UDK: 316.34:7(497.1)
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2601057D
Original Scientific Article
Received: 15.10.2025. Accepted 19.12.2025.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 1, 001–268

To cite text:
Delić, Nevena and Petra Parčetić. 2026. "Being Moved and Moving, Non-Metaphorically: The Case of the Protest Movement in Serbia." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (1): 57–76.

Nevena Delić & Petra Parčetić

BEING MOVED AND MOVING, NON-METAPHORICALLY: THE CASE OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT IN SERBIA

ABSTRACT
Within the past year, the ongoing student-led protest movement in Serbia has been deeply reshaping the landscape we live and move in. We ask ourselves, as artists and cultural workers, how may we offer our expertise? More specifically, beyond the affective and reflective framework that we operate in, what are the practices and know-hows that could be used to strategize and change the course of social and political movements? By addressing different notions of performativity, and the relationship between kinetic and ideological movement, we reflect on what it takes for a body to move politically and freely. We look into what dynamics come into play when bodies gather, move, and chant, and explore the choreographic and dramaturgical implications of a protest, suggesting how they can be situated outside the predetermined and consensual spaces of artistic expression. Ultimately, we argue for artistic tools, knowledge and the stage offered by public space to be seen not as metaphors, but effective operational strategies that can be integrated in the protest movement and offer a new kind of understanding of the mechanisms needed for enacting change.

KEYWORDS
Assemblism, Corporeality, Social Dramaturgy, Choreopolitics, Protest.

Introduction

Ever since the railway station canopy in Novi Sad (Serbia) collapsed on the 1st of November 2024 as a result of corruption in the railway station renovation processes, and murdered 16 innocent civilians, it is hard to imagine daily life in the country without at least a single element signaling the ongoing protests – adjusted public transport routes, canceled festivals, or periodic inaccessibility to public administrative or legal services. The movement that is entirely student-founded and -led, has over time grown to include different types of civic engagement to reach the whole population. When a public movement

Nevena Delić: Independent artist and curator, Belgrade, Serbia, Email: nevena.delicnew@gmail.com, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0717-0553
Petra Parčetić: Independent producer and researcher, Belgrade, Serbia, Email: parceticpetra@gmail.com, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7767-3450

starts penetrating almost every pore of the system, its presence is detectable in every workplace and every living room, while manifesting itself in various forms of gatherings and street actions across the country – we ask ourselves, as cultural workers, what knowledge and vocabulary can we bring to the table? What might help us grasp the complexity of the movement, its narrative, as well as the lived experience of what it means to "take part" in political action? In times of civil unrest, could insights generated from artistic strategies help mobilize, resist and enact political change, and if yes – how?

In this paper, we set out to situate different types of artistic and culture-related strategies in the currently active protest movement in Serbia. By moving away from analyzing artistic and cultural practices within their already established realms and their prescribed affective frameworks, we attempt to challenge and call for a more engaged set of strategies, through which artistic know-hows serve as effective tools for articulating demands and intervening in the public sphere. We assess the political potentiality of artistic strategies and their applicability outside of artistic production through a variety of theoretical lenses. The paper first explores the notions of symbolic versus kinetic expressions and their mutual relation (Lepecki 2013; Lavender and Peetz 2023), as well as speculates on what it means to "move politically", defined by Hannah Arendt (1993: 13) as the ultimate trajectory of setting change in motion. We then extend the notion of political movement with the concept of "assemblism", which the artist Jonas Staal describes as a social "practice that links domains of art, theater, performance, activism, and politics" (2017: 1), from which we propose what a performative and prefigurative understanding of a protest can offer. The theoretical implications we offer in this paper are demonstrated in the concrete happenings that we have witnessed in the last year – commemorative walks, blocking parts of cities, and durational activities such as hundreds of kilometers long walks. Besides examining the actions which put the body and bodily presence at the forefront, the paper also considers the use of slogans and their embodiment as equally crucial in articulating the message and its prefigurative implications.

The paper is organized in four different sections, each zooming in on a specific set of concepts mainly taken from the artistic discourse, and in turn – how and whether these can be leveraged for the current protest movement in Serbia. In the first section, we delve into the representations of the protest movement from the perspective of bodily presence. Departing from the assertion that we still lack the capability to move politically (Lepecki 2013: 14), we examine how bodily presence within a protest could foster the necessary potential for movement – simultaneously and inseparably political and free. Furthermore, how can different practices of gathering imply a collective political movement? Using Jonas Staal's assemblism as a theoretical pillar, we take concrete examples from the protests to break down and further introduce the inferences the real political actions can teach us. Here, we supplement with Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Collective Assembly* (2015), where the concept

of precarity in society and its power to assemble crowds and connect bodies present in a space together are helpfully elaborated.

While the first half of this research heavily dwells on the corporeal conditions and bodily performativity of the protest, the second half reflects on the interwoven notions of imagination, action, enactment and freedom to stress the importance of integrating different conceptions of political intervention and going beyond the conventional political mechanisms of attaining change. Here we rely on Hannah Arendt's performative notion of freedom, prefiguration, and more recent perspectives on strategic and social dramaturgy (of different authors), in order to understand the extent this perspective is reflected in the protest movement so far. This paper argues for a non-metaphorical understanding of public space as a stage, not one that seeks to directly conflate politics for art and vice versa – an emulsion that we find neither feasible nor helpful – but rather one that offers a strategic alliance. We examine how artistic strategies can serve as constitutive parts of a protest movement and be usefully deployed outside the predetermined spaces of art production, consumption, and institutionalization.

On Performance and Protest

What does a protest movement consist of? What does it require from us; urging and necessitating our bodily presence? We look at protests as "embodied commitment", which merges "direct and symbolic expression" (Lavender and Peetz 2023: 11) for the sake of voicing political demands. If the very term 'protest movement' implies both a physical movement of gathered bodies, as well as a symbolic movement toward a desired outcome, the question we pose is: How do the kinetic and direct versus symbolic and ideological aspects of movements come together in the form of protest? How does this contribute to our abilities to move politically? Departing from Hannah Arendt's notion of our incapability to move politically (for now), André Lepecki equates the political movement with the free one: "We do not know — at least not yet — how to move *freely* (italics added by the authors of this paper)" (2013: 14). Putting the free and political movement together further ties in with Arendt's (ibid.) warning that "the political vanishes completely from the world" when our actions are not directed at learning how to move freely.

Asking ourselves how to move freely, how to move politically, is relevant for protest movements in general, and in the case of current Serbian protests likewise, as public gatherings that vocalize the public demands addressed to the state authorities further foster political and critical thought. The absence of the capability to move freely is an absence in both kinetic and semantic movement, as well as the relationship between the two (Lepecki 2013: 14). We argue thus that exercising political movement together is necessarily an exercise of sensemaking in the collective and/or an exercise of embodied action. Protest can therefore be conceived as a collective practice in the latter two. Like performance, Lavender and Peetz argue, protest "is an act of manifestation" (2023:

5). Manifestation of a certain political voice and movement, when expressed in a group, brings us to the examination of the significance of the joined physicality and the togetherness of the bodies. Analogically to performance, this notion of movement can be extended using the concept of 'assemblism' termed by artist Jonas Staal, that "the body as the foundation of social architecture" is the prerequisite for the protest, and thereafter – a change (2017: 5).

We use assemblism to examine and further explain the relationship between kinetic and semantic or ideological movement, as we believe that these two – both independently and in a relationship, underlie the foundations for social change. Staal (ibid) explains that the gatherings of the bodies at different places, followed by the simultaneous movements, form a "political choreography that suggests the articulation of some form of collectivity". The presence of the bodies is a significant element towards further political mobilization. As Butler (2015: 129) reminds us – the presence of the bodies means representation. These bodies simultaneously become the ones who mobilize and the mobilized ones, or as Augusto Boal, author of *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), terms it – the participants are "spect-actor[s]". The line between spectators (audience) and performers or actors (participants) is hence eliminated. An important detail to emphasize here is that the engagement of the audience, or more precisely, the merging of the roles of actors and spectators is not simply to check 'community engagement' off of the list of participatory artistic practices. It is to train the engaged crowd in "social antagonism, or what Boal vividly describes as a 'rehearsal of revolution'" (Bishop 2012: 122). Boal's suggestion of active engagement in practicing realistic scenarios offers a way to learn how to move politically, freely, while resonating with Staal's framework. Staal's questioning of the capability to dismantle the "us/them dichotomy" (2017: 10) that can potentially emerge as an obstacle in public gatherings, such as protests and performances, where the actors are separated from the spectators. 'Assembling meaningfully', in Staal's framework, relies on the successful elimination of this aforementioned dichotomy, through a collective effort (ibid: 5).

To give a concrete example observed throughout the still ongoing protests in Serbia, we will unpack the statement reiterated frequently on banners, in Instagram post captions and other formats, i.e., "Svi smo pod nadstrešnicom" (which translates to English as "We are all under the canopy", referring to the collapsed railway station canopy). The statement implies exactly the removal of the "'us/them' dichotomy", refusing the distance between those present at the accident and the rest of the population that were lucky enough not to stand/walk under that canopy at the time of the accident. Critically, it underlines having a body as the only precondition for this kind of emerging identification with the victims. Both physically and symbolically – "we are all under the canopy". The statement of solidarity thus effectively takes the accident as symbolic of the current political state, transforming and expanding the protest to consider the entire population of a state disrupted by the concerning levels of corruption, media censorship (Reporters Without Borders 2025), and other numerous economic, political, and social problems, as the precariat. Stating that

we are on the verge of being murdered any (time of the) day – hence the protest actions, ensures that these assembling practices are indeed manifestations of collectivity (2017: 8), within which there is no distinction between spectator and actor; thus, the assembling practices are entailed of 'spect-actors'. Furthermore, as Butler (2015: 55) reminds us, "acting in the name of that support, without that support, is the paradox of plural performative action under conditions of precarity". The bodies assembled together at protests show codependency and care towards each other, inherently signaling the lack of protection and support they should receive from a regime or environment they inhabit. We see this case in the example of a collective precarious state or 'being under the canopy' that the Serbian population experiences every day. Therefore, the assembling and simultaneous political movement helps foster the resistance, or at least signal to this precariat the current population has turned into.

In this state of precarity, it is intriguing to see how the protesting, assembled body becomes more unified, making this infrastructure more powerful. In Butler's words, this body collected around different levels and types of precarity functions "as a site of alliance among groups of people who do not otherwise find much in common and between whom there is sometimes even suspicion and antagonism" (ibid: 30). In the case of Serbia, we saw this in every protest and performed collective action, such as the alliance between a Muslim student from Novi Pazar (the major city of Sandžak, the region in Serbia with the majority of Muslim population, and hence the most religiously isolated and frequently discriminated region in the country) and an (Eastern Orthodox by faith) student from Ćuprija wearing a traditional Serbian hat *šajkača*, protested together and kept on meeting at different protest actions across Serbia. Although the differences in religion do not necessarily represent a different type of precarity, or a precarity at all, it is important to emphasize that the Muslim population and the faith of Islam generally are heavily politicized and ostracized in Serbia. The two students from seemingly two 'opposing' groups of society, physically and symbolically come together in, accordingly: a kinetic and semantic movement, an assembly of the different types of precarity for a common goal upon which they are allied.

Using the performativity of rehearsed movement, representation of the group and collective values, but all in practical scenarios leads us to (potentially) imagine the capability of the protest being the ultimate bodily liberation. The performance acted out in real life, both kinetically and symbolically, and offered in the public space are opportunities for rehearsals and practices that might unlock the capability to, in Arendtian terminology – move politically. In a more structural way, Staal (2017: 8) argues that the collective power generated in assembling creates "a morphology (the social form emerging through the practice of assemblism [...]) structured – composed, scripted, choreographed – by egalitarian ideals". While not holding the power nor always itself constituting a political action, artistic practices can help rehearse, build, and catalyze political and free movement, as 'we [artists] give form to power' (ibid: 10).

Corporeality: Bodies in Action in Space

In the previous paragraphs, we elaborated many perspectives on the role of movement, both kinetic and symbolic, in protest, and in turn in political action. Although there are numerous cases of lone bodies performing an act of protest, a practice that offers a different kind of framing, dramatization, subjectivation (Rancière 1999), and legal implications, our focus will stay on collective acts of bodily presence – (previously mentioned) assemblism in spaces. Here we further examine bodies as the main bearers of the actions enacted to deliver a message or a demand (Lavender and Peetz 2023: 5). In particular, we elaborate and stress the critical spatial and temporal aspects of such kinetic and symbolic movement, an aspect that is essential for such movement to constitute as collective political action. First, we investigate the role of context in the politicization of a movement. Second, the formation of the public, and thus political, body. The concrete examples seen in the ongoing Serbian protests include (but are not limited to): blocking the bridges and major city crossroads, chanting, and engaging in commemorative walks.

By exposing oneself through bodily presence, hence exposing oneself to the threats of the regime it is protesting against, the body itself becomes a communicator, a message bearer and a symbol of the demands (re)iterated in the protest (Butler 2015: 63-67). Lavender and Peetz further elaborate on the importance of physical presence – "for the most part, protest entails being corporeally present – one's body in a space, engaged in action" (2023: 5). We argue that the spatial element is essentially what gives a political context to collective corporeality. Demonstrating a certain message in an environment that is accessible to the general public (e.g. a street) and is unprotected (considering the body is situated in a space ruled by the repressive authorities it tries to counter through protest or civil disobedience) has a different meaning than a body delivering the same message in a closed (both policy- and space-wise), controlled space (e.g. a gallery). As Butler explains, the body persevering in its exposure is what signals to the political sphere it exists in – and in turn, rises up against; this is all demonstrated through a performativity of the body (2015: 67). For instance, protesters gathering in front of the Generalštab building in Belgrade (Federal Secretariat of People's Defence Building, now partly the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence) in order to signal its potential selling, and consequently demolishment, represent a 'human wall' (see *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*[1]). The bodies expose themselves to a threat of potential involuntary removal from the site, but also speak of their demands and their political stance through their physical presence in this particular space to condemn the potential demolition by the current authorities of this historically, culturally, and architecturally significant structure.

1 Although the Generalštab building is officially a part of national heritage, its status had been endagered by the newly passed lex specialis, which approves demolishing, selling and/or building a new architectural structure. Bogdanović and Miljuš (2025).

Figure 1. Photo: Safeta Biševac, "Untitled." (Danas 2025, 11 Nov.) Courtesy of the photographer.

Figure 2. Photo: Safeta Biševac, "Untitled." (Danas 2025, 11 Nov.) Courtesy of the photographer.

We focus here on the potentiality of collective power, taking into account interpersonal differences or, in Butlerian terms, the different precarities that all seem to level off when the bodies assemble together (2015: 30); in doing so, they form conditions for (political) action. More precisely, it is the space between the bodies, "a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates" (ibid: 63). Butler's notion reflects Arendt's position on bodies appearing together in space. It is through this appearance, one in relation to another,

that "we are made available, bodily, for another whose perspective we can neither fully anticipate nor control" (ibid). The aligned bodies exposing and acting together are closer to fulfilling the potential "for affinity and cooperation across sometimes seemingly insurmountable degrees of difference, quite often in shared opposition to conditions of what Butler calls the 'differential distribution of precarity'" (Parry 2022: 33).

As we saw in the example of forming a 'human wall' around the Generalštab complex, once assembled together in the street around the partly-ruined buildings, the protesting bodies become the assemblists. They depend on each other, and their precarity is unified. In her speech at the Occupy Wall Street protest in New York City in 2011, Judith Butler reminded that bodies assembled together act together, and are allied; but they also "suffer, [...] require shelter and food, and require one another. So this is the politics of the public body, its movement and voice" (smabiner 2011). Thus, the body that exists in relation to another is a public body. It exists in a specific time and space, and is thus, the only body that has the capacity to exist as the political. The political body in its movement and voice therefore embodies the demands it is fighting for (Butler 2015: 63). We, therefore, contend that the political movement that Arendt speaks of, is more attainable in such a context. We contend that the previously mentioned relationship between the kinetic and symbolic is strengthened through such acts of staging, not dissimilar to the concept in performance. The physical presence of the assembled bodies in a particular space, at a particular time becomes an ideal proclaimed by that group (e.g. in the given instance of the Generalštab protest, that relationship is seen as the bodies standing together around these buildings to voice their stance for preserving the immobilities of the national history). As Kyle Parry, in his book *A Theory of Assembly* (2022: 33) explains, the collective actions such as protests remain one of the most "historically persistent sites" of enacting a change. The bodies assembled, in spatio-temporal relation to each other, thus, serve to catalyze the movement as a political one. Only when exposed, physically and thus symbolically, in the space where the change is urged to be enacted in the public spaces that we physically inhabit, does a public, political body emerge for collective political action. The public spaces where the protests are performed, as Staal (2017: 5) mentions, can affect the morphology of the gatherings, therefore becoming agents, bodies to be activated – as we will see in the last segment of the paper (e.g. squares, spatial configurations, architectures of state power). Furthermore, the bodies that are often overlooked, when speaking in the context of human bodies, are the ones that are absent. How may we locate the agency of absent human bodies, i.e., those incarcerated, disavowed, deceased, or structurally denied physical access to gathering? In the former case, are non-human bodies isolated from the social and political reality they (physically) exist within? We argue that they are incorporated into the movement, but what this paper tends to unravel is the potentiality of the physically present human bodies, who – as Butler (2011) reminded in her Occupy Wall Street speech – require physical and emotional needs and who, by their

assembled presence in flesh, directly embody the precarious condition, but "a protest against it" (Staal 2017: 3) too. In other words, this paper tends to explore the conditions and potentiality of human bodies to represent the values they are trying to propagate and the regime they are trying to dismantle – all through their physicality. Representing, therefore, comes in with "embodied commitment" (Lavander and Peetz 2023: 11) for those whose voice is silenced, bodies absent or structurally denied.

Action, Enactment and Acting Out

In this section, we aim to examine Hannah Arendt's performative notion of freedom through the imagination-action-freedom trajectory, in order to establish a common or resonant vocabulary between political action and theater studies. The vocabulary in question is not to be understood as simply a space where the two lexicons happen to overlap, but as fertile ground for a nuanced understanding of imagination as a faculty of world-building, as well as the prescriptive and speculative nature of a protest movement. This common vocabulary points toward the necessity of seeing imagination as both a precondition and a constitutive part of emancipatory political action, whereby the emancipation in question is the enactment of freedom through a rupture with what is established, be that through a form of prefiguration or civil disobedience. As a starting point, we take Arendt's framework of imagination and freedom. We then go further into the notions of political imagination and prefiguration, situated somewhere between a rupture within the given and a rehearsal of a desired future.

Our understanding of imagination is based on the ability of seeing beyond the given order as articulating what is not yet there, inseparable from the creative act of intervening, interfering and inscribing. Arendt (1972) ascribes human action to the capacity to imagine outside of and despite what is there, meaning a deliberate denial of factual truth in order to see that things might as well be different from what they are. Imagination, being the source of all human action according to Arendt (1972), is what enables political change within the "vulnerable texture of facts in which we spend our daily life" (ibid: 6). This refusal to take things as they are, the intentional denial of truth as the ability to lie, and the capacity to change things according to one's belief as the ability to act, both stem from imagination. This does not mean that an emancipatory kind of change is brought up whenever imagination enters the political arena to negotiate the frame of the given and the possible. There is no inherent ideological inclination to imagining. Imagination, according to Arendt "can be mobilized for a variety of political projects, whether progressive and emancipatory or violent and exclusionary" (ibid: 4). Freedom is to be understood in relation to this, as freedom from things as they are. We would suggest that such freedom, if not an apparition or fleeting image, is not granted instantly or without a kind of deliberate and collective action. As Arendt argues in *What Is Freedom?* (1961), the field of experience of freedom is action

in itself. Building on Arendt's proposal of freedom as something to be "acted out", we propose to see a protest movement as a rehearsal of freedom, enacted even when the conditions for it are not yet met through systemic change. This notion of freedom is two-fold: on the one hand, it points to the performative aspect, on the other hand, it connects it with the prefigurative dimension of "acting out" something that is not yet there, extending towards and channeling a possible future. And through this, the performative trajectory of imagination, to action, and to freedom is made clear.

Returning to the question of imagination and the role it plays in the sphere of politics, it is only logical to address the term political imagination and ask if it is necessary at all to frame it as such. Political imagination refers to how political alternatives are imagined, practiced and embodied, necessary for different articulations of the social and the political. Much of our inability to change the political state of affairs is often assigned to what is known as corruption of imagination, the lack of visionary thought (Fisher 2009) when dealing with the late-capitalist paradigm. Here, the imagination in question is the ability to imagine otherwise, to imagine an alternative to the given and act upon that. When that imagination is compromised, it reinforces the boundaries and contours of the world it seeks to transcend. This predicament carries a temporal problem, as described by Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić (2022: 13):

> Ruminating on society's decline as a crisis of social imagination, the loss of any long-term perspective impedes a vision of a common world. Here we have a temporal problem: the imagination is invested in a future. But the bitter message of all neoliberal reforms today is: "There is no future." The social mood of "no future" grows against the background of neoliberalism and its hegemonic conception and experience of time in which only the present is "real." [...] It seems that if the present is to pass favorably, it must hijack the near future, i.e. predict it and control it moment by moment. Bereft of living in the present, our time is accelerated to a near future without the distance that is necessary to imagine it otherwise. This hinders the fantasies of a society drastically different from the capitalist democracy regarded as the best possible world.

The idea of rehearsal, as proposed earlier, already alludes to a kind of prefigurative attempt of calling into being. Prefigurative politics refers to political practices in which actors and movements organize themselves according to the social relations, values, and principles they wish to bring about. The idea is to "prefigure" the desired world in the here and now, instead of postponing transformation until after taking power or achieving systemic change. It is bound to its temporality. More than a structural and linear plan, it offers immediacy and a fracture in the present, letting fragments of the desired future slip in, to be understood as testing out possibilities, or even as a rehearsal of the desired future and its possibilities. Prefiguration has a specific lineage in theater and performance studies, overlapping with its political agenda, while at the same time carrying distinct dramaturgical and aesthetic connotations. In Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979), the stage is formulated as a space of

prefiguration in the political sense, explicitly describing theater as a rehearsal for revolution: audiences, spectators turned protagonists (or, in Boal's terminology, as mentioned in the previous sections – "spect-actors"), prefigure new social relations by acting them out (Boal 1979: 98). The idea is that performance can embody or anticipate alternative modes of being and relating.

Both in theater, as well as in politics, we can perceive tension between representation and prefiguration which seeks to escape it, whereby representation is understood as the already established model of who speaks in the name of which interests. While (political) representation can be understood as mediation of interests, prefiguration means immediacy and performative rupture. It is through this exact tension between the two that, in his book *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), Rancière defines politics in the first place – the instance when those previously not represented enter the arena and challenge it. In this sense, politics always has a prefigurative dimension. Prefiguration, although born out of collective experimentation and situated by necessity, is completed when it expands beyond locality and moves towards building counter-institutions (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022). That is why in the following sections, we address prefigurative practices used in the ongoing movement in Serbia, which enact the principles they desire, such as plurality and collectivity. Rather than treating such relations as the end goals, prefiguration enacts them in the present, whereby the means of struggle mirror and embody the desired future.

This is not a metaphor: From artistic know-hows to counter-strategies

Building on previously laid out notions of assembly, prefiguration and the performative notion of freedom, in this section we attempt to situate the arguments in the unfolding protest movement in Serbia. We propose this as an attempt, as we are aware of the impossibility of fully grasping and integrating the real-time happenings in this research process, bound to its finality. In this attempt, we apply a dramaturgical perspective in analyzing the protest strategies and their afterlives, the use of slogans, bodily configurations, routes, manifestations of duration and other elements of street demonstrations. We look into the choreographic means of articulating social and political intersubjectivity (Hewitt 2005), as well as the dramaturgical arc of transindividuation (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022) that can be applied to the unfolding protest movement. We emphasize that the use of this specific terminology is not yet another venture at using theater as a metaphor, but rather an effective, deliberative and strategic device able to integrate itself into the protest movement. Our understanding of political struggle in relation to its space of appearance – a stage, is an anti-metaphorical one. Much of the discourse on recent protest movements, civil uprisings and resistance has been built around the notion of public space as something to be reclaimed, as if its primordial function has

been contested. Instead, we are inclined to use a more dynamic notion – that of space of appearance (Arendt 1958), to underline the relational, fragile and temporary nature of bodies assembling in public. Space of appearance is to be understood as enacted, brought upon and performed.

The term social dramaturgy, one of the pillars on which we base this writing, has an expanded field of application and a lineage of which we touch upon only certain points. Mainly, we embrace the term as a methodological tool for seeing and articulating relations and affects in social space, dramatically invoking principles, images, symbols and actions. As Vujanović and Cvejić (2022: 181) point out in their elaboration of transindividuality as an "alternative ground upon which the self performs", we have to consider that "social dramaturgy treats art by a way of symptomatology, namely, that art can only reflect social processes". Therefore, social dramaturgy refers to one direction of a two-way process. The aim is not to say that reality operates under dramaturgical principles, but that these principles come from real-life processes and that a dramaturgical lens can be a way of extrapolating and examining them. McAdam (1996) introduces "strategic dramaturgy" to underline how social movements depend on performance to convey messages, demands and encode symbols in movement actions, thus giving attention to the framing and sensemaking function of dramaturgy within social movements. The question we pose is: What kind of dramaturgical thinking is to be found in the unfolding of the protest movement? How can this thinking be used as a strategy for posing demands, mobilizing the public and its discourse, while challenging power structures of representation?

Instead of speaking of the collective body of the crowd-turned-community, merged and solidified by a common interest, we will refer to the notion of transindividuality as proposed by Vujanović and Cvejić (2022). The process of transindividuation is capable of painting this "coming together" not as a moment of crystallization, but as a reflective and dynamic process, mutual constituting and transforming the self and the "we" – that is, the capacity of "we" (Vujanović and Cvejić 2022: 181). The proposed "dramaturgical arch of transindividuation" distinguishes the steps of this process within a social movement and very clearly anticipates the direction of the current happenings in Serbia. Vujanović and Cvejić draw out the following lineage, as a variation on Turner's social drama model (1982) which incorporates the principles of transindividuation. The starting point is a threat, a (violent) event which changes the normal course of things, a lingering possibility of society's fragmentation. In the case we are examining, the threat is both the symbolic and very literal disintegration of social infrastructure. Next, the crisis is socialized and collectivized by those affected. In the case of the ongoing movement in Serbia, what mobilized those affected is the shared condition of having a body, which, as mentioned in the first section, functions as grounds for new alliances based on the emerging identification with the victims. After that comes the more tactical and mediated social expression of solidarity by means of aligning, self-organizing and cooperating, all of which we have seen take place, giving life to

new constituencies, alliances, and support networks. Lastly, the arch finishes with a constitution of both a new transindividual community and a new institutionality based on collective experiences (ibid: 227). Similarly, our employment of the pronoun "we", on which we insist, is a reflection of this. "We" operates here on three levels - as an indication of shared authorship of this paper, "we" as indicative of our position as artists and cultural workers, and "we" as a rhetorical and bodily alignment with the transindividual community of protestors, that is, the same "we" mobilized and performed in slogans, images, and demands. The different instances of "we" are mutually constitutive at the backdrop of the crisis in question.

There are, however, ways of applying the dramaturgical and choreographic lens on a smaller scale, and looking into what constitutes the concrete elements of a protest movement in terms of space, duration and "atmosphere" – understood as an ambiguous struggle to describe the culminating affective quality of a public assembly. When speaking about a protest movement, it is impossible not to mention its spatial configurations, their eloquence and effective potential. Since the beginning of the student-led movement, we have seen numerous transformations and reconfigurations of the protest assembly, from nation-wide sit-ins, decentralized assemblies, simultaneous blocking of three bridges in Novi Sad, over one hundred kilometers-long marches, over one thousand kilometers-long bike rides, synchronized walking over pedestrian crossings, to the already standardized capital city marching routes. Each of these experiences touches differently on manifestations of duration, agency, questions of power and collectivity. If we try to think of the most widespread image of a protest assembly, it is that of a mass gathering using the city as a context-specific stage. Mass citizen protests, both in Novi Sad and Belgrade, have played a key role in negotiating visibility through numbers. Their routes have managed to channel a multivocal message, from commemoration and solidarity to demanding accountability from the responsible state authorities. Routes which lead from a site where the crisis is symbolically located, such as a faculty building, finishing at the High Prosecutorial Council, point to the institution's accountability by bringing the crisis to its doorstep. On the other hand, a decentralized gathering across different junction points of Belgrade, all going in the direction of the National Assembly, speaks directly to the decaying state power, symbolically identified by its official seat. Experience has shown that protests taking place closer to the seat of power are more likely to end with police brutality and abuse of authority by law enforcement. In order to understand how exactly this comes about, how police strategies can be countered and what exactly it is that these events are able to reveal, we will examine it in relation to Arendt's (1970) concepts of violence and power.

Although the two notions are often paired together and seen as two sides of the same coin, a more nuanced understanding of the dialectical relation between them is necessary. Arendt (ibid: 179) defines the relationship between the two phenomena through their distinction and entanglement, as

> Neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man's faculty of action, the ability to begin something new (...).

They therefore resonate with the previously discussed notion of freedom. While violence depends on instruments, power, for Arendt (ibid: 140–151), is intrinsic to political communities and does not require external justification. She argues that these concepts are often mistakenly treated as interchangeable – much like obedience and support – yet they function very differently. In her account, power emerges whenever people come together and act collectively. Its legitimacy is grounded in that very coming-together rather than in any subsequent action. When its legitimacy is questioned, power turns to the authority of its origins, whereas justification points toward future aims.

Arendt further clarifies this distinction by noting that pure power would appear as all against one, while pure violence would be a lone individual acting against everyone else. In practice, power and violence often coexist, but they rarely manifest in such isolated, 'pure' forms. This suggests that legitimate power stems from being entrusted by a community to act in its name. Accordingly, Arendt describes political institutions as the solidified expressions of these collective power structures that begin to erode once they are no longer sustained by the active support of the people. Decaying power follows a narrative sequence, as

> Every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence – if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it (ibid: 184).

As protests unfold directly in front of the center of the decaying power, such as the assembly building, the state is forced to defend and legitimize its lost power by means of violence. And so the dialectical relationship between the two notions is mobilized and performed by the police for the protest assembly, culminating in a spectacle of brutality and arrests. Protest routes are able to directly address the decaying power, rendering it at the same time visible, tangible, and empirical, furthermore proving that, as Arendt (ibid: 155) points out, violence dismantles power; it is ultimately unable to create or justify it.

Can the dramaturgical or choreographic lens be used to counter police violence and their strategies? In this segment, we mainly draw from *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance* from Rai and colleagues (2021), which proposed a vocabulary for a transversal logic of police strategies and how they are performed. What kept coming about is the importance attributed to the protest atmosphere, understood as an affective quality of a given situation, as "atmospheres focus us on the circulation and sharing of others' affects, whether that is through prediscursive materiality or through a medium of resonance" (Rua Wall 2021: 672). Whenever violence is enacted, it requires an atmospheric

precondition. In the case of widely used police strategies under the common denominator "strategic incapacitation", introduced by Patrick F. Gillham (2013), we see a number of those that can be understood as atmospheric manipulation. Tear gas can be understood as such, since it serves to isolate bodies and confine them to the painful awareness of basic functioning, therefore cutting the relationality with other bodies around (Rua Wall 2021: 672). The process of "kettling", on the other hand, refers to containing protesters in a confined space for prolonged periods of time, increasing tension by forcing the cramped bodies to stay static. This is meant to bring the crowd to a breaking point, bringing some to confront the police line, in which case they are identified as violent elements and instrumentalized for the sake of justifying police brutality which follows. The kettle has to contain the crowd for "just too long" in order to burn the protesters out and ensure that the collective body, or "crowded subjectivities" (ibid: 669) cannot be restored. To summarize, the logic of kettling relies on the intensification of the atmosphere through restraint. If so, could the already standard jumping in place under the slogan "Ko ne skače, taj je *ćaci*!" (which translates from Serbian as "The one who doesn't jump is a *ćaci*![2]) be seen beyond its apparent choreographic outline as a way of countering this police strategy? That is, can synchronized jumping be a means of neutralizing restlessness and tension and thus rendering police strategies ineffective?

Lastly, we assess the protest assemblies in their relation to time as a dramaturgical element. Here, we will take as an example the student-led commemorative marches across Serbia which became one of the most recognizable manifestations of resistance. This practice started in February 2025, with student groups walking to both neighboring and distant cities where demonstrations were announced, followed and greeted by citizens. This durational aspect resonates with what Bojana Kunst calls "a durational search for new political embodiments" (2012: 128), where she claims that the durational aspect established a critical understanding of time as a commodity in dance practices in the 1970s. Manifestations of duration point to both the economically and politically conditioned perception and distribution of time, unlocking their subversive potential. Marching over 230 kilometers, in the case of the Niš-Belgrade route in March 2025, is an exercise in resilience and endurance, not in ableist terms, but as a form of necessity. As Kunst suggests, a community is not united by any representation, but by shared temporality and a "being together, without any strong intensity, but exposed to banality" (ibid: 91-92) that unfolds through duration.

The aim of this paper is to speculate on how artistic know-hows can be used to strategize and analyze a protest movement, therefore ascribing a more integral role to art that goes beyond its affective framework. What we are proposing is therefore a kind of alliance between art and forms of political intervention. In order to do so, we need to avoid falling into the trap of idealizing

2 A term which originated in the context of the Serbian protest movement, used to describe those who side with the government, support the regime, and express disapproval of the movement.

this kind of artistic political agenda and look into the symbolic capital that art claims through this relationship with the political. The relationship between art and politics is by no means something that still needs to be proved, as art has long been considered an ideological apparatus under the umbrella of culture – a superstructure within the topographical paradigm that serves the reproduction of relations of production (Althusser 1971). In this sense, we come close to what Chantal Mouffe would describe as the overall 'politicality of art', due to the fact that "there is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art" (Mouffe 2007: 4). Artistic practices always play a role in the constitution, maintenance or challenging of a given symbolic order, or what Gramsci would describe as hegemony – a political force assuming an impossible universality. However, to stop at this and conclude that all art is political a priori only serves to defend the "spontaneous ideology of the field" (Marchant 2019: 13), that is, "to preserve the functionality of the field against disturbances and its supposed autonomy". Here, Marchant refers to the paradoxical condition where art is political, precisely in being not political, i.e., an ideology able to neutralize the need for explicitly political art, while at the same time enabling capitalization on the symbolic value of 'political art'. According to Mouffe, if the ground zero of art's politicality is granted by the fact that it exists within a symbolic order which prescribes its value, the second level refers to art's criticality, as it can either constitute the given order or challenge it. Only the third level is where we start to approach the idea of artistic activism, understood as an alliance between art, in this case proposed as dramaturgical strategies and choreopolitics (Lepecki 2013), and other kinds of political intervention and organization. This kind of exchange between expertise can only happen when art leaves behind its appropriate space, such as an institution or a theater hosting a consensual community.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau distinguishes the concepts of strategy and tactics. While strategies represent methods of institutions or structures of power, which have a proper place from which to operate, tactics are everyday maneuvers for those without structural power. Tactics have no place, they are opportunistic, situational, and temporal – they appropriate the spaces defined by strategies. If we were to apply this distinction to artistic practices, which often implement so-called artistic strategies, acting in service of a social movement would mean for these strategies to be translated into tactics. As such, they would be able to leave behind their appropriate spaces, assume an interventionist character, step into the antagonistic and contested public sphere and to lend their expertise to an emancipatory political agenda.

Coda

Within the span of the writing process, numerous events have resonated with our initial intentions, changed them, reframed the questions we pose(d) ourselves and brought us to a series of ethical concerns, relating both to academic research and artistic work in the given climate. Although it was definitely

a more challenging dynamic of work to adapt to, we concluded that working in line with the unfolding events (and their consequences, where applicable) is what made this research more aligned with the reality of the public sphere, pushing us to acquire a more alert, receptive and opportunistic approach to the research process itself. The question of the public sphere is particularly significant, as it means that we accomplished, or at least set some foundations in how to accomplish, what we introduced to be one of our aims of research. That is, to try to call for a more integrated set of tools and strategies, whereby knowledge and expertise from the domain of art are able to operate within and for the sake of a protest movement, rather than taking the role of the commentator or critic from the comfort of their consensual and pre-established spaces.

We have analyzed a various set of theories in relation to the abovementioned, most notably in an attempt to give solutions for establishing the relationship between kinetic or direct and symbolic, semantic movement. By establishing this, to move freely, as Lepecki (2013) translated Arendt's "moving politically" (1993) has been explained by the notions of prefiguration and rehearsal of freedom, change in immediate space-time. In order not to leave these at the level of theoretical suggestions, we delved deeper into borrowing analytical tools from theater and performance studies, i.e. dramaturgy and choreography. By understanding the choreographic means of articulating social and political intersubjectivity and directly addressing the power which is being brought into question, dramaturgical elements that are a constitutive part of protest gatherings, we further argue for their strategic implementation.

By reflecting on these strategies, our main points of conclusion, as cultural workers, direct us towards fostering societal and/or political change through direct engagement. More precisely, when asking ourselves how can we integrate artistic strategies into the movement, and go beyond capitalization on the symbolic value of "political art" which responds to so-called urgencies within a closed and consensual space (gallery, theater, etc.), we sought to give potential solutions for the integration in further protest actions. Coming together (assembling) around the same aim regardless of potential in-group differences, presenting the demands for the change with their own bodily presence (Staal 2017; Butler 2015). Upon the mention of the latter, the point which is also important to emphasize in this section is that this paper strictly focuses on *immediate* human bodies gathered as the "foundation of social architecture" (Staal 2017: 2). It focuses on the bodies' potentiality to enact a change, while taking into account their relationality to the direct surroundings, physical and psychological needs, and thus threats posed by exposure in spaces ruled by regimes they are protesting against. The direct role of bodies in a broader context, e.g. institutions, urban infrastructures, or absent human bodies and art's capacity to apply its strategies in relation to these could be a theme to explore on its own. Later on, prefigurating the desired change even when the structural conditions have not been met, and locating freedom in the field of action (Arendt 1961); repeated durational actions, as well as organized embodied answers against the repressive forces of police – all of these are examples we directly

infer from the ongoing protest movement, and successfully observed through the existing theoretical body in the fields of theater studies, performance research, and other adjacent fields. Therefore, if art (practitioners) left behind its supposed exceptionality and autonomy and offered itself/themselves in favor, they would operate on what Mouffe (2007) understands as the final stage of politicality; or one could argue – the real stage, considering that that is when artistic strategies enter the public arena, allying with the public sphere. In that sense, the notion of public space, which often seems to be speculated in the field of artistic research as a space to be 'reclaimed' turns out not to have this need at all. In the above mentioned sections, we rather argue that public space is a space of appearance. Public space, for art and its practitioners, should represent a space of enactment precisely through their direct engagement, and through the final-level *mouffeian* politicality of art.

Although there has been a great deal of artistic expression and art interventions since the beginning of the protests, they have mostly been operating as a space for reflection on what has been/is happening in the movement (e.g. the exhibition of photographs, installations, video work and similar artistic material recorded, collected and/or created during the protest actions). With this paper, we argue that to establish the direct movement, other than only symbolic (Lavender and Peetz 2023), as well as the relation between these two, art needs to enact the public space. In doing so, artistic practices, which are often even proudly proclaimed to be political just by their existence, could increase the potential of the political movement. The 'political' they are told to exist in by default, we contend, is also something they can easily hide behind. That is, the artistic practices can thus stay criticizing and countering the dominant political regime within their predestined spaces. However, in order to keep the political and critical thought active in the public sphere, we believe it is necessary to directly support the actions that foster the political and free movement (Arendt 1993, Lepecki 2013). Integrating themselves in a protest movement, under the condition of renouncing their exceptionality and lending themselves in favor of a counter-hegemonic struggle, might therefore offer a way of going beyond the conventional political mechanisms of attaining change.

References

Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In: Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* New York, NY: Monthly Review Press. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm.

Anon. 2025. "Završen protest ispred Generalštaba: „Nećemo mirno gledati rušenje i gaženje Ustava i zakona."" *Danas,* November 11, 2025. URL: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/studentski-protest-ispred-generalstaba/ (Last accessed: November 20, 2025).

Arendt, Hannah. 1961. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought.* New York: Viking Press. https://pensarelespaciopublico.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/hannah-arendt-between-past-and-future.pdf.

_____. 1972. *Crises of the Republic.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. https://monoskop.org/images/7/70/Arendt_Hannah_Crises_of_the_Republic.pdf.
_____. 1993. *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*. Munich: Piper.
Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London, England / Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
Boal, Augusto. 1979. *Theater of the Oppressed.* New York: Theater Communications Group. https://revolutionary-socialism.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Augusto-Boal-Theatre-of-the-Oppressed-20081.pdf.
Bogdanović, Nevena, and Slaven Miljuš. 2025. "'Živi Zid' Studenata i Građana Protiv Rušenja Generalštaba u Beogradu." *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* November 11 2025. URL: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/studenti-protest-generalstab-rusenje-beograd/33587568.html (last accessed: November 26, 2025).
Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. London, England / Cambirdge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
Choi, Oden. 2023. *Networked Movements Through the Dramaturgical Lens.* PhD diss., Human-Computer Interaction Institute, Carnegie Mellon University. https://kilthub.cmu.edu/articles/thesis/Networked_Movements_Through_the_Dramaturgical_Lens/25152860?file=44430881.
de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. https://monoskop.org/images/2/2a/De_Certeau_Michel_The_Practice_of_Everyday_Life.pdf.
Figure 1. Biševac, Safeta. November 11, 2025. "Untitled." From Danas. Last accessed: November 20, 2025 (URL: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/studentski-protest-ispred-generalstaba/).
Figure 2. Biševac, Safeta. November 11, 2025. "Untitled." From Danas. Last accessed: November 20, 2025 (URL: https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/studentski-protest-ispred-generalstaba/).
Foellmer, Susanne. 2016. "Choreography as a Medium of Protest." *Dance Research Journal* 48(3):58–69. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312097316_Choreography_as_a_Medium_of_Protest.
Gillham, Patrick F., Bob Edwards, and John A. Noakes. 2013. "Strategic Incapacitation and the Policing of Occupy Wall Street Protests in New York City, 2011." *Policing & Society: An International Journal of Research and Policy* 23(1): 81–102.
Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* New York, NY: International Publishers.
Hewitt, Andrew. 2005. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Kunst, Bojana. 2012. *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism.* Berlin: Sternberg Press. https://zajednicko.org/mreznabibliografija/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/bojana-kunst-artist-at-work-proximity-of-art-and-capitalism-1.pdf.
Lavender, A, Julia Peetz. 2023. "On Protest." *Performance Research* 27: 3-4, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2155388.
Lepecki, André. 2013. "Chroeopolice and Choreopolitics: Or, the Task of the Dancer." *TDR/The Drama Review, 57*(4): 13–27. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00300.
Marchart, Oliver. 2019. *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere.* Berlin: Sternberg Press.
McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Mouffe, Chantal. 2007. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1(2). https://chisineu.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/biblioteca_mouffe_artistic-activism.pdf.

Parry, Kyle. 2022. “Introduction.” In: Parry, Kyle, ed. *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press: pp.: 1–44.
Rai, Shirin M. et al, eds. 2021. *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Rancière, Jacques. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Read, Jason, and Jeremy Gilbert. 2019. “Talkin’ Transindividuation and Collectivity: A Dialogue Between Jason Read and Jeremy Gilbert.” *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1(4): 56–77. https://capaciousjournal.com/article/talkin-transindividuation-collectivity/.
Reinelt, Janelle. 1998. “Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy.” In: Colleran, Jeanne, Jenny S. Spencer, and Ann Arbor, eds. *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*. MI: The University of Michigan Press: pp.: 283–300.
Reporters Without Borders. 2025. “Serbia: Media Freedom Index.” URL: https://rsf.org/en/country/serbia (last accessed: November 23, 2025).
Rua Wall, Illian. 2021. “Atmospheres of Protest.” In: Rai, Shirin M. et al., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press: pp.: 665–678.
smabiner. 2011. “Judith Butler at Occupy Wall Street.” *YouTube*. Last accessed: November 26, 2025 (https://youtu.be/JVpoOdz1AKQ?si=SEz0FHgu-ekKhdAL).
Staal, Jonas. 2017. “Assemblism.” *e-flux Journal* (March). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism.
Vujanović, Ana, and Bojana Cvejić. 2022. *Toward a Transindividual Self: A Study in Social Dramaturgy.* Berlin, Germany: Archive Books.

Nevena Delić, Petra Parčetić

Biti pokrenut i kretati se, nemetaforički: slučaj protestnog pokreta u Srbiji

Apstrakt

U protekloj godini u Srbiji, studentski protestni pokret, Studenti u Blokadi, preoblikovao je okruženje u kojem živimo i krećemo se. Kao umetnice/i i kulturne/i radnice/i, pitamo se kako možemo ponuditi svoju stručnost. Konkretnije, koje su prakse i znanja koja bi se mogla koristiti za strateško osmišljavanje i promenu toka društvenih i političkih pokreta izvan afektivnog i refleksivnog okvira u kojem delujemo? Baveći se različitim pojmovima performativnosti i odnosom između pokreta i pokreta – onog kinetičkog i onog ideološkog, promišljamo šta je potrebno da bi se telo kretalo politički i slobodno. Ispitujemo koja dinamika nastupa kada se tela okupljaju, kreću, skandiraju; istražujemo koreografske i dramaturške implikacije protesta, sugerišući načine na koje se mogu smestiti van predodređenih i konsenzualnih prostora za prikazivanje. Na kraju, zalažemo se za to da se umetnički alati, znanje i scena koje nudi javni prostor ne posmatraju kao metafore, već kao efikasne operativne strategije koje se mogu integrisati u protestni pokret i ponuditi novu vrstu razumevanja mehanizama potrebnih za sprovođenje promena.

Ključne reči: Asemblizam, Korporealnost, Društvena Dramaturgija, Koreopolitika, Protest.