

WORKSHOP

17th January 2026

Tanzhaus NRW Düsseldorf

Artistic and Activist Counterpublics in Light of the Neo-Authoritarian Shift

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| 9.30am–10.15am | Louise Décaillet & Leon Gabriel (Bochum) Welcome & Introduction |
| 10.15am–11.15am | Daphna Ben-Shaul (Tel Aviv) The Performative Indefiniteness of Counterpublics in Contemporary Protests in Israel |
| 11.15am–12.15pm | Olga Shparaga (Hagen) Resistance, Solidarity, Care: a Feminist Perspective and Interpretation |
| 1.30pm–2.30pm | Oliver Marchart (Wien) One Minute of Dancing |
| 2.30pm–3.30pm | Azadeh Ganjeh (Ottersberg) Public Presence of Activist Bodies: Performative Practices of Appearance |
| 4.00pm–5.00pm | Livia de Souza Lima (Bielefeld) Performing Occupation: Black Women's Radical Democratic Practices Inside Representative Institutions |
| 5.00pm–5.30pm | Louise Décaillet & Leon Gabriel Closing |

Evening program

Performance:
Dirty Laundry. The Trashopera
by Nicoleta Esinencu
and teatru spălătorie

8.00 pm
Forum Freies Theater, Düsseldorf

Registration

The workshop is open to the public. Interested guests are more than welcome, but kindly asked to register via e-mail.

Contact

dramaturgies-afterlife@rub.de

Concept & Organization

Louise Décaillet
Leon Gabriel

Ruhr-University Bochum
Louise Décaillet and Leon Gabriel

Workshop

“Artistic and Activist Counterpublics in Light of the Neo-Authoritarian Shift“

Date: 17th of January 2026

Place: Tanzhaus NRW Düsseldorf und Forum Freies Theater Düsseldorf

The neo-authoritarian tendencies that today threaten democracies on a global scale take on unique forms depending on cultures and forms of government in which they develop. Alongside the decisions of state power such as the tightening of migration policies, attacks on justice and the separation of powers, freedom of the press and academic research, we also witness a brutalization of social relations manifested through antifeminist backlash and queer- and transphobia, the rise of racist and anti-Semitic attacks, and the ever-stronger presence of identitarian far-right groups in the public space – as well as their digital violence. While this brutalization clearly endangers democratic life itself, it also urges to reexamine the very spaces and practices of protest and opposition, of resistance and solidarity, as well as their political performativity. The survival of those already precarious spaces is increasingly threatened. Their capacity of resistance not only consists in the political alternatives they develop, but also in their ability to withstand the normalization of far-right thinking – “remain stable” (*“stabil bleiben”*), as actors of German civil society often put it.

Activism, political theory, and the arts offer a variety of concepts that allow for oppositional spaces and practices of radical democracy in response to authoritarian tendencies (Marchart 2010). As a critical tool from feminist and queer theory, the concept of „counterpublics“, for instance, has emphasized the liberal bias of the traditional notion of the “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*) and drawn attention to the significance of various marginalized, subaltern groups in creating oppositional discourses (Fraser 1997), as well as contesting the heteronormative values and forms of life imposed by the interests of the nation-state (Warner 2002). Counterpublics can also emerge in the wake of social movements that problematize the gendered separation between the public and the private (Majewska 2021), seeking to establish practices of the common based on shared resources and lived experience. In the context of social movements such as the Arab springs, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and NiUnaMenos, activists and political theorists alike have reflected at length upon the

political performativity of street assemblies (Butler 2015) and their ability to reclaim public spaces as common goods. The bodily act of assembling in public space, in this respect, has been analyzed not only as a form of protest, but also as a performative space of togetherness and alliances, as an immanent enactment of democratic values (Lorey 2020). Their oppositional dimension therefore consists not only of formulating immediate demands to the state, but also of their prefiguration of another politics.

However, this theoretical enthusiasm for the embodied politics of social movements cannot but evoke a certain disillusionment. Not only have street assemblies been drastically curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the presence of vulnerable bodies in public spaces is no less exposed to police violence or other forms of intimidation. Current neo-authoritarian tendencies reveal how easily mass mobilizations can be repressed, pacified, or even ignored by institutional politics. At the same time, recent years have also shown that political gatherings are not necessarily emancipatory in themselves — think of the reactionary forms of protest during the storming of parliament buildings in the US and Brazil, for example. As expressions of “the great resentment” (Fassin 2019), those assemblies enact the increasing masculinist demand in the struggles for supposedly stolen resources and privileges. And yet, those repressive public movements are not a counterpart to the long-time hegemonial neoliberal era, as their affective calls for sovereignty and property emerge out of that which has been overlooked: the social (Brown 2019).

Rather than romanticizing street politics, theater and performance studies and political theory can join forces to analyze the sustainability of radical action and shed light on various paths and spaces of collective resistance. Against the abovementioned backdrop, emancipatory political agency can be found in the practices of counter-communities (Loick 2024) which, due to the forms of marginalization and oppression they face, develop forms of relationality and sociality that reject dominant ways of life. Through civil disobedience (Akbarian 2024), practices of denial and retreat, or experimental gatherings (Hartman 2019), the understanding of what is considered ‘political’ is constantly challenged and “ways of relating” (“*Beziehungsweisen*”; Adamczak 2017) are being tested out. While the performative arts are often (but incorrectly) claimed to be inherently political just because they assemble people, it is here that one of their most important potentials comes into play: To experiment with such relations and to address the very

conditions of appearing in public. Our workshop thus aims to discuss the new challenges faced by contemporary counterpublics and counter-communities in different world regions and the practices of resistance they enable against neo-authoritarian politics. How do these practices of assembling, protesting and commoning emerge in the face of their ongoing repression, and how do they oppose not only state power, but also attempt to escape other forms of economic, political, social, and cultural domination? How do artists and activists utilize digital, street, and community spaces to express their demands, forge alliances, and create alternative spaces of togetherness? And how are they testing other forms of society?

These questions call on us to examine the dynamics of collective resistance in terms of their cultural specificity and the transnational solidarity they can inspire. Finally, the workshop will therefore take place at one of the venues of the independent dance and theater scene: The concepts of counterpublics and counter-communities appear even more relevant in the context of the growing precarization of the cultural sector. In Germany, this precarization translates into budget cuts that are severely affecting the national, but also international independent scene forcing artists and institutions to defend the *raison d'être* of culture as a common good. Thus, the workshop is also an opportunity to question the role of art institutions, their modes of action and collaborations with activists, and the significance of artistic imagination in the face of neo-authoritarian tendencies.

The workshop will take place on Saturday, January 17, from 9.30 am to 5.30 pm at Tanzhaus NRW Düsseldorf. After the workshop, you are cordially invited to have dinner with the participants and to see the performance *Dirty Laundry. The Trashopera* by Nicoleta Esinencu and teatru spălătorie that will be shown at FFT Düsseldorf (a theater venue in front of Düsseldorf main train station) at 8 pm.

Contact:

louise.decaillet@rub.de
leon.gabriel@rub.de

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Daphna Ben-Shaul

The Performative Indefiniteness of Counterpublics in Contemporary Protests in Israel

The major waves of contemporary protests in Israel, directed against a neo-authoritarian regime and policy, have created a social dramaturgy that has moved from a socio-economic struggle in 2011 to a democratic-liberal struggle in 2020-2021 and 2023, and in the last two years, 2023-2025, has become an existential struggle for the value of life and ethos. Focusing on recent years' protests, I will address the indefiniteness of counterpublics – the complexity of demarcating both counter-position and public. To this end, I link spaces of appearance relying on political and aesthetic performance with paradigms that problematize counterpublics: by the suggested oxymoron 'majoritarian antagonism', which constitutes a sharp counter-position but whose prominent trait is a national unitary; alongside the agonism (Mouffe 2000), expressed in a nexus of multiple conflictual publics, and intersects with the conception of the public sphere as non-egalitarian (Fraser 1990). Aesthetic performance plays a central role in this constellation through its ability to mark the protest's spaces and publics while undermining their uniformity and boundaries. In the midst of Israel's ongoing state of emergency, multiple articulations were created through acted images and symbols that shape civic messages while reflecting their inherent paradoxes and indefinite mobility.

Prof. Dr. Daphna Ben-Shaul is full professor and a senior faculty member at the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, at Tel Aviv University.

Olga Shparaga

Resistance, solidarity, care: a feminist perspective and interpretation of mass protests in 2020 Belarus

The starting point for my reflections on resistance to ongoing repression, first and foremost by the state power, but not only, is the mass protests in Belarus in 2020. (Queer)feminist solidarity played a key role in these protests. This role was expressed in various forms of association and alliance-building: around the "arrested" art collection; in the form of a united women's team (Svjatlana Tsichanouskaja, Maria Kalesnikava and Veranika Zepkala); women's chains of solidarity, women's marches and sisterhood in prisons. (Queer)feminism was an important component of these forms of protest and allows us today to continue to articulate a democratic future for Belarus from a gender perspective. To describe these strategies, I also use the concepts of caring solidarity, weak resistance (Ewa Majewska), and the relational approach, which allows us to proceed not from the logic of

identification, but from the logic of building different relationships, without fear of contradictions and ruptures. All of this will be discussed in my speech.

Prof. Dr. Olga Shparaga is a philosopher in exile and a visiting scholar at the Institute of Philosophy at the FernUniversity Hagen

Oliver Marchart

One minute of dancing

I will be trying to tackle three questions by relating them to one minute of public dancing: (1) How to imagine political action in the public sphere, if we think of politics not on a grand scale, but in the most minimal sense conceivable. (2) How to rethink aesthetic theory as a theory of embodied, affective and choreographed politics. (3) What does it take for public action to be democratic and what are the conditions for imagining democratic futures?

Prof. Dr. Oliver Marchart holds a professorship in political theory at the Universität Wien.

Azadeh Ganjeh

Public Presence of Activist Bodies: Performative Practices of Appearance

This presentation examines how contested and marginalized bodies – whose presence in public space is structurally questioned, regulated, erased or criminalized – mobilize performance as a form of counter-politics. Through acts of appearance in public spaces, in digital environments, and within moments of protest, activist bodies transform vulnerability into performative agency. Appearance here is not merely visibility, but a deliberate practice that disrupts dominant regimes of representation and legitimacy.

By rehearsing a right of appearance, these bodies enact alternative political imaginaries that resist exclusionary norms while actively producing new forms of collectivity and creating public spheres. Performance becomes a counter-political tool: a situated practice of space-making that challenges the power-regulated image of political sphere. These embodied actions generate accessible and relational spaces that invite participation rather than spectatorship, extending from localized struggles to transnational networks of action and solidarity.

This sharing proposes performance as both a strategy of resistance and a methodology for reconfiguring the activist body—one that foregrounds sharing embodied knowledge, and the radical potential of performing presence.

Prof. Dr. Azadeh Ganjeh is a performance artist, scholar, dramaturge, and activist, a member of the Rebel-Ist-hah! Collective and a professor of Performance Art in Social Context at the Hochschule für Künste im Sozialen in Ottersberg.

Lívia de Souza Lima

Performing Occupation: Black Women's Radical Democratic Practices Inside Representative Institutions

This contribution draws on my ethnographic research with Black women elected to the Rio de Janeiro Legislative Assembly to discuss how practices of *occupation* function as feminist radical democratic interventions within neo-authoritarian contexts. Rather than focusing on mass street assemblies, I examine how political action unfolds inside state institutions themselves—spaces historically constructed to exclude Black women. I argue that entering, inhabiting, and transforming these institutional arenas constitutes a performative practice of resistance that challenges both authoritarian retrenchment and the racialized logics of representation. Conceptually, I approach these actions through the notion of affirmative refusals: embodied political gestures that simultaneously refuse intersecting structures of domination and affirm alternative ways of doing politics. By analysing how Black women perform occupation—through bodily presence, discursive interventions, and identity affirmation—I trace how they rehearse other modes of political life even while exercising formal power. In the workshop, I will open a discussion on how these performances inside institutional spaces expand our understanding of radical democratic action beyond the street, revealing modes of resistance, relationality, and endurance that persist under conditions of increasing authoritarian pressure.

Dr. Lívia de Souza Lima holds a PhD in InterAmerican Studies from the Universität Bielefeld and was a fellow at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.