

Mobilization, Force, and the Politics of Transformation

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In his seminal book *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (1998) Randy Martin proposes to rethink the relation between dance and politics based on his concept of mobilization. He asks what dance and the study of dance can bring to politics given that both are forms of articulation of the social. For Martin, the dynamics of mobilization are already inherent in politics although political theory has given very little thought to its implications (1998, 4). On the other hand, the dynamics of mobilization are just as crucial in bringing about a dance performance gathering together performers and members of the audience alike. Dance for Martin therefore resonates with what he calls “the entire social kinesthetic” (24). Mobilization traverses diverse social, artistic and political practices shaping and connecting bodies and creating agency and difference along the way. Thus, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière pointed out twelve years after Randy wrote this, art and politics do not reside in separate spheres. Rather, one needs to think of their primary connection as one of being embedded or enfolded in the raw material of our sensory world. Art and politics both shape and distribute sensory experience as both legible and sensate in their own right and as necessary to their own ends and needs, with the former re-distributing and re-negotiating what the latter has posited as hegemonic (Rancière 2010, 148–49).

On embarking with Randy Martin and Rebekah Kowal on what was one of Randy’s last projects, the *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* (2017), I was trying to find my own definition of the relation between art and politics (Siegmund 2017). Confronted with discussions about the legitimacy of making dances in the era of neoliberal capitalism and post-Fordist labor in the seminars of the Choreography and Performance program at Giessen University in Germany, I was increasingly driven to counter my student’s impulse *not to move* at all anymore, since according to their understanding, any kind of movement can be exploited by creative capitalism. I found myself reverting to what at first glance looks like a conservative stance, that of making a point for *making art that moves*. Thus, in my essay for the *Handbook*, I argued for the political within the aesthetic dimension of art. Along with Rancière, I tried to make a point for art as being political as such because it takes apart and reassembles what had been configured elsewhere. Art creates agency for those whose voices could hitherto not be heard and thereby changes the field of social articulation. To make matters more complex, I held that the two dance productions I analyzed rearticulated the social in such a way as to create ambivalence. They throw into doubt truths held elsewhere by offering multiple points of view at one and the same time. They remained open productions in the sense that they ultimately refused to settle for any interest—even the interest of those they arguably spoke

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for—in favor of a playful exploration of forms, bodies, strictures, rules, and protocols. Eschewing the logic of either-or, I find the political within the field of aesthetics resides in the ambivalence of attitudes and possibilities that dance creates. Its disturbing quality lies in the fact that what it has to say, what it creates, and what it displays—and it says and displays a lot—both emotionally and intellectually, *refuse to settle*.

To sharpen my argument, I drew upon the field of philosophical aesthetics, a more prominent approach to the study of dance in Europe and Germany than in the US. Christoph Menke's writing on art provided me with a concept of "force" that underlined the foundational risk inherent in the production and reception of art (Menke 2011). Since human beings have force, they are able to imagine and to transform themselves. The working of force in a work of art is twofold: force gathers material from beyond the realm of performance, which stabilizes these forces in the shape of form. Yet, force also jeopardizes form by threatening to undo the bodies form has created. It creates forms and bodies that it simultaneously puts at risk, undoing them behind their backs thus preventing any kind of identitarian closure. Upon reading my essay, Susan Leigh Foster pointed out to me the similarity between the notion of force and Randy Martin's notion of mobilization. With thanks to Susan Foster I would like to follow this point up here in this short essay. Therefore, I briefly juxtapose the concepts of mobilization and force to spell out their similarities and their differences before addressing the question of transformation that is at the core of both the current social and capitalist kinesthetic, as Randy Martin has it, and of dance.

Mobilization

Randy Martin conceptualizes the relationship between dance and politics as one of mobilization rather than resistance. Mobilization is a force that helps to articulate the relationship between dance and politics in a positive and productive way. (Martin 1998, 13) To Martin, politics are already in motion shaping the world. Like dance, politics are a collision and displacement of forces that produce difference. As opposed to existing readings of the term mobilization, Martin conceives of mobilization as not being subject to efficacy or the particular interests of specific social groups. Mobilization is something that precedes mobilization's usage. "If movement can be plotted on a grid of space and time, mobilization is what generates the grid," Martin explains (4). Mobilization is instrumental in creating and preserving "a space where new formations germinate" (13). "Hence," Martin continues, "through mobilization, bodies traverse a given terrain that by traversing, they constitute" (4). Mobilization draws upon forces and contexts from beyond the realm of the given performance (political, economic, conceptual, aesthetic) and assembles them in one space to work with and on them. Just like a dance production, mobilization brings together dancers ready to participate in the creation of a choreography and members of the audience ready to attend the performance. Thus, mobilization is situated "between production and product" (4), a dynamics that underlies the various analyses Martin conducts in the individual chapters of his book. The production side assembles a "capacity for movement," whereas the side of the product highlights the materialization of identities "accomplished through the performance" (4). Mobilization produces agency that is ultimately conducive to the imagination of any political project by concentration on the process of "how bodies are made" (4). Since mobilization is not movement per se, but the "capacity for movement," it needs to operate on a different level than movement. It becomes a vector of energy that stimulates bodies and their movements to take a certain direction. As such, mobilization is the potential for action that, in principle, may take any direction. It is ongoing and hard to contain. Directing and containing is the task of the dynamics between the production and the product of the dance.

Force

On rereading the passages on mobilization in *Critical Moves*, it seems to me that Randy Martin is very well aware that something else was at stake. Mobilization as a concept threatened to earn him

more than he had bargained for. “By mobilization I want to stress not an alien power that is visited on the body, as something that is done to bodies behind their backs, so to speak, but what moving bodies can accomplish through movement” (1998, 4). As a sociologist and political theorist, Randy certainly was not interested in what went on behind peoples’ backs because he focused instead on social change and on the making of bodies to instigate change. If mobilization is neither identical with the movement it facilitates nor with the bodies it creates and deploys spatially, where else can it come from, I wonder, if not from behind the body’s back? Maybe it is even an alien power in the body itself that neither mind nor body can fully grasp outside the effects it produces on those bodies? Although Randy shied away from connecting his concept to what Sigmund Freud discovered as the residue of the drive and what Friedrich Nietzsche metaphorically described as the Dionysian side of the production of art, mobilization resonates with all of these. By doing so, it puts the very bodies and the new forms of subjectivity it produces at risk again.

It is here in this moment of uncertainty that Christoph Menke’s concept of “force” as a dark power gains significance. Being a philosopher of art, Menke is not primarily interested in social change but in the notion of equality that art has been linked with since the Enlightenment. His claim for force is also a claim for the basic freedom of human beings. This is why art is political. Neither freedom nor equality are a given. “Man is neither free nor equal by nature,” Menke states, referring to Hannah Arendt’s “prepolitical state of nature, which is,” as Menke points out, “nevertheless a social state: the economic, technical, cultural state of ‘society’, the life of ‘private citizens’” (Menke 2011, 11). In this social state, we acquire capacities by learning. We gain skills by training that turn us into human beings able to successfully participate in society. However, acquiring capacities also implies that some skills are worth more than others. We are being graded according to normative values and binaries (worthy–worthless, useful– useless, abled–disabled, etc.). “Our capacities socialize but also disunite us. They are fields for and objects of struggle” (12). However good this struggle of capacities may be in some respects, it cannot be the place of equality because, sadly, someone always has to lose the battle. Rejecting the more popular view that the struggle for political equality resides in the emancipation of all productive differences from other less favorable differences, Menke argues that true emancipation lies in the liberation from “the differences that constitute our abilities,” that is, in freedom from our socially acquired capacities and abilities (13). Provocatively, in my essay for *The Oxford Handbook*, I have called this a move from difference to “in-difference.” Instead of grounding the idea of equality in the emancipation of differences, we can locate it at a more fundamental level where differences do not yet exist, where there is an indifference to difference, and where human beings are equal in force. Aesthetics is the preferred realm where subjects may experience the force of their own undoing as subjects.

Thus, Menke looks for something that facilitates capacities. What facilitates capacities is force. Force is ontologically different from capacities for otherwise it would just be another capacity falling prey to the production of individual differences.

Capacities make us subjects who successfully partake in social practices. In the play of force, we are presubjective and metasubjective agents but not subjects; active without self-consciousness, inventive without goal. . . . Equality, as equality of force, is nothing given. Force, in which we are equal, is a presupposition, because it is there for us, we experience and know of it only by performing acts in which it unfolds. Such acts are aesthetic; acts of play, of imagination. (Menke 2011, 14–15)

Our political equality as a *potential* is primarily an aesthetic freedom, aesthetics being the field of potentiality in which forces manifest themselves *without ends as forces*.

Being the grid rather than the movement, being the potential to move rather than movement in space and time, force and mobilization align. They are rallying calls for change and transformation, for different articulations of bodies and social kinesthetic energies. They both are *impersonal*

nonsubjectified vehicles for an open process of doing and undoing. The impersonal, presubjective tears the personal and subjective apart. Dance for Randy Martin “concentrates on the social forces that make bodies what they are” (Martin 1998, 24). For Menke dance makes us experience the forces that make bodies *not* what they are, while during the performance they clearly *are* something. Art makes us unlearn what we have learned socially. It makes us do what we cannot do, which leads to the production of an unforeseen event. What Menke points out is that force never allows the body to settle even in the form it has assumed. What Randy Martin fails to see when avoiding looking at what happens behind the body’s back is the undoing of what capacities have created. To radicalize Martin’s notion of mobilization, one can say mobilization *never stops* even when dancers and audiences have gathered and joined forces. The move between production and product that mobilization triggers never results only in the physical materialization of identities and the production of differences. It always also and *at the very same time and by the very same gesture* results in a move of disidentification. In order to become political, political mobilizations have to stop mobilizing in order to act for a certain cause. But the mobilization of dance does not stop. By dint of the very force that drives it on, mobilization effectively never stops during its action’s duration.

Transformation

It is here that, yet again, the critique sets in. Producing the unforeseen by giving up what one knows for sure (the unlearning and undoing of techniques, representations of the body, received social interaction), isn’t that precisely what creative capitalism wants us to do? To keep capital afloat, we have to become subjects of flow or flowing subjects ourselves, assuming ever more mobile and more precarious existences. New forms of subjectivity are immediately commodified to create new markets. As Bojana Kunst points out in her book *Artist at Work*, “subjectivity is at the core of human production . . . and capital powers deeply affect the powers and potentialities of life” (Kunst 2015, 41). Creative capitalism consumes subjectivities. What during the heyday of performance art in the 1960s and 1970s was held to be an act of emancipation today only serves “contemporary post-Fordist production. . . . One’s work is intertwined with the performance and maintenance of creativity” (42), which is the primary source of revenue for neoliberal capitalism. This is precisely why many of our students at Giessen refuse to move to create new forms of subjectivity. Not to move seems to be the adequate way to counter the dominant social kinesthetic, which is performative. Not to go with the flow today means not to flow at all.

I resist this argument if only because it is a simple reversal of neoliberal claims on the body, producing a mirror image that remains tied to the logic of its enemy. I resist it also because the powers of mobilization as Randy Martin theorized them still produce something worth our while and attention, however precarious and ambivalent the results may be. Movement materializes and carves out places for the subject to speak, move, or act. The crucial point in the students’ no-go argument is the notion of subjectivation and desubjectivation that links creative capitalism with artistic production. These notions short-circuit two forms of production and two forms of subjectivity. I, on the other hand, hold that these notions are not the same in dance as in capitalist production. According to Giorgio Agamben, the work of creative capitalism with all its technical tools and gadgets is to destroy subjectivity (Agamben 2009, 20). Subjectivities cannot take form anymore because contemporary technology short-circuits the wish for the Other with the promise of its instant gratification through consumer goods and, perhaps even more so, through images. Thus, this technology erases both memory and imagination as necessary capacities to form subjects. In so doing, it replaces subjects with consumer zombies. It destroys desire.

Desire is distinct from the wish. Whereas neoliberal consumer capitalism thrives on the wish, dance works with desire. Whereas neoliberal consumer capitalism promises to fulfill your every wish until, inevitably, the next one comes along to be satisfied, desire remains faithful to its object because it cannot own it. There is something clinging about desire. Desire is not contemporary. It is already so

passé once it emerges that it promises to drag yesterday into the future. It does so precisely because the object it creates is an indefinite object that, even after countless failings, it will always resurrect and remain faithful to. It is worth remembering here that Randy Martin conceived of the body primarily as the seat of desire. Desire for him is “the physical agent of activity” (Martin 1985, 56), forever responding to and effecting change in the environment, as Susan Foster puts it in her essay in this volume (Foster 2016, 21). That the body as a desiring body ready to affect and be affected may be mobilized to move, requires—and this is my point—a moment of disidentification. To start moving at all requires a moment of impersonality and presubjectivity, a moment of what I have called in-difference to difference. Once mobilization has set bodies in motion, its force as a surplus prevents the identitarian closure of the scene created by movement. Only when the product, the result of mobilization and its work, prevents the subjects formed and endowed with agency from ever becoming a self-identical subject can mobilization as a moment of force *continue to effect change*. This is what art does. Mobilization thus conceived speaks of a moment of rupture that produces an opening which propels social subjectivity forward precisely because, for the time of the performance, the dancing bodies have become aesthetic subjects *equal* in force and their power to transform. Aesthetic subjects are split subjects because they do not know what goes on behind their backs, yet are prepared to be carried away by the results of mobilization. They are never entirely in control of what they do, show, or try to achieve. That is why their performance is risky and open to new social formations even beyond the stage.

Thus, my advice for my students would be to create indefinite objects rather than no objects at all. In order to articulate subjectivity differently, mobilization, as we have seen, needs a moment of desubjectivation or disidentification to resist hegemonic forms of governance. The form of subjectivity produced by mobilization, which is not destroyed, contrasts the form of subjectivity of consumer capitalism. Instead, it becomes momentarily suspended or expanded, hovering in midair to be analyzed and re-formed. I have argued for the political dimension of the aesthetic as residing in the ambivalences and ambiguities the dance piece creates. The product plays with its own limits and with the contexts it operates in. It questions our judgment by opening up multiple points of view without settling on one. Thus, the work of art may not be consumed because it is always overdetermined and underdetermined. I want to go back to attend the performance, again and again. Even after countless failings, my desire for dance remains strong. The bodies that mobilization for movement produces will always sink back into themselves as opaque resistant bodies while at the same time being instilled with imagination and potentials to move. With each performance, we resurrect them. They are here, but never quite here; they are over there on any kind of stage anywhere, intertwining presence with an inexhaustible absence that may not be consumed but can only be desired. Therefore, the object of art or dance appeals to memory and imagination as human capacities that allow for an ongoing engagement with the performance. It is also in this sense that performance *remains* (Schneider 2011). Desire is faith in the object or, in this case, the dance. It implies an ethical dimension. For Randy Martin let’s mobilize our faith in dance to create indefinite objects.

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