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GESTURE & POLITICS

WHAT (PRE)OCCUPIES US?

The question of (pre)occupation will guide the following observations on art practices and conversations on political thought in the current times of economic instability, precarity, and transformation shadowed by a quite apparent revival of radical politics as it was experienced in the Arab Spring and the OCCUPY movement in many cities in the world. The term "precarity" was not a part of my vocabulary until I noticed its increasing usage in the leftist discourses of the last years, when intellectuals, activists – and artists working in politicized contexts and with tactical media – began to adopt it from discourses on *precariedad* in Latin countries aimed at expressing an increasing concern with existential risks of living under conditions of the neoliberal labor market.

The online forum "Transform" (http://transform. eipcp.net/), a transversal multilingual webjournal, has released critical texts on precarity to foster research into political and artistic practices of institutional critique in view of the widespread condition of temporary,

flexible, contingent, casual, and intermittent work in postindustrial societies, brought about by the neoliberal labor market and subjecting large parts of the population to "flexible exploitation or flexploitation (low and insecure pay, high blackmailability, intermittent income etc), and existential precariousness (high risk of social exclusion because of low wages, welfare cuts, high cost of living etc)."[1] If one digs deeper, one finds texts by Spanish radical women's collectives on labor and strike ("what is your strike?"), published as *Nociones comunes. Experiencias y ensayos entre investigación y militancia* and reflecting different investigations into the terms and practices of a new political ethics.[2] Or, rather,

1 See <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1159437958#redir>. The "Transform" platform also provides a link to the multilingual eipcp-webjournal on "precariat" <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704>, where I found Paolo Virno's essay on "Un movimento performativo" [A performative movement]. A genealogy of the development of new concepts of *precariedad* in Europe was carried out by María Isabel Casas-Cortés in *Social Movements as Sites of Knowledge Production* (Phd dissertation, 2009); she traces it to the feminist situationist movement, the *Colectivo Situacione* and its manifesto *Precarias a la Deriva*, articulated during and after strikes in Spain in 2002.

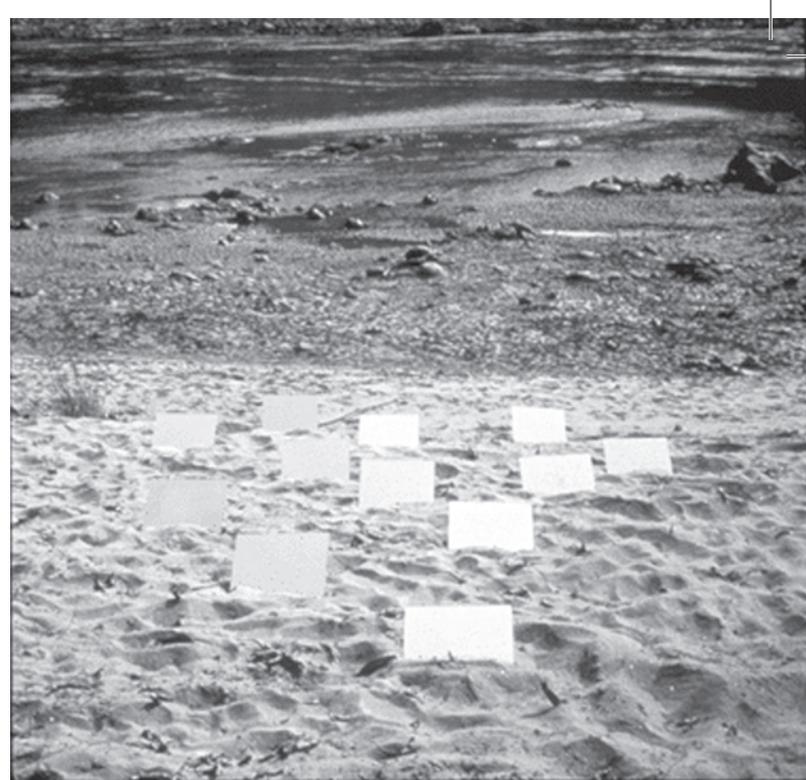2 *Nociones comunes. Experiencias y ensayos entre investigación y*

reflecting writing *between* research and militancy.

It is the relationship between the gesturing of these terms, and activist practices that sometimes might also be considered "gestures," which concerns me here. In a recent online debate someone suggested that the Occupy Wall Street movement was rumored to have started as a site-specific installation piece – an act of homage to Tahrir and a durational performance which turned out to be quite popular. Such ambivalence of gesture and (unpredictable) virtuosity would be confounding, I think, if reflected through the prism of the sentimental tactics of performance and installation art, which after all have already been institutionally sanctioned by documenta and all the biennials from Venice to Gwangju. Site-specificity was once the primary, pre-occupational motivation for land art and earthworks – for example Robert Smithson's *Mirror Displacements* or *Spiral Jetty* in the 60s and 70s – but it is now supplanted by distributed, networked operations which link the mirrors-screens to transversal, temporary appropriations of strategic urban spaces, occupying for real. The tactics of camping/occupying give a whole new meaning to what Josephy Beuys once called "social sculpture": The campings, via mediated flows, connect localized protests translocally and can stimulate and sculpt powerful mirroring effects. Setting up tents, then, exceeds the aesthetics of installation, suggesting that we turn to questions of constitution and interface behavior, of how relations are made and unmade, and how we become what we do as individual and collective actors.

Working in the field of dance and performing arts, I want to react to the question "what (pre)occupies us?" – in the context of technological research that often seems oblivious to the political and ecological crisis in our lives.[3] For example, the relationship between politics

Robert Smithson, *Yucatan Mirror Displacements (1-9)*, 1969. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York | 381

and performance was implied but not really tracked when I conducted my annual workshop in interactive media on the grounds of an abandoned coal mine in southwest Germany.[4] Generally, we organize such workshops on the site to explore new modes of composition and experimentation with media/performance, including forays into the outdoors and the abandoned mining facilities. But last year, several of the younger media artists who joined the lab suggested that we read Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* and Giorgio Agamben's "Notes on Gesture" (in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*). In the locations where I spend much of my creative time as a choreographer/teacher (UK/US), Virno's or Agamben's ideas on new virtuosities in the workplace and on gestures were virtually unheard of. The German media artists gestured at Virno and Agamben; thus we decided to begin the lab with readings, and an underlying inquiry: can we

militancia (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2004) collects texts on the theory of political praxis as it especially concerns women, im/migrant and intermittent workers. For the German translation, see Birgit Mennel, *»Was ist dein Streik«: Militante Streifzüge durch die Kreisläufe der Prekarität* (Vienna: Turian & Kant, 2011).

3 The question – "O que nos (pre)ocupa? – was posed by the editors of the Portuguese journal *Cine Qua Non* 5 (2012), to whom I had submitted a quite formalist essay on "Re-scripting the Stage: Performance and Interactivity," dealing with sound wearables in dance and the current aesthetic debate on interactivity and participation, whereas the editors in fact postulate that "every artistic gesture is, to a certain extent, a political act." Why would they think so?

4 The 9th international Interaktionslabor took place in August 2011 and was conducted as the initial formation of a new independent "performance academy" involving participants from the region (Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and beyond): <http://interaktionslabor.de>.

generate and reproduce radical thoughts and radical actions within the system (say, the laboratory, the theatres, the universities, the museums, the galleries, the art market, the publishing industry)?

Since there were other choreographers and dancers in the lab, I also suggested we add Boyan Manchev's provocative "La résistance de la danse," an essay claiming for dance – as "disorganized experimentation

Yoko Ando, *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior,* YCAM 2011 © YCAM

with the body's potency, which cannot be sublated in a function and/or commodity" – a subversive political force of counter-operation vis-à-vis standardized forms of subjectivity-production. So during the first day of the lab we read and discussed; the process was slowed down as many participants spoke different languages, and thus we needed to take time to re-translate the radical texts into these several languages.[5] This proved inconclusive, and we lost track of the political texts as we quickly moved on to the studio to work on choreographic

5 See "Theorie" pages on the 2011 web-archive of the Lab. The texts mentioned are Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), available at <http://www.generation-online. org/c/fcmultitude3.htm>; Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesturem" in: *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 134-40, available at <http://modvisart. blogspot.de/2006/04/g-agamben-notes-on-gesture.html>; Boyan Manchev, "La Résistance de la danse," *Mouvement* 47 (2008); English version: "Odpor plesa/The Resistance of Dance," *Maska* 25 (2010): 9-19.

and software problems. What preoccupied us was how to wear a sensor and transmitter on the arm or body, how to create intimate media allowing us to "control" data flows and media outputs through gestural action.

During the past twelve months, I also attended the 2001 Choreolab in Krems, Austria, a workshop dedicated to movement practices, improvisation, and interdisciplinary inquiry into "e/motion frequency deceleration." Once again the vast majority of the encounter was spent moving, which is understandable with a group of twenty or more dancers. The philosophical or political question of why we wanted to slow down movement was barely touched upon in regard to contemporary socio-economic realities, with the exception of a masterclass by butoh master Ohno Yoshito, and a seminar led by media theorist Soenke Zehle (one of my partners in the Interaktionslabor 2011) in which he addressed Virno's thoughts on virtuosity and the "exodus" – the mass defection from the State and what Virno envisions as an intemperate movement toward the public sphere of a radically heterogeneous Intellect, a defection of the multitude that might change the rules of the game. Lastly, in March 2012 I attended a workshop at the YCAM, Yamaguchi (Japan), which was dedicated to a new interactional software system the YCAM engineers had programmed for dancer Yoko Ando (a member of William Forsythe's dance company). Critical discussions revolved around "attention" and "reaction" to systems and massive data environments, yet no one ever directly mentioned Fukushima or the civic unrest caused by the earthquake/tsunami and nuclear reactor catastrophe during my entire stay in Yamaguchi.

How are the rules of the game changed? One might argue that the political revolutions in the Arab countries, the economic crisis in the Euro-American zone, the OCCUPY movement, civic unrest as well as reactionary backlashes across the world, the fall out from Fukushima, etc., are processes of unrelenting density. The realities have overtaken the vocabularies of performance art and agit-prop theatre; blogging websites and YouTube make new media art redundant. After all, dancing in a reactive system monitored by Kinect cameras and transforming motion into sound does not strike us as having a close connection to

radical politics implied by tactical media advocates who claim, following the Critical Art Ensemble's 2001 manifesto on "digital resistance," that transgressions into public space and the network society of control are enabled by tactical appropriation of digital networking for subversive purposes.[6]

One of the ambivalent claims for subversion made by media activists is of course the ready availability of low-cost wireless network technologies to all, professionals

Francis Alÿs, *Cuando la fe mueve montaña,* 2002.

and amateurs alike, and Paolo Virno already suggested that post-Fordist social cooperation eliminates the old dichotomies of "public/private" and "collective/

individual." Neither "producers" nor "citizens," Virno argues, "the modern virtuosi attain at last the rank of Multitude."[7]

While the activists (*Precarias a la Deriva*) admit that the idea of precariousness may not be new, their focus on how dangerous instabilities particularly affect women, young people and immigrants in today's economic system enables them use of the concept of precarity to create a common understanding for people to organize around. For many people it no longer makes sense to organize around their work situation. Casas-Cortés quotes the activist YoMango suggesting that "our work is constantly changing, it is never really defined. At the same time an interesting possibility opens up to organize/resist/struggle (something like that) or maybe disobey around the different aspects of life: housing, health, emotions, human relations, food, leisure."[8]

"Something like that:" the casual reference to the question of what constitutes resistance against the appropriation of life kept me thinking about the spectrum of online debates I recently witnessed. Many of the conversations I take part in seem organized by professionals (academics and media activists) wanting to engage both the amateurs and the virtuosi out there in Tahrir and the OCCUPY camps, expand or retheorize the so-called "Twitter revolution" (in Iran) or the so-called "Facebook revolution" claiming affective labor in the blogosphere or the social networks as reciprocal exchange with urban resistance and the contestations on the squares that may involve physical hardship and possible arrest or loss of life. These theoreticians of the revolution are excited by the "embodied" actions on the squares. Anthropologist Diego Hernández Nilson, however, posting from Montevideo, considers both networking and urban mobilizations "reactionary" or "sedentary" gestures, arguing that the globalized cities themselves develop resilient mechanisms against the mobility of capital, alarming their urban dwellers to express "indignation" at the loss of relative security offered by the biopower.[9] The online discussants

6 Cf. Eric Kluitenberg, *Legacies of Tactical Media: The Tactics of Occupation: From Tompkins Square to Tahrir* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011) 9.

7 Paolo Virno, "Virtuosisty and Revolution" (2003), available at <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/view/34>.

8 Casas-Cortés, *Social Movements as Sites of Knowledge Production*, 321.

9 Diego Hernández, March 26, 2012, on *empyre soft_skinned_space*: <http://www.mail-archive.com/empyre@lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/

often act like *indignados* themselves, and while this is understandable, in view of the many possibilities that exist for addressing forms of organizing, performing and shaping social realities, it does create a certain cognitive dissonance between the rules of engagement, similar to the discrepancy I find between critical media and performance art filling various gaps between arts and science/technology, on the one hand, and the virtuosic non-specialists filling the streets and squares by putting their bodies on the line, on the other.

I have come across conceptual artistic gestures that I find quite poetic, but also immensely futile. Francis Alÿs's *Cuando la fe mueve montaña* [When faith moves

Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present,* 2010. Courtesy of MoMA.

mountains] is one of these futile gestures, enacted on 11 April 2002 by five hundred volunteers forming a single line across a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. As the day was progressing they worked to move the sand just one shovel forward across the entire dune. The gesture was filmed and photographed, and later exhibited at a biennial. The seemingly meaningless earthwork was then "read" into the context of the city's recent history and socio-economic situation, and is said to have created an urban legend that is still performing work today. But it didn't change the rules of the game, how could it?

msg03998.html>.

Other performance artists deploy particular strategies or self-referential gestures to create their own legends, whether it is Marina Abramovic staging her self, in "The Artist is Present," during a long-durational set piece allowing audience members to sit down across from her and stare at her, or Stelarc re-suspending his body from flesh-hooks holding him by the skin, after he had for many years abandoned this practice in favor of cyborgian experiments with the body's extended operational architectures via robotic prostheses and artificial intelligence systems.

The return to "suspended body" is a symbolic gesture, performed for an audience and not with it. The participatory impetus is clear in Alÿs's and Abramovic's performances, even if a direct political ethics is harder to discern, and most performance and media artists are likely to be caught up in a paradox, namely that their symbolic actions or their gestures of defiance (say, taking their bodies to a limit or exposing themselves to contingencies) will remain sedentary, safely protected by the duty of care of museums and galleries, doctors and guards.

Paul Chan combines his media art with activism, online blogging and open source advocacy, and with his recent *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007) staged a "public art" project of very large dimensions, siting Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on the streets of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Chan collaborated with the non-profit organization Creative Time and The Classical Theatre of Harlem, calling the performance "a play in two acts, a project in three parts," referring to the play and the shadow fund developed to accompany the project and benefit the devastated city. In the spirit of a communal activist project, Chan and his team engaged the community through conversation, workshops, and seminars, seeking not only to contextualize the play, but also gain a better understanding of the city's history and develop lasting relationships with its people – all of this of course predictable tactical maneuvers of the artist-as-ethnographer. Reflecting on "The Unthinkable Community," Chan writes movingly that staging the play on the streets of New Orleans was meant to be a reflection on the meaning of words like solitude and community in an age in which the explosion of technologies – from mobile phones to social networks

Stelarc, *Suspension*, gallery performance, Armadale, 2012. Photo courtesy of the artist.

– that facilitate communication, have actually increased the individual's sense of alienation and solitude, rather than reducing it: "Time deepens connections, whereas technology economizes communication. This is why, despite the growing number of ways for people to be seen and heard, tele-technologies have ironically made it harder for people to comprehend one another."[10]

While the sincerity of the political gesture cannot be doubted (and is an echo of Susan Sontag flying into Sarajevo to direct Beckett during the siege of the city), at the same time the site and the community are instrumentalized for a subjective act of directing theatre

in front of a "back drop" of devastation, as Chan himself says in the video and audio tapes now collected at MoMA and other arts institutions. His claim that common interests bring people together is debatable (who benefits from theatrical gestures?), and Sarajevo, New Orleans or Fukishima are particular sites that inspired particular kinds of solidarity or a lack thereof. But the call for solidarity underlies much of the political rhetoric, especially after the protests erupting in North African and Middle Eastern countries. Analyses of the media transmission of Tahrir Square indicate that the protesters were highly aware of their (self)mediation, staging their transgression for others to see, sculpting their iconic mass eruption gesturing at themselves in

10 Paul Chan, "The Unthinkable Community," in *Eflux Journal* 16 (May 2010), online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/144>.

front of the video cameras and mobile phones, holding signs. The protesters were present.

Presence and attention in artistic performances have a different value, and that value belongs to an aesthetic repertoire that cannot be genuinely equated with the political, in spite of what Brecht and Benjamin had hoped for, in the context of the early modern avant-garde. In the context of the OCCUPY movement, under rather less oppressive democratic regimes of governance, theatricalized visibility and connectivity function differently, since the protesters had more space to maneuver compared to the people on Tahrir Square or in Libya. The question of virtuosity, in Virno's writing, was clearly referring to the flexible post-Fordist workers, and to the Multitude which is its own audience; only in regard to an audience as "public realm" does Virno use the comparison with a "performer" (e.g. a pianist like Glenn Gould), and virtuosic performance, for Virno, never gives rise to a finished work. If this is so, we are able to ask whether we can productively distinguish between artistic gestures that are futile, in the sense that a content-driven political art stages "resistance" by reacting theatrically to an object of contention, and an attentive or affective aesthetic that is immanently political in its consequences – of becoming, of becoming-movement, of striking at productive labor, of affecting social relations and not of completing work.
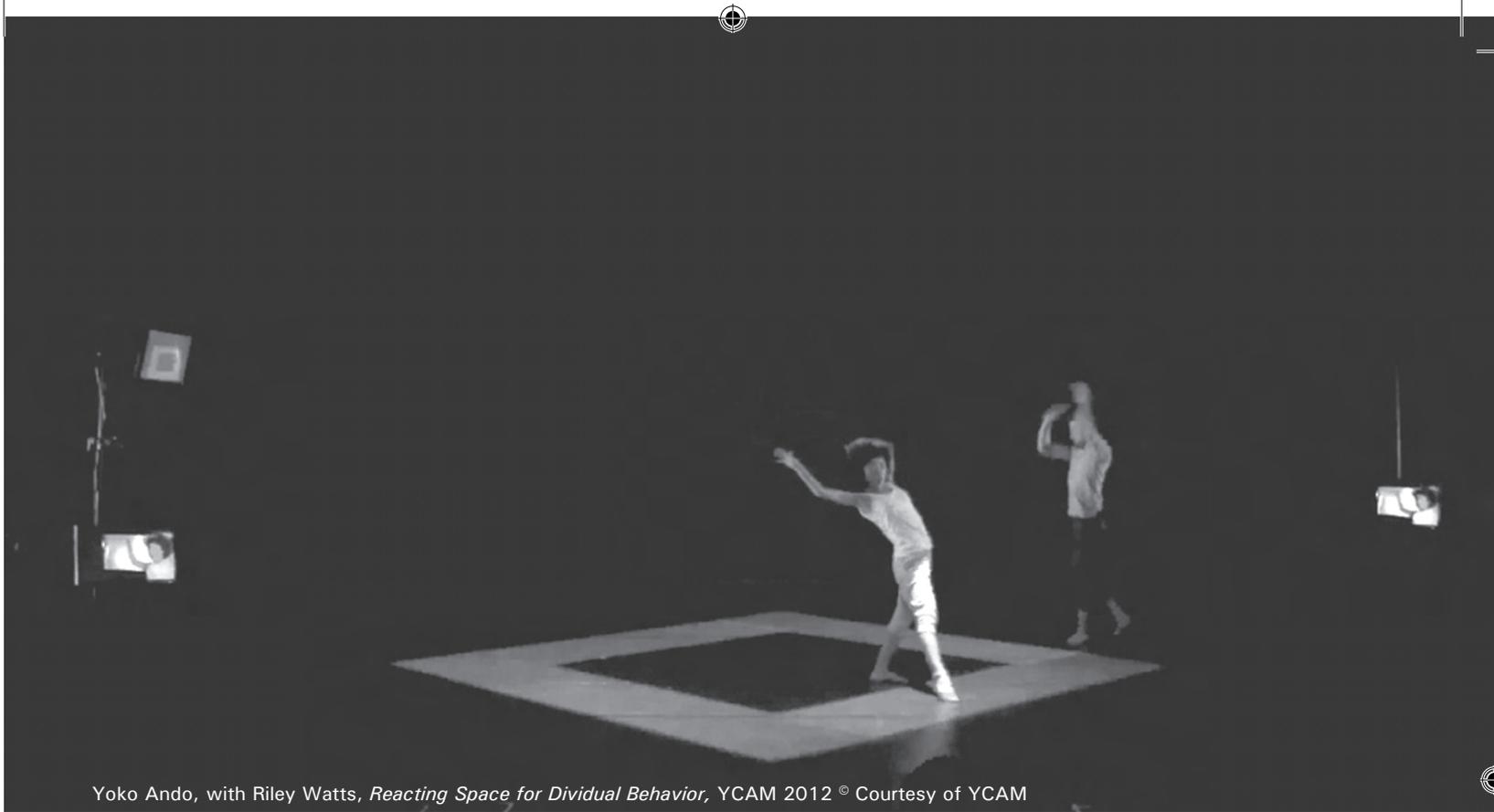
I conclusion, I will try to sketch the possibilities of the latter. As to the former, we probably find numerous examples of contestation that in fact also quite literally take up the gesture of occupation. Italian friends tell me that people had occupied the Teatro Valle in Rome in June 2011. Did they attempt a more militant intervention into a hierarchical institution and its civic role of representation? Did they seek to prevent it from being taken over by private capital? Or is the occupation of a theatre a conservatory move, as it seemed to have been for the Mavili Collective, the occupiers of the Embros theatre in Athens, who are seen cleaning up the place in their humorous fastforward video (http://vimeo.com/32000191) – a "re-activating" gesture towards setting up a space for collective meeting, thinking, and direct action? Or can acts of preservation also be subversive?

On the other end of the media arts spectrum, Slovene artist Marko Peljhan's MAKROLAB, POLAR and PACT projects "occupy" very different terrains that would need careful exploration in order to comprehend the political tactics involved. Since 1995, Peljhan's PACT Systems function as a global network developing Open Source and strategic media technologies, which in the case of POLAR meant building quasi-scientific autonomous self-sustaining units for information gathering, including data from environmental satellites, arctic weather data, and plant growth data that could help initiate new perspectives on the global ecosystem. In 2010, the installation *polar m [mirrored]* at the YCAM in Yamaguchi explored natural radiation phenomena confronting them with the limits of human sensorial perception. Here Peljhan proposed that our understanding of the basic indeterminancy and the non-linear intelligence, found in nature's apparent randomness and noise, is limited by the physical characteristics of our senses. For some years now, he has operated on the extreme periphery of the art world, for sure, and perhaps processes like PACT are situated already beyond aesthetic criteria. They strike at our perceptions of reciprocal relations to land, climate, ecosystem, data environment.

WHAT IS YOUR STRIKE? DIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR?

The act of claiming a place for direct collective action is a political gesture, and undoubtedly this is what Bertolt Brecht must have had in mind when he imagined a new theatre for the scientific age – not a theatre that stages plays with political content, but a place for rehearsals by the Multitude developing political tactics for the production of life ("Grosse Produktion"), a kind of biopolitical production combining immaterial with material creation of knowledge, codes, affects, gestures, attitudes, languages, ways of living, social protocols for economic sustainability, choreographies of participation able to reconnect public policy, social justice and civic imagination. What we can learn from the OCCUPY movement is, hopefully, a new belief in "social choreographies" that can give momentum to a motley assemblage, trying out "general assembly" methods or "people's microphones" even if, after a while, they appear as cumbersome or ineffective as the concept of no-demands. There was beauty in the dysfunctionality I sometimes experienced in the London

Yoko Ando, with Riley Watts, *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior,* YCAM 2012 © Courtesy of YCAM

OCCUPY camp, since there was also an obvious ethics of cooperation at work, taking care of sanitary conditions, of food supplies, sharing tents, helping each other and re-organizing the site infrastructures as the occupation went along. Public rehearsals.

In the art-sci laboratories, we find it harder to make our experimentations public, but the YCAM example serves as a reminder that "system design" can have numerous agendas, not only benefitting the artists who may rehearse the new possibilities of heightened attention and bodily awareness of a reacting environment – thus practicing techniques of ecological awareness vis-à-vis complex information environments of the kind in which we also move in our daily lives where we are often coercively traced and tracked (located) – but also serving educational and public purposes. Yoko Ando's *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior*, developed with the software engineers of the Interlab, was exhibited in the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, which is also a Public Library: school children, adolescents, and adult citizens were invited for creative

workshops to experience playful behavior as methods of intellection, perception and communication in the realm of physical expression.[11] The wider social dimension of choreography, in the current digital age, is addressed by many of their public workshops, in which people can interact with installations or virtual environments to discover movements, memories and motifs that lie dormant in their own bodies. When I was there, the gestural focus in Ando's work, which introduced the term "dividual behavior" referring to actions that connect us to others (rather than reflecting our individual self), caught my attention. It resonated strongly with the unfulfilled promise I saw in the Interaktionslabor, where we dwelled, not unlike the collective research into choreographic and performative tools carried out by the Zagreb-based company BADco (http://badco.hr/), on developing intimate wearables that help to articulate

11 Cf. <http://www.pmstudio.co.uk/news/2011/03/07/visit-ycam-yama-guchi-center-arts-and-media>. For their wide-ranging programming, see <http://www.ycam.jp/>. Peljhan' s *polar m [mirrored],* exhibited collaboratively with Carsten Nicolai, is shown here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEfYhDeX-NY>.

Yoko Ando, with Riley Watts, *Reacting Space for Dividual Behavior,* YCAM 2012 © Courtesy of YCAM

stories or how to make choices about how we modify our bodies or extend them to others.

If one looks at Ando's performance carefully, one notices how she continuously shifts and reorganizes her bodily movement in heightened awareness of a range of live mirrors (LCD screens positioned at different angles in the space) capturing motions in the field of video cameras, reacting to between-presences or between-times (some of the movement is played back with 6 seconds of delay), while her gestures touch invisible objects in the 3D environment crafted through the depth-vision of the Kinect cameras. These gestures generate sound and thus her movement is sounding, biogrammatically reposing multiple parts of her limbs into a series of affective tones, timbres, and colors, her body becoming dividuated, choric, and polyrhythmic.

In the feedback environment, we experience her and her fellow dancer's quick movement-perceptions (their thinking through movement) as complex rhythms, challenging our own understanding of the architectonics of the audio-visual environment as constantly infolding and overlayering – the polyrhythms here turning orchestral, as if we were all partaking in a (social) relatedness where our movement is played out as a potential collective. There is no individual: I feel part of a comprehensive affective layering that, one might suggest, bears micropolitical resonances. This could be a collective virtuosity, if we all felt the dynamism of our movement as a social sculpture, a modulation of dividuated cooperation? It is in this sense, then, that I would argue for a modest political potential in the dynamics of rehearsal. Not a rehearsal of self or a pre-occupied pose, but of engagement with (technologically mediated) environments that gestures towards inter-action, which after all has a utopian quality which the protests on Tahrir Square so visibly sculpted.