

## Performance and the Re-making of Bodies-Politic<sup>1</sup>

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The poetic, performative, and political expressivity of Nêle Azevedo’s *Minimum Monument*,<sup>2</sup> an image from which serves as the cover to this volume of *Performance Matters*, resonates across this special issue on “Performance and Bodies-Politic.” It alerts us to our individual and collective histories (of wars, genocides, developments of mass culture), and to contemporary crises (people on the move as never before, populations and identities disappearing, the ice melting, the Human melting into a primordial puddle). And yet, even though each figure is similarly moulded, part of the performative magic of the work is seeing the individual differences emerge, as the rate of melt is variable. The work is both a memorial and a provocation; it has been made and re-made with collective labour around the world since 2005. Azevedo offers a repeatable minor register which, over time, space, and scale becomes monumental, creating a sense of global identity while attending to processes of disappearances. *Minimum Monument* gives us both the nameless multitude and the attention to individual process that reverberates across this issue, in which the articles and materials show the dynamics of performance working through bodily experience in a range of political contexts.

This special issue evolved from a series of events at University College Cork, Ireland in 2015 (“Performance & Politics & Protest”) and 2016 (“Bodystories”).<sup>3</sup> The driving themes and questions in the first part of the series considered the intersections of performance and public political life, the efficacy and strategies of performance in that arena, and the ways in which performative actions enable protests and processes of political change to remain open and non-violent. Following this event, we sought to further explore the rich interplay of diverse sites of culture, performance and activism, focusing on how particular bodies intervene and invent new modes of expression, disrupting smooth systems of control, resisting the ever-narrowing confines of what is acceptable, and engaging a playful sense of possibility through creative arts research. Bringing together scholars, performers, artists and activists, we sought to expand understandings of bodies and embodiment, to address the violence of forgotten, elided, segregated bodies, and the repressed histories of bodies. Through a performance framework we see how the expressive, experiential terrain of the body meets, interrogates, and re-calibrates our understanding of ongoing questions of agency, action, and subjectivity in order to attend to the various ways in which bodies tell their own stories at the intersections of arts, activism, and scholarship.

This issue of *Performance Matters* continues to expand this conversation between the embodied individual and the collective, both as abstract concepts and lived complex realities. Performance offers ways to consider how the political refuses to stay put either within the throb of a collective gathering or in the thrall of the individual (all the while also knowing that getting lost in the thrall and the lure of the throb is half the fun). Performance also matters in that it gives us strategies and frameworks for survival and for creative political pathways that need constant renewal and reinvention. We know from performance that we must, again. We know the discipline, endurance, and play of the again, and the once again, and the once more, with feeling. We train and rehearse to make, re-make, and attune the one and the many. This special issue cultivates the traffic between these registers and foregrounds the ways in which multiplicities and particularities entwine through political performatives that play out on and through bodies. The range of work offers examples

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where particular lives become either legible or overwritten through performative processes of political will, imagination, representation. This entangling of the individual experience and its collective political representations creates a framework epitomized here, where each contribution presents the dense lived complexity of a particular locale and specific bodies but where, in the overview and alongside each other, we see how bodily lived experience expresses, refines, and represents both a micro- and a macro-politics. As they range across geo-political frameworks, varying national boundaries, and identity politics, the works in this issue offer concepts for reassessing established norms and political efficacies, and modes of research and response that show the plurality of the body politic, which is continually renewed and re-made as *bodies-politic*.

Azevedo’s image also materializes Judith Butler’s views on the body politic, where the seeming solidarity (and solidity) is always already melting. In Butler’s argument, “[t]he body politic is posited as a unity it can never be. Yet, that does not have to be a cynical conclusion” (2015: 4). This special issue of *Performance Matters* resonates with and extends Butler’s recognition of the complexity and tensions of the body politic. The promise of seeming unity or smoothness, however, clashes with the complexity of lived experience. Each of the articles proffers a range of bodies-politic on the move, being made and re-made through performative everyday practices and encounters. In the materials section we see a lively array of performative scholarship, where creative methodologies offer modes of research in which, again, we see the fissures in the smooth surface of any presumed body politic resulting in bodies-politic—bodies, in other words, engaged in an ongoing exercise of re-invention, re-living and re-imagining possibilities of survival, and offering testimony to forgotten disposed-of lives, as well as bearing witness to creative new modes of existence.

The opening article from Helena Buffery, “Multiple Exposures: Moving Bodies and Choreographies of Protest in Contemporary Catalonia,” presents the complex imprinting between the individual and the collective across the mediums of street, stage, and screen. Ethnographically layering the impact and entanglement of street protest and performance in Catalonia, her writing stages the overlapping textures of history and the politics of minoritized culture, paying particular attention to social, political and aesthetic choreographies. As witness/participant, she carefully positions her spectatorship of unfolding events via screen media from abroad, and as an audience member and scholar on the ground in Catalonia, in order to assess the ways in which moving bodies register minoritized culture and language. She closely reads the complex political “scene” alongside three contemporary examples: Àlex Rigola’s adaptation of Joan Sales’s novel *Incerta Glòria (Uncertain Glory)*; Carme Portaceli’s staging of the testimonies of women victims of Francoist violence during and after the Spanish Civil War, as recovered and reframed by feminist historian Carme Domingo in *Només són dones/Solo son mujeres (They’re only Women)*; and Sol Picó’s collaborative, processual work with women dancers and musicians of diverse cultural origins in *WW—We Women*. Buffery reveals how the moving body is the site of emerging intensities of oppressed and minoritized experiences, which the moving body can therefore excavate and expose in unique ways. She traces the many rippling effects of the socio-political struggles, demonstrating how bodies register, enact, and remember and where dance and protest each offer us different layers in this landscape of multiple exposures.

Where Buffery maps the intensity of the presence of bodies in protest and performance, Nuala Finnegan’s work traces the accumulation of names without bodies as she maps the terrain of femicide, or *feminicidio*, as it is represented through theatre, performance, and translation. In “Translating Femicide: *Women of Sand* and the Performance of Trauma,” she focusses on the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez as a kind of “ground zero” where the scale of the atrocities against

women persist unresolved. She examines the linguistic and performative strategies of Humberto Robles’s documentary theatre piece *Mujeres de arena* [Women of Sand], which draws us into to the scene of the crime, not as voyeurs but as witnesses who must in some way acknowledge and respond to the dead. Finnegan’s own response in part focuses on her position as a translator and outsider and offers a critical account of the potency of the aporia of translation processes as a platform of transmission for the stories of the violence of disappearance and murder. Finnegan’s essay explores the power of theatre and performance as a potential site for cumulative acts of remembrance that are particular and individual, and which also reach across borders, languages and terrains to interrogate the process whereby implacable unmitigated violence continues unabated.

The question of the performative and ideological reframing of borders is additionally seen in two other pieces in this special issue. Pieter Verstraete’s essay, “‘Acting’ under Turkey’s State of Emergency: A Conversation with Kurdish Artists about Theatre, the Dengbêj Tradition, and the First Kurdish *Hamlet*,” traces the troubled borders of language and cultural identity in his research on Kurdish theatre. Based on a series of interviews with Kurdish artists, his essay accumulates examples of strategies adapted by artists within ever-heightened political struggles. The respondents included costume designer Ismail Oyur Tezcanlı, playwright Yusuf Unay, actor and director Mirza Metin, instructor and director Rezan Aksoy, and director Celil Toksöz. By examining the performative possibilities and challenges of creating theatre, he shows how this becomes a significant act in and of itself in that contested region. The essay offers a context and framework for the work of Kurdish theatre artists and in this way his scholarship also addresses the dearth of research on this minoritized culture and censored linguistic border. His essay draws together cultural encounters that are readily overlooked, fragmented, and too easily dispersed in the ongoing mass migrations and exiles challenging borders in material and ideological ways.

Also attending to border politics as they are enacted through monuments that normalize existing borders and colonial histories, Shalon Webber-Heffernan looks at the performative potency of the monumental to interrogate territorial-based identities. In “Performing Monument: Future Warnings,” she focuses on two particular case studies. The first is a two-mile-long land art installation at the US/México border entitled *Repellent Fence* (2015), a monument erected by Postcommodity (a Southwestern United States-based art collective). Secondly, she examines an intervention and interrogation of a monument in Toronto—*King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don River* (2017)—by comedy-art duo Life of a Craphead. Focusing on these examples, her essay shows how performative actions can set seemingly stable borders in motion, where elided colonial histories of disappeared Indigenous voices find resonant space, and how the mimetic dismantling of monuments re-writes other potential histories and futures.

The articles section draws to a close with Gillian Whiteley’s essay “From *being one* to *being-in-common*: Political Performativity, Proxemics, and the Joys of Provisional Unity,” which grapples with sites of protest as performative zones of assemblies, where even with the expansion of modes of communication across digital platforms there is still an intoxicating draw toward collective assembly. Whiteley examines the theoretical positioning of performance and protest alongside considered examples of how collective identities and political will are expressed in group actions. She is both wary of and drawn by the collective pull and potential joy of *being-in-common*. This attention to the affective is key in looking at both the provocative historical example of Dutch Provo and at the current struggles for borders and identities within the contemporary British political scene. She reframes the histories and genealogies of encounters with protest sites as possibilities for new performative actions alongside a consideration of contemporary British politics that is still very

much in flux. She questions the central role of performance in collective dissenting actions, as well as sites of coalescence of identity and political will. These questions lead us to the materials section, where the role of the body as the site of both the particularity of the one and the representation of the many comes to the fore.

The materials section offers a consideration of the body as the material and everyday locus of socio-political power, manifest either as repressive control or expressive agency. The ever-more prevalent neoliberal models of delimiting all within the values of a market-economy create an ever-more pressing need to articulate the ways in which bodies can resist and restructure the seemingly unending “measuring” mechanisms of control and organization, labelling, and coercion of bodies *en masse*, as well as the internalization of individual regimes of surveillance. The body continues to be the site of both oppression and agency: while, for example, we see the ongoing struggle of women to have safe and legal access to reproductive rights, or individual struggles with recognition and support for bodies who fall outside of the ever-narrowing “norms” of what is desirable (body size, ability, age, gender, sexuality, etc.), we also see the resilience of bodies on the move across borders (both literal and metaphorical) or playfully performing new modes of resistance or provocation.

In Eliza Steinbock’s interview with trans visual artist Cassils, “A Conversation with Cassils on Propagating Collective Resilience in Times of War,” we are witness to their discussion on the ways in which performance responds to the surge of violence on bodies blurring the normative binaries of gender and sexuality. Cassils works intensively at this border zone where the one and the many meld—where the body of the individual performer bears the intensity of the many bodies, a zone which reveals and revels in its multitudinous expressivity. The work opens attention to the spaces between bodies as both the border of violence and the site of joyful contact.

These tensions of policing pleasure and labour resonate with Ailbhe Smyth’s performative and affective response to the legacies of abuse in the Irish context, which is permeated with a particular form of Catholic Church control and domination. In “A Great Silence Lay Upon the Land: Ireland’s Secreted Histories,” she responds to a performance event staged in Dublin by the Performance Collective as a memorial to the silenced lives of those who were condemned to menial labour and confined to work within an intricate system of control orchestrated between Church and State and acquiesced to by a subdued or submissive public. Smyth asks us to hear the silences of those stolen lives. She does not attempt to fill the silences but to mark their traces and affective impact on the surviving generations in Irish cultural and political life, which resonates around the globe diasporically and the exporting of these regimes of confinement across other colonized zones.

In Ayaka Yoshimizu’s excavations of the stories of Trans-Pacific Japanese migrants who worked in the sex trade in Western Canada, she layers memories, archival research, and her own bodily experiences in that research journey. In this sensory ethnographic response, “Doing Performance Ethnography Among the Dead: Remembering Lives of Japanese Migrants in the Trans-Pacific Sex Trade,” she encounters traces of bodies deemed disposable or erasable, excluded from agency with a body politic which this piece haunts. She accumulates instead a texture of fragments which offer glimmers of liveliness and personalities beyond the archive alongside the toll of the work of remembering on her own body.

Also readily excluded from the body politic are bodies marked “disabled.” However, Kaite O’Reilly’s piece, “The Politicized Disabled Body,” provokes a re-thinking of the collective politics of disability and representation. She critiques the history and ongoing use of the so-called “disabled” body as a

sign of corruption and of the establishing of oppressive regimes of “normalcy.” She disrupts the hegemony of theatre practices which smooth out difference, resulting in arid and toxic monocultural zones. As a playwright, she takes that critique into practice, provoking us to think about dramaturgies of inclusivity as a platform for new modes and forms of performance-making and receiving. She alerts us to how bodies are used in signifying practices that need a radical rethinking and enable exciting new formal developments in playwriting and dramaturgy.

Each of these pieces is resonant and particular, inspiring new modes of thinking with and about bodies that culminate in a drive for a liberatory politics that aches for a rethinking of the processes of the making stable of the body politic, and that encourages a perception of the plurality that moves beyond Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1985), or an acceptance of the limits of a “realpolitik.” Instead, in the processes of the remaking and ongoingness that is never done, we find that some forms of relief, appeasement, or release are possible, however momentary. And while that is exhausting, as these pieces also reveal, there is exhilarating connectivity possible that has yet to be exhausted in terms of imagination and desire.

This special issue of *Performance Matters* moves across terrains and histories: from traces of Japanese migrants to dispersed traditions and performance languages in Kurdistan, from the streets and theatres of Catalonia to the performance memories and legacies of laundries and industrial schools in the Republic of Ireland, from translations and transmissions of *feminicidio* in Mexico to borders and monuments across the Americas, from the daily political and politicized life of a trans artist to the lived experiences of disjointed multitudes in political protests and the histories of radical ways to re-imagine how we might live together peaceably, creatively, in lively networks of difference and acceptance. It is fitting, then, that we also include a review by Caoimhe Mader McGuinness of Paul Routledge’s *Space Invaders: Radical Geographies of Protest*, a book which looks at protest located across disparate geopolitical sites through a geographical framework. Assembling a wide range of sites and methodologies moving beyond boundaries and borders, Routledge’s book demonstrates a growing performative literacy in the complexity of social interactions, where collective activity and individual differences repeat on this macro scale. That is, as with this special issue, each site offers particularity and yet resonates across the other examples. This special issue does not fit within a border or national identity; there is no even route or historical framework to easily link and outline these interconnections. However, I invite you to read these rich and varied pieces as a compass for a map of the possibility of theatre and performance studies to attune and attend to where the margins crack, where there are pressure points on bodies, where mainstream culture wishes to smooth out lives and steamroll jagged painful histories.

Performance helps us take part in that magical and exhausting process of remaking; in performance we know we are never done, and if we make work, witness it, offer our spectatorship—as these pieces remind us to do—we remember not that we can be done, but that we can be open to being undone, and re-done, so that the body politic becomes articulate as bodies-politic in the ever-challenging work of remaking liveable lives on this damaged planet. Performance matters as a means and mode of remembrance and re-imagining. Across this issue, from performative practices of everyday life, performance structures, new dramaturgies and research methods, the work ruptures any neat and tidy sense of the notion of “the body politic.” We see the ways in which bodies-politic trouble, translate, and transform potentialities of lives of individuals and the gathering together of those material realities. Further, bodies-politic host the politics of the body that shape our experiential material living. Through the expressive rupturing, re-scripting and re-sculpting of bodies

as political platforms, the work across this issue foregrounds performance as central to the work of remaking bodies-politic.

## Notes

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2. See: <https://www.neleazevedo.com.br/>.

3. See: <https://performancepoliticsprotest2015.wordpress.com/> and <https://bodystories2016.wordpress.com/>. The symposia grew from an on-going collaboration with Sandra McAvoy who was then coordinator of the Women’s Studies program, and who has since retired from university life, though not from her engagement with work as an activist, in particular for women’s rights. I sincerely thank Sandra for this rich collaboration and for her inspiring ongoing work. I also wish to thank all those who participated in these symposia for their energy and commitment to the intersections with these events. We are grateful to have had the support provided by the UCC University Strategic Research Fund in support of these events.

## References

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