workshop is not the street, the shopping center, the bar, the family dining room, the corporate office, or the hospital waiting room—and so actions taken within its real context cannot be expected to directly translate to these (or other) real contexts” (Snyder-Young 2013, 7). For Snyder-Young, theatrical exploration of political contingencies remains within an aesthetic frame distinct from the real world.

On the other hand, Boal’s use of the word “rehearsal” suggests a planned future doing of the action, a move from practice to performance, with impact beyond the metaphorical space of theatre. In his native Portuguese, the word “ensaio” can also mean a test, trial, attempt, or experiment (Houaiss and Cardim [1987] 1993, 100). Carvalho writes that the symbolic action of spect-actor “is taken as a collective proposition, a kind of trial and error, as a transition, the preparation of plans and gestures to enact change, a way of pushing culture and society to improve” (2019, 89). The spect-actor not only rehearses for the revolution but also tests ideas in the creative space, and offers proposals to others participating in the collective experience.

The freedom and playfulness of the theatrical allow exploration in what Boal calls the subjunctive mood, the realm of challenge, imagination, and creativity, “the comparison, discovery and counterposition of possibilities” (2006, 40). Educational theorist Shari Popen likens this aesthetic space to “imaginative geographies, in which opportunities for transitive knowing are freed up, rather than over-determined by highly structured contexts and places” (2006, 126). This is a space of inventive images, creative doubts, and fanciful imaginings. Here in the realm of the subjunctive, disagreement with the police can be tested and creatively explored. Here is where spect-actors can rehearse the revolution. In contrast, the Rancièrian police operate in what Boal terms the indicative mood, the realm of power, agreement, certainty, and authority (1998, 80). But for Rancière, the goal of democracy is not to establish a new police control but rather to represent those who are unrepresented, to count those who remain uncounted in society. Because human society is complex, each new reconfiguring of representation will struggle to represent every person, every voice, every interest, every possibility. As American philosopher Tyson E. Lewis explains, for “Rancière, the social totality is always divided against itself: every count is a miscount [and] the naming of the world is never complete but always includes an excluded surplus” (2009, 295). Each reshaping of social and political space struggles to authorize every speaker. In effect, Rancièrian democracy is a process of dissensus that continually moves from the subjunctive to the indicative and back again as more and more voices are heard and authorized.

The end goal of Rancièrian democracy is difficult, perhaps impossible, because our human voices are so diverse, our desires complicated. Radical equality must be assumed at the start and the representation of voices through authority continually negotiated, questioned, and expanded. And here is where the spect-actor of Theatre of the Oppressed practice can contribute to a goal of Rancièrian democracy. The marginalized spect-actor who tells their own story opens a space for the questioning, challenging, and reconfiguring of representation by groups whose voices are unheard and whose speech is unauthorized. If this process is constantly practised with the goal of authorizing as many voices as possible, again, and again, and again, moving from subjunctive to indicative mood and back again, then Theatre of the Oppressed can manifest Rancièrian dissensus as both a rehearsal *of* revolution and a rehearsal that *is* a revolution.



## The Emancipated Spect-actor in Action

The bridge between Rancièrian democracy and a rehearsal for revolution is the emancipated spect-actor, a hybrid participant-spectator who uses their intellectual equality and interpretative skills to question police systems while also performing aesthetic acts that re-imagine which speakers are authorized, seen, and heard. This is not the observational spectator of Akhtar, who synchronizes heartbeats with others during the performance but then leaves the theatrical collective behind. Neither is this the intellectually engaged Brechtian spectator who understands the contradictions between ideology and oppression presented on stage and therefore is moved to resist them outside of the theatrical experience. It is not that Boal's spect-actor or Rancièr's emancipated spectator are incapable of theatrical activism under neoliberalism; rather, the convergence of the two ideas also allows for participatory theatrical activism that confronts neoliberalism both inside and outside of the theatrical frame in both subjunctive and indicative moods. The emancipated spect-actor intervenes in the problem of neoliberalism: they embrace their individual freedom of choice as an intellectually equal interpreter of the world, but also call forth civic values by proposing alternative representations, rehearsal of revolutions, to their community. To be an emancipated spect-actor is to offer aesthetic possibilities to the collective in order to challenge police authority and the isolation of the neoliberal subject.

One example of the emancipated spect-actor in action is the year-long performance art project titled *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* by Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz (2014–2015). To protest the institution's attitudes toward sexual violence and lack of support for student survivors, Sulkowicz carried a heavy dorm mattress everywhere she went on Columbia's campus for an academic year (Smith 2014; Taylor 2015). She felt that the university failed in its response to her report that she was raped by a fellow student, whom a Columbia University disciplinary panel cleared of responsibility (Taylor 2017). Over the year, she negotiated her mattress through classrooms and dining halls, quads, and crowds. On the last day of the project, she carried the mattress across the stage at graduation (Taylor 2015). It was a deliberate aesthetic act, a durational performance that formed part of Sulkowicz's senior art thesis project, and an attempt to create something artistic out of a traumatic experience. Sulkowicz noted in her performance diary that “to me, the piece has very much represented [the fact that] a guy did a horrible thing to me and I tried to make something beautiful out of it” (Battaglia 2015). The performance also created an alienation effect as the mattress, an object associated with the privacy of the bedroom, became unfamiliar in public contexts. This alienation symbolized what many sexual assault survivors go through when they report a violation of their person—their bodies, sexual and medical histories, character, and values become material for public display. Carrying the mattress through public spaces demonstrated the juxtaposition between public and private codes of behaviour and discourses around sexual violence.

*Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* worked on multiple levels: it was both a solo artwork and a participatory performance, and its target audience was as specific as the Columbia University disciplinary board and as expansive as the broader community surrounding the campus in the Morningside Heights neighbourhood of New York. As part of the project, Sulkowicz ruled that she could not ask others for assistance carrying the fifty-pound mattress, but she could accept help if offered (Mitra 2015, 389; Smith 2014). Performance scholar Shayoni Mitra notes that the material weight of the mattress drew “attention to the extraordinarily difficult, weighty task of articulating an adequate response to the original violation” (2015, 387). In practical terms, it also made the mattress

difficult to manoeuvre. Sometimes Sulkowicz carried the mattress alone; other times, large groups of supporters walked with her. One of her first offers of help came from a homeless stranger who saw her struggling with the weight of the mattress (Battaglia 2015).

*New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith argued that “one of the most effective aspects of the piece is the way it fluctuates between private and public, and solitary and participatory” (2014). The material weight of the mattress and Sulkowicz’s real struggle to carry it invoked a collective experience, first through the participation of others who helped Sulkowicz carry her mattress, and secondly by proposing civic values to her audience community. Mitra contends that “their sharing of the weight tilts the verb ‘carry’ away from a specific object to an idealist, metaphorical gesture, as this performance enacts a call to collective action by the activist” (2015, 389). The performance called attention to Sulkowicz’s isolation as a young woman alone labouring to carry an unwieldy object, as a survivor whose account of sexual assault is not believed by the campus authority who has the power of redress, and as a neoliberal subject with the freedom to express herself in public ways. *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* emerged from an individual interpreting their own experience, but the performance also invoked the value of the collective and invited community members to participate in Sulkowicz’s reframing of sexual violence discourse. Claire Bishop, writing about contemporary participatory art, is skeptical that attempts to create or strengthen social bonds through art can overcome neoliberalism’s primacy of individual choice. Bishop argues that political participatory art that hails audience members as participant-spectators and attempts to inspire individuals to take action for social change in fact supports the neoliberal agenda of diminishing state responsibility for civic values (2012, 14). *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* resists this impulse because the performance is not predicated on creating social bonds: it can work as a solo performance or as a collective performance. While it invites community, it does not require it. The performance does not explicitly ask spectator-participants to take direct action for social change but instead offers the opportunity to participate in an aesthetic act of alienation.

The use of alienation in Sulkowicz’s performance aligns it with the #MeToo movement aimed at changing social and legal attitudes toward sexual violence. It is important to note that while Sulkowicz’s project was widely discussed in print and online media, she created her performance two years before the hashtag #MeToo went viral online. *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* did not explicitly use #MeToo language. Feminist activist Tarana Burke first founded the Me Too Movement in 2006 to support survivors of sexual violence (Me Too, 2018), and the rapid spread of the hashtag on social media in 2017 brought the concerns of survivors of sexual harassment and violence to the forefront of public discussion (Ohlheiser 2017). Like Sulkowicz’s mattress on the Columbia University campus, the phrase “me too” worked to authorize and legitimize in public spaces survivors’ stories that previously had remained as private speech. The hashtag was also alienating; its intervention into social media spaces manifested gaps in the sensible for consumer-observers who were previously unaware of the frequency and pervasive nature of sexual violence.

At the same time, the #MeToo movement attempted to reframe discussions of rape and sexual violence from acts of individual responsibility into concerns for everyone. When individual social media consumers posted #MeToo as part of a popular movement that acknowledged sexual violence as a persistent problem, they reaffirmed what Mohanty calls “the salience of collective experience” (2013, 971). Digital media scholar Candice Lanier argues that the #MeToo movement attempted to “shift the blame away from the individual to the society that made sexual harassment, assault, and rape both possible and permissible” (2019, 4). The alienating effect of the flood of confessional #MeToo, like the alienating effect of Sulkowicz’s mattress appearing in spaces of

public discourse, reframed representations of sexual violence. Although *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* was not explicitly a #MeToo performance, it worked similarly by drawing on personal experience to highlight collective experience and thereby point out structural inequities.

As an emancipated spect-actor, Sulkowicz claimed the position of actor in her own deeply personal story of feeling marginalized by the systems of authority represented by Columbia University and its disciplinary board. Controlling the means of artistic production, she created an aesthetic response within the subjunctive frame of an art project. In this subjunctive space where disagreement can be tested and creatively explored, she encountered a variety of responses, from harassment, puzzlement, and enthusiastic support from survivors' groups (Smith 2014; Taylor 2015). In her performance diary, which recorded reactions to the work and her analysis of the project, Sulkowicz remarked on the interpretive openness of the piece, writing that "people think I was supposed to have this warlike relationship with it and it was supposed to be this object that I was angry with, but for me, that related to how people chose to read my piece rather than the way I lived with it" (Battaglia 2015). For the nine months of her durational performance, she challenged the institutional and representational norms that govern who is authorized to speak about sexual violence. When she accepted assistance carrying the mattress, her performance became a collective act and called forth values of empathy and community. And through aesthetic intervention in police representation, *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* attempted to authorize in the public realm the speech of assault survivors on the Columbia University campus.

Like Sulkowicz, the emancipated spect-actor emerges as a hybrid twenty-first-century activist who traverses both the subjunctive frame of performance and the indicative of police representation of the world, taking aesthetic action in order to re-imagine whose voices are authorized to speak and to be heard. As a neoliberal subject, working from an individual rather than collective stance, the emancipated spect-actor interprets the world first and foremost from a personal or individual place. Yet their political interventions resist the isolation of the neoliberal subject and highlight the importance of community for social justice, future change, and the "long march toward a collective protagonism" (Howe et al. 2019, 1). Boal and Rancière's visions of spectatorship combine to form a neoliberal participant-spectator who interprets the world individually, takes aesthetic action to authorize the voices of the unheard in order to effect social or political change, and offers a model for future activism.

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