

## Elpida Karaba

20 People and One Lesbian / A Public Opera

The dynamics of "reversibility"

The ephemeral choir of 21 people put together by artist Chryssa Tsampazi, gave its one and only performance on May 31, 2011, between 5 and 7pm., at the centre of Athens, on the pedestrian walkway between Academias and Panepistimiou streets. The choir sang the text: "20 People and A Lesbian. A Public Opera. This is your relationship. I am everywhere and nowhere. You can find me." American composer Chris Peck wrote the music to the text. Tsampazi's performance focuses on directing group action – in the form of instructions. The obvious associations elicited by the title/description of the action, intentionally place it within the typology of the artistic performance targeting issues of identity, gender and difference. Tsampazi's self-professed intention is direct: she uses her sexual identity and "specifically the word lesbian, as a political tool against the structures of authority". The artistic performance reflectively incorporates the questioning of what in the performance is performative, what is the identity which is performatively ascribed to the entitlement of the subjects as people and a lesbian, respectively? Does this entitlement entail a call to the subjects to take up a position in public space? What is, moreover, the role of art – of a public opera in this instance – in forging a relationship between the subject and the public sphere?

On the particular circumstance of May 31st, the artistic performance, in opposition to the intentions one might ascribe to it, by virtue of the questions mentioned above, had an unforeseen effect. It rendered this form of art, at one instant apolitical and in the next potentially political, on account of an unscheduled encounter. On the same date and at the same time, in the area surrounding the University of Athens and at a distance of a few meters, a group of people gathered to protest against the government's new measures re. the educational system, and to join forces with the 'Aganaktismeni' of Syntagma square. The intensity of the songs of protest and the vibrancy of the rallying crowd – organized, among others, by Mikis Theodorakis, famous music composer of the greek resistance – overshadowed the 'public opera'. The small audience of the public opera's viewers, the 'pretense' of an artistic performance, came face to face with the 'real' political demonstration. In this unexpected circumstance, the 'political' boundaries of each field were placed directly within the line of fire. This coincidence showcased the significance of the accidental and the unforeseeable in intensifying the effects of (artistic) actions in public.

Public actions place their subjects at the center of the public sphere's production, the field within which individuals competitively lay claim to their identity. In this case, the decision to join one or the other of the gathered crowds, brings you face to face with events and phenomena. That is to say, in the case you opt for the 'real' political demonstration, you choose the path of action, by contrast to the case of choosing to watch the artistic performance, since in the latter case, you reserve for yourself the position of passive viewer. In these two activities there seems to be an assumption of an active and a passive position. Yet, there is within the intermediate space of these positions, the option of "reversibility". In the artistic performance "20 people and a lesbian", the subjects of the choir recite performatively their identity by means of which they produce, that is to say they create, the necessary point of a fictive origin. In the course of this re-citation, the viewer also receives an invitation to assume a position. The invitation is activated in the juxtaposition of people/lesbian which prompts us to consider the processes themselves via which certain identities and modes of existence are legitimized, at the same time revealing the distorted performances which the established aspects of our existence fail to perceive, and reestablishing those under a new perspective.

The "reversibility" in this process consists in the following: the position in which the subjects are placed who decide to watch the performance is rendered problematic against the background of the choice between action and theory, between the passive and the active attitude they assume by opting, on the one hand, to watch the artistic performance and, on the other, to temporarily align themselves with the lesbian. By contrast, if participation in the protest rally is understood as eminently active, it is rendered passive by virtue of

that very eminence. It is also rendered passive in the eminent aspect of the use of familiar melodies, words and slogans which assert a 'generalised', revolutionary identity and procure a nostalgic sense of familiarity and safety. In other words, the 'participation' of the spectators and the actors in the performance – along the spectrum of the incidental encounter – raises a process where an internal commitment is made which presupposes an 'intrapersonal dialogue', all of which is described philosopher Hannah Arendt as 'an extremely active state' ... This concerns the dialectical production of thinking, it is the way an individual prepares for a viewing of truth. The 'intrapersonal dialogue' concerns our identities and actions, it affirms the necessity – especially under the present circumstance- of collectively joining forces. As the outcome of that dialogue the performative act poses 'indecent' challenges in reference to the terms of such collective joining of forces.

The 20 people and lesbian of the performance do not intentionally join forces with the protesters. The homophony or the cacophony of their song together with the other songs 'bespeaks' the boundaries and the terms of collective gatherings and actions. The performance itself describes the impossibility of conjoining art with life. Simultaneously, it entails the possibility of reversibility, which describes the impetus of 'thought forms' that can potentially turn things 'upside down', without this being the result of specific events or the outcome of historical necessity . The performance with its dynamic of reversibility, describes and assesses the overthrow of set positions, of fixed and inflexible conceptualisations of events and phenomena. In that sense, it may be conceived as an attempt to exit persistent ideological constructs, which allows for the momentary overcoming of the dilemma(s) of action, of passive versus active existence.

Elpida Karaba October 2011

See, Arendt H, 1986 [1958], *The Human Condition (Vita Activa)*, greek tr., Athens, Gnosi: 396

See Loxley, J. (2007) *Performativity*, London, New York, Routledge: 124-5.

Problematization refers to the critical process which transforms intuitions and fixed interpretations of phenomena into questions. The work of problematization is to shift those intuitions into practical and manageable questions.

Arendt H, *ibid*, 394.

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## In Conversation: Valerie Smith and Chryssa Tsampazi

VS: How was the performance for the video *On A Runway* an important piece for you?

CT: It was the first time I used people as my medium and material in a work. In 2010 I invited a group of people to embody the idea of a chorus. I wanted to combine theatrical conditions with fine art practices in order to create more effective projects that suggest new shapes of encounter.

VS: Did you believe performance was a way to have more political impact?

CT: Yes. I started by creating a series of performative speech actions in a public space in Chicago. Increasingly my work has become a series of performative enactments rather than a simple performance. In some works I became a solitary figure of the prophet Cassandra in the midst of a crowd, where I addressed the impossibility of an oration to adequately speak about loss, love, and structures of political power. At that point I realised that I had to avoid becoming the protagonist. I wanted to find a new method and shift more responsibility onto the viewer.

VS: Did analysing the ineffectiveness of these actions lead you to *On A Runway*?

CT: Yes. I was influenced by the role of the ancient Greek chorus that represents both the population at large and the unspoken or unconscious desires of the protagonist. The traditional notions of protagonist and plot are displaced by the dynamic between speakers and audience. I invited twelve friends of different nationalities to participate. Each person walked towards the camera as they held a small mirror that reflected the sunlight.

VS: This piece reminds me of the early work of the artist Joan Jonas, in which she reflected light from mirrors at long distances. But your intentions may be a bit different than hers. The chorus of twelve holds mirrors like signs, reflecting the landscape but at the same time blinding the public, while they walk towards the camera flashing the mirrors. Is the idea about trying to communicate, but not being able to? Or, are the performers trying to blind you?

CT: Exactly. They blind you like the government, but they are also trying to create a sense of a code. I wanted to work with light. The idea came from Praxagora, the heroine of ancient comedy *Ecclesiazusae* [Assemblywomen]. Her name translates into taking action in a place of public discourse. The plot of *Ecclesiazusae* concerns a revolution. The women of Athens, led by the brilliant and sophisticated Praxagora, take over the Parliament and, in short order, vote in a communistic society, which grants equality for women and free love. My idea was to create an action in Northerly Island Park on Lake Michigan, which used to be a single-strip airport that operated from 1948 until 2003.

VS: Has it always been important for you to have a political message in your work?

CT: It doesn't have to have a political message necessarily, but it should reflect the economic, social, and political contradictions of a particular location. *On A Runway* was a piece I did only for the camera. Later, I created *WHO SAYS THIS IS NOT THE WAY IT SHOULD BE*, a work that took place in two different parks with the same name: Humboldtthain Park, in Berlin and in Chicago. These two neighbourhoods in these cities share similar social and economic conditions for immigrants and have a high level of violence. My idea was to use the parks as a stage for a song recited by a group of teens.

VS: Since the performance was not public, because the final work was a video, was the most important part of it about the process of working with the participants and making the actual lyrics?

CT: Yes. I selected songs from the participants that made them feel secure. From among those that they gave me, I combined some to create a new song of thirty lines with a refrain. The process was important for this work.

VS: Was it the message of the song, which had to do with the feeling of being protected and safe, or was it the opposite, about insecurity? In other words, what is the essential message of the work?

CT: It has to do with the feeling of insecurity. This „new“ song functions here as a space for private and/or communal means of protection. It creates a situation in which these groups of teens can come together and speak as one. It was mostly about creating a protecting wall with their bodies in the park. An ephemeral life as sculpture.

VS: In the 1990s, I saw a lot of video and photography work on teen culture. It is a fascinating age. After you finished your MFA were you thinking about your school years? Why did you choose teenagers? Was it because of what teenagers experience socially, or were you going back to the basic issues of life?

CT: Yes, it is such an intense and passionate age. It reflects the process of changing from one state to another. So it might have to do with me finishing my MFA. I mean, with this transition. But it was also in part the fact that I had been living in an area in Chicago where I heard shotgun sounds very often. It was a gang area and gang members are mostly teens. They are looking for protection and security in these groups.

VS: It must have been a shock to come from Greece and experience this. Is this piece a comparison between European and American society?

CT: I would not say a comparison, but a form of a self-definition and cultural identity. It was part of Stories of Relativity, a group show at the Sullivan Galleries in Chicago, which is part of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was the first piece I created after my graduation.

VS: Later you created a public performance with a chorus in Greece. What were the criteria for picking the participants? Did it matter to you who they were?

CT: It was an open call. I was invited to create a piece by a curator, who organised the parallel cultural events for Athens Gay Pride, which is an annual festival. 20 People and One Lesbian. A Public Opera was commissioned by this festival and took place a week before the parade. I invited twenty Athenians to come and join me in singing a text in the form of a choir as a musical piece.

VS: What was the text you sang?

CT: “20 People And One Lesbian. A Public Opera. This is your relationship. I am everywhere and nowhere, can you find me?” The composition by Chris Peck was inspired by ecclesiastical music. So it sounded like a composition for the church. We sang it almost continuously for two hours with brief intervals of silence. The street public was our audience.

VS: Was it about invisible differences?

CT: I wanted to use my sexual preference and particularly the word lesbian as a political tool against the power structures of city authorities. It is also important to mention that the location where the performance took place is an area in Athens in which immigrants used to go and sell watches, sunglasses, and bags. It is a location associated with the “Other”.

VS: Do you think the festival is making steps towards change? Was the performance politically effective?

CT: If it doesn't turn into a commercial festival it will be effective. But I believe these parallel cultural events are more effective than the parade itself.

VS: It sounds as if these manifestations are leading in the right direction. With this piece you were very much involved in making steps towards political change. Being in Berlin rather than Athens prevents you from contributing to a possible change that might happen in Greece. However, at the moment, perhaps the country has their economy to think about ...

CT: That is absolutely true, but last May when the piece took place, people had just started to gather in front of the Parliament to demonstrate. I experienced all these desperate moments in Athens. The crisis, the social tensions between Greeks and immigrants. I believe that it was a great coincidence that the piece happened at that time. It was a good moment to put all these issues on the table and deal with them. No matter what is or was more important. And, unfortunately, homosexuality, especially for the women in Greece, is still an issue.

VS: Of course you are right; social, political, and economic issues are raised parallel to each other. In recent history, during the sixties, these fights took place simultaneously. The fight against poverty, the Vietnam War, sexual liberation, and racial equality ... now is just as good a time as any other to talk about these issues. I remember you did one more piece in Greece, is that right?

CT: A Walk through the City: When I Am Weak You Are Strong was a piece I did for the international symposium "Commun(ica)tion of Crisis", where I was asked to work with local teens and create a workshop. It related to unemployed high-school graduates.

VS: What was the process you used with them? How did you find your actions?

CT: First I asked them to bring to the workshop a traumatic or a stressful event that changed their lives and to choose a place in the city where they had spent a good time. We worked together for five days. Everyone had to direct another person in the group and through these exercises, improvisations, and discussions we decided to create a walk through the city with four stops. At each stop the group spoke the title in unison and presented an action. Then they continued walking through the city with their hands behind their backs. During the performance, I was surprised by the energy that came across. It was like being in a funeral.

VS: Did you feel the happening had an effect on the local government?

CT: No, but the teens felt empowered by their actions through their participation in this artistic process.

VS: Did they continue with this symposium?

CT: Unfortunately not. There is no money to support such international exchanges at the moment.

VS: What are you working on for Goldrausch?

CT: I am working on a new idea and developing a story about love. The idea is to write a musical composition and invite a group of people to respond to it as a chorus.

VS: Again, will your method be to generate a story that is set to music and song related through the chorus?

CT: Yes, but in this work I will be the protagonist.

VS: Will the love story be between you and a partner?

CT: I do not know exactly where this idea is going to lead me ... but love will become a place of social engagement.

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