

BENEATH THIS FLAG STANDS A BODY: ON HUMAN FORM AS FINAL TECHNOLOGY

By Anna Jayne Kimmel; PhD Candidate Stanford University, Theater and Performance Studies

To picture scenes of protest, I simply close my eyes to conjure a decouped landscape of resistance: bodies pressed tightly together in a street, moving but going nowhere, all oriented toward the same facing as if the adversary was there, present. Perhaps police officers face-off in the perimeter, shields raised—less plausible in my imagination that they passively look on, supporting the cause. Banners, posters, and flags are lofted above, clarifying intent with messaging in bold block letters. The atmosphere bleeds with sound—of organized chants, spontaneous shrieks, the rhythm of steps muffled by more subtle shuffles. Excess floods the scene on every plane; surplus affect fills every corner.

This scene could be anywhere that crowds form: Gezi Park 2013, Ferguson 2014, Washington DC 2017, Algiers 2019, Hong Kong 2020. Technology of the police aside, this scene could be any century: 20th-century China, 19th-century England, 18th-century France, 17th-century Russia, to name but a few historical protests. One can only imagine that such events will continue into the oppositely-expanding horizon, too: 22nd-century Australia, 23rd-century Canada, 24th-century space?

With such historical ubiquity, scenes of bodies en masse have become commonplace, habituated by less polarized assemblies of parades, conventions, and stadiums. But as technologies advance at warp speed—in public health, space exploration, artificial intelligence, and commercialized machinery—in ways that alter and displace the human form, I am left anxious that humanity has lost sight of how and why this body remains most salient. In an increasingly virtualized society, I find it necessary to mark the limits of automation and mechanization, of the non-human machine. Shadows cast from the banners may obscure the faces of those who protest, but beneath each flag stands a body. May its footprint not be soon forgotten.

So let us reflect on why this body matters, with its beautiful skin, soft flesh, sweet sweat, and implications of imperfection, vulnerability, and precarity, that is, with all of its humanisms. Others before have offered a compelling alternative, articulating when the human and non-human boundary becomes productively blurred: Haraway, Parker-Starbuck, Bay-Cheng, Chen, et al. These feminist efforts are valiant, but here I want to emphasize why, in moments of protest in particular, technology has not superseded flesh, and moreover, has made little to no real advancement in doing so. I believe bodies will always have to place themselves on the line for reform to transpire, that assemblies will always require a coalesced proximity of life.

Even as technological advancements relentlessly plow forward, physical and material bodies continue to be a requirement of political dissent, an unchanging technology in spite of the times. As the military advances remote drone strikes, able to kill from a distance, why are unarmed bodies like Joshua Wong's still deemed a threat as I write? Why is it that—even as we can arguably automate the dancing body—we have not automated the protesting body? What is the elusive quality that requires the live form? How do we rationalize the continued necessity of bodies in demonstration? There is something irreplaceable about the body and it is worth identifying that edge.

To respond to such capacious questions, I have gathered aesthetic works with flags, some with and some without bodies, to consider the resulting variances in the relationships between body and object. Like the rainforest, scenes of protest can be diagramed by layers: on the floor,

the people, a sea of muscle, tissue, sinew, flesh, sweat, and bone pulsating a shared message. Above this understory, posters, banners and flags emerge, a canopy of cardboard, picket sticks, sharpie-ed messages, and other repurposed material revealing the power of craft. Unlike other objects of the canopy, the fabric of flags moves too, undulating and responding to force as a human form can but cardboard cannot. Thus while I would not claim the flag as a requirement of protests, I select it for object of analysis here as it offers an approximated counterpoint to the animated body beneath.

The following pieces are not exhaustive, nor comprehensively representative. Rather, they contain images that flooded my mind in 2020's summer as protests against police brutality, state-sanctioned violence, and racism reached unprecedented scale, and reverberated deeply into snapshots of Trump rallies and the US-election cycle more broadly, a Proustian overflow of memories spawned by disdain at displays of vulgar patriotism that veered beyond the grotesque. No image felt more superfluously disposable than the hand-sized flags on wooden sticks displayed from the back of pick-up trucks, a capitalist wave if there ever was one.

A symbol over-saturated with political connotation and implications on identity, the flag oozes with material signification: for the fabric to be black or white, half-mast or burnt, starred or striped. To wear a flag, wave a flag, or watch a flag hang limp, the difference of draping matters in moments of protests, signaling pride, defiance or defeat to those looking on. Subsequent themes of animation, automation, and deanimation guide my writing as theoretical terms that give language to the shifting potentialities revealed by the art. Implicit is the negotiation of vulnerability, precarity and risk involved in these scenes. My aim is not to fetishize presence, but to take seriously the particular properties afforded to technologies of flesh.

Intersecting questions of the public sphere, independence and collective action, power and visibility thus coincide. Hannah Arendt's articulation of the space for appearance becomes another cornerstone for considering the body as final technology, by which I mean complete and unchanging, without further system updates or prototypes to come, a playful quip on Foucault's technologies of the self. Yet if Arendtian politics require a space of appearance, more specifically, I would add, it requires bodies that appear—people of the polis as material force (Arendt 1958). Performance studies and critical dance studies understand this corporeal specificity. From Randy Martin's notion of movement (1998) to Judith Butler's reinvigorated right to assembly (2015), from the political writing of John Dewey (1927) to the choreographic approach of Sally Banes (1993) both on embodied democracy, there is an a priori understanding that the body required is human. "Interpellation implies a visceral address" writes Mark Franko, articulating the way the body is required as present so as to be addressed by the state (or whomever the protestors speak against), a centering of the body between kinetic and political (2002: 60).

When bodies are not allowed to assemble—due to political restrictions of an authoritative regime (including in democratic states), public health concerns such as COVID-19, or otherwise forced limitations—can this political performative be transferred to the non-human? Indeed, for a text on the right to assemble, Butler devotes much space to the complicated distinctions made between human and nonhuman animals, between organic and inorganic bodies that are ultimately related.¹ Yet the *human* and *life of human life* are two components which never fully

¹ Following the tradition of Donna Haraway, Butler expresses that "if we cannot really speak about bodies at all without the environments, the machines, and the complex systems of social interdependency upon which they rely,

coincide (Butler 2015: 42). By centering the flag as such an object that can potentially extend, replace, or displace the body, I think through the body's role in the space of appearance in more explicit terms, a sort of proof by contradiction with pressing implications.

Animation: On Banners Waved High

As the kinetic project of modernity becomes modernity's ontology (its inescapable reality, its foundational truth), so the project of Western dance becomes more and more aligned with the production and display of a body and a subjectivity fit to perform this unstoppable motility (Andre Lepecki 2006: 3).

Consider, for example, a moment from Ohad Naharin's "Last Work", a contemporary dance premiered by Batsheva Dance Company in 2015. A figure in bright cerulean blue, running in place on a treadmill in the upstage right corner of the stage for the full 70-minute duration, punctuates the tumultuous piece with a sign of endurance and continuity. By the closing scene, this dancer (often the acclaimed Bobbi Jene Smith) carries a large white flag overhead as she continues to run, at times assisted by another cast member to allow the cloth to bellow more fully. The labor of surrender feels more redemptive and belligerent than submissive. It's a striking end to a series of political tableaux. And yet, while the flag marks the final iconography of the performance, it is important to note that the white flag itself does not offer the unresolved tension of Naharin's choreography, but the physicality of the dancer holding and hoisting the banner waved high.

This scene, staged on the proscenium, holds together these disparate trains of thought on the space of appearance, political force, and the body's imperative for assembly. While the flag lends an overt politics to the performance, if simply hung from the catwalk I would miss the "labor of participation" beyond representation that mobilizes the agency of the dance (Martin 1998: 3). This physical labor makes all the difference to me, rendering visible the "kinetic excess" that fuels modernity (Sloterdijk in Lepecki 2006). In another performance, further signifying the power of the human body over the flag as object, Yvonne Rainer's "Trio A with Flags" (1970) draped American flags around the otherwise nude dancers, showcasing cloth that is clearly not clothing, and allowing the dancers' bodies to dominate the patriotic costuming of stars and stripes. Both performances suggest the animation, not automation, of the flag and all it presents—a lesson that can be translated from this controlled environment to the public sphere.

As a conduit for animation, in the hands of a body the flag performs a liveness of resistance (if only to gravity explicitly, but social forces implicitly), where body and affect become actively intertwined. Deftly theorized by Sianne Ngai, animation is "the general process of activating or giving life to inert matter" (2004: 92). Animatedness names how affect becomes publicly visible, agitated or moved by, a catalyzing force replete with racialized overtones. Appealing to the dancerly sensibility in me, through animation Ngai suggests "associations with movement and activity...semantic proximity to 'agitation'" that bends toward the "contemporary meaning of the political agitator or Activist" (2004: 31). If there is proximity to agitation in animation, what is its origin?

While Ngai understands that animation becomes a source of anxiety, she does not fully articulate the nuance of the medium of the agitator as she moves fluidly between clay and

then all of these nonhuman dimensions of bodily life prove to be constitutive dimensions of human survival and flourishing...So the analytic distinctions we tend to make between machine, human, and animal all rely on a certain covering over of blended or dependent relations" (Butler 2015: 131-132).

corporeal, mud and muscle. Yet it seems that the specificity of the external force matters, not least in moments of protest and demonstration. Consider the following sentences:

Facilitating the transition from the image of a body whose parts are automatically moved, to the oppositional consciousness required for the making of political movements. [...] Animatedness thus brings us back to the politically charged problem of obstructed agency (2004: 96, 32).

Obstructed agency, obstructed justice. If Ngai's formulation of animatedness implies an involuntary motion, a subtle shift away from motility toward mobility, then there is an incompatibility between animation and protest, a lack of intentionality unless clearly performed. But the flag waved in "Last Work" is not just animated, but animated by the human. If the dancer's labor were to be "automatically moved," the potency of the scene would be reduced precisely because a mechanized, automated, or otherwise programmed bearer would not visibilize a conscious intent to the gesture.²

Automation: On Mechanical Arms

Yet the "thinging" of the body in order to construct it, counterintuitively, as impassioned is deployed by both abolitionists as a strategy of shifting the status of this body from thing to human, as if the racialized, hence already objectified body's reobjectification, in being animated, were paradoxically necessary to emphasize its personhood or subjectivity (Ngai 2004: 99).

Yet to romanticize the potent potentiality of the body beneath the flag is not to let automated attempts fall unrecognized. Consider for example, "Black Flags", part of William Forsythe's *Choreographic Objects*. The 2015 performance features two industrial, robotic "arms" that each wave an immense black flag, the weight of the fabric shifting the currents of the air and revealing the power of invisible resistance. The flags sweep the space, at times dancing in unison and other times operating in counterpoint, cutting the open space in imaginary pathways, in immense, impressive sweeps. The rigid, unyielding surface of the mechanical arm contrasts the rippling fabric made supple and alive by the movement. The black flag waves as an antithesis to surrender; the demonstrations continue as an antithesis to submission. Arguably the black flag has its strongest resonance in Israel in the present moment, but its symbolism is nearly universal.³ The fabric may speak for itself, but surely it enunciates differently dependent on how it is animated.

Forsythe's choice to replace the body with the mechanical apparatus feels dangerously tantalizing, especially as made by an individual most lauded as a dancer and choreographer. Arguably, a human form could not endure the strenuous work of moving the heavy flags, at least not without showing signs of labor and exhaustion. Beyond the theoretical implications on the idea of humans exploring space through technology, and the limits of the automatic in the realm of the aesthetic, it is tempting to ask how Forsythe's "choreographic objects" resist prevailing assumptions that *the politics of movement are exclusive to the human body*? But, more urgently,

² If I am intentionally centering the individual so as to reduce variable, the implications reach into the collective. As Gustav Le Bon theorized from a psychoanalytic perspective, the centrality of psychology for crowd dynamics bares interest on the necessity of the live human figure, especially when he writes that the man in the crowd "is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will" (2009: 19).

³ 2020 saw protests by the 'Black Flag' anti-Netanyahu movement, though Joby Warrick's *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (2015) and the US Prisoner-of-War flag, for example, suggest an alternative historical trajectory. In all, however, resistance runs as a common theme.

how can we push back against such a universalizing inquiry, to argue against the exhaustive potential to “remachine the body” (Lepecki 2006: 7)?

Before attempting a cogent response, let us yet consider two more performances of the flag in motion without a body in sight. A 54’x16’ US flag waves in the 2008/2015 exhibit by William Pope.L, “Trinket”. Four industrial fans animate this monumental flag until it begins to tear at the seams from the violent force of the artificial wind. A 51st star interrupts the grid, an off-spring, an echo, an interruption? Excess nonetheless, the bodies unseen sewn on. Lit by theatrical lights in a large warehouse room, the piece questions scale—of aesthetics and violence alike. Perhaps most known for his slow crawl, in other work, Pope.L moves between mediums to bend more toward the body, at times employing bodies and at other times more traditionally visual forms including performances in the street. “Embodiment” and “Proto-Skin Set” are other works that suggest his valuation of the body more explicitly than “Trinket”.⁴ But the absence of the body renders the power of this piece markedly different than “Last Work”. As Terry Myers writes of “Trinket”:

Pope.L has reworked this conundrum by making his sly work behave as if it were both a kinetic, unraveling art work and a living, decomposing thing. [...] It is, in all senses of the word, *moving*. Judging from his work, this must be a word that means everything to Pope.L

Moving as the piece most certainly is, it moves in ways decidedly different than had a live body been the agent of animation, not the mechanized fans. Andy Goldsworthy’s “Red Flags” (2020) is yet a more recent example of austere art relying on the symbolism of the flag without including a body beneath. Both installations, while impactful, fail to reflect an updated form of protest, to supersede the value of the body as final technology. This is not a shortcoming of the art, arguably not even its intent, but a revealing testimony nonetheless to the technologies and mediums of protest.

Animation thus becomes bound up in, but separate from, a question of technology, automation, and the resulting impact on agency and the body, or, as Ngai summarizes, the “animated-technologized body” (2004: 101). This ambivalent potential of the body excites me, and the implications are striking: “the ‘human body’ as such is already a working body automatized, in the sense that it becomes in the new age an automaton on which social injustice as well as processes of mechanization ‘take on a life of their own’” (2004: 99). But what distinguishes affect of animatedness from automation, however, is “the way in which it oddly synthesizes two kinds of automatism whose meanings run in opposite directions” including the extremely codified and the liberating release, the site of contact between the human and the non-human (2004: 100). Indeed, I find a slippery edge between automation in the mechanical sense in which the body is replaced by inorganic parts, and automatism in the Negri-Hardt-Vino tradition of autonomous resistance, both materialist concerns with diverging results. The automatic nervous systems of affect exist outside both, the skin around an organized system of order and power (Tomkins 1962). By re-centering the body through this performance studies approach, I offer a reminder that “rethinking the [political] subject in terms of the body is precisely the task of choreography,” that not everything is meant to be automated (Lepecki 2006: 5).

De-animation: On Cloth Draped at Rest

⁴ For a discussion of Pope.L.’s kinetic strategies, see Lepecki 2006, chapter 5 “Stumbling dance: William Pope.L’s crawls”. But if Lepecki centers “where he performs his crawls”, i.e. the material space in the space of appearance, I don’t want to take for granted that it is muscle and skin, flesh and bone that animates the crawls (2006: 88).

I want to slip one step further, from the flag waved and the flag in motion to the flag at rest, before responding to the question I first posed. As a part of the solo exhibition, *Rogue States* (2019), visual artist Stephanie Syjuco presented “To the Person Sitting in Darkness”. The work features a large quasi-American flag on a 15’ pole in the courtyard of the museum, black stripes replacing the white, skull and cross bones replacing the stars, a materialization of the flag described by Mark Twain in 1901. Empty, the aluminum chairs under the flag emphasize the absence of the human figure, resulting in the lack of animation, vigor, and vitality. Shadows alone cross the floor. Indoors, 22 flags hang from ceiling, their designs taken from blockbuster, Western films that depict a fictionalized, terrorist enemy: Nambutu in *Casino Royale* (2006), Nibia in *Ace Ventura* (1994), and Tazbekistan in *Ambassadors* (2013), for example.⁵ In contrast to the animated flag held aloft by sweat and labor in “Last Work” and those automated above, these fabrics lie stilled and limp. Their iconographic power remains, but the peoples they represent are disappeared from sight/site.

Separately, *Total Transparency Filter* features a black cotton panel stitched with square white letters, “I AM AN...”, a materialization of an Oakland sign posted by a Japanese-American business owner, as photographed then by Dorothea Lange (1942) and reconstituted by Syjuco (2017). Partially retracted on a moveable track overhead, the fabric message is obscured, condensed, and slightly transparent. Across campus from where her banner currently hangs (and from where I write), Stanford University unfurled their own banner to a largely emptied campus with the message “Know Justice Know Peace, Black Lives Matter,” on the exterior wall of Green Library, rendering the building either site of ideological resistance or complicit actor in virtue-signaling.⁶ Without the risk, however, of the live figure, it is unclear what tangible effects unfolded alongside the unfolding of the banner.

From the conscious animation of the first set of flags, to the mechanized automation of the second, these flags at rest suggest aesthetics and politics of deanimation. When Ngai writes of the “ambiguous interplay between agitated things and deactivated persons, one could argue that what early animation technology foregrounds most is the increasingly ambiguous status of human agency in a Fordist era” (2004: 91). Agency and action, two words that unequally frame properties of animation. “Here the act of animation begins to look inherently and irredeemably violent...the violence at stake here lies less in the doll’s animation than in its deanimation, the death of its human operator but also to the deanimation of its human witness” (2004: 118-119). To remove the body is to remove the specter of embodied and endured violence that animated the flag in the first place, to remove the need for response.

So the Necessity for Vulnerability Remains

There is an indexical force of the body that arrives with other bodies in a zone visible to media coverage: it is this body, and these bodies, that require employment, shelter, health care, and food, as well as a sense of a future that is not the future of unpayable debt; it is this body, or these bodies, or bodies like this body or these bodies, that live the condition of an imperiled livelihood, decimated infrastructure, accelerating precarity (Butler 2015: 9-10).

⁵ This work was originally commissioned for “This Site is Under Revolution” at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, June 6 - July 12, 2018.

⁶ When I walked on campus—still off-limits to the non-affiliated public—on January 1st, 2021, I noticed that the banner had been removed. A blank wall for a new year, but for the sake of progress or amnesia?

Recently, many Americans have expressed a renewed sentiment that they would never condone kneeling for the flag. But Bobbi Jean's body, that body beneath the flag, continues to matter in the most profound ways, challenging the personification afforded the flag. Having attended to the flag without a body, we can begin to parse why technologies fail to supplant the living organism. It is precisely the risk of slipping into the Foucauldian world of surveillance and punishment that renders the body beneath the flag so potent, why protest remains an unchanged technology. For when absent, I fear too easy to look away should you feel implicated by the address, a lacking social contract to return the gaze. Returning to scenes of mass protest that saturated my senses this summer—selected from moments of active participation as well as more passive spaces of news media—these flags beat with desperate need for causal response. Beneath these flags were bodies on the front line, not a mechanical arm or stilled fabric. That body might not be irreplaceable, but the specificity of that body matters: in Portland, pregnant women linked arms in the frontline, knowing that their explicit vulnerability heightened the stakes to the protest. It is the willingness to risk that demands attention.

I remain fixated on why those bodies remain necessary, irreplaceable by automatized and immune mechanics. If the Arendtian space of appearance remains a baseline for public engagement and democratic foundations, Butler intervenes to remind us of the necessary conditions of appearance for public and plural actions. She emphasizes the implicit precarity and vulnerability of subjects protesting—implicitly precarious because an essential right [food, health care, employment, fair wage, etc.] is being called for in the demand; vulnerable because the body is in the line of fire, sometimes all too literally (2015). It seems the materials of appearance are equally important in works where the human figure is absent.

In the shadow of no body, the felt-toll of labor reduces, and subsequent orientations of vulnerability, precarity, and risk remain muted. Contra “Black Flags”, “Trinket”, “I AM AN...” and “To the Person Sitting in Darkness”, the specificity and attention called upon the unique body remains irreducible from the political impact of the assembly. It is a recognition of choreographic empathy, the inextricable value of live embodiment, following Foster (2011). Identity also enters into play when the body is present, opening the potential for sexism, racism, ableism to transpire with more tangible aggressions. Summarized, vulnerability is a part of the politics of the body imperative to assembly, whereas the flag's technicality lacks a “bodily vulnerability” (Butler 2015: 123).

This raises a dangerous conclusion that protests would not be as successful if there was no such risk, which is to say that protests succeed only so long as there is risk—often in the form of police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. We clearly do not want to fall into this logical fallacy, though, and thus must rethink the stakes of political performativity. Perhaps it is not the vulnerability of the body that legitimates and renders successful this act, but the ephemeral quality that follows, a condition equally true of Arendt's space of appearance. Precisely because the performance might end at any moment and subsequently vanish (à la Phelan and Auslander), the motivating demand persists. Thus, perhaps the machine fails not because it lacks a fleshy vulnerability, but because it appears as eternal and lacks the disappearance ontologically endowed to live performance.⁷

⁷ Tomkins too, writing in another valence, notes the value of vulnerability contra the fortitude of mechanized forms: “This much is quite clear and is one of the reasons for the limitations of our present automata. Their creators are temperamentally unsuited to create and nurture mechanisms which begin in helplessness, confusion and error. The automaton designer is an overprotective, overdemanding parent who is too pleased with precocity in his creations.

There is a viscerality, viscosity, performativity, and empathy attached to the human form that remains necessary in an ever-technologized world. As we move from the visual to the visceral through the above pieces, kinesthetic potential sits at the core of an empathetic response (Foster 2011). What is assessed is the “risk of exposure” (Butler 2015: 142). Others have disagreed with me— virtual protestors risk the violence of digital identification, algorithms of injustice poised to pounce (Benjamin 2019). Syjuco herself has created a digital space for inclusive protest via the platform *Public Public Protest*. And TikTok users have revealed the power of social media for social activism, intervening in meaningfully coy acts of resistance. The space of appearance, promoted via Arendt for democracy, can readily transform into the dangerous space of surveillance, warned by Foucault. Perhaps increasingly so as stilled images increasingly circulate via social media as proxy for our (political) selves. Yet perhaps the body alone can choreograph empathy and spawn reform, through its liveness associated with animation that requires a constant performance.

As soon as he has been able to translate a human achievement into steel, tape and electricity, he is delighted with the performance of his brain child. Such precocity essentially guarantees a low ceiling to the learning ability of his automaton” (1962 1:116).

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