



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HOPEFUL ACTS IN TROUBLED TIMES: THINKING AS INTERRUPTION AND THE POETICS OF NONCONFORMING CRITICISM

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This paper begins with Hannah Arendt's claim that thinking *itself* is dangerous (1971, 176), and ends with an encounter with *Dance Curves: On the Dances of Palucca* (1926), Wassily Kandinsky's abstraction of a series of postures of German Expressionist choreographer Gret Palucca, from embodiment to photograph to line drawing. In my encounter with *Dance Curves*, I find a model of nonconforming criticism, where the relation between my critical engagement with Kandinsky's work, its ties to the photographs of Palucca, and their dialogue between body, movement, writing and drawing is made visible through an exposed thinking in process. Nonconforming criticism is a process of deliberately mishandled translation, in this instance, where I intervene in an already shifting configuration of ideas. This model of nonconforming criticism unfolds through slippages of attention that move beside performance, folding outwards to the political nexus of its nowness.

To Arendt, thinking is interruptive, but it also leaves you dazzled, 'feeling unsure of what seemed to you beyond doubt' (1971, 175). What does this grip of ambiguity offer to thinking in the context of criticism, when it exposes itself through peripherals: shifts of attention, adjacent events, fragmented translations? Might this dazzlement be hopeful, an interruption into troubled times that makes way for a nonconforming criticism? What are the implications of nonconforming criticism as a thinking *beside* performance, toying with the dangerousness of the fragmented, the exposed or the vulnerable? As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes, 'beside' offers 'some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives' (2003, 8). For Sedgwick, beside resists dualistic thinking, offering a spaciousness of

relation, or, as I see it here, a productive ambiguity of relation between performance and criticism. I consider the textures of nonconforming criticism, understood here as a frame that renders legible forms of thinking in process, (*beside* performance,) that reject the category of criticism either implicitly or explicitly, or dismiss its utility. Instead of engaging with criticism's temporal relations to performance, I am interested in its phenomenology. Implicit in this exploration is an encounter with the politics of Arendt's work on thinking and appearance tethered to the now.

In this entwinement of unfinished configurations of meanings, gripped by experience and distracted by the plural futurities of now (the political moment), being dazzled might be a form of resistance to what Bojana Kunst calls 'the ready-made possibilities of discourse', that is, the 'pre-established models of criticality and reflexivity' to which art and artistic subjectivity often partake (2015, 13). Kunst's work considers the relation between subjectivity, neoliberalism and modes of work, making a case for a paradoxical relation: between work as an activity and process that pertains to the common, and one that concerns appearance precisely because of its potential coercion. I use work here to speak of the activity of criticism, as well as the process of undertaking that activity and its making visible. Similarly, criticism is constituted here in reference to what Roland Barthes foregrounds as an activity, rather than a body of judgments ([1966] 1987, 12), and Jennifer Doyle explores as residing in an affective density made possible by its eventness, that is, criticism as a 'deeper awareness of the space around artworks and expanding our sense of what it means to be present to art' (2013, 14). Nonconforming criticism is a lens through which to examine thinking in process that disturbs coercion through a queering of its utility.

My concern is with processes of recognition, rather than criticism as an object of study. Recognition is tied to assumptions of what constitutes an inherent good, which implicate this critical act in a particular politics. Recent Indigenous political scholarship, most notably the work of Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson, points to the problematic nature of recognition when it claims transcendence from forms of structured dispossession without acknowledging its reliance on mutuality. Simpson argues that political recognition often results in a reiteration of colonial structures precisely because of its staging of relations of inclusion (2014, 17), whilst Coulthard proposes self-recognition as a vision of decolonisation that rejects dependency (2014, 42). Relations of power become reconfigured when recognition occurs by means of an alternative politics. It is here where *beside*, as Sedgwick argues, offers a productive spatial irreducibility that sets a different ecology of relations between thinking, affect, criticism and performance. The interruptiveness of thinking as it unfolds in encounters with attention constitutes a poetics of appearance that is vulnerable, searching for dissonance, rather than homogeneity.

Arendtian scholars disagree over the extent to which her later work on judgment and thinking constitutes a break with, or a continuation of, her investigation into politics (Beiner 1997, Disch 1994, Young 1997, Taylor 2002), yet share an articulation of Arendt's work as marked by a poetics of withdrawal and appearance. Here, I consider the inter-relation of Arendt's political examination of appearance and thinking through the prism of a model of nonconforming criticism that destabilises thinking as interruptive and withdrawn, and appearance as spectatorial and collective. Arendt argues that 'feelings, passions and emotions' which 'can no more become part and parcel

of the world of appearances than our inner organs' (1971, 31). At the same time, experience, emotion and reflection are inter-related: 'every *show* of anger, as distinct from the anger I feel, already contains a reflection on it' (1971, 31). This incomplete line of inquiry in Arendt's work between thinking and appearance opens up an encounter with entanglements rather than distinctions. Nonconforming criticism implicates emotions and passions with thinking and experience; in doing so, it destabilises discursive structures that conceal difference.

Thinking and action: tethers of presence

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt articulates the inter-relatedness of action, speech and togetherness: 'without the accompaniment of speech', she proposes, action would 'lose its subject, as it were' ([1958] 1998, 178). In Arendt's conception of the political, language is what enables an articulation of action: to speak is a form of action, when it takes place in a web of relations. What 'appears in the outside world', Arendt argues, is only what we make of somatic experience 'through the operation of thought' (1971, 32). Thinking's special predicaments, Arendt states in *The Life of the Mind*, 'may be ascribed to the radicalism of its withdrawal from the world' (1971, 22). In this radicalism, there is also already a process of translation that is tied to an idea of the commons. It is also a relating of body, matter and thinking. Arendt's life-long project of asking 'what we are doing' when we are thinking ([1958] 1998, 5) marks her as a writer deeply committed to the entanglement of thinking and politics, and concerned with what constitutes the matter of thinking. Whilst Arendt's position presupposes thinking as an interruptive and private activity, this is grounded in her relation to modernity as a moment of crisis, in which the realm of freedom becomes subsumed to the 'maintenance of life' (1998, 40). The danger, Arendt warns, is that 'the modern age [...] may end in the [...] most sterile passivity' (1998, 322). This is not surprising for Arendt, the reluctant philosopher, who displayed a commitment to thinking the political whilst sceptical of Western philosophy's resistance to the political freedom of action (Arendt in Hayden 2014, 14).

It is for this reason that Arendt foregrounds a poetics of appearance, in which morality is posited as the problem of distinguishing between good and evil, contextualised in relation to thinking on the nature of publicness, judgement and thought. Mental activities, which are to Arendt non-appearing, 'occur in a world of appearances and a being that partakes of these appearances through its receptive sense organs as well as through its own ability and urge to appear to others' ([1958] 1998, 75). In Arendt, I find thought at the edge of what appears, and what wants to make itself appear. The processes of visibility and withdrawal mark the articulation of thought. Arendt contemplates the intertwined nature of thinking, will, and judgement. In her opening to the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, dedicated to the activity of thinking, Arendt includes a quote from Plato that is telling of the theatricality of thought in her own conception:

Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing. (Plato in Arendt 1971, xvii)

The quote is from Plato's *Statesman*, the Socratic dialogue about the relationship between power and knowledge. On the one side, the argument presents the statesman as ruler by virtue of his expert knowledge, and on the other, the statesman merely presents an appearance of that knowledge, without actually possessing it. This distinction between the appearance of knowledge, and thinking as a process distinct to that of obtaining knowledge, is important in Arendt's work. Prompted by her earlier work in *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues for a relation between thinking and action cautious to appearances of knowledge, but committed to examining what separates being in the common world from being private. To Arendt, this fuels a key question: 'where are we, when we are thinking?' (1971, 7). I am interested in the dimension of thinking in Arendt's work not as a matter of privacy, but as one that is necessarily tethered to plurality.

In Arendt, plurality of thought is interconnected with political plurality. This is best expressed in the interlinking of the terms *vita activa*, the life of action, tied to political plurality, and *vita contemplativa*, that of contemplation, tied to thinking, which for Arendt draw meaning for one another (1998, 17). To Arendt, action itself is connected to plurality as a human condition, and all thought arises out of experience: 'no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking' (1971, 87). Plurality, to Arendt, is a means of being with 'difference' (1971, 184) that grounds the activity of thinking. At the same time, Arendt's ideal thinker is someone who 'knows only that he knows not' (1971, 173). An inquiry into thinking is, for Arendt, a 'means to bring out of hiding' (1971, 66). But what might be implicated in a queering of these sets of relations in Arendtian work, in favour of a porosity that disavows public and private binaries, refocusing on collectivity and dazzlement?

In *Affective Economies*, Sara Ahmed challenges the assumption that 'emotions are a private matter' in order to argue for their centrality in 'the surfacing of individuals and collective bodies' through their circulation (2004, 117). To Ahmed, emotions are not within, but they 'create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds' (ibid.). Similarly, Doyle, in her examination of the ethics of radical refusal, points to the ways in which emotions question 'who is being disposed of what, who is unravelled, how and why' (2013, xiv). And in *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick inquires into the relation of phenomenology and affect, accounting for the intimate association between touch and affect (2003, 19), foregrounding the matter of thinking. Touching and feeling are ways of attending to experience; it is precisely in the vulnerable intimacy of presence that thinking emerges already in process, already in commons. Thinking holds a performative dimension, that already affects. If emotions are, as Ahmed reminds us, never within, but always in relation, so too does thinking make evident boundaries of bodies, or, as Arendt states (in the line quoted above), a bringing out of hiding.

Sedgwick's commitment to language itself as 'productive of reality' (2003, 5) is significant here, displacing JL Austin's performative 'from its localised dwelling' to 'a property of language' (2003, 6). Interestingly, Sedgwick's work in *Touching Feeling* is precisely oriented around the performativity of the non-linguistic, or rather, 'involved with this unsettling aberrance between performativity and theatricality' (2003, 7). For Sedgwick, the entanglement between touching and feeling, texture and affect, is constituted not by 'delicacy of scale', but by their being 'irreducibly phenomenological'

(2003, 21). This materiality is precisely what I want to bring to Arendt's conception of thinking: interruption is not what occludes thinking from appearing; rather, it is the precondition for its appearance, particularly in slips of language, in the affective economies and material embodiments of language.

There is, nevertheless, a tension implicit in Arendt's relating of social and political, public and private. Despite her philosophical education shaped by phenomenology and existentialism, as much as it was by migration and conversation, Arendt was a reluctant philosopher. This is most visible in the shifting tonalities of her work from the human condition to the activities of the mind. Committed to collective action, she was equally interested in what emerges in the public realm of appearances as she was in the withdrawal necessary for thinking to occur. Feminist engagements with Arendt's work (Benhabib 1993, Dietz 1991, Honig 1995, Pitkin 1998) have foregrounded the problematic use of the concepts of the social and the private in relation to political agency, whilst at the same time accounting for the potentials of collectivity, plurality, and difference in the work by means of a rejection of conformism, a searching for the agency of thought.

Contemporary readings of Arendt foreground the ways in which affect and resistance are an important part of her political thinking. For example, Kimberly Maslin proposes that what marks Arendt as such an intriguing figure is her commitment to reinforcing 'the impossibility of divorcing political form from the ontological aspects of human existence' (2012, 586). This marks her as a deeply political thinker whose concerns with activities of the mind are inherently connected to her interest in plurality and the public realm. More explicitly, Deborah Nelson explores the entanglement between affect and thought in Arendtian work, examining how thinking and suffering were intertwined for her, inherently connected to an acknowledgement of plurality and distress: the person who stands between the 'twin poles of totalitarian idealism—the solipsism of thoughtlessness and the boundarylessness of revolutionary sympathy—must tolerate, even embrace [...] distress' (2017, 71). This relationship emerges for example, in her essay *Truth and Politics*. Here Arendt speaks of modes of being alone—the 'solitude of the philosopher', the isolation of the scientist and the artist—as having in common a lack of political commitment 'as long as one of them lasts' (1968, 255). However, when such modes of being are adopted as modes of life, they enter 'in conflict with the demands of the political' (255). This is, according to Arendt, of political relevance: 'conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change,' Arendt tell us, but its metaphorical value is as 'the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us' (259). Arendt's relating of modes of being to public and private life is connected to her interest in articulating the process that connects thinking and action. The mind's ability is to make 'present what is actually absent' (1968, 76). This coming into appearance is connected to what Arendt sees as the space of appearance in *The Human Condition*, as that which 'predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm' ([1958] 1998, 199), that is, political organisation itself. This is in dialogue with the dual conception of the public as standing in both for 'being seen and heard by everybody' (50) and 'the world itself, in so far as it is common to us all' (52). This dimension of witnessing anticipates our contemporary understanding of performativity as constitutive and affective; if thinking holds a performative dimension, then what relation does this hold with appearance?

Fundamental to Arendt's philosophy of appearance is the position that 'nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*' (1971, 19). The realm of appearance is constituted through spectated actions. It is, in other words, always witnessed. This conception, however, needn't imply a separation that deactivates the witness from participating. As Arendt argues, appearance is 'something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves' ([1958] 1998, 50). Our feeling for reality and, as such, our relationship to reality is governed by appearance, as that which provides a realm in which to see 'what is worthy of being seen or heard' ([1958] 1998, 51). Arendt therefore delineates a notion of appearance that is a fundamental characteristic of the public realm, itself a necessity of collective political engagement, but also establishes a relation between thinking and doing, collective bodies and sense-making processes, tied to the performative.

In *Performativity and Performance*, Sedgwick and Andrew Parker expand performativity to account for the act of witnessing, as opposed to an inherent citationality present in language. 'It's the aptitude of the explicit performative,' they conclude, 'for mobilizing and epitomizing such transformative effects on interlocutory space that makes it almost irresistible [...] to associate it with theatrical performance' (1993, 13). This tether to action makes possible a relation between 'text and context' (15). It also, however, makes possible an understanding of the potential of thinking and its ties with action, particularly when its processes appear in and through language. Parker and Sedgwick's revisiting of performativity examines the constant shift between text and context, between saying as doing, and doing as saying.

Arendt's own choreographic move between the constitution of the public body and the interruptiveness of thinking enmeshes the affective into the political. Cecilia Sjöholm touches explicitly on Arendt as a thinker whose philosophical engagements with appearance are defined by 'what it means to act and think in a world that is defined through differentiation', as appearances can only be conceived 'in terms of variety, multiplicity and heterogeneity' (2015, 13). This engagement with variety and aesthetics is fundamental to Arendt's conception of appearance. In her interview with Günter Gaus, prompted by a question regarding her philosophical work, Arendt states that her profession, 'if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory' ([1964] 2013, 22). This position discloses Arendt's commitment to differentiating political thinking as something that triggers collective action, creating new spheres of freedom. For Arendt, language remains; but language also matters, and this mattering holds multiple implications. Might this 'matter' be surfaced, to return to Ahmed, through the circulation of affects? In what ways might criticism act as a productive frame through which such negotiations might take place between thinking and matter, publicness, and collectivity, shifting modalities of thinking about criticism from the transactional to the phenomenological?

'Letting something else through': productive tensions

Criticism constitutes, engages in, and often reproduces networks of power. These networks of power operate infrastructurally, by connecting the (performance) work, frames, and structures of its presentation, the social arrangements it invites or constitutes, and economic and cultural

politics that shape these. At play are both structural and cultural operations of power. I am interested in what I call nonconforming criticism as a reaction to these operations of power, their occlusions, and the predominant colonial structures that have shaped dominant critical practices in the cultural ecology. I understand nonconforming criticism not as an emergent phenomenon; instead, I see it as a frame that enables differentiation between structures that occlude alternative forms of criticism, and those that continue to reshape and confront them. To this end, nonconforming criticism explicitly rejects its usefulness to performance, instead thinking beside it. In my encounter with Arendt's examination of thinking through affect, I see emergent connective tissues of criticism: relation and poetics. These signal the tense relationship criticism has to questions of deliberation and representation, shaped by the dominance of rationalist traditions that have dominated performance criticism since the Enlightenment, tethered to notions of authority.

Feminist historians of the eighteenth century, such as Jean Elshtain (1981), Joan Landes (1988), Mary P. Ryan (1998), Dena Goodman (1992), Amanda Vickery (1998), and Nancy Fraser (1990, 2007), have argued that the formation of political and public rationality conceals more complex relations between different publics and gendered spheres of debate. Elshtain proposes that the problem was a politics of recognition that constituted a public/private binary: the politicisation of the public is part of an 'elaborate defence against the tug of the private, against the lure of the familial, against evocations of female power' (1981, 15–16). Goodman collapses this division to examine how women occupied spheres in which different forms of critique developed, 'constituted by salons, Masonic lodges, academies and the press' (1992, 4). Goodman argues that 'the very instability of conceptions of public and private spheres [...] helped to create volatile and shifting ground upon which both criticism and revolution were constructed' (1992, 2). Such accounts point to the ways in which criticism and its relation to gendered notions of rationality 'serve as a mask for domination' (Fraser 1998, 64), showing how 'political economy enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally' (1998, 65). Fraser proposes that 'the meaning and boundaries of publicity depend at every point on who has the power to draw the line between public and private' (2007, 314). This inter-dependence of criticism, political power, and publicity makes evident the ways in which mastery is constituted around the conflation of authority with authorship, publicness with exclusion.

Similarly, in his examination of the intellectual politics of the Romantic period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historian Alex Benchimol argues that 'two significant traditions of intellectual practice: one popular and radical, the other bourgeois and liberal' (2010, 11) characterised the emergence of early forms of criticism. This led to the development of a contested 'cultural modernity' (ibid.) that laid the groundwork for traditions of criticism situated within, and on the margins of, the press—from newspapers to periodicals, pamphlets, and salons. Benchimol refers to this ongoing cultural conflict as a process of differentiation and struggle 'over control of the very basis of intellectual conflict: the idea of an organised public' (2010, 4), at a time when new modes of 'intellectual sociability emerged' (2010, 5). Benchimol's analysis is an important reminder of the tie between politics and value in criticism and, notably, reviewing practices. Across scholarship of the eighteenth century, criticism's relation to authority is tied to cultural conflicts

that shaped it, and connected to a tension between artistic and economic value, publicness and rationality—colonial, gendered structures that fashioned particular sensibilities tied to whiteness, power, and visibility.

This relation to authority, authorship, and rationality is also made evident across contemporary scholarship on criticism (Butt 2005, Lijster and Gielen in Lijster et al. 2005, Elkins and Newman 2008, Felski 2015). For example, in her work *Critique and Postcritique*, Rita Felski reminds us of how the turn to affect in literary critique challenges its rationalism and ‘its frequent neglect of emotion, mood and disposition’ (2015, 11). Similarly, Felski mentions postcolonial and decolonial studies on criticism that make evident its ‘indebtedness to linguistic models’ and its privileging of interpretation at the omission of ‘vectors of experience that resist or exceed such an explanatory frame’ (2015, 14). Felski’s engagement moves beyond a politics of positionality, revealing the potential of alternative modes of resistance and critical cultures that, to draw on Talal Asad’s words, account for ‘competing conceptions of meaning’ (Asad in Felski 2015, 14). Critique is connected not only to modernity’s colonial logic, but also to an Enlightenment conception of politics and rationality, in which the public voice is already embedded in a politics of exclusion. This tradition of criticism becomes an institution, shaping public discursive spaces rather than participating in them. There is a historically grounded relation between criticism, publics, and deliberative spaces, tied to the constitution of the nation-state and patriarchal notions of critique.

Political theorist Jodi Dean speaks explicitly to the contemporary dimensions of criticism’s relation to the democratic, examining the ties between political critique, debate, and neoliberalism. I note in her study the foregrounding of how compliance, instrumentalisation, and occlusion dominate contemporary criticism, with severe implications for its potential for radicality. Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism challenges ‘the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations’ and, she adds, ‘the mechanisms by which the will of the demos manifests’ (2005, 55). This presupposes a relation between criticism and political rationality rooted in the eighteenth century, but whose resistance might lie in dwelling in and beyond language and thinking’s vulnerabilities to dominance, as well as criticism’s relation to mastery.

As an ideology and practice of contemporary government, neoliberalism has global reach as well as local specificity, and has been most widely examined (Brown 2015, Harvie 2005, Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005) as rooted in the stimulation of competition with limited state regulation. Neoliberalism is a political rationality that alters discourses on value, and it is here we identify the co-option of some forms of criticism in the interests of monetisation. This ecology places pressure on cultural work’s productivity at an economic and civic level, whilst also appropriating its affective structures to an increasingly growing and cross-profession private sector. It enmeshes subjectivity and collective work in difficult tensions between public and private, political and personal. In order to make visible how affective relations unravel political questions of meaning, presence, and commons, I think we need to account for the bodied experience of criticism, and foster alternative modes for its decolonisation. I see nonconforming criticism as a way of making appear that which refutes categorisation as criticism, accounting for the bodied experience of thinking beside performance—a different form of vulnerability, a thinking beside.

In *Unthinking Mastery*, Julieta Singh's examination of the relation of mastery to power and forms of violence, the author cites Hélène Cixous' search for 'letting something else through'. To Singh, this is a becoming differently by means of vulnerability—that is, an awareness of relations of dependency (2018, 23). Singh's work connects mastery to the political realm, situating it beyond the realm of political governance by means of a border. To Singh, mastery involves 'the subordination of what is on one side of a border to the power of what is on the other' (13). Singh foregrounds the importance of vital dependency as a means to find new 'ethico-political possibilities' (24), arguing that mastery emerges as 'splitting of the object that is mastered from itself' (10). I see criticism as distinctly implicated in mastery as a border of power. In this entanglement, I note a relation between mastery and binaries that have shaped dominant conceptions of criticism, such as rationality and publicness. I note Singh's work as paying attention to materiality and the ways in which it 'affects discourse' (21): a reminder of the material relations that exceed language.

This entanglement between language, affect, and rationality is related to questions of public/private, social/political at the heart of some of Arendt's work. As I have argued here and elsewhere (Damian Martin 2015), Arendt enmeshes the affective into the political in her examination of thinking and appearance. I therefore understand nonconforming criticism precisely as a refusal of legibility, and in this way as an interplay between materiality and affect, thinking and its appearance. Criticism's relations of power (that they often occlude) also seek to govern a performance's meaning or value as a forceful, violent act—what Susan Sontag referred to as the excavation of interpretation ([1964] 2009).

Susan Sontag's argument in *Against Interpretation* is based on the proposition that art is a process of appearance and that criticism, in its relationship to it, can obscure that becoming visible as much as it can contribute to its coming into being. This is most evident in the quote by artist Willem De Kooning that starts her essay, which speaks of content as 'an encounter like a flash' (quoted in Sontag [1964] 2009, 9). The 'flash' which De Kooning speaks of is graspable but incomplete, by nature temporary and fragmented. Sontag is a key modernist thinker in a lineage of critics interested in an open dialogue between art and criticism, calling for a type of criticism that enables 'experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself' ([1964] 2009, 10). Sontag proposes a criticism that foregrounds the work of art through thinking, reorienting interpretation away from excavation of meaning, and towards presence. Sontag shapes criticism as tethering thinking and appearance. Criticism is conceived as a critical document of a time-bound encounter with performance. This is not dissimilar to subsequent ontological explorations of performance documentation and modes of relating performance, writing, embodiment, and duration (e.g. Phelan 1993, Schneider 2011).

What marks both the work of Sontag and that of Arendt is a shared interest in art's appearance. For Sontag, this takes the form of a rejection of explication as emphasised by her title, 'Against Interpretation', whereas for Arendt, it is an investment in art's 'capacity for thought' ([1958] 1998, 168). Arendt's own exploration of art distils its capacity for traces, though she severs art from political practice per se: 'the men of speech and action [...] need the artist, the poet and the historian [...] because without them the only product of their activity [...] would not survive a

moment' ([1958] 1998, 173). I am interested in how Arendt attributes thinking processes to the work of art itself, as well as the permanence of its trace. I see this attribution as marking a shared concern with Sontag's rejection of the excavation of meaning. Both search for ways of capturing the multiple threads of meaning (and its traces) left by the work of art. Sontag's claim of interpretation as liberating a work of art when resisting explanation offers us a mode of locating a contemporary politics to the event of criticism. Arendt draws a link between appearance as a means of political engagement and recognition, and the notion of plurality. In this way, Sontag's resistance to interpretation is phenomenological. Returning to questions of temporality, thinking, and affect, I see a politics of nonconforming criticism that rests on a relation of mutuality between performance and criticism—what Singh proposes as 'being differently', and what I suggest as thinking beside performance. This implicates a different relation to the work of art, in which criticism is not subordinated, but adjacent to it.

Sontag was a voracious diarist, and amidst the volumes of fragmented reflections she produced between 1964 and 1980, published under the title *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks*, I find a proposition worth dwelling on: that writing is a series of transformations. 'The function of writing is to explode one's subject—transform it into something else,' she proposes (11/5/76). I am interested in what is held in tension within this statement: the explosion of the subject of writing in turn requires a transformation on behalf of the subject who is writing. What might be made visible in further considering the politics of this self-reflective encounter in a wider phenomenology of criticism? What if we shift Sontag's argument about appearance away from luminousness, that is, criticism as making a work itself appear, to a different relation: beside Thinking beside performance, rather than away or towards, creates potential for a new critical phenomenology. If thinking itself is performative, beside performance reveals a discursive relation not only between subject and performance work, but also between processes of thinking and their affective matter.

The hopeful possibility of nonconforming criticism as a frame for being beside performance lies in thinking's appearance, like de Kooning's flash in Sontag's essay: emergent in language's affective economies, the noise of parallel encounters, inattention to performance's phenomenology for a dwelling in the present that is only possible, because of its exposure of thinking: a mishandled disclosure of sorts. I recall Peggy Phelan's assertion in *The Ends of Performance*: 'the challenge for us is to love the thing we've lost without assimilating it so thoroughly that it becomes us rather than remaining itself' (1998, 11). I propose that nonconforming criticism operates through its own formative, phenomenological processes of appearance. It also stages a process of appearance of meaning that has a different mode of relation to the modernist logic of interpretation: one that exposes thinking, and makes visible autonomous meaning-making processes made to appear within its fabric.

I see the distinctness of nonconforming criticism as residing in thinking's performative witnessing. Arendt proposes that thinking is a mode of being in public: disclosure without closure. Thinking is a site of politicisation. Therefore, we might see how thinking acts as a connective tissue with the encounter with performance and its time. What is revealed by the peripheral fragments—

memories, collisions of events both within and outside performance, shifts in attention, disclosures of subjectivity—when these are unresolved, yet understood as the fabric of criticism itself?

In attending to these slippages of attention and engagements often illegible as criticism, I search for thinking that is processual, fragmented, and multiple, but also an action—perhaps, to borrow from Arendt herself, thinking that is dangerous. In tension with Arendt's conviction that thinking is necessarily an act of withdrawal, I ask, what value might be found in thinking that is exposed? Similarly, what porousness might exist between thinking and affect, criticism and performance? How might we develop new ways of paying attention to thinking in its multiple human and non-human interactions, a letting of something else through?

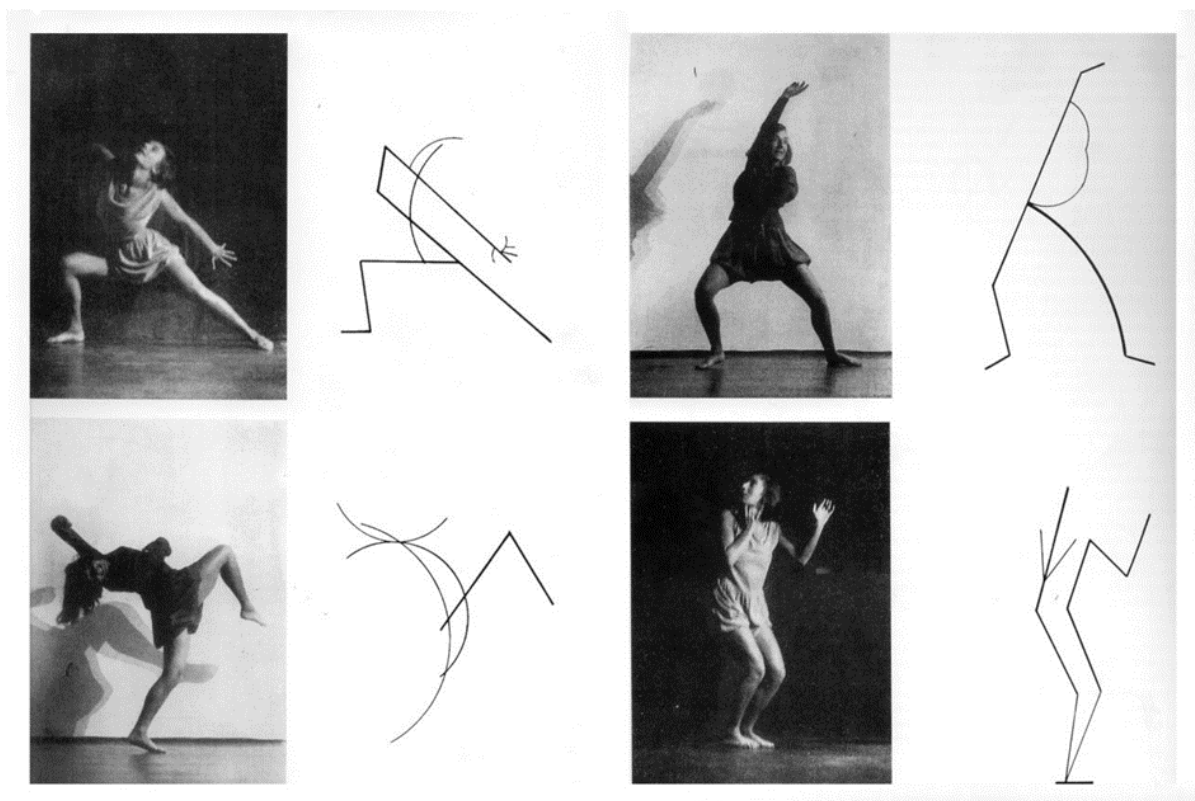
In lieu of an ending, an opening: troubled encounters

In lieu of an ending, I ask if a phenomenological engagement with nonconforming criticism might bring forth potential openings that tend to our encounter with the present; how thinking beside performance might refuse criticism's utility and coercion. In my dwelling with Arendt, I sought a resistant poetics rooted in thinking, politics, affect, and their entanglement. In line with Kunst's elaboration of work as a dual performance, I am interested in how thinking emerges in nonconforming criticism, its dissonant appearance and politics of use. This relation of beside performance is not distinct to performance criticism. In her work *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, Jane Rendell proposes that criticism is tied to spatial sites of engagement 'which are material, emotional, political and conceptual' (2010, 1), which can be examined as distinct modes of critical writing. Rendell foregrounds a spatial politics of criticism that favours multiple modes of attention which account for how sites interlock with artwork. Art writer and theorist Mieke Bal also speaks of her encounter with an artwork in similar terms. In *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing*, Bal engages in procedural thinking that follows the outlines contained in a number of works by the artist Louise Bourgeois. Bal deploys narrative as a way of making architecture *mean* within the artwork. Such an encounter is relevant here for the ways in which it is constituted by and through the text, reflecting on the spectatorial implications of two simultaneous events: that of writing, and that of the encounter with the work. This spatial politicisations of criticism's encounter with performance work share an interest in foregrounding the poetics of criticism's phenomenology, and resistant relations to its use.

I am interested in nonconforming criticism as a constitutive of a poetics both hopeful and troubled. Speaking of trouble, Donna Haraway aligns it as much with a contemporary diagnosis as with an action: 'We [...] live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times,' she proposes. 'Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places' (2016, 1). Troubled, then, is a multiple state of destabilisation and hope. In this phenomenological poetics, nonconforming criticism is constitutive of thinking that is tethered to affect, whilst also accounts for the politics of witnessing. In other words, criticism is a matter of thinking in process. I turn to four analytical drawings that Wassily Kandinsky developed for the essay *Dance Curves: On the Dances of Palucca* (1926) as a mode of thinking beside, as an emergent process within the multiple threads of the work, and as one

shaping an encounter with that work, now. I am less concerned here with the work itself, but how its extensions and attentions disturb modes of recognition of criticism, both as engagement and as form.

Kandinsky's *Dance Curves* concerns itself with four photographs by Charlotte Rudolph that depict Gret Palucca in four distinct poses—bent knees and lifted arms, head tilted up, body suspended on one leg, arm reaching out. Kandinsky's drawings are presented beside the photographs of Palucca, delineated by sharp lines extending in multiple directions, unfinished curves that wrap into each other. This relation to bodily abstraction is not devoid of the modernist logic that seeks to displace affect, but it is also, I propose, distinctly affective, fragmentary, and incomplete. Nonconforming criticism appears here through a dissonant poetics tied to, but also in conflict with, the abstraction of the Bauhaus modernism, performing line as movement, movement as interruption, and interruption as appearance. There is an anthropocentrism residing in this abstraction, implicated with modernism's problematic logics of capture, yet open to an ecology where mastery might equally be troubled, perhaps more so because it marks itself so visibly into the relations of beside presented by the work. If mastery is constituted around authority and authorship, what relations of disavowal might be possible? What loosening lies beyond a slip of attention, and away from the critical fictions contained within this dialogue, in shifting relation between source and object, at the borders of language?



*Image 1: Wassily Kandinsky, Dance Curves: On the Dances of Gret Palucca (1926)
Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv.*

It is not that *Dance Curves* is itself nonconforming; it is the processes of my encounter with it and its multiple threads of meaning, in which I follow this mishandled translation, from a body, to a photograph, to a drawing, to an encounter. I am not interested in this translation as a problem of regimes of encounter, but as a sustaining of concurrent, intersecting and divergent expressions which my own witnessing configures. The difficulty in delineating what precisely is nonconforming about this encounter, is also precisely what makes this criticism nonconforming. It is, to return to Arendt, a dazzlement, in which the materiality of the works sustained within and adjacent to *Dance Curves* takes shape, and in which embodiment opens up as an avenue for adjacent meaning. In this affective ecology, thinking is interruptive and dazzling.

By way of their encounter as analytical drawings, these images did not render a body to a document, or movement to stillness, but quite the contrary—despite their relation to the source, they lost utility. This accidental displacement frees them from the conventions of early modernist abstraction, enables a different choreographic taxonomy to take shape by way of relation: arching lines, sharp lines, intersecting lines, tandem lines, suspended lines: politicised lines. My encounter pays attention precisely to the gap between the drawings and the body, where the photographer's presence (the third author) also makes itself visible—a document of a thought process, a movement with attention: a performance of authorial relation, entangled with the contemporaneity of my moment of encounter. This tending to the slippage between Kandinsky, Rudolph, and Palucca does not discount their historical entanglements, yet follows the threads of thinking as it is made manifest, or made to appear: precisely because of its precarious fragmentation.

In his *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky expounds on curves in relation to dance as tethered to points, 'brief states of immobility' that suspend both active and passive point formation (1926, 42). Hinged in this positionality, *Dance Curves* takes shape, to me, precisely in the gaps, the in-between of line and body. Accounts of *Dance Curves* tend to omit Rudolph's authorial presence, marking a distinct relation between drawing and movement, Kandinsky and Palucca. However, Rudolph's photographic authorship complicates the temporal relation and authorial autonomy of the work itself, as well as the borders of the work. In that way, I see my own encounter as searching for the ambiguity and fiction of the initial proposal of the drawings beside Palucca's poses. This slip of my gaze is a search for something beyond the 'hegemonic human of modernity' (2018, 101), even when its authorial commitment relied precisely on an attempt to bind a moving subject.

In this abstraction, another politics is revealed. In examinations of Kandinsky's essay, Susan Laikin Funkenstein foregrounds the ways in which the drawings, presented in relation to the four photographs of Palucca, foreground fluidity between dance and visual art, rather than stern distinctions that shaped modernist art history. In Funkenstein's words, 'seeming antitheses in physical culture and women's culture' reveal a contestation of binaries of 'high art/popular culture, masculine/feminine, and mind/body' (2007, 390). Funkenstein provides a reminder that abstraction is not neutral, but 'infused with complex debates about [...] gender identity' (391), with which Kandinsky and Palucca's compositional dialogue engages. As Cornelia Butler further argues, Kandinsky's conception of the line itself as 'the imprint of energy—the visible trace of the invisible'

(2010, 154) is influential to Rudolf Laban's own conception of the gesture as 'trace form' (155), for example. This critical relation within dance and modernism reveals the porousness of compositional borders as well as unmasks a more diverse relation to gender, abstraction, and body politics—albeit further woven into an already imbalanced power relation shaped by a desire to outline, where body becomes document, becomes drawing.

My encounter with Kandinsky's *Dance Curves* is shaped by my attending to a particular poetics of attention. In the pixelated black and white of digital archival material, I feel constantly distracted by the movements of the drawings. I think beside these drawings precisely because of their false performative, their relation to mediation occluded by the appearance of Palucca's body. I come back to 'beside' as an ungrounded mode of relation, but one which continues to take up space here. This beside resides in the realm of a spacious agnosticism. To return to Sedgwick: beside comprises a range of relations, amongst them 'desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting' (2002, 8). Beside is as much intuiting a relation between 'texture and emotion' (2008, 17) as it is a 'seeing differently', to borrow from Amelia Jones (2012). Thinking beside the drawings implies a stunted attention, a distraction perhaps, towards the periphery, but it also already bound in a literal beside—one in which Kandinsky's drawings are placed next to the Rudolph's photographs of Palucca, suspended in air. In this beside, I see the attraction of a fiction that is nevertheless bound. In this encounter with nonconforming criticism, beside makes possible a thinking that is already in relation, tethered between my encounter and that staged by Kandinsky.

I see nonconforming as a frame that brings into productive collision Kandinsky's *Dance Curves*, as a model, and my encounter with it, as a collusion. On the one hand, Kandinsky's *Dance Curves* reveals itself to be a thinking in process, engaged in abstractions of photographed movements of a body. On the other, my encounter with *Dance Curves* renders material an experience of a performance document, a deliberately mishandled translation that is made to appear. I see its fictionality as a complex affective relation to compositional politics, and to modernism's tension with the now. My own tuning to slips of attention between photograph and drawing is a dazzlement: a confluence of meanings distracted by temporalities. Interruption is a precondition for thinking's appearance, says Arendt, yet here, I see it in relation to bodies, boundaries, and affects—entanglements that already shaped politics of criticism, but that might also configure a form of appearance for thinking itself.

In this way, my focus on the space beside the drawings and photographs searches for the peripheries of attention in *Dance Curves*. In the digital archival material, I slipped in between these drawings, drawn to the digital noise of their reproduction ninety-three years later, between the resonances of Bauhaus and the politics of abstracted lines, the imposition of bordered spaces and the poetics of translating movement. I followed those shifts in attention in being beside the drawings. It is on the one hand, that thinking already makes itself known in Kandinsky's curves and Rudolph's photographs of Palucca's movements, embroiled in mediation that also makes process matter. On the other, it is my slip of attention that makes visible an unfinished thought, an interruption that is searching.

In coming to a new set of relations, filtered through the thickness of my own troubled encounter, I bring the baggage of now to an early modernist study, coming to what Ahmed calls a queer use, that is, to an inversion: 'a temporal discordance between past and present' which is manifest 'as a discordance between form and function' because in an institutional sense, use 'becomes a question of fit' (2018). It is this (my) mis-use, or this problematising of the question of criticism as use-full to the work, which I am probing in articulating a relation to distracted thinking. At the same time, this reveals the politics of relation that shaped Kandinsky's own critical use, and its enmeshment in Bauhaus's commitment to abstraction, as well as dialogue with shifting formal and gendered concerns of modernist dance.

As Ahmed proposes, 'without use, a path can disappear, becoming overgrown, bumpy, unusable' (2018). I understand, in this case, a shift in noticing is then a bump; it quickly disappears, and its traces are hard to value in the discursive economies of communicative abundance. Nonconforming criticism, as it emerges in my encounter with *Dance Curves*, and in the work itself, is tethered to this mis-use, to a critical engagement that is dissonant, bumpy. How might my attention shift, stage an encounter with a thicker present, a difficult present, without depoliticising the relation with Kandinsky, Rudolph, and Palucca? I propose that a different poetics of use is a hopeful dazzlement, interruptive and affective.

In Arendt, I articulated a relation between thinking's interruption and the entanglement with affect. This queering of thinking as in process, as shaping a mis-use beside performance, pays attention to affective economies and relations that shape the critical encounter. In this way, I see nonconforming criticism as a frame for learning other ways of letting something else through, in order to resist not only the already constituted discursive ecologies and thinking's coercion, but also the reproduction of paradigms of mastery that fix performance and criticism, affect and matter. A hopeful act, then, is one that searches for the matter of thinking in slips that disturb these relations

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Biography

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