

The (Supra)Tactical Performance Spectrum: Transgressive Performance as a Political Act from Poetic Eggs in Buenos Aires to Mambo- Dancing Maggots in New York City and Beyond

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Current dominant academic discourse concerning artistic activism and the political potentialities of transgressive performance centres on the notion of tacticality (Bogad, 2016; Shepard 2011, Duncombe, 2016). Here counter-normative interventions are framed as politically impactful in so far as they are developed according to a clear action logic in pursuit of defined goals. The (auto)ethnographic data that informs this study, collected over sixteen months of participant observation with artist and activist performance collectives in Buenos Aires and New York City, shows that such tactical orientation of transgressive performance is sometimes the case, but not always so. Observations of transgressive performances that purposefully evade tactical consideration and frame such rejection of obligatory rationality as a significant political act in itself are also documented. Such acts are proposed as reflecting a different 'supra-tactical' or 'supersensible' orientation towards transgressive performance that goes beyond the tactical paradigm and associated power/knowledge structures that dictate compulsory ascription to dominant constructions of the 'sensible'. Accommodating the intermingled co-existence of both orientations observed in practice, the blended concept of the '(supra)tactical performance spectrum' is proposed that seeks to encompass the range of political motivations and implications of transgressive performance that have been overlooked by previous over-concentration upon tacticality.

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Cracking open papier-mâché eggs full of automatic poetry alongside a penguin, a giant eye, a cat in boxing gloves, and a princess; wheeling around a dead mouse covered in glitter on a tea trolley; setting a birthday cake on top of a coffin; swaying in a nude, masked crowd whilst throwing oiled asparagus at onlookers; walking the streets with a knee length beard full of questions attached by clothes pegs; parading as part of a pack of otherworldly creatures pushing towering, interactive garbage sculptures built in shopping carts ...

Many have asked me why I was involved in such activities during the sixteen months of comparative (auto)ethnographic¹ fieldwork that I conducted with socially-committed artist and activist² performance collectives in Buenos Aires (BsAs) and New York City (NYC) during 2017 and 2018. This is a pertinent question – *why?* – being a centrally desired provocation of the artists and activists with whom I work, often counterpoised against its equivalent: *why not?* Sometimes performers answer such queries; oftentimes no. These (non)answers, as this paper will show, may unveil calculated ‘tactical’ aims underlying such transgressive acts, ‘supra-tactical’ attempts to escape and undo means-end rationality and associated matrices of power/knowledge altogether, or a seemingly contradictory admixture of both such ‘tactical’ and ‘supra-tactical’ elements. This is the spectrum of contextually contingent (supra)tactical performance possibilities that I propose as a new model for interpreting transgressive performance as a political act.

When I speak of ‘transgressive performance’, I refer to actions that create notable disharmony³ between what ‘should be’ according to hegemonic normative scripts and what ‘is’ within the performance. This definition is left purposefully loose in acknowledgment that it would be obtuse to attempt to impose a strict categorization upon performances often themselves intrinsically opposed to claims of definitive meaning. Elsewhere I have used the term ‘absurd performance’

¹ As I expand upon in greater depth elsewhere (Sillitoe, 2020) I use the semi-parenthesized term ‘(auto)ethnography’ to label my methodology that posits ethnography – that is the “deep hanging out” (Rosaldo, 1989; Clifford, 1996; Geertz, 1998) of extended participant observation within a given group – and autoethnography – that is concentration upon the actions, thoughts, experiences, and emotions of the researcher themselves as data (Chang, 2008; Boylorn and Orbe, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2015) – as mutually informing. My observations with different performance-making collectives and reflection upon my own practice as an artist and activist are thus understood as one holistic data set.

² I define ‘activist’ and ‘artist’ performance practices according to the primary self-identifications of each individual or collective, recognizing that such distinctions are far from mutually exclusive yet still persist, often via self-policing as Josh Macphee and Erik Reuland make clear: “[a]s anarchists, we have seen our politics denigrated by other artists; as artists, we have had our cultural production attacked as frivolous by activists” (2007: 3).

³ I say ‘notable disharmony’ since, while the spectrum of norm transgression is expansive and may include mild deviations to fervent scandal, my work focuses specifically upon exaggerated, tenaciously counter-normative acts.

to describe the same phenomena and explore its interconnections with absurdist philosophy (Sillitoe, 2020). Further, I embrace overlap and ambiguity between my current definition of transgressive performance and other interrelated fluid categories such as queer, punk, dada, or avant-garde, recognizing that many of my own performances and those observed during my fieldwork could also variously fall under such labels. Here, akin to Barthelme's consideration of the 'post-postmodern new newness', I query the need "to slap a saddle on this rough beast" (1985: 512).

Rather, reflecting upon Michel Foucault's conception of 'power/knowledge' and Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'distribution of the sensible', I put forward a flexible understanding of transgressive performance as acts that undermine dominant constructions of the supposedly 'known' or 'sensible' and the power structures that rest upon them. Discussing the concept of power/knowledge, Foucault writes that

power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (1979: 27).

Consequently, whilst the "heterogeneous, unstable, and tense force relations" (Foucault, 1978: 93) that nebulously constitute 'power' are prone to distillation into state and legal structures, all power relations may be seen to remain mutable. They are alterable precisely because they rest upon dominant notions of what is considered to be 'known' and such constructed "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1984: 74) may change, if never disappear. Normative frameworks informed by prevailing concepts of what is 'known' or 'true' thus intrinsically undergird accompanying power disparities, providing a semblance of foundation and 'sense' to actually foundationless, senseless inequalities. Meanwhile Rancière states that "the idea of a 'distribution of the sensible' implies...a polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in a space of possibilities" (2004: 42). This is the constructed normative framework of aesthetic-political possibilities that dictates dominant definitions of the 'normal', 'perceivable', 'acceptable', and 'possible', that is, the 'sensible'.

Transgressive performances in my terms are thus acts that defy and que(e)ry the dominant '*distribution of the sensible*' within the context of their occurrence, in turn addressing the "essential political problem" identified by Foucault of

ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth...not...emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but...detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (1984: 74/5).

Simplified: while power inequalities, based upon constructions of ‘knowledge’, are inevitable, less (or more) oppression remains possible at all times as notions of ‘knowledge’ may shift, allowing transformation of associated power structures. As shall be illustrated below, I extract the concept of the (supra)tactical performance spectrum from my data in reflection of how I observed different artists and activists creating transgressive performances to do so in very different manners, some tactically seeking to reconfigure constructions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘sense’ in specific ways whilst others were more intent on undermining or even abolishing such constructions altogether.

I have structured this model in terms of the relation of performances to tactical thinking so as to underline how my research fills several gaps within recent research framing artistic activism and transgressive performance as inherently tactical, exemplified by the work of Larry Bogad (2016), Ben Shepard (2011), and Stephen Duncombe (2016). I take the term ‘tactical performance’ specifically from Bogad’s 2016 book of the same name, itself growing out of previous concepts such as ‘tactical media’ (Garcia and Lovink, 1997; Critical Art Ensemble, 2001; Boler; 2008; Raley, 2009). This, as Nayar (2010: 100) points out, stems from the even earlier notion of ‘tactical television’, whilst also informing parallel contemporary terms such as ‘tactical frivolity’ (Kingsmith, 2016), indicating how such focus upon tacticality in conceptualizing creative political acts is profoundly entrenched. Reflecting this unifying, broadly unquestioned foundation of assumed tacticality⁴, I refer to this body of scholarship collectively as the ‘tactical performance literature’. It is to demarcate as clearly as possible how my work builds upon this literature that I primarily label the alternative orientation towards transgressive performance that my research exposes as ‘supra-tactical’. However, inspired by Immanuel Kant’s description of “a realm that is unbounded, but that is also inaccessible to our entire cognitive power: the realm of the supersensible” (1790/1987: 15), I also occasionally employ the term ‘supersensible performance’ to describe such acts that strive to outstrip the dominant distribution of the sensible.

Emphasis upon tactical thinking is referenced back by Bogad (2016: 5; 87) to Michel de Certeau’s (1984/2005) distinction between strategic powers and tactical players. Here, in contrast to strategic power held by normative institutions within intertwined established physical territories and hegemonic discourses,

⁴ Assumed inevitable tactical orientation links to rich philosophical debate concerning the necessity or lack thereof of ‘practical reason’ and ‘instrumental rationality’ to human action. For outlines of such argument about whether calculated pursuit of reasoned ends must essentially characterize human behaviour or not, and, if so, how, see Star (2018), Knauff and Spohn (forthcoming), and Sylvan and Chang (forthcoming). I lack the scope here to enter such debate in-depth, rather noting that, in my research terms, the dominant frame of tactical performance is undergirded by assumed universality of rational goal pursuit, whilst my observation of supra-tactical performance troubles this assumption.

tactics are the “art of the weak” (de Certeau, 1984/2005: 219) that innovatively respond to and make seditious use of surrounding dominant power/knowledge infrastructure in order to outwit or potentially change it. Thus “a tactic is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power” (*ibid*: 220). In this view, underdog rebels aspiring to undo the strategically enforced authority of powerful institutions must then necessarily turn to a tactical orientation as their sole recourse.

Subsequently, an assumed truism shared within the tactical performance literature is that transgressive intervention constitutes a new ‘tool’ within the Social Movement Studies concept of the ‘repertoire of contention’ (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). This is the idea that those wishing to provoke socio-political change draw from a predefined list of potential actions, transgressive performance being pegged on as another such option to be calculatedly deployed whenever deemed most advantageous in relation to activist aims. As Bogad puts it, transgressive performers are here seen to “add new tactics to the repertoire of contention, and...revamp old tools so they don’t get rusty with disuse, or dull with overuse” (2016: 5). This viewpoint is further echoed by Shepard’s analogy that “[w]ithout a little seasoning, the stew of social protest becomes bland” (2011: 2), the “seasoning” of playful performance seen as making the broader inventory of potentially tedious political stratagems more palatable and their cumulative effective nourishment of society more likely.

Transgressive and playful performance, often bracketed within broader discussions of humour, is thus framed by the tactical performance literature as both externally and internally tactical. The practice is here presented as offering an innovative complement to existing action repertoires and a relieving ‘coping strategy’ preventing ‘burnout’ regarding assumed more key political activities (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamembaum, 2014; Maon and Lindgreen, 2018). This has become the dominant academic frame for interpreting the political motivations and implications of transgressive performance, adopted by numerous scholars (Farrar and Warner, 2008; Lechaux, 2010; Boyd and Mitchell, 2012; Routledge, 2012; Kauffman, 2018). It is notable that the vast majority of this scholarship has been based on case studies from the U.S.A. and occasionally Europe, with a few collectives in particular attracting disproportionate attention such as the culture jamming impersonators of corporate and political figures The Yes Men (Mouffe, 2008; Lambert, Bonanno, and Bichlbaum, 2009), the anti-capitalist preachers and choral singers of The Church of Stop Shopping (Lane, 2002; Perucci, 2008; McClish, 2009; Hindley, 2010; Lechaux, 2010; Berthon, Fischer, and DesAutels, 2011), and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) (Bogad, 2010, 2011; Routledge, 2012; Ramsden, 2015) comprised of multiple cells of ramshackle clowns that appear at various protest situations “to play with police absurdly” (Bogad, 2016: 1). Such tactical performance literature in turn has motivated recent proliferation of ‘toolboxes’, ‘handbooks’, or ‘trainings’ offered by ‘movement

incubators' or 'tactical labs', also largely based in the USA, such as Beautiful Trouble, Center for Artistic Activism, A Blade of Grass, Critical Tactics Lab, 350.org, Movement Net Lab, or Training for Change.

In what follows, I will show how my (auto)ethnographic data problematizes assumptions of inherent tacticality that have guided such recent professionalization of transgressive performance and delineation of supposed 'best practices' for optimized political impacts. Recognizing a tendency for tacticality within some of my fieldwork observations, I question its application as a totalizing explanation, observing in addition the possibility of transgressive performance that operates outwith dominant frames of means-end rationality without direct aims or clear rationales and that frames this very rejection of tacticality as a political act in itself. As such the two aforementioned opposing ideal types⁵ of transgressive performance emerge from my data – tactical performance and supra-tactical performance – and a blurry spectrum between them of contextually contingent (supra)tactical performance possibilities. I thus formulate the semi-parenthesized term '(supra)tactical' to express three related dialectical conditions within a single shorthand: the ideal type of the tactical; the opposite ideal type of the supra-tactical; and the actual shifting liminal realities of the (supra)tactical.

Since ideal types are unattainable in their pure form in reality, I refer to *more* tactical or *more* supra-tactical inclinations throughout this paper, recognizing that a broadly tactical performance typically contains some more supra-tactical elements and vice versa. Indeed, the tactical performance literature that I build upon is not entirely devoid of such nuance, and in some ways my counterpoint of supra-tactical performance picks up on threads left hanging, if underexplored, by these scholars. For example, Shepard is careful to point out:

Some argue that organizing is about labor movements and material ends – but this is a narrow view. For many, organizing is also about shifting the mechanisms of everyday life, challenging the regimes of the normal (2015: 2).

Nonetheless, Shepard goes on to primarily instrumentalize play and performance as a sustainability strategy in an auxiliary role supporting apparently more significant political work, privileging the tactical side of the spectrum as the 'real' explanation for transgression.

Likewise, Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe, three major figures of the tactical performance literature writing together, explicitly acknowledge that "[t]he limitations of the rationalist view of social movements are many" (2008: 5).

⁵ Wherever I make reference to 'ideal types' I am alluding to Max Weber's (1904/1949) heuristic framework for designing and interpreting social research in relation to an imagined model exemplar of the subject at hand in contrast to the reality observed. For further information on the history and use of this concept, see Lindbekk (1992) and Swedburg (2018).

However, their critique centres upon the tendency of more structural theories to ignore the “pleasures many find in the chase to create a better world” (*ibid*: 5), this being addressed by a dual emphasis upon structurally informed calculation and the pleasures of dissident playfulness, such gratifications in turn re-instrumentalized as coping mechanisms or recruitment tools. With some qualifications, these scholars thus remain rooted in a rationalistic paradigm that generally assumes an integral backbone of means-end calculation undergirding any performance. Such emphasis upon an assumed essential pre-eminence of rationally calculated action also marks the difference between my counterpoising of tactical and supra-tactical transgressive performance orientations and notions of “instrumental” and “expressive” actions within Social Movement Studies (Curtis and Zurcher, 1974; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Smucker, 2014). Instrumental actions are those pursuing predefined goals whereas expressive actions “come from the heart and the gut – whether or not our ‘heads’ calculate the specific outcome” (Smucker, Russell, and Malitz, 2013). This distinction has typically been made in order to buttress a central argument that ‘expressive’ action may form a useful supplement to the more significant work of ‘instrumental’ action, rather than to herald the former as representing a fundamentally different yet no less valid way of understanding politics and the political implications of transgressive action as I do with supra-tactical performance.

Elsewhere Duncombe raises the paradoxical issue that

[i]n opposition to...instrumentality, an activist artist might aspire to create artwork that, in the perplexing words of the poet W. H. Auden, “makes nothing happen”...It is hard to imagine a piece of work not working at all, for even not working is work of a sort...it is an aim. (2016: 123).

The purely supra-tactical performance thus appears impossible whilst ensconced within a context characterized by tactical thinking, where even to oppose tacticality may be readily framed as tactical. In response, I would emphasize, as my (auto)ethnographic vignettes below will exemplify, that whilst attempted supra-tactical performance may be called out in practice as acting somehow tactically, this balance of tacticality is undeniably distinct from that propounded within the tactical performance literature. Here calculation, focus, and reconstructive hope is replaced with chance, diffuseness, and disruptive disorder. Nonetheless, I do note the inability of the proposed term ‘supra-tactical performance’ to fully capture the intricacies of the oblique practice that it seeks to describe that both reaches beyond yet remains marred within prevailing notions of tacticality. However, it is integral to point out that this limitation echoes a similar fault in the notion of tactical performance, even supremely tactically orchestrated interventions potentially containing the germs of supra-tactical disruption. Indeed, Bogad begins to acknowledge this when noting within an extensive list of largely direct tactical attributes of transgressive intervention the simultaneous possibility for “creative disruption of the articulation of power, or synaptic disruption in the

minds of passersby as clichés are broken up through playful and surprising action” (2016: 280). It is precisely to reflect this constant, dynamic push-and-pull of more tactical and more supra-tactical elements of transgressive performance as a political act, as observed throughout my fieldwork, that I propose the more nuanced concept of the (supra)tactical performance spectrum.

In the further interest of maintaining nuance, it must also be noted that I found the different socio-political histories and cultural contexts of BsAs and NYC to exert a profound influence upon the motivations for and practices of transgressive performance in each fieldsite. For example, I found memories of the 1976-83 military dictatorship and 2001 economic collapse in Argentina to both produce culturally specific taboos which influenced how, where, and when artists and activists felt able to create transgressive performances in BsAs. Likewise I observed both the specific history of slavery and racism in the United States and the ongoing national discourse of ‘culture wars’ between conservative and progressive forces to distinctly mould the performance practices of artists and activists in NYC. Such contextual contingency of transgressive performance practice has been largely overlooked by the generalizing discourse of the tactical performance literature that has been disproportionately informed by US case studies, as I have discussed in greater depth elsewhere (Sillitoe, 2020). However, the purpose of the current paper is rather to elucidate more broadly the concept of a spectrum of (supra)tactical performance possibilities. The influence of cultural and socio-political context upon whereabouts on this spectrum transgressive performances by artists and activists in different places are more prone to fall is a topic that must be addressed elsewhere. This article rather aims to throw an empirically-informed theoretical paving stone that may facilitate myself and other researchers of transgressive performance across contrasting fieldsites to further undo the ethnocentrism of previous research on this topic in the future.

I will now progress to illustrate actions occupying different positions upon the proposed (supra)tactical performance spectrum via the analysis of (auto)ethnographic vignettes from my participant observation with four collectives, presented in order from most tactical to most supra-tactical. Namely, these groups are the anti-capitalist activist network Rise and Resist in NYC, the popular theatrical education project *La Escuela de Teatro Político* in BsAs, the surrealist, ‘errorist’ arts group *Etcétera* also in BsAs, and the anarcho-nihilist performance art collective The Cart Department back in NYC.

Rise and Resist

During my fieldwork in NYC in 2018 I soon noted that the level of research-relevant activist activity in the city had dipped since the 00’s swell of tactical performance literature detailing the exploits of groups such as NYC Reclaim the Streets throwing sporadic carnivals in public spaces (Duncombe, 2002),

Billionaires for Bush sardonically lauding George W. Bush's protection of the super-rich at the expense of the poor (Farrar and Warner, 2008; Lechaux, 2010), Absurd Response to an Absurd War reacting to the normalization of the Iraq war via counter-normative street intervention (Bogad, 2006), or Missile Dick Chicks lampooning the patriarchal logic of war by performing with huge torpedo phalluses (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). Rather than spurring innovative interventions in public space as activist-scholars documented in the Bush and Obama eras, I found the rhetoric of tactical performance to largely be inhibiting the production of such acts by NYC activist groups during Trump's presidency. Here a common refrain was that during the 'heyday' documented by the tactical performance literature, transgressive intervention had significant potential tactical clout, yet now this type of action was tactically untenable. A former member of Billionaires for Bush told me, for example:

Bush was ridiculous, sure, but he still had political legitimacy, you know, through his father and other things, that we could usefully undermine. But Trump undermines himself as part of his daily routine – what are we supposed to do with that?

Here a shifted political landscape was seen as stripping transgressive performances of their previous tactical advantage. Trump, for many NYC activists engaged with during my fieldwork, was a clown who could not be outdone and whose insidious irrationality needed to be resisted by rational, earnest opposition.

This being noted, I did still discover that some contemporary activist groups such as the anti-capitalist network Rise and Resist, queer anti-gun violence collective Gays Against Guns, or environmentalist and bicycling rights group Time's Up! were making occasional use of transgressive performance interventions on a smaller scale. Meanwhile other established creative activist networks such as the aforementioned groups The Church of Stop Shopping and The Yes Men maintained sporadic performances. As such I was able to participate in occasional performance interventions with contemporary NYC activist collectives, such as the Rise and Resist action documented in the following vignette.

New York City, 2 August 2018

Part of a wave of 'Abolish ICE'⁶ actions co-ordinated by numerous activist networks across the city, including New Sanctuary, Occupy ICE, and The Stop Shopping Choir, Rise and Resist had called a performance demonstration entitled 'Profiteer's Day'. According to their online promotion it was to be a "Wall Street Fleece Market...a mock hawking of For-Profit

⁶ ICE is the common abbreviation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. During my fieldwork I found ICE police to be often considered as a symbol of an increasingly draconian state, notoriously responsible for separating infant children from their parents at the US/Mexico border and imprisoning asylum seekers indefinitely.

Prison industry apparatus...a joyous, righteous but raucous noise to put those profiting from ICE on notice."

Arriving to the congregation spot at 25 Wall Street, I discover a gaggle of approximately forty protestors holding placards linking Bank of America, Wells Fargo, JP Morgan, and other surrounding financial organizations to ICE. Above them, on the steps stand three suited individuals grabbing at toy dollar bills that I begin to participate in dangling in front of them. They shout about the great investment opportunities offered by Trump's proposed border wall and immigration enforcement. Trump himself, with an oversized papier-mâché head, raises a golden sceptre in hearty agreement. They point towards a nearby \$675 a day hotel and call it cheap, referencing the average \$782 a day price of an ICE prison cell to the US taxpayer.

Attempts are made by members of the larger activist mass to rally surrounding tourists and workers into booing yet with little success. The group pulls down Trump and the business people from their pedestals, pushing them into a mass that marches the short distance to the Charging Bull statue, chanting 'Immigrants are welcome here, get ICE outta here'. At the bull, chants continue and the business-people return to cawing over the money to be made in children's prisons. Other activists turn to explaining the scene to tourists lining up to take photos touching the bull's remarkably polished testicles, shining from the daily caress of so many hands.



Figure 1: Rise and Resist's ironic corporate sharks. Photo by Erik McGregor.

Here, following a similar model to Billionaires for Bush, the over-zealous business characters offer a ridiculous performance ultimately rooted in facts. They flounder ludicrously at play money whilst dropping references to numbered data such as the comparison between the ‘cheap’ hotel and an ICE prison cell. The characters are obviously a joke, yet their punchlines are hard data. Here a seemingly disharmonic break from the normal flow of activity on Wall Street unveils itself as a distilled presentation of the logics followed behind the closed doors of surrounding banking headquarters. This was done purposefully. The tactical goal of calling out specific financial supporters of ICE activities, hoping to contribute to pressure upon them to withdraw investments bankrolling the separation of migrant families, dictated the action, directing and delimiting it according to the perceived best route towards achievement of this aim.

Any more perplexing elements in such a performance, as I typically observed amongst activists in NYC, were restricted in the interest of maximized, direct, short-term impact. As much as the fanatical business-people might stir some initial confusion in unfamiliar passersby, this confusion and discomfort was sought in so much as it was considered tactically advantageous in shaming and undermining the legitimacy of targeted institutions, and was ultimately dispelled as soon as it was seen to achieve or lose this tactical promise. Such activist transgression is typically explained as it is done, the crowd of classically placard-wielding activists in this instance signalling, and sometimes literally explaining to more dumb-founded onlookers, the ironic intentions of the business-people characters.

The above anecdote thus provides an example of a broadly tactical approach to transgressive intervention, serving to confirm the validity of previous observations within the tactical performance literature in relation to their typical case studies of activist networks in the USA. However, as much as I discovered tactical performance discourse to be valid in the context of NYC activists groups, what my research shows is that once we cast the net a little further to include socially-committed artists and collectives working under different cultural and socio-political conditions, we begin to encounter a far greater diversity of perceptions of the political potentialities of transgressive performance. This is what the examples in the rest of this article shall demonstrate.

La Escuela de Teatro Político

The activist collective that I worked most closely with in BsAs was *La Escuela de Teatro Político* (ETP) (The Political Theatre School). ETP is a volunteer-run collective of popular education and performance creation established in 2013 under the umbrella supervision of the nationwide anti-capitalist network *Movimiento Popular La Dignidad* (Popular Movement of Dignity). The collective seeks to explore through discussion and practice the possibilities of theatre and performance to provoke socio-political change. Themes of core workshops include Theatre of the

Oppressed, Brechtian theatre, history of Latin American political theatre, community theatre, community singing, and clown. Typical class sessions would take place in the headquarters of ETP, the occupied theatre *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa* (The Other Thing Popular Theatre). These sessions would involve theatre games, discussions of texts, and the devising and preparation of street interventions or performances for weekly Friday and Saturday night shows in *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa*. Participation in this entire process and any subsequent performances is what informs my fieldnotes concerning ETP.



Figure 2: Members of the ETP en route to an intervention. Photo by Alvaro Panaro.

In comparison to my work with activists in NYC detailed above, I observed transgressive performance, whilst still treated with caution, to be more prominently placed within the activist ‘repertoire’ in BsAs. This may be connected to an assertion shared by numerous members of ETP that I did not encounter so prominently amongst NYC activists, cogently expressed by one collective member, Chili, who told me – ‘*No podemos mantener nada sagrada, si no nos convertimos en una iglesia*’ (We cannot hold anything sacred, otherwise we turn into a church). In other words, the undermining of all normative structures, including nascent sub-cultural ones, is essential to the maintenance of autonomy and not becoming beholden to the word of an alternative, newly oppressive and inflexible ‘Lord’. That

is, there must not be only one ‘correct’ way of doing activism. Thus, in contrast to Bogad’s suggestion that transgressive performance is a “crowbar” that must be used correctly because “in the case of mistakes or miscalculations, that crowbar can break or rebound, causing painful self-inflicted injuries” (2016: 2), I found members of ETP typically remained more open to novel or experimental crowbar manipulation.

I observed that such experimentation with more supra-tactical elements within activist performance was often facilitated in BsAs by the key notion of *alegría rebelde* (rebellious joy). Here activists in BsAs were able to frame their interventions as pitting the delight of transgressive resistance against the drudgery of normative conformism, more supra-tactical elements often legitimated as helping sustain the broader fight for a fairer and more enjoyable future. *Alegría rebelde* thus appears as an Argentine parallel of ideas expressed elsewhere, such as Hardt and Negri’s proposed “posing against the misery of power the joy of being” (2000:413), or George McKay’s observation that “pleasure and direct action can be intertwined political strategies” (1996:131). However, diverging from McKay’s assessment based upon work with British protest movements, I did not observe the notion of *alegría rebelde* to operate solely within the realm of strategy, but also sometimes as a window for more supra-tactical interventions that may provoke socio-political change in different ways.

It was with emphasis upon their potential contribution to *alegría rebelde* that, following encouragement to participate in the popular education model of ETP not only as student but also teacher, my proposal of workshops of absurdist intervention were accepted through general assembly. Subsequently I facilitated eight weeks of sessions that came to be known as *talleres del absurdo* (workshops of the absurd), culminating in a collective street intervention with a group of five other members of ETP: Majo, Gianna, Lucía, Ceci, and Jesús. This process opened up many insights into perceptions of and motivations for transgressive and absurd performance both within the small workshop group and the broader collective, as the following vignette illustrates.

Buenos Aires, 5 December 2017

Lucía writes “Rebelamos adentro de la absurdidad de este mundo” (We rebel within the absurdity of this world) on a sliver of paper, rolls it into a tube, and slots it inside the small hole on the underside of a papier-mâché ‘egg’, adding the ovum to a pile of others with their ‘yemas poéticas’ (poetic yolks) already inserted. Next to her Majo scribbles “los ojos de tu abuelo” (the eyes of your grandfather), whilst Ceci chooses lines from a poetry anthology to copy out, and Gianna flicks through newspapers selecting words at random to note down. The next day we are to stage the final intervention of our series of workshops of absurd performance, entitled

by Lucía ‘El Huevonazo’⁷ (grand spectacle of giant eggs), the eggs as a central prop to be playfully distributed by a giant eye, a penguin, a cat in boxing gloves, a princess, and a spoon. We are in the sun occupying the outside stage at Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa, while another group of compañeros – Mati, Javi, and Mercedes – are within the theatre building painting signs for an upcoming march against the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In reality, participation in the two activities is not mutually exclusive, Lucía entering to paint a banner for a while, Javi occasionally exiting and helping fill some eggs. Finishing the eggs we begin to play with them, rehearsing for the next day, throwing the eggs between us, juggling them, trying to steal them from one another. Javi emerges in the doorway of the theatre holding a ‘¡Fuera OMC!’ (WTO out!⁸) sign and says with a grin “Estamos aquí adentro preparando para una manifestación importante y afuera hay algo que no tiene ningún sentido” (We’re inside preparing for an important demonstration and outside there’s something that doesn’t make any sense). Gianna, tossing an egg high in the air, responds, “Hay un mundo más allá del sentido y estamos yendo pa’ allá con alegría rebelde” (There is a world beyond sense and we’re headed in that direction with rebellious joy), to which Javi laughs and Mercedes, having also exited to investigate the commotion, appears to cringe. After playing a little longer, we place all the smaller eggs inside the larger egg we had prepared as their receptacle, ready for the next day. Mati approaches us and reminds us that it is important that we carry ID with us during the street action, in case of attracting police attention. Majo pulls a face and I jest that perhaps we could put our passports inside the eggs to play with too but Mati is not amused, stating curtly “Compas, es muy serio lo que digo” (Comrades, what I say is very serious).

The diversity of phrases inserted by different individuals within the approximately two hundred smaller ‘eggs’ used in this action speaks to the varied perceptions of its (anti)rationale within the participating group. For example, where Lucía foregrounded socio-political injustice as the fuel for an ongoing social struggle within literal statements, adding snippets explicitly about the ‘absurdity of capitalism’, Majo opted for short, disconnected, emotive statements without an obvious message. In the action itself, where members of the public would receive these clippings of poetry, those of Lucía would offer a direct political explication whereas those of Majo would more likely extend any initial perplexity provoked by the counter-normative intervention. The former lends the action a tactical purpose – rebellion against injustice and the spectacular spreading of anti-oppressive sentiment, which, as Lucía put it, was hoped might become more ‘contagioso’ (contagious) if expressed in this way. In contrast, Majo expressed the desire to engender poignancy and sudden, intimate reflection through short, cutting images, not necessarily feeding directly into a broader ‘revolution’, suggesting a more supra-

⁷ This also carries strong connotations of testicles and a term of (sometimes playful, sometimes not) disrespect.

⁸ The WTO is known as ‘La Organización Mundial del Comercio’ or ‘OMC’ in Spanish.

tactical intention to obliquely corrode the normative distribution of the sensible. Within the same action, these orientations existed side-by-side.

The co-occurrence alongside the classic activist action of banner painting grounded the above egg production and the performance it prepared for within a broader activist repertoire and associated overarching tactical frame. Javi's playful suggestion that our act that 'made no sense' was inferior to their 'important' preparations as such did not come without teeth. Behind it lay the truism, observed also concerning consistent questioning of the legitimacy of clown classes within the ETP curriculum, that an action required rational justification in order not to become frivolous. As alluded to in comparing Lucía's and Majo's phrases, for some this was a legitimate note, for others such obligatory 'sensibleness' was itself in need of critique. This emblemizes the potential co-existence of more tactical and more supra-tactical intentions to different degrees within different transgressive performances that my research centrally highlights. Grimaces at suggestions of a movement beyond sense or po-faced declarations of seriousness in response to more playful acts signal towards the apprehension of many activists in BsAs towards transgressive performance whose clear tactical formulation was not apparent. At the same time I observed this unease with deliberately supra-tactical action to represent part of a more open constellation of activist perspectives in BsAs in comparison with NYC, facilitated, as illustrated above, by greater internal movement criticality and the legitimizing narrative of *alegría rebelde*, as Gianna evoked once more in response to Javi's semi-jesting gripe.





Figures 3 (previous page) and 4: 'El Huevonazo'. Photos by Eloísa Molina.

Etcétera

I also collaborated with the dadaist/surrealist arts collective *Etcétera* and their sub-project *Internacional Errorista* (International Errorist) in BsAs. During my field-work *Etcétera* celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their foundation in 1997, launching an autobiographical book concerning their history and development of the philosophy and practice of 'errorism' (*Etcétera*, 2017). The group began as a self-described "*tribu de jóvenes artistas*" (tribe of young artists) squatting the former printing press of Argentine surrealist artist Juan Andralis and using it to set up laboratories of experimental art. From here the group began to collaborate with H.I.J.O.S. (*Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* – Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence) in performances known as *escraches* (Kaiser, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Druliolle, 2013) denouncing unprosecuted members of the dictatorial military junta of 1976-83 in "massive, festive and mobile spectacles of public shaming" (Sosa, 2014: 31).

Following the notoriety garnered by their creation of such mass spectacles, the group began to receive attention from the international art world, and today often operates within this sphere, having exhibited in recent years in the biennales of São Paulo, Taipei, Istanbul, Athens, and Jakarta. Significantly for my research,

this international arts activity remains complemented by ongoing interventions within street protest in BsAs. Previous apparent collective organization has transferred to general administration by the couple making their living as artists under the moniker – Fede Zukerfeld and Loreto Garín Guzman – commonly referred to in exhibition catalogues as the ‘co-ordinators’ of the group. In contrast to ETP, who have yet to receive scholarly attention, their international arts reputation means that Etcétera have already been subject to some investigation, though none specifically assessing their motivations for producing transgressive performance (Battiti, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Scotini, 2010; Flores Sternad, 2011; Eilat, 2015; Kelley, Jr. and Zamora, 2017). My major research participation with Etcétera was as a member in the *Erasmus Mundus*⁹ programme of ‘*deseeducación*’ (diseducation) facilitated by Etcétera with a base in the independent gallery, *Experiencia Hiedra* (Ivy Experience). In these ‘(no)work(no)shops’¹⁰ that ran throughout my fieldwork period we discussed the socio-political possibilities of transgressive performance, feeding these conversations into the creation of interventions. This process informs the bulk of my fieldnotes concerning Etcétera.

Pithily summarizing his perception of the difference between Etcétera and activist performance groups such as ETP, long-term collective member Hernan told me – “*somos más cool, boludo*” (We’re cooler, *boludo*¹¹). This was expressed at the end of a conversation reflecting on the collective’s greater irreverence towards established societal and subcultural norms, holding a more independent and thus more experimental position, coolness roughly equating to disrespect towards convention. Indeed, irreverent rule-breaking played a central role in the rhetoric and performance practice of Etcétera throughout my participation with them. A more supra-tactical valorization of transgression in and of itself appeared intrinsic to group identity. However, valuing transgression for its own sake did not translate to a negation of potential affiliation with other stakes. As aforementioned, the origins of the collective include participation in the *escraches* of H.I.J.O.S., distracting police attention with outlandish street theatre whilst others pelted the residences of unprosecuted torturers and murderers with red paint, pushing for the repealing of impunity legislation, illustrating a supremely tactical use of transgressive intervention.

⁹ A pun making a deliberate ‘error’ in the spelling of the European educational exchange programme, Erasmus Mundus

¹⁰ Written in this way, mocking the borrowed English word of ‘workshop’, “*porque no trabajamos ni compramos nada*” (because we don’t work or buy anything), Fede told me.

¹¹ The word *boludo*, ubiquitous in Argentina, is difficult to effectively translate. Signifying a cloudy status between ‘ballsack’ and ‘jerk’, the word is used fluidly in informal contexts as a generalized insult, to suggest stupidity, to display camaraderie, or to pinpoint emphasis.



Figure 5: Etcétera in action on the streets of Buenos Aires.
Photo by Sub Cooperativa de Fotógrafos.

What does distinguish Etcétera from the ETP position outlined above is that occasional tactical mobilization of performance takes place against a backdrop of commitment to more indirect troublemaking, rather than vice-versa. Etcétera often extolled contradiction as a virtue, messily combining tactical and supra-tactical motivations without perceiving a need to justify either. Their emphasis upon the accidental, aleatory concept of ‘error’ illustrates this, a tactically-orchestrated error being oxymoronic yet embraced nonetheless. In a self-penned description of errorist performance the collective writes – “*Aquí no hay ensayos: la acción dramática nace del error*” (Here there are no rehearsals, the dramatic action is born of error) (2017: 268). In contrast to the practice of ETP that was heavily influenced by Augusto Boal’s proposition that the Theatre of the Oppressed “in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without a doubt *a rehearsal of revolution*” (2000: 141), I found Etcétera to abandon premeditation and rehearsal in favour of the possibilities opened by improvisation and ‘error’. Here “*el error es una afirmación negativa, una especulación sobre otro resultado posible*” (Error is a negative affirmation, a speculation about another possible result) (Etcétera, 2017: 270). Rather than a direct goal, performances inspired by ‘error’ pursue the opening of other possibilities, maintaining open what more tactical performances tend to close off, as the below vignette will illustrate.

Buenos Aires, 9 September 2017

Sitting in a circle with nine others on the floor of *Experiencia Hiedra*, we wait for Augusto, the ‘maestro errante’ (wayward teacher) of this particular (no)work(no)shop to finish setting up his projector. Four of us – myself, Sophie, Mishko, and Jacinta, plus Augusto – have been regular participants in recent errorist actions, the others more sporadically involved.

Augusto calls our attention and begins a presentation introducing the concept of errorism for those less familiar, naming Fede and Loreto – at the time undertaking an artistic residency in the Netherlands – as founders and the curators of this series of (no)work(no)shops. He cites the direct influence of Situationism on his plan for the day of a *derive*, adding matter-of-factly that “a través de una coreografía errorista, de mover el cuerpo de una manera extraña o inesperada, tal vez podamos desestabilizar el poder” (through an errorist choreography, moving our bodies in a strange or unexpected way, perhaps we can destabilize power). He then projects a sequence of videos of birds, ants, and fish moving in packs, telling us that we are going to do the same, handing out a selection of open-ended cardboard headsets that restrict our vision to a single plane with the appearance of virtual reality goggles. He announces – “*Esto es la realidad aumentada tercermundista*” (This is virtual reality of the third world) to much laughter.

Placing our goggles on, Augusto instructs us all to hold hands, leading us out into the street as director of the *derive/intervention*, as photographed by Jacinta. He leads us along at a slow pace, largely in silence, pressed up against walls, so that visible through the visors is only a tiny portion of wall at a time, rendering discernible minute detail otherwise often ignored. I note the varied textures of the walls, splutters of spray paint, mosquitos caught in spiders’ webs, an eyelash stuck in a blob of paint, countless chips and cracks, and many scribbled messages: “*chupa verga grande puta*” (suck huge dick slut), “*yo voto Scioli*” (I vote Scioli), “*Cristina volverá*” (Cristina will return) ...

Turning the corner onto more commercial Corrientes Avenue, Augusto instructs us to turn around and leads us along as we face pedestrians and motor traffic, provoking the attention of many. An extended shout of “*Pelotudoooooos!*” (Dickbeeeeads!) is aimed at us from a passing construction workers’ van. An older man approaches me specifically to ask “*Qué hacen? Es algún tipo de arte?*” (What are you doing? Is it some kind of art?), then, whilst I pause to consider how to respond, exclaims incredulously, “*No vas a contestarme?*” (You’re not going to answer me?), before hurrying off. A woman asks Augusto, “*Esto es algo político?*” (Is this something political?), to which he responds, “*Puede ser*” (It could be). One passing man asks if he can join and adds himself to the sequence temporarily, albeit without goggles, commenting on how he wishes he saw things like this more often.

Augusto leads us inside a supermarket, then a clothing store, encircling a taxi for a few moments and eyeing intently its driver, then into Federico Lacroze train station. Here, as we form a circle around a hot dog stand, two police officers approach Jacinta and request her ID, stating that it is illegal to take photos inside the station. Admitting later that he feared potential escalation of the situation, Augusto leads us promptly out of the station, recollects goggles, and instructs us to choose a nearby spot to reflect on the experience, moving both ‘normally’ and ‘abnormally’ in this chosen space, to reconvene in the gallery thirty minutes later.

Chatting as we disband, I note a sticker reading “¿Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?”¹² (Where is Santiago Maldonado?) on a nearby lamppost and ask Augusto how he thinks the performance might have been different if we’d carried a banner featuring that ubiquitous question of the moment, suggesting we were searching with goggles for the disappeared activist. Augusto laughs and states that it would have transformed the action entirely, that we couldn’t have done it and maintained an undefined troubling of norms of movement and seeing. Mishko adds that the police may have intervened a little sooner, too, and I speculate that maybe the workers would not have called us ‘pelotudos’. Augusto feigns agreement – “Tenés razón, nos habrían llamado hijos de puta” (You’re right, they’d have called us sons of bitches).



Figure 6: La realidad aumentada tercermundista. Photo by Jacinta Racedo.

¹² Santiago Maldonado was an anarchist activist from BsAs who had moved to the province of Chubut in southern Argentina in order to support the resistance of the Pu Lof Cushamen Mapuche community in their ongoing reclamation of ancestral lands. During a police operation attempting to evict the Mapuche community from their land on August 1 2017, Santiago Maldonado went missing. Following this, images of Santiago’s face and the question ‘¿Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?’ (Where is Santiago Maldonado?) became inescapable across BsAs, being painted and pasted on walls across the city. Marches attended by hundreds of thousands occurred the week following the disappearance, and then on the first day of each month until the ‘discovery’ of Santiago’s body on 17 October 2017.

The explicit signing of performance, or lack thereof, is highlighted here as a major distinction between more tactical transgressive performance and more supra-tactical interventions. Following Augusto's reasoning above, to transgress under a label that states 'this is why we are transgressing' – as seen within previous anecdotes with the Rise and Resist statistical placards or Lucía's explicitly anti-capitalist 'poetic yolks' and as the inclusion of a '*Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?*' banner would have been above – is to centre a defined political purpose that denies more general problematization of normativity. Here transgression becomes ultimately legible according to dominant rational logic. In contrast, to transgress without a clarifying label is to draw into question the basis upon which the perceived need for such explanation and justification stands, potentially opening the way for more indefinable, perhaps unforeseen anti-normative impacts. Linking back to above discussion of Foucault and Rancière, here acts contravening hegemonic scripts of obligatory rational justification may be seen to obliquely question and destabilize dominant power/knowledge hierarchies and any associated distribution of the sensible. In turn such acts might open possibilities for surpassing normative order that more tactical intervention, pre-justified according to hegemonic rational logic, may not be able to reach.

The questions from passersby about presumed vague 'political' or 'artistic' intentions detailed above, illustrating a typical public reaction to unsigned intervention observed throughout my fieldwork, indicate the confusion often prompted by unmarked, difficult to categorize actions. Meanwhile, Augusto's response of 'could be' typifies the cultivation of bewilderment as valuably disruptive by artists, which I generally observed to be dispelled as damagingly obfuscatory by activists in both BsAs and NYC. Such more supra-tactical problematization of normativity formed a driving motivation of the above performance, as seen in Augusto's academic speculation on the potential of a situationist-inspired 'errorist choreography' to potentially destabilize power. Here an ethereal rather than direct goal was pursued through an oblique rather than on-the-nose transgressive performance. Meanwhile, Augusto's joke that, if less unsettled by ambiguity of the action, the workers would have simply slung a different slur at us, nods toward a lack of hope of immediately altering social norms or creating political change in any case that I often observed underlying more supra-tactical performances. Here such performance takes on a more explicitly Sisyphean flavour as it is perceived that, having created a transgressive intervention, one will simply have to start all over again within a largely undented normative framework.

When a specific political issue was raised within an Etcétera performance, I typically observed it to stir reflection upon interconnection with broader oppression, rather than tactically pursue the immediate resolution of said issue. For example, continuing with the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado as a case study, in an event at the '*ex-ESMA*' former clandestine centre of detention now preserved as a memorial site, Fede and Loreto, performing alone, distributed placards

featuring Santiago's face in amongst others bearing the logos of multi-national corporations such as Ford, Dow, and Benetton before presenting a tongue-in-cheek outline of their planned *Museo de Neo-Extractivismo* (Museum of Neo-Extractivism). Here they mocked, in matching tuxedos, the genuine 'greenwashing' exercises of environmentally destructive companies, whilst implicitly connecting the fatal consequences of swallowing such a mendacious pill to the historic mass-murder emblemized by that performance site and the recent assassination of Santiago. The ludicrousness of such lies and their ever-perpetuating consequences were rendered into farce, critiquing once more the normative framework that allows such damaging deceit to be framed as 'sensible'. Thus Etcétera contributed to widespread calls for justice for Santiago Maldonado, but rather than directly stating this demand as was typical in ETP performances and other activist actions surrounding the issue, inserted it obliquely alongside broader troubling of oppressive normativity and obligatory rationality.

The Cart Department

The Cart Department¹³ are a performance art collective based in NYC that variously describe themselves as anarchist, nihilist, and dadaist. This loose 'art-gang', to use Alan Moore's (2011) term, began to form briefly before my arrival to NYC in 2018 as a group of individual performance artists came together around their mutual interest in using shopping carts as bases for large, interactive sculptures made from garbage, often serving as the centrepiece of street interventions. The core Cart Department group consists of six artists, plus myself accepted as a central member during fieldwork, surrounded by an outer circle of approximately fifty less intimately involved collaborating performers, photographers, and organizers. My fieldnotes are informed by participation in all Cart Department activities throughout 2018 including regular street and gallery/venue performances, informal planning meetings, and prop, puppet, mask, and cart making sessions.

¹³ This collective name emerged from a coalescence of factors. Another project of four members of the group is making puppet shows to accompany the 'imaginary hardcore acoustic doowop' band Pinc Louds, where they are known as 'The Art Department' of the band. Meanwhile, another member, Kalan, had previously coined the term 'performance (c)art' to describe cart-centered performance, referring to this practice on his website as "a miniature but triumphant parade against everything, a glitch in the matrix of being and purpose" (Sherrard, 2014). These two terms blended to form The Cart Department.



Figure 7: Kalan 'Enormous Face' Sherrard of The Cart Department performing on the streets of Brooklyn. Photo by Kalan Sherrard.

Throughout my fieldwork, The Cart Department regularly organized what they called 'talent shows' or '(not)happenings' in different public spaces. These street interventions consisted of members and associates of The Cart Department presenting a cabaret of performances whilst inviting passersby to participate or to share an act of their own. The following vignette describes one such event.

23 May 2018, New York City

Kalan, Jamie, Kevin, Madison, Jimmy and myself as core members of The Cart Department, alongside other associated artists such as Pablo and Efrain of the puppet collective Poncili Creación and Tina 'Mother Pigeon' known for her work making pigeon sculptures, gather at the intersection of Broadway and Union Avenue in Brooklyn. We begin to create a stage upon the stoop of an abandoned building by surrounding it with cart sculptures and hanging sheets and umbrellas that Kalan has painted with spiral patterns. Kalan, Jamie, Madison, and I are all wearing masks: Kalan's consists of several tree branches tied together with wire and shredded white plastic material hanging over his face; Jamie and Madison's are both human-like faces made from pink cloth with grotesquely oversized noses, ears, and mouths; mine is a

cardboard box augmented with a mesh front, deer antlers, a golden papier-mâché crest, and pieces of chalk dangling on lengths of wool.

Opening the show, Kevin shares some surrealistic songs from his project *Papo Cucaracha Vertedero El Tercero* (Father Cockroach Garbage-Dump The Third). Immediately afterwards, Kalan begins to play some mambo music from a loudspeaker and, putting on a heavy French accent, invites everyone to climb inside extra-large black refuse sacks and to move as if they were maggots, instigating a dance which continues for several minutes with the participation of the whole group and some passers-by. Efrain then plays some songs on three pennywhistles simultaneously – one in his mouth and one in each nostril. Jamie begins to dance provocatively to a heavy metal soundtrack whilst Madison hits him in the groin repeatedly with a mannequin leg. Jamie then retrieves his puppet ‘Daddy Long Arms’ from their seating place atop a cart sculpture and he and Madison tell the story of how Daddy Long Arms discovered a melted baby in the street named ‘Asparagus’ and now feels so sad that he needs to punish himself. Jamie pulls down Daddy Long Arms’ pants and manipulates his spaghetti-like arms so that he spans his own puppet buttocks in an apparent mix of euphoria and despair. Shortly afterwards, Jimmy opens the curtains on the puppet theatre that he built inside a shopping cart and presents a show of a levitating sumo wrestler and a romance between a rat and scarecrow. Following this, I begin to offer a poetic sermon concerning peach juice, grandfather clocks, scorpions, worms, and birds of paradise – amongst other topics – before rotating my mask to the side and inviting both the other artists and observing passers-by to draw an interpretation of what they had just heard on the side of the mask, using the hanging chalks provided. Rotating the mask again, I pull a string that allows for a puppet made from a purple carrot to be born from the secret compartment at the back of the mask and swing on a woollen umbilical cord. Springing forth, Kalan dances with a line of three deflated inflatable penguins tied to a stick before acting out a nonsense-language love scene between two puppets of pink deer.

The (not)happening then escalates into a free performance jam, with all the artists present cramming onto the stoop-stage with much percussion, shrieking, singing, howling, and whistling, inviting further passing members of the public into the melee, most of whom either ignore or decline the invitation, others watching from the sidewalk, and a small number joining briefly to dance. This reflects the constant stream of both engagement and disengagement from members of the public throughout the above performances with (non)reactions ranging from increasing speed to get past as quickly as possible, to pausing briefly to take photos, videos, and selfies, to actively taking part in participatory parts of the show, to asking ‘Why?’ again and again, to shouting abuse such as the man who said ‘Get the fuck outta here you bunch of fucking freaks’, to offering high praise such as the woman who exclaimed at the end of the show that ‘That was one of the best things I have ever seen in my life, I wish I could be like you guys.’ In relation to this final example, Kalan responded by giving the woman his artists’ card with his contact details and saying – ‘Oh you don’t want to be like us, honey, but you should totally come out with us next week and perform something!’ Meanwhile, in response to the ubiquitous question of ‘Why?’, Jamie responded on multiple occasions by declaring that we were there to “promote cart culture” whilst handing out fliers concerning the collective’s planned *Greatest Cart in The World Pageant* event.



Figure 8 and 9: (Not)happening. Photos by Ivana Casanova.

This anecdote illustrates an embodiment of the closest thing to a uniting principle that I observed amongst the seeming chaos of The Cart Department's actions: a generalized desire to make the world a stranger place. Debate raged as to what the broader political consequences of this may be, with some members of the collective putting more emphasis, for example, on the inherent value of antagonizing conservative ideals, whilst others spoke more of promoting public embrace of bizarre, queer diversity. However, the shared root inspiration of rendering the world more unusual remained consistently throughout fieldwork conversations. Jamie's above declaration of an intention to "promote cart culture" was a common catchphrase used by members of The Cart Department when asked for justification during an intervention. Exactly what constituted 'cart culture' was always left undefined, rather ambiguously illustrated in action by costumed parades with carts full of broken clocks, fire extinguishers, twisted foam, and other debris. The clattering of such incongruous items, cumbersomely stacked and hauled with difficulty through the streets, may be considered the aleatory song of 'cart culture', calling out to onlookers and indirectly asking them to reconsider the 'normal'. This links to Kalan's absurdist reworking of the Gandhian imperative to embody desired societal change in one's actions: longing for "a world where there are freaks wheeling carts full of weird shit everywhere" and so doing precisely that.

Expanding on this sentiment on another occasion and reflecting concerns that I found shared throughout the collective, Kalan spoke of a diffuse hope that his performances "do some good in the world", hypothesizing that extreme, outlier performance might breed greater future acceptance of diversity wherein "in one hundred years maybe everyone will be able to be a freak like this and not just a white, male artist with my cocktail of privileges". Thus the above frenetic blur of self-spanking puppets, dancing refuse sack maggots, copulating deer, floating sumo wrestlers, singing cockroaches, and new-born anthropomorphised carrots might be seen as challenging and undermining norms that baselessly subjugate those in less-privileged intersectional positions more violently than others. In this way, despite insouciance regarding direct rationalistic political engagement, The Cart Department remained intent to corrode oppression throughout my observations, in contrast to occasional charges from more tactically focused groups in NYC that their acts were 'trivial', 'detached', or – unironically – 'nonsensical'. There, once more, lies the rub in terms of the difference between the tropes of more tactical and more supra-tactical transgressive performance that I observe within my data. From a more tactical perspective, for a performance to appear truly 'nonsensical', rather than only apparently so whilst actually guided by a clear underlying action logic, is a grave and politically dangerous failure. Meanwhile, from a more supra-tactical viewpoint, to emphasize the presence of a clearly intelligible reason behind a transgressive performance is to assimilate it to normative scripts of obligatory rationality and blunt its potential to destabilize the hegemonic

‘distribution of the sensible’ upon whose foundations oppressive power/knowledge structures and regimes of truth are constructed.

Distinct from the commitment to a defined political ideology that I observed to typically reinforce more tactical transgressive performance, I observed members of The Cart Department often express a sense of absolute meaninglessness as a motor for their actions. For example, on one occasion, publicly sketching a grotesquely oversized anus, Jamie declared, “This anus doesn’t mean anything, but I’m still drawing it. What does that say politically? I don’t know. I don’t know if I’m interested in the question.” Here Jamie identified a particular liberty represented by acting without need for ‘sensible’ justification, uninterested in killing that buzz and its potential contagiousness within concentrated reflection upon precise political consequences. Replying on another occasion to the reproachful question of a passerby – “That’s horrible! Why are you doing this?” – following a street performance featuring his puppet ‘Skinny’ who, feeling hot and hungry, torturously removes their own skin and eats their own intestines before, equally painfully, putting their skin back on again, Jamie faux-courteously said “Thank you, that’s a great question”.



Figure 10: Jamie ‘Rip Darlie’ McGann of The Cart Department performing with their puppet ‘Skinny’ on the streets of Brooklyn. Photo by Ivana Casanova.

On many occasions when confronted with inquiries like this I observed members of The Cart Department similarly express exaggerated uncertainty and flip the question back. For example, pushing a cart full of toilet plungers and Christmas trees down the street in a mask of metallic green fabric stitched to a fluffy red wig, core collective member Gigi was asked by an elderly pedestrian, “And who are you supposed to be, young lady?”, to which she responded – “Oh, I’m trying to find out, do you know?” A member of the activist network Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Committee (MACC) who I knew from the other half of my fieldwork in NYC, and who we bumped into briefly during that same performance-walk, later asked me about the significance of the toilet plungers. She explained that following the 1997 case of Abner Louima, a Haitian man sodomized with plunger and broom handles by NYPD officers, toilet plungers had become for a while a symbol of racist police brutality in NYC. She wanted to know if we were reviving that symbol, yet when I asked Gigi about this she was not aware of the case and offered no rationale for the use of toilet plungers as props beyond that they were “obviously ridiculous”. Whilst likely a reflection of generational gaps in knowledge – the activist in their late 40s, Gigi in her mid 20s – this also serves as a further succinct example of the division I observed between the logical scrutiny typically applied to performance within activist networks creating more tactical acts and the more frolicsome ambiguity generally sought by artist collectives creating more supra-tactical performances in both NYC and BsAs.

Meanwhile, on another occasion Kalan reacted to attempts by nearby activists to drag him from dancing with a mask he had made from a discarded pizza into direct discussion with the group of homophobic demonstrators he was antagonizing by throwing the pizza-mask to the ground and shouting “This is pointless!” before leaving the scene. This illustrates a drive to undermine prejudice obliquely through absurd performance rather than engage with it as if it made sense that I observed to inspire many of The Cart Department’s oblique interventions. Transgressive performance here is born from an impulse to nonsensically antagonize prejudiced arguments rather than engage them in direct discussion that potentially lends legitimacy both to them and to dominant notions of normatively-prescribed rational conversation as the most ‘valid’ mode of interaction. On numerous occasions during fieldwork members of The Cart Department associated tedium and exasperation with straight-faced political discussion. For example, Kalan once remarked, wielding a dead octopus as a puppet, “I’m so bored of talking with most people, I’d rather wave an octopus in their face”. On another occasion he jokingly speculated, “I wonder if I should go into politics, I’d hate it, but I’d be really good at filibustering, just put on a diaper and speak in nonsense languages for hours.”

Here more supra-tactical performance is motivated by a discursive break with conventional constructions of reasonable political ambition and what constitutes judicious political action. The foundation of the tactical performance

literature – that politics consists of rational actors pursuing given ends by the most appropriate means available – is rejected. Rather, apparently senseless and irrational performance disrupts normal flows of interactional co-construction of meaning and notions of legitimate power, exemplifying a truncated form of what Victor Turner (1987) identified as “social drama”. Here the initial “breach” of transgressive performance cultivates “crisis” within challenged hegemonic normativity yet then attempts to extend and exacerbate destabilizing chaos, rather than move on to the establishment of a new normative order through “redressive action” and “reintegration” as Turner speculated and as exemplified by the more tactical activist interventions detailed above. The rational drive for absolute, concrete solutions is thus questioned via more supra-tactical intervention, ongoing destabilization of oppressive regimes of power/knowledge favoured over their attempted correction and potential inadvertent reproduction.

Conclusion

By introducing the concept of supra-tactical performance, this paper seeks to problematize normative paradigms of what constitutes political action and allow us to begin to think, research, and perform beyond the confines of currently dominant discourse concerning artistic activism straitjacketed by assumptions of a necessarily rational, tactical drive for any given act. Some transgressive performance, for sure, foregrounds direct, calculated aims, as documented above to be the dominant tendency, whilst expressed distinctly, amongst Rise and Resist and *La Escuela de Teatro Político*. A purpose is to be met via such transgression – a further step along an imagined linear progressive pathway. However, other instances of transgressive intervention, such as many of the Etcétera and Cart Department examples detailed above, may be seen to be driven more by a desire to disrupt and disturb the very dominance of such positivist thinking. Here my observations illustrate another, very different conception of the political implications of transgressive performance than that which has been given precedence in academic literature on this topic until now. In this light I argue that the tactical performance paradigm must be reframed as accounting for one ideal type of transgressive performance as a political act, rather than as a totalizing explanation as previously presented. In turn, lead by my (auto)ethnographic data, I propose the complementary ideal type of supra-tactical performance as the opposite pole of an actual spectrum of always intermingled contextually contingent (supra)tactical performance possibilities.

More tactical performance may be seen to potentially achieve a more focused impact on its intended target yet whilst simultaneously deprived of the broader counter-hegemonic potential of more supra-tactical acts. This may be connected to notions of (il)legibility. Bogad writes of his tactical performance model:

We are playing on the cultural horizons of expectations of the public, on the edge of novelty and familiarity; if our work is too 'out there', it falls beyond that horizon and is illegible. We hope to push those horizons outward into stranger and more thoughtful interpretation by putting our work right on the edge of the horizon (2016: 93).

Whilst my observations with Rise and Resist and ETP largely correlate with this perceived necessary legibility according to pre-existing cultural scripts, albeit in distinct contextually specific ways, what my work with Etcétera and The Cart Department illustrates is the parallel possibilities of an embrace of the troubling potentialities of illegible performance as another aspect of political transgression. Abandoning obligatory rationality and actively breaking with dominant distributions of the sensible, rather than dancing on their margins, these supersensible performances exemplify an alternative, as-of-yet under-researched supra-tactical orientation for politically challenging transgressive performance. These acts seek to evade the inadvertent re-legitimization of hegemonic normativity potentially resulting from remaining within the fringes of its mandates, rather attempting to controvert such boundaries altogether. Power/knowledge hierarchies are thus potentially corroded at their rational ideological roots, in contrast to the attacks upon specific branches one at a time of more tactical performance that necessitates "a well-constructed action logic... with a calculated purpose and desired impact" (*ibid*: 26).

My research in BsAs and NYC would suggest that, significant variations between different cultural and socio-political contexts notwithstanding, performance networks primarily identifying as activist tend towards a more tactical orientation with transgressive performances inspired or curtailed in relation to perceived strategic utility whilst those identifying primarily as artists tend towards a more supra-tactical orientation driven by personal compulsion and notions of indirect cultural and political import. However, further research in a broader diversity of fieldsites is necessary in order to more adequately assess this apparent trend, bearing in mind that notions of what constitutes an 'activist' or 'artist', or indeed 'tacticality' and what may or may not lie beyond this, are themselves culturally constructed in distinct ways in different places and times.

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