

Embodying the Political: An Imperative Dialogue

By Katherine Mezur

Perhaps the entire Tanzkongress 2016 could be called "Embodying the Political," because the theme "Being Contemporary" spun into motion the many already political provocations of "whose contemporary?" and questions concerning the "contemporary" of dance being defined in dominant Western dance history terms. But, according to the Tanzkongress brochure, the focus was on: "...the notion of the contemporaneity and the inherent call to deal with the conditions and radical changes of the present and face the responsibility for one's own times." (Dance Congress Team, 2016 Programme 7). The artist dialogues of "Embodying the Political" were set up to work first hand with these challenges and more deeply with the Tanzkongress team's direction that, "... the concept of contemporaneity serves as a source of friction to critically deal with our aesthetic, cultural, and production-specific frames of reference and paradigms." (TK Programme 7)

The panel "embodying the political," used the alternative format of a "conversation" between two pairs of two different artists whose work involves art activism. Each artist in each pair spoke about their work in relation to "political" intentions, with each artist explaining their own version of "political" in and through their artworks. The artists had been paired and prepared in advance of the Kongress but the intention of dialogues turned into more singular presentations instead of conversations perhaps because of the acute differences (political and technical) between each artist. The panel organizer and chair was Jan Deck, a Germany-based, dramaturge, director, and curator. The paired participants were, dramaturge and director John Jordan (UK) art-activist, and Rima Najdi (LB/DE) artist, followed by Andrea Bozic (HR/NL), a choreographer and Ivana Ivkovic (RS). Their roles in performance practice were diverse, some were dramaturges and more theatre based, and others were focused on visual media, virtual places, and physical perception of performance and event.

For this report, I think the importance of these presentations lay in these radical contrasts of "political." Perhaps, if the panel had been directed towards a discussion and questions instead of presentations, we might have challenged how and if their works "worked" politically or not. While these "political" differences may seem peripheral to these works, in fact their "dialogue" presentations clearly showed how much these different politics mattered for each artist through their choices of intermedia in theatre, dance, architecture, objects, and/or media, and differences of "embodied politics." If the curator of the panel had set up a frame of questions or provocations on the "political" and "embodying," then the frictions between the presentations might have been more productive. Or, if the definition of "political" had been more aggressively questioned, then a more interactive exchange among the artists and audience might have taken place. Still the shifting and shading of the "political" from artist to artist tells

us something about this problematic and ambiguous relationship between politics and bodies (digital or analogue). The structuring of these event/presentations has their own politics within the original writing/performing.

That said, the accompanying abstract for the panel reflected the direction suggested by the panel organizer, Jan Deck. According to Ivana Ivkovic, he wrote the theme of the panel and its suggested direction with the emphasis on one of Chantal Mouffe's writings where she argues that, "the actions of the activists dissolve the fixed distinction between art and politics, and interventions in public space replace distanced critique." (Jan Deck, in TK Programme) I think these points were opened up in each presentation, but without a chair directing the time, there was little dialogue or participation by the audience to perhaps press each of these "artists" to question their own relationship to art/politics. Perhaps like all congresses, the energizing points brought about by coming together, will be taken up in further connections between these artists. I think it is especially fruitful to think of this first encounter as a starting point and trajectory into future entanglements. It is also important to understand that these artists are all multi-disciplinary, across performance, film, virtual mediated spaces, writing, radio, and large and small forms of visual materials. I suggest that as I only summarize this encounter, that everyone could go online and find their websites for their further work and provocations.

The first two presenters in dialogue were John Jordan (UK) art-activist, and Rima Najdi (LB/DE) artist. To begin, John Jordan could not attend in person. He presented online as a giant talking head, which made it somewhat difficult for Rima Najdi to dialogue with him. Rima Najdi, based in Berlin, calls herself a "polyglot," who works best in one-on-one performance forms. Her work crosses between her multiple "identities" and deals with our everyday mediated and real situations of terror and practical work life. Her films are like radical citizen-artist masquerades, where she takes enormous chances like wearing a vest with giant dynamite packs and posing in public places in Beirut, or staging herself again at public Christmas markets in Berlin, as the radical other "woman," with a soundtrack of faked snipers. Najdi runs this thin line of performance disturbance in very up close personal spaces. We then moved to John Jordan's utopian journeys and questioning of everyday and contemporary consumer politics in his filmed-performances, demonstrations, and mass organized (still performance and film) interactive public disruptions. From his online work I am most impressed by his research and public processes: bringing to light different communities of people who are doing, living, working everyday-politics. Jordan spoke about his current interventions from the COP Paris meeting to a rally he was about to organize. Jordan's emphasis on the collective and considering how "fear" works on artists and the public resonated with Najdi's public performance acts. Jordan mentioned Gabriele Klein's works on the ideas of "shock" in society, and also Alan Kaprow's call for giving attention to things. He brought this together in how in a event of "crisis," fear prevents us from paying attention. This "paying attention" was deeply felt in Najdi's works and

Jordan's opus video works in communities of resistance and "utopian" production. Much more could be discussed about the differences and frictions between singular and communal art activism. Jordan brought up a pivotal issue that he was not dependent on his art for his living and that made him freer to take risks and that made his work bolder and more straight forward: if he staged a protest performance, he had nothing to lose. He also said as he continued his work, he could not go "back" to making performances that were not connected to activism. Jordan emphasized social change as the purpose for his work and he challenged and developed his aesthetics along with his political awareness. Certainly these two artists are in the league with Chantal Mouffe's "artists."

The next dialogue was between Andrea Bozic (HR/NL), a choreographer based in Amsterdam and Ivana Ivkovic (RS) a director and dramaturge activist based in Zagreb. Ivkovic's presentation was inspired by Chantal Mouffe's talk "Strategies of radical politics and aesthetic resistance." Ivkovic's presentation was a performative talk. She used the phrase, "Let's talk about..." and filled in various provocative phrases, situations and sayings, which she then discussed later in her work examples. For example, "Let's talk about: activism, dramaturgy, practice... or Let's talk about, "protest," or "infrastructure," or "politics." I kept thinking that her talk was a wonderful campaign-like speech and I was thrilled that she could use our Tanzkongress audience as a venue for performative politics! Ivkovic's works and talk emphasized the necessity of engaging in public institutions and the urgency that we do that now: we must stop making "shows ...let's assemble in happenings!" But she also re-iterated one of Mouffe's challenges that art practices cannot substitute for the political acts. Perhaps we could have taken this up across the artists' works, and played with this productive friction of art/acts. I wondered how many of their works were on video (but live at one time) and how on a screen there may be a distancing of politics from our watching bodies? Ivkovic and Bozic both bring up the politics of place, but in different ways. One example of Ivkovic's collective BADco. Collective, "A Pound of Hysteria" and earlier works, "Is there life on stage?" we see BADco.'s collective works that use construction, infrastructures that frame the audience's vision and how they must face the vision in these works on oil, work, collectives, and imposed physical/time structures. Her work can be seen as "more theatrical" but the twisting of texts and bodies and projections does not allow the audience to "watch." Putting Ivkovic's work next to Andrea Bozic's video installation work, brings together these two artists who immerse their audiences to force them into a kind of internal discomfort and mobilization. While I have not witnessed their works, there is a physicality in their works that is as direct as Najdi's and Jordan's but from the inside out. That is, their performative vision/gestures demand an internal change in perception or at least a re-orientation, an act of political disturbance on this viscerally deep level. Instead of debating which activists' acts are more direct or whether they press their audiences to action or not, it is important to consider how embodiment is also always in transition: one is always re-re-embodimenting

one's corporeality: on a cellular level, emotional level or external pressures of heat, cold, pain or inside-out terror. Then these works of immersion, especially Bozic's "The Cube" seemingly a more subtle Mouffe-ish political at first sight, may disturb on this biological level of scale, skin, proprioception and heartbeat, that at this micro-level of activism, still moves us out of our complacency. I am struck by the subtle shifts in Ivkovic's and Bozic's works and reminded that all these embodied politics also take time, enormous time in tiny fractured moments for our senses to communicate the threat of suffocation in our everyday lives. All these artists agreed in their discussion that we are at this place of "high risk" that demands absolute engagement in a now that continues into each next moment. One of the artists remarked how easy it is to be cynical. We are dying everyday. But it is much more challenging to activate aesthetic politics that can "shock" our systems: our political corporeality.

To end without concluding, these "artists" are positive, practical, and active. Out There. Something that dance-focused artists might consider, is how to re-perform their works in fearless public spaces, and, perhaps, these artists might collaborate with other artists, moving all these works into active public institutions where change, yes, according to Ivkovic, Bozic, Najdi, and Jordan, that is not only possible but imperative.

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