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Performance Constellations: To Show the Invisible

Lukáš Kubina

Marcela A. Fuentes. *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America*.

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[reviews]

The aim of the book *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* written by performance scholar Marcela A. Fuentes is to implement a new concept in performance theory that would describe the transformation of protest performances under the influence of the Internet. Thus, the author asks how social movements combine the tools that are being provided by digital networks with the ‘traditional’ protest repertoire.

In doing so, Fuentes draws on performative theory, the foundations of which were established in the 1950s by the philosopher of language John L. Austin, and concepts that extend notions of performance beyond strictly physical place-dependent events.¹ She uses the term ‘performance constellation’ to shift the focus from single occurrences of performance to complex networks of collective asynchronous performances that take place on various online and offline platforms. The author uses the term to describe the relationships between individual events that often occur on different temporalities and spatial levels.

The book could also be described as an excursus into the history of protest in Latin America over the last 30 years. Alongside this, the author pursues another clear pragmatic goal with the book, which she makes explicit in the very conclusion: Fuentes wants to provide a tool or a guide for social movements to build an effective tactical repertoire in the Internet era.

The book was published three years ago (in 2019) and, therefore, represents a rather recent addition into a long line of publications that deal with the performativity of protest. The beginnings of a conceptual grasp of such an approach could be found, for example, in texts by Richard Schechner (1970) or Lee Baxandall (1969) dating from the late 1960s and early 1970s. These (and other) scholars reflected the massive upsurge of the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Activists during this time gave rise to a repertoire of oppositional cultural practices that are still in use today.

As the number of recent scholars’ works declares, the interest in the performativity of protest continues to this day. For the purposes of the presented review, I consider it essential to mention the existence of two research centres that provide influential insights into the phenomena of the performativity of protest culture. One is the University of Warwick, that, thanks to theatre scholar Baz Kershaw, provides

1 An expanded definition of performance in a mediatised culture is developed, e.g., by theatre scholar Philip Auslander in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008), or by media theorist Chris Salter in *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (2010).

a tradition of interest in the performativity of resistance since the 1990s. Scholars from this university published several studies in the collective monograph called *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, edited by Shirin M. Rai, Milija Gluhovic, Silvija Jestrovic, and Michael Seward (2021).

The second institute where the interest in the politics of performance and the performativity of protest is being centred, and which I consider essential to this book, is the Hemispheric Institute at New York University. Several publications have been published there in recent years that were focused on contemporary 'artivism' in the American area. As Fuentes states, major influence on her concept of 'performance constellation' comes from the writings of Diana Taylor, one of the leading exponents of Hemispheric Studies (and founder of the Hemispheric Institute) who has been involved in the performativity of resistance across the Western Hemisphere for several years.

The notion of 'performance constellation' represents – *de facto* – a certain modification of Richard Schechner's definition of performance. While aiming to include all the functional and structural links between culture and community into performativity (performance theory) and performance itself, Schechner defines performance as a constellation of all events that take place between the time when the spectator enters and leaves the theatre space (SCHECHNER 1988: 39). Fuentes' concept of 'performance constellation' thus extends Schechner's notion while linking the individual on- and off-line events, or performances, beyond individual occurrences. Fuentes introduces actual protests, as well as the political or

activist dimension of protest performance in line with the approach of Baz Kershaw – i.e., his method of analysing protest performances in order to describe the principles of a given ideology in a society. Key to his approach is the question of the effect, or success, of a given performance, which depends on the ability of actors to transmit meanings within a given ideology (KERSHAW 1992: 16). Thus, according to Kershaw, each performance could be described as an ideological transaction between performers and spectators. Building on this perspective, Fuentes shows how performance constellation reveals otherwise abstract principles, particularly the neoliberal ideology that has become dominant in many Latin American countries after the fall of dictatorial regimes. Specifically, the mentioned approach focuses on activities that aim at disrupting the hegemony of the dominant neoliberal ideology and the violent system of capital accumulation in Latin America. I consider this part of the book to be crucial and extremely important at a time when ideologies in individual communities are fundamentally influenced by transnational corporations whose impact is difficult to discern.²

The book consists of four chapters that are devoted to four specific performance constellations. In the first chapter, the specific tactics of artistic activist groups in the 'stone age of the Internet' are presented with the help of the example of Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT). As Fuentes explains, in the mid-1990s, EDT remediated existing protest repertoires in order to support Zapatistas in their

² The ability of neoliberal ideology to 'not be seen' has been described, e.g., by philosopher Mark Fischer (2018).

resistance to the transnational market.³ The collective organised the so-called ‘online sit-ins’ to cripple the transnational financial institutions while creating an experience of activist co-presence at the same time and thereby creating a transnational solidarity. Using other examples, Fuentes attempts to show that bodily performance is entangled with digital media and that this shift makes it possible to embody transnational systems of power – systems that exist thanks to postmodern mechanisms of decontextualisation and abstraction. To support the statement, Fuentes provides examples from the Argentine economic crisis of 2001 in the second chapter of the book. She shows the mechanisms that have been applied in the era before the emergence of social media by the activists to re-enact online, for example, pots-and-pans protests (such as chain emails or PowerPoint presentations and web interfaces).

The next section of the book sheds light on the massive student movements that fought against the privatisation of education in Chile in 2011. In doing so, the author discusses two types of performances from the tactical repertoires (street performances flash mob *Thriller for Education* and Relay Run *1800 Hours for Education*) and the ways they have been replicated in virtual space – especially via the viral dissemination of audio-visual recordings on social media. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the specific temporality in per-

3 The Zapatista Army of National Liberation is a leftist alter-globalisation and anti-neoliberal guerrilla movement fighting for control of local resources that formed in the early 1990s in Mexico. The EZLN – Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or Zapatistas for short – is named after one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Emiliano Zapata.

formance constellations, i.e., the ability of asynchronous constellations to mobilise protest participants on different temporal levels.

The last chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of hashtags, an important tool for mobilising activists on social media. Fuentes describes hashtags as textual performances – gesticulated text capable of transmitting affect and creating a sense of solidarity or expressing dissent. According to the author (99–100), the hashtag is a specifically ephemeral phenomenon (she uses Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s term ‘enduring ephemerality’).⁴ In its modularity, according to Fuentes, the hashtag is more akin to processes of embodied memory, what Diana Taylor refers to as repertoire, rather than forms of preserving material in traditional archives (TAYLOR 2003).

Fuentes frames all the examples within a broader socio-political context and devotes considerable space to the characteristics of neoliberal ideology in various Central and South American countries. This approach allows her to show quite successfully how an otherwise abstract ideology is made present through on- and offline performances. At the same time, however, Fuentes’ approach shows how extremely difficult it is to assess the success of protest performance, which Fuentes attempts to do, not entirely successfully, in the conclusion. In the case of the performance constellation concept, there are several methodological complications that arise when attention shifts from the local to the global. With the development of the internet and the possibilities of

4 Media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2008) describes this concept in her study ‘The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future is a Memory’.

global action and the creation of transnational activist networks, the ability to encode meanings on the part of actors and the ability of diverse audiences to decode these meanings becomes more complicated.

I believe that Fuentes would have found it helpful to pay more attention in her theory to the meaning of culture, the system of signs through which actors from different communities and societies can agree on the meanings contained and created in performances. As Baz Kershaw writes, 'culture' is a medium that can unite different communities in a common project to form an ideological force working for or against the *status quo* (KERSHAW 1992: 36).

In conclusion, protest performances have been using the potential of the internet network as a tactical tool for four decades, yet there is still a lack of consistent reflection on this transformation. In this sense, Marcela Fuentes' book is a remarkable contribution to this topic. Although the proposed concept of performance constellation requires further elaboration, its broadly interdisciplinary conception of performance provides an inspiring and useful tool for analysing contemporary social movements.

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