

# The Performance (of) Contemporaneity: Between Eschatology and Epistemology

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When I say that I want to think contemporaneity of the performance art or the contemporaneity's performance art between eschatology and epistemology, I wish to start with determining the contemporaneity as a specific "epoch of an end" (including the end of art) most recently developed by Alenka Zupančič, then – through an example of performative action in public space that happened in Ljubljana during the April 2020 pandemic days – I will think about the performance art strategies of intervening in that order, and findings, thinking and concepts produced by that intervening. I am nevertheless targeting to an attempt to construct a certain exit, a continuation and a reformulation that might be realized by the gesture of "performing the desire" developed by Nenad Jelesijević – as an emancipatory gesture that, following the notions of Jacques Rancière, supports construction of political community as a community of equals that is based on pleasure.

Zupančič in her book *The End* – that was published just a few months before the start of coronavirus pandemic – defines the present as the time determined by a specific and general "atmosphere of the end" (Zupančič, 2019: 7). However, she clarifies that that "end time" (ibid.) oscillates between "the feeling of the end as such" (ibid.), "the end of the end" (ibid.), and the feeling of impossibleness and indetermination of the end. Significantly, she notes that we live at the time in which we do not (anymore) expect a catastrophe (total war, atom bomb, comet... virus), we rather (already) live in it. We are not before the apocalypse, but exactly inside of it.

"Apocalypse has already started and become an active part of our lives and the world as it is. It is not waiting for us somewhere in the future, it already dictates social, economic and environmental conditions of the world." (Zupančič, 2019: 78-79)

The point is therefore in the fact that the apocalypse we are immersed in is not bringing an end of the world, but it is itself at the first place some new world, an "awful new world" (Zupančič, 2019: 79). Or, by the words of well-known Croatian "epistemological anarchist", political theorist and philosopher Zoran Kurelić, we are inside of a "crawling apocalypse which price is going to be paid

by the future generations” (noted in private correspondence).

That general feeling of an end – of ideologies, of big narratives/stories, of history – has been already shaping in the previous/20th century that is characterized – as noted by Alain Badiou – by “passion upon the real” (Badiou, 2005: 50, 56). That “real” is perfectly reflected in the book *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama (cf. Fukuyama, 1992) who places the thesis on triumph of liberal parliamentary democracy within the capitalistic ideology that, apparently, does not need any further continuation. Yet, after the cold war, the fall of Berlin Wall, and presumable annihilation (and final equalization) of 20<sup>th</sup> century’s “totalitarianisms”, we are not faced with an end, but precisely with its mutation. As Zupančič claims, it is about construction of “a new bizarre temporality” (Zupančič, 2019: 13) generated by permanent feeling of acceleration of persisting at the time of impossibility of an end, and also about a new type of power, governance and ruling produced by that time.

“History has begun again, but as the beginning of the end (of the world). Not so much in sense of ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’, but rather in sense that they might be one and the same; but not in sense that the world can only end without capitalism, it will rather end because of it.” (Zupančič, 2019: 43-44)

A new situation emerges along with the final politics embodiment within the imaginary of what Badiou has been lucidly defined as “capital-parliamentarism” (Badiou, 2006: 239) i.e. “too objectivistic suture of market economy and voting ritual” (ibid.), that “has no alternative”; a situation of absence of dialectics as an ultimate history accelerator, or, “a situation of non-dialectic contrast between destruction and justification” (Badiou, 2006: 57) that brings in: total relativization of all values; prevail of opinion over the thought; disbelief in power of revolution, change, progress; and, in the first place, equalizing of the good and the evil in ethical field, of equality and inequality in political field, and of communism and fascism (also fascism and anti-fascism) in ideological field.

“The famous ‘end of ideologies’ that we are using to mark our modesty, our humanitarian piety, means only a resignation of any newness of a human.” (Badiou, 2006: 50)

Within the general atmosphere of simultaneous presence and absence of the end – that generates fast assimilation of any effort to construct a critical, subversive, revolutionary action into the current dominance relations – we also face a specific re-articulation of the idea of the end of art.

Hegel was of course the first who introduced the theses on the end of art in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, seeing it in the first place as a radical transformation of art that deliberates itself from all pre-inscribed rules about its form and content. In accordance to his core theses that the being essence is its manifestation, Hegel claims that – after romanticism – art best and first plays its role as philosophy (cf. Hegel, 2003). That Hegel's idea in contemporaneity is probably most affirmed by Giorgio Agamben; likewise, he claims that art's role and position are not central anymore, but the conceptual thinking becomes central now (cf. Agamben, 1999). As Jacques Rancière also pointed out, we are facing the fact that contemporary art (especially stage, performing, and performance art) sets itself a task that used to belong to philosophy – to answer to some of the most important questions of present. It therefore moves itself from representation to presentation, or, toward pure presence (cf. Rancière, 2010).

As Freddie Rokem stresses, the fruitful relationship between discursive practices of theatre and philosophy is not a new thing, especially having in mind the complementary and multi-layered creative position of Bertold Brecht who based his work as “philosophy of theatre”, and Walter Benjamin's exposing of “performative nature of philosophy” (cf. Rokem, 2019). Performativity is therefore the regime that makes concepts visible, being consequently common to art and philosophy; it is, as stressed by Mladen Dolar while following Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “a key moment of conceptuality itself, an inherent moment of revealing a concept” (Dolar, 2019: 25). A concept therefore cannot actually exist if it is not performed, as stressed also by Judith Butler (cf. Butler, 1999).

However, as elaborated by Jelesijević in his book *Performance-critique. A Turn into Abolishment of Art*, not every performance is emancipatory by itself. It is only emancipatory when, as defined by Rancière, offering new ways of watching as understanding, collaborating and co-existing (Rancière, 2010: 13). Or, if it is ultimately assuming equality of intelligences – that it is possible to teach others something that you do not know – as advocated by Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster (cf. Rancière, 2005b). Jelesijević further defines the concept of “performative intervention into the configuration of the sensible” (Jelesijević, 2018b: 21) as a fundamental condition for

“political emancipation in art, through art and with art, not only the emancipation of its protagonist, but whoever, everybody involved in a performance. Consequently, the critical artwork means an act of politicization of time-space and simultaneous politicization of the aesthetic, it is, at the same time, the consequence, the purpose and the instrument of an act of political subjectivation that reconfigures communal distribution of the sensible” (ibid.).

The emancipatory is therefore not necessarily establishing within the very content, but in relation with ways of presentation and the perception politics. As Rancière defines,

“art is not political for bringing in its messages and sentiments about the world order. Neither, it is political for the way it exposes social structures, conflicts or social group identities. It is political for the very gap that it attaches to itself having in mind that functions, for the very sort of time and space that it establishes, and for the very manner that it cuts into that time and space and populates it” (Rancière, 2012: 51).

And on,

“artistic images do not provide weapons for struggle, but they contribute to inscribing new configurations of the visible, the speakable and the thinkable, and, by doing that, to drafting a new landscape of the possible. However, they do that provided they do not anticipate their meaning and output” (Rancière, 2010: 63).

How can an emancipatory intervention be constructed in the eschatological present and what are its possible epistemological implications? I am going to view that question through an example of performative intervention by Primož Bezjak, an actor and a performer, and his colleagues<sup>1</sup>, who taped the platform of the Republic Square in front of the Slovenian parliament in Ljubljana with black tape crosses in the beginning of “corona April 2020”. This is one among first local art-activist, guerrilla-performative, autonomous-beyond-institutional actions in public space since the beginning of bio-political “new normality” that introduced fear and anxiety for the sake of preserving “the bare life” (Agambenian *homo sacer*) before the final normalization of Agambenian “state of exception”. (cf. Agamben, 2005) So we initially read the action on the pandemic deserted square as a mute, yet eloquent comment of the forced prohibition of movement, gathering and opinion expressing, and of the imperative of “social distancing” – the (still actual) measures uncovered by health protection, adopted and implemented by Slovenian government upon consolidation of its own authoritarian power position and with accompanied sadist discourse.

We all know that we live in times of biopolitics – defined by Michel Foucault as the governance technology that does not decide about deaths of its subordinates anymore, but rather regulates

<sup>1</sup> According to most publicly available sources that has covered the intervention, it is possible to conclude that it is an author’s work, even though it is not self-evident, as, for instance, it is marked as a “citizens’ action” within the web exhibition “Virulent Self-portraits” by MG/MSUM Ljubljana. It is also possible to conclude that the action was taken by several individuals. Either way, Bezjak is here exposed as the action’s coordinator as he was the most (or the only) exposed and, following that, the one who mostly suffered the legal and public consequences as well.

population's living; it reaches its peak in the genesis of neoliberalism as a variegated mixture of racism, neocolonialism and neoimperialism, wrapped in a cellophane of human rights, tolerance and multiculturalism. (cf. Foucault, 2015) Furthermore this conceptualization has been developed by Agamben as a model of governance where biopolitical bodies are produced right thorough primal effect of sovereignty that means life inside and, at the same time, outside of law, for the governor is determined as a carrier of monopoly over decision about the state of exception. (cf. Agamben, 2004) But now we move into the "pharmaco-pornographic age", as argued by Paul B. Preciado in his book *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in The Pharmacopornographic Era*, in which governance intrudes directly into the body under the mask of "health related reasons". That situation of mutated biopolitical paradigm has – globally – opened space to state power to rule our lives via the total body control even more brutally than ever before. (cf. Preciado, 2013) The body movement itself has thus become an ultimate treat, violation of the rule and inevitable political resistance gesture. By taping the crosses, Bezjak is exposing the absence of bodies as absence of fulfilled, sensible and potent life, while recalling its political potential.

We can further think Bezjak's action within the genealogy of similar guerrilla activist-artistic-mobilizing actions emerged in public space during bigger manifestations against globalized capitalism worldwide (eg. Seattle 1999, Prague 2000, Genova 2001) that, as a rule, (still) provoke a global system's "safety panic", often resulting in suspending of freedom of expression, or, following the diction of the 39<sup>th</sup> article of Slovenia's Constitution Act, "expressing the thought, speech and public performing"; and of the 59<sup>th</sup> article: "freedom of artistic expression". That cataclysm of European democracy that escalated in recent months of disinfected reality is described by Gerald Raunig in the book *Art and Revolution. Artistic Activism in the Long 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. (cf. Raunig, 2011) Such "artivistic practices" (cf. Milohnič, 2005 and 2009) can be also found in local surrounding. They are building their expression on autonomist tradition, on use of body that is rather constitutive than representative, while – in thematic sense – referring to critique of global capitalism, neoimperial militarism, and structural violence. Mysterious collective called UZI - Urad za intervencije [Intervention Office] realized few direct guerrilla actions on the borderline between art and activism around 2001; that brought in a fresh air in otherwise pretty homogenous, aesthetically and market-oriented narrative of the art scene in Slovenia's early state independence period.<sup>2</sup> To warn about the "black spot of Slovenian independence process" – the

2 The note on "apoliticalness" of Slovenian contemporary art (including the context of that time still actual bloody decay of formerly common state Yugoslavia) has been best summed up by a curator of stage arts Michel Uytterhoeven

problem of the erasure – collective Dostje! [Enough!] realizes in 2003 the action *United Leaves* in form of scattering dry leaves and reading a political manifesto at the headquarters of political party ZLSD<sup>3</sup> [*United Leaves* is a word-game parody of the party's name]; the next day activists write the word IZBRIS [erasure] with their own bodies on the carriageway in front of the parliament building, and thus briefly block the traffic and everyday ignorance of that problem. With words Marko Breclj's, those actions can be labelled as "soft- terrorism". Besides that, it is important to recall the activity of Breclj himself and mention, among many of his "soft-terroristic action", the exceptional *Vatentat* [V-assasination, V referring to attendance of Vatican's representatives at the venue but also to "vata", cotton wool that author used during his action] of the political chameleon Dimitrij Rupel from the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia party, who was in that time foreign affairs minister at the celebration of the first anniversary of University of Primorska in 2003. As mentioned by Jelesijević, this event is "importantly meaningful as a playful intervention into the real that turns the real upside down, parodies it and for a moment shows its reverse side" (Jelesijević, 2018b: 215). "Activist" practices in Slovenia have become more intensive during demonstrations against the violence of financial capitalism in 2011 and during the people's uprisings against overall neoliberalization from 2012 to 2014. One of the most interesting actions from that time were multiple "attacks" at the police's safety fence installed on the Republic Square in front of Slovenian parliament building; the fence that – same as nowadays – has been reducing public space making gathering difficult. "Artivists" tried to burn the fence, they were pulling it trying to move it away, giving in that way a visibility to systemic, structural, state violence, as analysed by Jelesijević in his writing *The Resistance in Spectacle, the Spectacle in Resistance* posted at his blog Performans.si. (cf. Jelesijević, 2014)

As Jelesijević argues in his article *The Revolution Square* at Performans.si,

"from the visual point of view the crosses are a remark of Malevich's black cross that had been persistently (pseudo) replicated by the NSK collective who, by doing that, inscribed itself into the contemporary art canon as a bit of the East in the West" (Jelesijević, 2020).

But we can as well think Bezjak's action within genealogy of famous political performances

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during his visit to a festival in Slovenia, as he noted that the Slovenian art production is "full of beauty". He said, as Milohnič states in his above mentioned book: "In Ljubljana, opposite to other places, the war seems to be so far away. I have a feeling that Ljubljana behaves as if there was no war at all. Can you explain me that?" (Milohnič, 2009: 118)

<sup>3</sup> It is not out of place to mention: in that time visible member of that party is currently the state's president.

realized in former Yugoslavia,<sup>4</sup> gradually escalating in their originality, radicalness and politics since the 1960's to their peak in 1980's, when the state slightly slid from socialist to liberalist mode; the same liberalism that reached its peak at the end of the 1990's, as well as its current collapse – at that very Republic Square recently taped with crosses by Bezjak. Majority of these performances were realized in galleries (and that was already an important deviation from the theatre's stage regime), while some of them went further by structuring the art liberation gesture (also as) a gesture of deinstitutionalization by realizing their actions directly in public space – in that way bringing back to it the political potential and at the same time giving visibility to systemic repression that is everytime “the glue” of the dominant ideology. In accordance with Althusserian understanding that art gives visibility to dominant ideology (cf. Althusser, 2018), or, with Benjaminian maxim that communism responds to fascist aestheticization of politics with politicization of art (cf. Benjamin, 1998), the performer's (naked) body – as, in most cases, a “carrier of ideology” – has put political subjectivation (emancipation) in focus of artistic action. Our first associations are probably Marina Abramović (e.g. *Rhythm 0*, 1974) and/or Vlasta Delimar (e.g. *Fuck Me*, 1981), yet Tom Gotovac and Sanja Iveković are more interesting for our subject, as they, much like Bezjak, openly “violated public order and peace” with their doing, and were also subjects of police intervention. In his probably most known action *Zagreb, I Love You* from 1981, Gotovac was running naked in the streets of Zagreb shouting the statement which is the performance's title, occasionally laying down and kissing concrete ground. Police arrested him and ended the performance exactly after seven minutes. In her performance *The Triangle*, done at the day of the Yugoslav president Tito visit to Zagreb, Iveković defies the ban of standing at the windows and balconies, lays on a deck chair at her balcony, pours whisky, lights cigarette, reads a book and simulates masturbation; an “official person” soon rings at her door and insists that she must remove all objects and persons from the balcony; that's how the performance ends.

Such comparison is (at least) interesting, as it seems that in Slovenia we currently deal with a sort of ideological “retro-principle” as we face openly totalitarian state measures only after long years of liberal-democratic order which followed getting state's independence, and that usually tried to – at least – aestheticize such approaches. Governance were mostly only grumbly observing and ignoring such actions in 1990s, marginalizing, mocking and punishing them as a violation in 2000s, but in the last decade we can notice obvious escalation of repression and tendency of criminalizing

4 Political performance is the matter of Eastern Europe. Katja Kobolt and I as co-editors have checked that thesis in the collection of texts *Performative Gestures – Political Moves*. The book is one of the few publications that address that question and focus on it.

any kind of resistance, including the artistic one. In that frame Bezjak was legitimized (and fined) during the action; police has also visited him at his home the next day, which can certainly be understood as an intimidation gesture that reminds to methods from East Berlin during the Cold War.

Following the markable Rancière's definition of politics as aesthetic activity based on redistribution of the sensible (space and time) that intervenes into a governance (with his word: "police") regime by rebelling the "proper" distribution of bodies, functions and senses (cf. Ranciere, 2005a: 38), we can claim that Bezjak has constructed with his action a lucidly political act *par excellence*. At the time of the omnipresent parrot-echoing "stay at home" imperative, he realized his action not only as an artistic lucidity, but also as – and that exactly is his "feedback loop" – personal courage that in best manner confirmed the premise of "personal is political". However, if we keep following Rancière who claims that the "aesthetics of politics" (attention – just opposite from Benjamin's "aestheticization of politics"!) is an act of political subjectivation – an involution of critical formula: make visible what stays invisible –, we can conclude that Bezjak's action opens up a process that can include all of us and influences processes of politicization of body, as well as of space and time.

Bezjak, in a way, evokes the *vita activa* principle – defined by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human condition* – as a combination of labour, creation and acting (cf. Arendt, 1996). Bezjak intervenes in reality as *homo faber*, therefore in the field of creativity (*poiesis*) and, consequently, acts as *zoon politicon* in the sphere of activity (*praxis*). Activity (acting) as such counters isolation, it has to be realized among people, it requests a public(ity), a community, a public place. Among the three expressions of *vita activa* only acting cannot be imagined without humans, as it moves an individual out of private sphere (*oikos*) to the political and makes one a political being. The private sphere we have been radically pushed into shows tendency to become dominant life sphere; it excludes acting and we should be seriously concerned about that.

In that sense the action opens perhaps the most important question of the present, the question of possibility and conditions of constructing the common as a political gesture that supposes the radical equality. Jelesijević gives an excellent starting point in his article *Waiting for the Political. Toward the Protagonism in Performance* stating that:

“If a performative strategy is not perceptible for the common, its reach is only representative and we cannot speak about the truly political that can (i.e. not necessarily) arise in the performative.” (Jelesijević, 2018c: 131)

Community’s destiny is, as excellently exposed by Dolar (cf. Dolar, 2019), historically common both to philosophy (that breaks with myth) and theatre (that breaks with ritual). Thus the key question is, as Jelesijević argues:

“How to rely on power of everybody – in Rancièrian sense: whoever – during performing, and how to achieve that that power acts politically emancipatory? In other words, how to invest desire in social field to create, articulate and affirm a rupture in the existent (the powers that be) during a realization and embodiment of a performance art (and performing arts, too)? (Jelesijević, 2018c: 133).

Or, as he puts: how to make “a turn into meta-performative” (ibid.)?

It seems like such attempt presumes a revolutionary gesture – Rancièrè respectively speaks exactly about a specific aesthetic revolution that, being juxtaposed to political revolution, stands up for building a community based on sensibility:

“Aesthetic revolution scenario tries to transform aesthetic repeal of domination relationships into a generative principle of the world without domination. That proposition opposes revolution to revolution: it opposes the revolution as a formation of community of sensibility to the political revolution perceived as revolution of statehood that actually re-ignites separation between humanities. [...] On one hand it causes diminishing of ‘aesthetics’ of politics, or, the practice of political dissensus. Instead, it offers creation of a ‘consensual’ community which is not a community of agreeing of all, but a community established as an association of sensibility.” (Rancièrè, 2012: 66)

If we make further step and accept that social production and desiring-production are the same thing, as claimed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, then it is only the desire that is truly revolutionary.

“Regardless of some revolutionaries’ opinion the desire is revolutionary in its essence – the desire, not festivity! – and no society cannot stand position of true desire without disabling its structures of exploitation, subjugation and hierarchy.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2017: 137)

It is therefore possible to conceptualize the contemporary performative act as a construction of a political community based on desire or, as Jelesijević defines, as “a gesture of *performing the*

*desire* that precisely in the space-time of its performance means true liberation, which is, after all, another name for joy” (Jelesijević, 2018c: 133). As he stresses in another article *Institution Trouble. Toward Self-organization of production. A Sketch* at Performans.si, that process is about an ultimate autonomous gesture that includes exiting from institutional frames, cultural hegemony and, accordingly, capitalist production relations with market logic.

“It is neither about changing institutions ‘from inside’ nor their demolishing, but about the gesture of *performing the desire* (which is not staging a desire’s projection) that precisely in the space-time of its performance means true liberation (which is, after all, another name for revolution). Self-organization is a prerequisite of such performance. The question of institution is therefore radically deconstructed and turned into another question: What and how after institution? And that question becomes a current issue in the moment when we decide to act without following institutionalized canons and imposed production modes.” (Jelesijević, 2018a)

It is becoming increasingly clear that a new consensus of community living should be invented here and now. The concept of “performing the desire” as a radically emancipatory act at the time of general end at the intersection of art and philosophy – aiming at revolutionary shaping of political community based on joy – might be a starting point. And, as pleasure is what serves no purpose as defined by Jacques Lacan (cf. Lacan, 1985), that community also serves no purpose except construction of a continuation at the time of the end. Or, as Samuel Beckett writes in his novel *The Unnamable*: “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on.” (Beckett, 1970: 116)

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