

**A PERMANENT
PARLIAMENT
NOTES ON SOCIAL
CHOREOGRAPHY**

**SPECIAL EDITION
BENAKI MUSEUM
ATHENS 2025**

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

CORY TAMLER

／ A WORK OF SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY
／ A TRAINING GROUND FOR THE IMAGINATION
／ A PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE
WITHOUT SUBSTANCES
／ A TECHNOLOGY FOR CLEANING
SOCIAL RELATIONS
／ A PROPOSAL FOR EMBODIED CIVIC DUTY
／ A JOURNEY INTO THE REALER REAL
THAT GIVES BACK TO THE REAL—
AS IF IT WERE POSSIBLE
TO BRING AN OBJECT
FROM THE DREAM WORLD
INTO WAKING LIFE
／ A LIFEBOAT

A Permanent Parliament: Notes on Social Choreography by Cory Tamler

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Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
The CUNY Graduate Center
365 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016
mestc@gc.cuny.edu
www.theseagalcenter.org

Laboratory for Social Choreography
The Kenan Institute for Ethics
102 West Duke Building, 1364 Campus Drive, East Campus
Durham, NC 27708
kie@duke.edu
www.kenan.ethics.duke.edu/laboratory-for-social-choreography

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Book design by Rafal Kosakowski

Contributors: Michael Kliën with Catherine Cabeen, Mallory Catlett, Blythe Davis, Barbara Dickinson, Jeffrey Gormly, Floor Grootenhuis, Frank Hentschker, Vitoria Kotsalou, Steve Valk, Shuntaro Yoshida

Additional contributors: Polina Kosmadaki, Alexander Strecker

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by the Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, June 11–July 27, 2025

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CURATED BY
POLINA KOSMADAKI
WITH CO-CURATOR
ALEXANDER STRECKER

PARLIAMENT
A SOCIAL
CHOREOGRAPHIC SITE
MICHAEL KLIËN
JUNE 11–JULY 27, 2025
BENAKI MUSEUM
ATHENS

Curatorial assistant

Vassiliki Daniil

Project director

Vitoria Kotsalou

Assistant project director

Aris Papadopoulos

Dramaturge and artistic collaborator

Steve Valk

Production design

Ilektra Ellinikioti and Tsabika Kotoula

Lighting design

Nyssos Vasilopoulos

Press officer

Evangelia Scrobola

On-site management

Maya Pipera assisted by Rosa Kliën

Production

R.I.C.E.

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into a shared reality.

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“Politics is the sphere of pure means, that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings.”

Giorgio Agamben

PARLIAMENT / A RETROSPECTIVE / EXHIBITION /

In April 2014, just before Easter, the Benaki Museum presented a first version of Michael Kliën’s *Parliament*. It was a “Choreographic Site for Citizens,” which invited viewers to participate in a loosely staged situation happening in the atrium of the building at 138 Pireos Street. There, Kliën and his team directed 14 “Parliament members” to act in reference to social cues and everyday encounters or gestures, observing themselves and others while moving through a space devoid of other sensory stimuli. Viewers were invited to watch, enter, participate in any way in this situation, for as long as they desired.

Over two weeks, 60 citizens from Athens actively participated in the work, and all visitors and staff of the Benaki Museum somehow went “through” or “around” the project.

“I think of this exhibition as a citizen’s parliament that works in silence from the depth of our being to resolve, to open, to heal, to change. A cultural technology put to work in a deceptively simple process. Humans are coming together to hold council about fundamental issues, the very core-problems of living: How to be in this world and how to be in this world together with others? *Parliament* negotiates the ethics that underly daily interactions as well as political acts. To entrust what our own senses tell us, to feel the life and struggles of others and form social bonds that allow each and everyone to contribute to society.”

This is what Michael Kliën wrote, presciently, in that first presentation of the project in 2014. Since then, he has presented different instances of *Parliament*, “open” (free to join) or “closed” (by registration), in places such as the Nasher Museum and Duke University, R.I.C.E. gatherings on the island of Hydra, at the Segal Center in New York City, and organized by the New Museum at Martha Graham Studios, as well as a dozen smaller ones in sites across Europe. In addition, participants have held their own sessions of *Parliament* in countries such as France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

Today, ten years later, a professor at Duke University and an established choreographer, Kliën comes back to Athens to re-stage his *Parliament* as “social choreography” at the Benaki Museum. The work has evolved, expanded, deepened: in the number



of participants, its layers of interaction, the complexity of movement and social reflection. It has become more systematic but also kept some of the original core principles: the absence of props and sensory prompts; the blurring of boundaries between the members of *Parliament* and the visitors; the diversity of participants coming from different social groups; the freedom of action, empty space, silence, and minimal aesthetics.

Michael Kliën works at the intersections of performance and contemporary art, social dynamics and collective action, to emphasize how people negotiate personal space, behave in the presence of one another, adhere to social norms, rituals, and routines that govern social behavior. The routines often operate at a subconscious level, shaping how we relate to others in public and private spaces. His participatory practice refers to the way in which human bodies, behaviors, and interactions are organized, structured, or “choreographed” in social contexts. Social choreographies, such as *Parliament*, bring attention to the idea that everyday life itself is a kind of performance, where our movements and actions can be seen as part of larger social scripts or collective gestures. Considering the aesthetic realm as “the invention of a form of experience that is defined by the dissensus between different sensory registers”¹ such works also activate a reflection on the social and aesthetic. *Parliament*, for example, reproduces but also resists power dynamics, class structures, gender roles, and cultural norms. It is less about individual expression through movement or dance and more about the structured patterns of interaction that reinforce cultural patterns and expectations and how they might be disrupted or unsettled.

1 Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum, 2004, 13.

Social choreography and our engagement with it are not simply the final product or the totality of the work; they also serve as starting points for reflection on its dissemination, including the influence of oral history and rumor, as well as interpretation. While it is evident that Michael Kliën's practice is deconstructing the materiality of the art object, we wonder what is being created in its place? One answer lies in gesture. It is worth noting Giorgio Agamben's argument in *Notes on Gesture* which states that gesture represents the most direct form of politics.² Per Agamben, what characterizes gesture is that in it, nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. Furthermore, this process critiques the institutional framework of the museum, challenging its foundational practices of archiving, and conservation, while simultaneously probing the tension between the fleeting nature of the moment and the museum's enduring impulse to archive and preserve. The work resists documentation and leaves no tangible trace, positioning itself within the realm of ephemeral and immaterial contemporary art.

Parliament utilizes the Museum as a site for experimental cooperation, aiming to renew the thinking and the conscience of citizens through movement, gesture and being together in space and time. Now, like ten years ago, people from different ages, races, nationalities, professions, social milieus, meet every day in the exhibition to move together in silence, to perform certain roles or identities or take on new ones, to coexist with their senses and with each other, to investigate modes of negotiating the fundamental realities of existence. Visitors are invited to participate

2 Agamben, Giorgio. "Notes on Gesture."
In *Means Without an End: Notes on Politics*.
Translated by Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino.
University of Minnesota Press, 2000, ix & 54–62.

in this process and enter *Parliament* while constantly questioning their established roles. Bodies come together to create a shared physical presence or message and influence the way *Parliament* unfolds. They form relationships, attune their perception to the dynamics of the personal and collective mind, they inter-act with the natural tendency and dynamics of human organization. Each of them leaves traces written in gestures, which can be retrieved, developed, and reproduced by another participant.

In the context of the Benaki Museum's mission and programming, *Parliament* takes its place as both a project and a retrospective exhibition that falls into the category of contemporary art—that is, defined as multi-disciplinary and boundary-pushing, while engaging with science, politics, and social issues. For me, curating *Parliament* is therefore open-ended and dialogical, non-linear and non-purpose driven, insistent on process rather than the final product, aspiring to provoke thought, debate, and interaction. *Parliament* matches the Benaki Museum's contemporary art program which focuses on occurrences that enact the ambiguity of notions like creativity, performativity, memory, time, and materiality. The work contributes to the program's mission in rethinking the museum according to an understanding of what Claire Bishop called “dialectical contemporaneity.”³ That is, an effort to renew the modalities of spectatorship it produces, to promote a non-linear perception of time, to reference the plurality of experiences in the world, as well as the multiplicity of possibilities to inhabit it.

Parliament is an exhibition that does more than invite the gaze. The work as exhibition, the exhibition as project triggers action and

3 Bishop, Claire. *Radical Museology: Or, What's "Contemporary" in Museums of Contemporary Art?* Walter Koenig Books, 2013, 6–8.

reflection. It challenges viewers to question their assumptions and perceptions not only about the world, the body, and movement but also as to what a museum, an exhibit, a creator, and an audience actually *are*. At the same time, this show is the equivalent of a “traditional” museum retrospective since it comprises and is built upon the layers of past sessions of the work the past ten years.

The 2025 retrospective of *Parliament* comes in a much darker age than its initial Benaki 2014 session. Inequalities have deepened globally, and “the” climate crisis is now a multifaceted emergency that encompasses environmental, social, economic, and political dimensions; further wars have broken out and violence has escalated in many parts of the world; radical conservatism, xenophobia, racism are everyday news. Voices defending humanism, empathy, equality are crucial and need to be expressed and dispersed as widely as possible. Works like *Parliament* embody, through the most fundamental means of gesture and presence, the democratic principles of participation, inclusion, freedom, and equality. Here, we are invited by Michael Kliën to take part and take action in an engaged, avant-garde practice that tests both the efficacy and the boundaries of art’s potential for social and political activism.



ALEXANDER STRECKER

PARLIAMENT
RETURNS TO ATHENS
TRAVELING IDEAS
AND SHARED DESIRES,
IN AND OUT
OF THE MUSEUM

“[Kliën] moved to Greece at the height of the economic crisis. The social fabric felt fragile. He had the sense of witnessing and being present within a wound breaking open. He was tear-gassed at protests; he began to absorb the situation. Not speaking Greek gave him, perhaps, a loosened gaze, a view of the shape of the rupture. Everybody in Greece knew who to blame, he thought. The lawyers blamed the judges, the judges blamed the politicians, the politicians blamed Europe. Diagrammed, it would be a network of pointing fingers. This, he thought, is the system we’ve created, as a collective, and we can no longer imagine our way out of it.” (71)

How do ideas travel? Where do they begin
and how do transform as they move?

The writer and dramaturg Cory Tamler first met Michael Kliën in 2016. Two years later,

she helped bring *Parliament* to New York City and even produced the event, despite never having experienced the work herself. Thus, on a grey December afternoon starting around sunset, thirty bodies gathered in a bare theatre to practice and embody a different kind of social organization. The gathering stayed with Tamler, continuing to sediment over time. By 2022, through a pandemic, Tamler shaped a subjective and collective reflection on the work out of a series of collaborative conversations. These coalesced into “a temporary stable pattern” (42) that constitutes the book you are holding, *A Permanent Parliament: Notes on Social Choreography*.

Parliament shaped Tamler’s own artistic and thought practices ever since she first encountered it, changing her and transforming as it moved. But Tamler’s book, and *Parliament*, have also continued to move and grow. In 2025, for the first time, *Parliament* will unfold over seven weeks, once more in Athens. It will be hosted in a museum, *the* museum where it debuted as a (semi-)formalized artwork in 2014. This exhibition represents both return and a transformation of *Parliament*. Likewise, Tamler’s *Notes* have traveled with the work, also changing through their contact with Athens.

We are told in the pages that follow how “the first time that something happened that could be called *Parliament* was on a rooftop in the port of Hydra” (72). There were ten participants at most. The set-up took all of 30 minutes and the entire experiment lasted about two-and-a-half hours, spanning another (presumably gorgeous, Aegean) sunset. But this is a bit too idyllic, I think. First of all, from the beginning, *Parliament* had many collaborators. Its most steadfast in Greece was Vitoria Kotsalou,



an autodidact dancer and choreographer. Like Tamler, Kotsalou was profoundly shaped by her encounter with Kliën and, in turn, she has profoundly shaped his work's adaptation to the Greek context.

Furthermore, the seeds of *Parliament* were originally sown on more fraught ground than an island getaway. As Tamler identified, it began when Kliën moved to Greece amidst crisis. *Parliament*—an insistently if allusively political work—grew out of an environment of frustration, blame, struggle, and stasis. In Kliën's own words this time:

“When I first moved to Athens, Greece, it was a society in a state of demise during the economic troubles of 2012. Greece felt like a mountain that could no longer hold any trees. The regular demonstrations I embedded myself in seemed stagnant and brutal. I remember equating the binary struggle to rehearsals of a civil war. I needed to create a situation that would not participate in this insanity, that would allow citizens to be inside the trouble yet create something that might transgress the entrenched positions between them. I imagined people in, behind, and between police formations and the demonstrators; moving amongst the anarchists, infiltrating the socialists and the Trotskyists alike, the government officials, the bystanders, the souvlaki vendors, and people like me. Amidst this madness, they would sense each other and connect across all boundaries to assemble a different reality. Supersensitive thought-bodies unfettered by the narrow blinkers of the situation, out of which movement grows. A matrix of deep relations resonating into the world. Although this has not still occurred, that is how *Parliament* started.”¹

Those years were, indeed, brutal. In the binary struggle between institutional power and those

without, “rehearsals” of a (still painful) civil war lurked, moving between representation and reality. At their core, many of these struggles *were* desperately trying to hold on to something real. Trying, and in many ways failing. Over the course of a decade, a material class warfare was waged from above: creditors protected, debtors disposed; public assets privatized and sold off piecemeal; salaries cut and pensions slashed. More than a dozen years later, the ramifications of these decisions are playing out across Athens with skyrocketing rents, stubbornly low salaries, and a generation that will be significantly worse off—materially and environmentally—than their parents were.

Looking back to then or thinking about an equally-dark present now, I keenly feel Kliën’s frustration about stasis and entrenchment. It is a frustration shared by many, including some of the bodies at the forefront of the resistance. Thousands, even millions march and gather in order to—produce a grinding gridlock. Too easily, resistance can become an endlessly rearguard action, doing what it can to salvage whatever can still be saved, all while the initiative and the creativity so often seem held by those intent on dispossession and destruction.² In defeat after defeat, blame and fragmentation lie close at hand. During the Crisis, for example, the repeated (and yes, ritualized) struggle between the police and the protestors appeared to offer very little given that life-altering decisions were being settled beyond closed doors, far, far away. The rehearsals continued taking place on the streets of Athens, over and over, for a struggle to protect real things—but all these efforts often felt like they were having very little real impact.

2 Cusset, François. *How the World Swung Right: Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*. Translated by Noura Wedell. Semiotext(e), 2018 (2016), 117.

Often, momentous decisions are made in the abstract, at a remove, but with long-lasting consequences on the ground. *Parliament*, by contrast, unfolds in one place, between people. It proposes not a return to familiar patterns but an invitation to something different. In some ways, it begins anew each time it is performed. Leave your bags, your phones, your possessions in the cloakroom. Come as you are. Forget who you are. Move with complete strangers until you become more intimately familiar than you ever could have imagined. In other ways, *Parliament* sediments over time, regardless of whether you have ever done it. Perhaps someone else in the room has done it many times before, granting you a sense of confidence. The first time, you might feel shaky. Take a deep breath, exhale. *Parliament* sessions “are long,” Kliën has had said, “long” (73). The idea of sedimentation, accordingly, runs throughout Tamler’s book. Settle in. What remains, remains.

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The score, delivered in a 20-minute briefing to these willing participants, is short but potent. Just a few rules, including a prohibition on the use of language or pre-existing codes of communication. Resist the urge to perform, embrace a stripped-down form of relation. Then *Parliament* begins. The performers warm up the room while the audience filters in and out freely over the course of many hours. As audience members soon confront: there is no outside. If you are in the room, you are part of *Parliament*. The distinction between there and far off, them and us erodes. If you give yourself to this present, living practices of relation start to sediment and grow.

Parliament was seeded in Athens, took initial shape in Hydra, returned to Athens in 2014 and has since traveled to a dozen other sites across

3 Kliën, Michael & Steve Valk. "Dance as a Metaphor for Thought." choreographnet, May 12, 2023. <https://choreographnet.substack.com/p/dance-as-a-metaphor-for-thought-michael>. See also, Jeffrey Gormly, ed. *Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change*. Daghdha Dance Company, 2008.

the world. Alongside Kotsalou, another key figure in the work's trajectory has been Steve Valk, an activist and dramaturg. As a long-time collaborator of Kliën, Valk has been instrumental in expanding choreographic practice beyond the stage, beyond the walls of institutions. For Valk and Kliën both, choreography is not just an "art form" but a practice of moving "towards the possibility of change as inscribed in the body."³ *Parliament* returns to Athens, again, in 2025 with a change. What you see in the room, inside the museum, is only a fragment. In its extended form—lasting weeks, prepared for months, building on practices developed over years—*Parliament* is fed by sources across the city and, in turn, hopes to feed them with sensitivities and visions cultivated in this white-walled room. For *Parliament*, seven weeks is a long time. For Athens, seven weeks is a blink of the eye. It is impossible to know beforehand how these two scales will interact. Thanks in part to Kotsalou's rootedness in the city and Valk's insistent prodding, the work is intent on generating movement, inside and outside of the museum and across the city of Athens.

Resisting a Κοινοβούλιο, or, Frustrated Social Desires

How do ideas travel, how do they transform as they move? In English, the word "parliament" comes down to us by way of old French: *parler*, to speak. This *Parliament*, by contrast, moves away from speaking: enough talking, enough words—let us sense, feel, move toward each other. Language, words, names, titles are part of what keep us trapped; obscuring and fortifying rather than freeing different ways of being together. Where language must fail, Kliën says, bodies can hold and contain multitudes.

In the initial discussions that built up to this exhibition, Kliën expressed a desire to re-ground the work back in its originary site in Athens.

Of course, being in Athens, it was hard to ignore the millennial phantom of the mythologized origins of democracy alongside our political systems' more urgent contemporary failings.

It bears mentioning that the 2012 protests Kliën described gathered at Syntagma, the central square of Athens. Just opposite, the actual Hellenic Parliament looms. How might another kind of Parliament work? The question has become all the more urgent over the past decade.

Surely, then, by returning to Athens, *Parliament* would take on its Greek name, *Κοινοβούλιο*?

No, no . . . something about it did not quite land. No one in Athens could quite articulate why. Well, you see, in Greek, the word is too . . . mm . . . Heavy? Formal? Rigid? Bureaucratic? Everyone struggled to find the words (either in Greek or in English) to express why the Greek word was not appropriate. It's just not right, they all said. "The work is called *Parliament*," declared Polina Kosmadaki, the commissioning curator. Yes, *Parliament* debuted in Greece but it has since traveled internationally, she said, and so that has become the work's name.

Allow me to linger, speculatively, on the denied translation into Greek just a bit longer. In ancient Greek, the root verb *βουλεύομαι* meant to "think." We know, however, that ancient Greek democracy, much like the present-day versions, was not a rational affair: people were swayed as much by logical arguments as by the affective power of rhetoric. There has always been an element of desire. In modern Greek,

this is made clearer given that *κοινοβούλιο* can be read as a synthesis of *κοινό-* (social, common, shared) and *-βούλιο, βουλή* (will or desire).

Which brings us back to *Parliament* in Athens. I find it understandable that there is presently a discomfort with the idea of a social or common desire. Perhaps it is even an apathy. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, a fear of dark and violent forms these social desires can take.

In Greece, for example, the last referendum took place on July 5, 2015. A referendum, even more directly than voting for one's representatives, is a democratic mechanism for the expression of a common decision or the social will. In this case, maybe the 2015 referendum had been political theater or an act of cowardice on the part of politicians—an abdication of their responsibility to make difficult decisions. Nevertheless, when the votes were tallied, 61 percent of the voters conveyed their desire for one outcome. The response to this expression of the people's will was crushing: in the years that followed, the additional austerity measures that were imposed were not only the opposite of what the majority had voted on but even more brutal than what had originally been proposed. What kind of social-desire was this? The *κοινό-βούλιο*, in its most direct form, had been more than frustrated—it was utterly trampled. There has not been another referendum in Greece since.

In Greece, as in many democracies across the world, the notion of representation has become more fraught and more elusive than ever. On a host of issues, in Greece and elsewhere, there is a stubborn gulf between what the common-will desires and the policies that are being undertaken.



4 “The world’s largest survey on climate change is out — here’s what the results show.” United Nations Development Program, June 27, 2024, <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/worlds-largest-survey-climate-change-out-heres-what-results-show>.

According to a 2024 poll by the United Nations Development Program, 72 percent of people globally want to move away from fossil fuels; 86 percent believe that countries should set aside their differences to work together on climate change; and 89 percent want to see more action from their governments on the environment.⁴ At the same time, the major UN climate conference in 2024, COP29, took place in Azerbaijan, an authoritarian, fossil fuel-producing state. The words and promises were many; accountability and concrete actions few. Decisions are being made far away, once more, untethered from the shared-will of the people.

I feel it is important to clearly state we have a democratic problem in the world. For myriad reasons, parliaments and other representative democratic institutions seem to have lost their efficacy and with this loss, widespread belief in their structures. *Parliament* returns us to representation in a more immediate form. Notably, the artist is rarely present in the room as the work unfolds. Especially in smaller, closed versions, Kliën has made a point of this. In its earliest iterations, he did take part, but soon realized how the center of gravity that invariably formed around the creator was too strong. We see similar dynamics play out every day in “representative” politics—the many become channeled into the one; a singular leader stands at the center of the millions in their orbit.

Here, in *Parliament*, the one is largely made absent. Instead, each day, each hour, each minute that *Parliament* unfolds, the relationships are negotiated amongst equals. Of course, pre-existing differences between participants

do not magically melt away. But the ones that remain are foregrounded for renegotiation, even transformation. When we exit the room, grab our phones and wallets, our identities return alongside our responsibilities and social positions. One participant's brand-new phone might cost more than another person's car; someone's luxury car more than another's apartment. Still, in the space of *Parliament*—without words, objects, or so many identifying scaffolds—we move together and apart, negotiating what a common desire might look like. We move with the hope that such practices might continue to take shape outside the walls of this room.

Skepticism may lurk. It is justifiable. So often, we are called on to *pretend* to melt our differences and move together, as equals. A “performance” which only lasts as far as the doors of the room beyond which they reassert themselves again, unperturbed. Kliën has long been aware of this danger, reflecting how

“Psychotherapy and the arts are both grappling with whether they are active practices or merely sedatives that help us to cope, as individuals, with the bullshit that’s going on in the world [. . .] I don’t want *Parliament* to be another coping mechanism, and I hope that what takes it into another category is that it gives you this cathartic experience of exhaling and releasing, being held by others and by yourself, and by the universe.” (118)

Does this sound too utopic, too romantic, like the sunset over the Hydra rooftops? Perhaps. But the world is not changed by cynicism. How do we get from here to there? What sustains *Parliament*'s flickering visions of transformation after the lights are off and the exhibition has ended?



There are no guarantees. But *Parliament* does offer experiences and reminders that we might hang on to; experiences that seem to be growing more and more rare in our world. As Kliën suggests,

“[*Parliament*] forces you to ask yourself, *if I like this so much, what does that mean? Why is my life not like this? And I struggle with this myself—and I’m an artist [. . .] if my life’s like this in Parliament, if life can actually be this wonderful and life-giving, why isn’t it like this always? Isn’t this what I should be working towards?*” (118–119)

In and Out of the Museum Through Different Doors

An artist once told me that the museum is like a mental institution—the place where they put the wildest ideas in order to keep them cordoned off from the rest of the society. This goes both ways, however. The institution’s walls are white, there are guards in every room surveilling your behavior, there are limited visitation hours . . . *Parliament*, I have argued here, began outside of the museum’s walls. In coming back to the museum, the goal of *Parliament* is not to lock itself up. Rather, it aims to enter the museum in order to open the doors and flow back out into the street, changing once more as it moves.

What is most different about this extended version of *Parliament* is how it combines the desire to oscillate in and out of the museum with relational structures that have been cultivated over months to support this dream. Although it may not be obvious to a visitor who walks into a white room and sees only a couple dozen bodies moving silently, many of these people will have come to *Parliament* for a reason, representing nothing but themselves while also being part of groups, organizations, and different forms

of social struggle. *Parliament*, it is hoped, will offer some new tools for their work to continue.

A long-time participant in *Parliament* told me: our society has a problem, many problems, but we keep going through the same doors to try and solve them. It's not working. We need to enter through other doors, to approach these problems through different frameworks. Might some of those doors be glimpsed within *Parliament*?

Writing this text more than six months before the opening, it is impossible for me now to know who exactly will be coming through the doors of the museum. I have some idea: there will be activists, refugees, people with disabilities, friends of the Benaki Museum, psychologists, dancers, writers, students, young people, educators, sexual minorities, architects, academics, organizers, even a few politicians, too. None of these groups or identifiers is monolithic. An architect may also be an organizer and may also be disabled in some way, visibly or invisibly. A politician may be a sexual minority—whether they publicly acknowledge it or not—and may be working to make the city more welcoming to migrants or may have recently begun to harden their position against the Other. None of these people function alone; the city is composed of all these relations, despite ongoing efforts to separate and even oppose Athens' many constituent parts. *Parliament* brings all of these people through the doors of the museum with the hope that different doors may be opened back out in the world. Clearly something is not working in the Parliament, clearly something is not working in the world. We cannot keep walking through the same doors, over and over, expecting a different result. Why not try this door, right here in this room, and see where it might lead?



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**A PERMANENT
PARLIAMENT
NOTES ON SOCIAL
CHOREOGRAPHY**

/ CORY TAMLER

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CORY ✓

One question I always have about this kind of work is: how should it be critiqued, or how should it be written about? Or how would you *like* to see it, well, evaluated? It's a bad term, but—

MICHAEL ✓

Parliament has never been written about, actually. There are a thousand people who have participated in it, roughly, but writing seems difficult. I wouldn't care for a traditional critique; it has to sit within a framework of ideas. I guess it writes out of itself.

INTRO(S) / 8

INQUIRY LEADS

SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY:

A BAGGY TERM

PSYCHEDELIC EMBODIMENT

THE SCORE

DOS BALANCED BY DO NOTS

/ 48

LEADERSHIP VACUUM

THE SCORE SURFACES IN FRAGMENTS

SHOE FETISH

WEB OF RELATIONS

A CAGE OF TIME

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SEDIMENTARY PRACTICE

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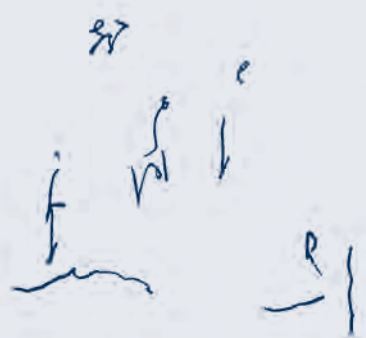
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Michael Kliën, undated
Image courtesy of the artist



MICHAEL ✓

I've heard that a lot after someone does *Parliament*: "I was just sitting there for two hours, rocking."

And I say, "Oh, I'm sorry."

And they say, "No, no, I've never felt saner in my whole life."

CS
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SEDIMENTARY
PRACTICE
LET'S BUILD
IT WRITES
OUT OF ITSELF

**MY WRITING
ISN'T
INTERESTED
IN TAKING
AN OUTSIDE VIEW.**

There is no outside from which *Parliament* can be seen. Part of the effect of the work is a deeply felt knowledge that there is no true passivity in a system. This will return later.

Michael Kliën and I have wondered together what on earth a *Parliament* text could be. Our wondering began as we talked in December 2018, after a session of *Parliament* I worked to bring to the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center in New York City, with Segal Center director Frank Hentschker and a small audience. The wondering continues through, and beyond, this little book. Not a documentation: such a thing would give a false sense of that outside which doesn't exist. Not a critique: to position this work as artwork would be to render it impotent. Not an explication of the score: the score needs presence, bodies. A *Parliament* text must be embedded in *Parliament*, and vice versa, part of the system. Our two voices, mine and Michael's,

MICHAEL ✓

The image of the lifeboat comes up often in my work, and it has its roots in something real and simple that happened. I went to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the big, classical museum. And I was sitting in front of this massive Rubens, a painting of curvaceous women and some mythological stuff going on, you know, fantastic painting, extremely large, with this massive golden wooden

frame around it. And after ten minutes of sitting there, I realized all I was thinking about is: could I take this frame and build a life raft out of it, and would it be stable enough to get me across the ocean? I was totally preoccupied by the logistics. How could I take this frame down, how would I fashion it into a lifeboat? The refugee catastrophe in the Mediterranean had happened by then, as well, which must have been informing this daydream. But actually, I realized, this is all I'm concerned with. I wouldn't give Rubens a second thought. Can I use it as a sail, this thing, the canvas? That's good. But otherwise, I don't care about it. We don't have the luxury of caring about tradition when we have to build lifeboats and get across to the next place and figure out what to do there. This is what I'm concerned with, this is what *Parliament* is concerned with,

are often inseparable throughout this text. We've known one another since 2016 and the rich sediment of this relation has been interwoven with my own artistic and thought practices ever since, so to write about his work is also to write from a perspective that's been profoundly influenced by his work.

Sediment is a word, an orientation, I first encountered through the score that initiates Michael's *Parliament*. In the way of practices of naming that resonate on contact, it has seemed to follow me since. In my performance practice I learn from and make with bodies of water, among them the Penobscot river watershed in Wabanaki/Maine and my guides and companions in, on, and along the river. Thinking with sediment opens a way of being-in-change that includes both construction and deconstruction, but in sedimentation this is no binary: parts of the riverbank erode to collect downriver in a deposit,

this is what we should be concerned with, because it's a serious situation and everybody seems to be docile and subdued and "okay." Coping. And it should be exactly the opposite. It should be like, let's build. Let's build life rafts.

one that will change the quality of flow; this deposit is also eroding and sedimenting, what has been has no primacy over what will be, causality is non-linear, agency is distributed throughout the system. Through sedimentation, temporary stable patterns form, like waterfalls, whirlpools, runs of rapids, deltas: the timescale of these patterns may be days or decades or hundreds of years, but understanding them as sediment encourages a different kind of mourning when they are dismantled. Dismantling is continuous with the new patterns that arise.

Temporary stable pattern is also a phrase I use regularly and trace back to Michael. We were talking about institutions and how they must plan for their own demise, if they're to avoid a different kind of death: stagnation, more akin to a dammed-up river, the unwieldy locus of power that centralizes agency, tries to exert limitless control over its immediate

surroundings as if it's separable from the rest of the watershed. An institution without a healthy relationship to its own temporary nature ends up unable to do much other than struggle against death by insisting on its continued right to exist. Such an institution, one that denies that it is in fact a temporary stable pattern, puts a lot of work into convincing everyone that we can't live without it. *We will always need opera houses*, say the opera houses. *We will always need police*, say the police and the prisons. *We will always need this dam*, says the dam, the power plant. To remove a system of dams, when it becomes necessary to do so, requires not only physical labor and expense—it requires undoing the dispersed false belief in the dam's permanence. Part of the dam's reality is in the mind.

This volume is a temporary stable pattern, made of sediment collected around *Parliament* sessions from the early days of its development until the end



of 2018. This includes conversations and reflections on the work from a variety of participants, extending into the early months of 2020. It also includes my own extended reflection on the *Parliament* at the Segal Theatre in 2018, which I produced and in which I participated. It has taken time to write and compile, and so the pattern has been eroding even as its shape becomes clear. The content pre-dates the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the bulk of my editing has taken place over the summer and fall of 2020. The pandemic thus enters the pattern.

I surprised someone recently by saying that putting a thought into words changes the thought, and was surprised by his surprise. This is sedimentary practice. Looking at a memory changes the past. Verbalizing a nonverbal experience becomes part of your understanding of that experience, becomes part of the experience itself.

Michael Kliën, 2013
Image courtesy of the artist

Parliament



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／ INQUIRY LEADS
／ SOCIAL
CHOREOGRAPHY:
A BAGGY TERM
／ PSYCHEDELIC
EMBODIMENT
／ THE SCORE
／ DOS BALANCED
BY DO NOTS

CORY TAMLER /

Thirty people in a bare theatre—bare also of audience space, because in spite of all its blonde wood it's what we call a black box, thoroughly convertible. Still, the doors, the booth, a sense of entry area, exit signs all orient space. We wait for things to begin, leaning on pillars, knowing where the bathrooms are, or worrying about where the bathrooms are. For the most part we don't know one another and a few of us speak. I have "organized" or produced this and so I need to do a little management, checking people in, managing calls from those who are lost, pointing out the bathroom. But when it comes to what's about to happen I don't know much more than the least knowledgeable in the room, and considerably less than at least a few of them, who have done *Parliament* before. One, retired, has traveled some way to be here. After her first

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Parliament she has made a private commitment to participate in every iteration she can.

It's morning, I think. At least my memory of it has a morning feel, now that I think of it I wonder why that is because I think we must've actually started in the late afternoon. But it has this overlay, of being just before waking fully into the day. As if everyone was quiet because we were all still asleep or sleepiform, our hair bedroom-bald. Maybe what I'm remembering are the effects of coming in out of the cold.

Michael starts his introduction.



**WE TALKED ABOUT
SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHY
WHEN WE MET
AT THE END
OF 2015.**

CORY ✓

There's something really different, to me, about *Parliament* than a lot of the so-called participatory art and theatre that I see. I go to see a lot of it. And I'm curious what you think about participatory work in general . . .

MICHAEL ✓

Oh, I'm personally very awkward in the participatory thing. I hate it. I can't do it. I can't deal with it. It freaks me out.

The term was new to me. Steve Valk, Michael's dramaturg, had a thorough and theoretical definition, but Michael told me he was "still struggling with what social choreography is, or could be" (a typical artist/dramaturg dynamic). I've struggled with it similarly in my own way ever since. A baggy term, you could stuff into it any collective movement of bodies in a social situation; the choreography might result from social dynamics and norms, architectural space, culture, politics. Steve, who tends to work and think at the institutional level, sees institutions themselves as bodies that social choreography can move: the right social choreographic intervention can cause these calcified structures to wobble, maybe to topple, die, be born anew. Andrew Hewitt's *Social Choreography*, published in 2005, came out parallel to Michael and Steve's early thinking with and through the term; before reading the book they'd never heard the name

I'm probably shy, or introverted, but whenever somebody wants to come and touch me, or wants to drag me on stage, I don't like it at all; and maybe that's also why I created this structure. I love doing *Parliament*. Like, I absolutely love it. You're just doing it in your own time, you're not forced, you don't even feel like it's participatory. You're *in* it, you're not participating. You're *it*. I think there's brilliant participatory work out there, but it's just not for me. I freeze up. Don't pick me.

CORY /

In participatory work or in social practice, where you might have a work that's an artist doing laundry or having conversations with refugees, you've got this tension around, well, is this art or is this everyday life? But in your work the tension's different, I think. It's something more like: did you construct this, or is it something you discovered?

of the author, who's a professor of comparative literature. In spite of their completely separate paths to the same terminology, Michael finds in the book the same concerns and ideas, and appreciates Hewitt's definition: that choreography is always the rehearsal of utopian social situations that are nevertheless real.

Where Hewitt is very theoretical, though, Michael works on the level of embodiment. We are deeply embodied beings, and most of our lives, he tells me, play out on an unconscious level. (Think of everything you're doing as you read this sentence: breathing, digesting, sweating, swallowing, muscles holding parts of your body upright, translating symbols to sounds to words to sentences to sense.) The making-conscious of our embodied selves into structures and maps and tools and alterations to our environment, that's what determines what we build: interactions, institutions, nations. But this

MICHAEL ✓

On one hand it's created, it's wished for, I think I would say, it's wanted, or it's called. This is something I still do: I draw lines, one line, and that line is interrupted. Time and space. And I try to figure out what kind of spaces, what kind of work do I want to create. And I always see it as this line of linear perception and it's interrupted and then pushed apart and in; it's filled, and expanded, and dug into the ground. It builds a huge perceptual hole in between, a rupture of time and space. It creates these liminal spaces that were simply not there beforehand, that didn't exist. Or maybe they existed, but they're not seen and not felt. And so in some ways I wished for this always, and I always will. I don't construct my work in a logical narrative. I dreamed that stuff. I know if I find the problem, I know if I make these little drawings and if I kind of

loops back on itself, as the institutions we've made then inform our understanding of our embodied selves, of how we think ourselves *into* the world. We've made our context but it equally makes us. *Parliament* and pieces like it are meant to intervene in that recursive loop. *Parliament* moves into a darkness at the edge of consciousness that takes you out of your normal social understanding of a situation into a kind of psychedelic embodiment, where psychedelic for Michael—it's a word that comes up in our conversations a lot—means “revealing the mind.” This is the no-place (one meaning of the word *utopia*) where it becomes possible to rehearse the next within a real now. What happens in *Parliament* is a rehearsal, *and* it is real. Often, Michael refers to this thoughtbody space as the realer real.

The score for *Parliament* is what draws the boundaries that will come to contain the realer real. In the

figure out what I want, the answers come sooner or later (sometimes years later).

It rises, if you stick with it; the solutions rise. But it's not a construction. If I already know how to construct it, it will not bring new knowledge into the world. If I want to figure out something new in terms of relational fields, I have to create stuff that I don't understand. What I'm already aware of cannot do that sufficiently to surprise me. There's a Beethoven quote: "They will learn to love it." I'm changing it to say, "I will learn to love it." From my very first inklings of *Parliament*, I knew I had to do it. I didn't know that I would present this as work, I didn't know that it would be anything. If anything, I must have been very confused at first, thinking, "That's weird, what am I going to do with that?" The inquiry leads the process. The curiosity. To say, okay, let's just try it. What happens then? When you

context of performance, the word *score* is often used to refer to a set of instructions, open to some degree to different interpretations and how they are enacted. You can think of the relation to a musical score as notation that must always be completed by a performer. Even in an elaborate musical composition, highly authored, the performers' skill and training and instrument all play a role, as does the acoustics of the space, and a host of other things you can fill in for yourself. All of this can be said of most live performance, and so a further element that defines a *score* is a lack of rehearsal, or of desire for a certain kind of repeatability. It exists in a lineage of the "open work" and also in relation to ritual, improvisation, and decommmodified art. *Parliament* is, or is set in motion by, something resembling a score. We found the following in Michael's notes, seemingly an early word-sketch towards that score:

An early *Parliament* word-sketch
Michael Kliën, undated
Image courtesy of the artist

observer	act	ponder	sense
integrity	act	obscure	sensory
act	sensory	pondering	integrating
ponder	to act	integrity	sense

work that way, sometimes it's exciting
and sometimes not much happens.

8
5

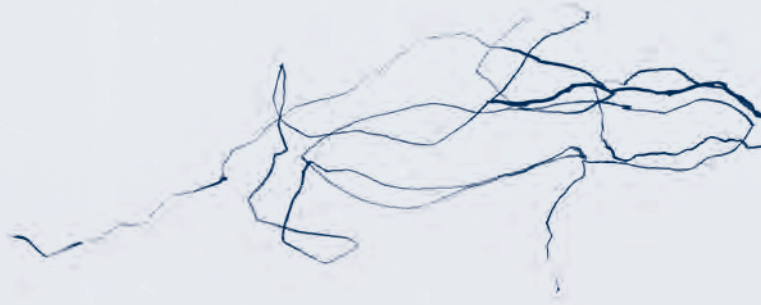
In advance of a session Michael sketches out the score, freehand, on a large piece of butcher's paper or newsprint. The score consists of *dos* constituted by infinitives, balanced by *do not*s. Participants are instructed *to act, to observe, to ponder, to sediment*, and all the while to remember: *do not be creative, do not have ideas, do not judge, do not resolve, do not perform, do not perform touch, do not worry*. Much of the meaning of these elements is transmitted in the telling, in person. It takes about twenty minutes to go through the score, after which *Parliament* begins, lasting until it's stopped. You might say it "runs."

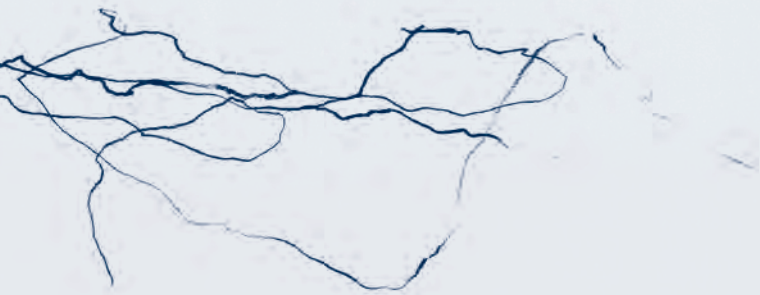
At the beginning of a session Michael delivers the score in the space where participants have gathered for their parliamentary encounter. This space might be a rooftop, an art gallery, a black box theatre, a conference room, a field, a town square: it can be sealed off or public, as long as the score has enough

time to work on the initial group of participants without outside interruption. What counts as enough time? Michael won't do a *Parliament* with a total timeframe of less than three hours, and won't do a public *Parliament* that isn't at least five or six hours. Much more preferable, though, is one that lasts several days. Or three months. Or one that never ends.



A "little drawing"
Michael Kliën, undated
Image courtesy of the artist





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SHUNTARO YOSHIDA

Together, wordlessly, with the other participants in our single room, we built a network from our bodies. When I made a micro-movement, it spread, amplified by the network into collective activity and a web of other movements I could not have predicted. I began to realize the possibility in this. My gestures and physical presence translated directly into a larger social body that connected all of the disparate selves in the room. We embodied a democracy: real communal exploration between all of the participants. In the pursuit of a common choreography, we contacted one another through our consciousnesses, our bodies, and our movements. Because of the high general level of attentiveness among us all, our choreographic moves were actively disseminated over time through the group. Each time a new point of view

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rose in the web, it shifted not only space and time, but also our developing collective kinesthesia.

Now, looking back on my participation in *Parliament*, I formulate questions like: How do we archive the indeterminate systems, the experiential and dynamic processes of a society? How do we navigate, negotiate, and weave our bodily movement with the embodied investigation of a social environment? What I realize now is that, as we reused, remade, and imitated movement in real space, we had been investigating the relationship between the social body and the human body.

The imitation of form and structure becomes communication, particularly noticeable in the absence of words. Imitation is a communication that delivers body, matter, and movement to individuals who, together, produce society. For me, choreography as mimesis is part of what the broader field of social choreography is all about. The democratized network of bodies that gets built up in *Parliament* is one way of opening up new critical possibilities for interdisciplinary research.





／ **TOO MUCH BY DESIGN**
／ **NO OBSERVERS**
／ **RULE OF ORDER**
／ **THE FIRST**
 PARLIAMENT
／ **NO RESOLUTION**

CORY TAMLER

We have just three hours, so we're doing a "closed" session in the Segal Theatre, where no one enters who hasn't been there from the beginning. When Michael and I talk later he'll identify a difference between his introduction and the *Parliament* score proper, but these two things bleed together for me as they happen and some of the things that are technically part of the introduction come to feel crucial to the experience after we begin. For example: the encouragement to let go of any urge that is an escape (to drink water, remove clothing, go to the bathroom, examine a shoe)—to do these things if they are necessary but to identify and release them if they're instead an expression of discomfort. Part of the score, I'd say now looking back and having freshly read the freshest Donna Haraway, is to stay with the trouble. He tells a story about Henry James. Then the description

of the score proper begins. Long roll of paper on the floor. There are things we are not supposed to do and things we are instructed to do. This is what Michael means about the divide between introduction and score: to examine a shoe isn't forbidden the same way that we're forbidden to perform, for example. By design, the score is too much. It's too much to hold in your head all at once, the way a numerical string beyond a certain length can't be remembered quickly and easily at a glance by the majority of human brains.

After he finishes explaining the score—which takes about twenty minutes—Michael leaves the theatre. He leaves entirely. He's not going into the booth to watch, this isn't being recorded, there are no observers—there never really are, in a *Parliament*. Anyone in the space is part of things, even if they are attempting not to participate. Passivity tends to excite the whole system, causing a ripple of wonder to move through it: why is that person resisting? A crucial, world-shifting tenet of quantum mechanics is that observers are not separate from situations they observe. Setting someone the task of trying to observe *Parliament* would be an elegant instantiation of this insight. From years of experience with the experimental setup, Michael chooses not to take part at all, this time. We are running this *Parliament* at the lower limit of possible duration, just under three hours, and he knows the time needed for the technology to begin working. He often does participate, but with a new group he won't step in for the first few hours. Otherwise, the participants look to him for leadership; he becomes the author, and the situation doesn't have time to form into a system with dispersed agency.



Score for the *Parliament* session at the Segal Center
Michael Kliën, 2018
Image courtesy of Cory Tamler

Parliament, NY

to act

lie, sit, stand, move
as thoughtbody

to observe

observe yourself observing others
with absolute gaze

do not be creative, do not have ideas, do not judge, do not react

constant peripheral vision

Super sensitive organism

to ponder

"sitting with" thoughts

to sediment

What remains remains

do not perform, do not perform touch, do not worry

**PARLIAMENT BELONGS
TO A BODY OF MICHAEL'S PRACTICES
THAT HE THINKS
OF AS TECHNOLOGIES
RATHER THAN ARTWORKS.**

It's in this sense that we talk about the discovery of *Parliament*. Like all technologies it has developed and continued to develop in relation to the interests of its users and, too, in relation to an underlying reality that we as humans won't ever fully understand, in a spiraling push-pull-push where everything has agency: Michael, the technology, the truth of the collective body. The question that touches off the spiral might not have much to do at all with the function of what gets discovered. Looking at photographs of performances and of public spaces a decade or so ago, Michael started to find it bizarre that they consistently represented a "proscenium arch kind of thinking": people facing in the same direction as if for an audience, or arranged according to a single shared organizing principle. One person pointing, for example, and everyone else looking in the direction of the finger. Thinking of Hardt

MICHAEL ✓

My very first introduction at the beginning of the semester, I always tell my class, "Your task is to dance, so that afterwards, you can say: *I have danced.*" And then I leave the room. So they freak out, *what that could possibly mean and how do I possibly do that and what am I doing.* A student of mine this year was an anthropology major. Never really danced before. And she wrote in her reflection,

she says: “This was still the beginning of the semester, and I was anxious for other class members to observe my untrained dance moves. I was quick to assume that having a background in classical or institutional dance training made you more qualified as a dancer. This goes back to the issue of socialization. For those first twenty minutes, I cautiously moved around. I wanted to make an escape and allow myself to fall freely into thought. But something was restraining me. Now, thinking back on it, I know it is the rule of order, but back then I believed it to be the spectator’s gaze.” You think in this situation, yes, *the others*, that’s why you can’t move. But what she did was to recognize that this is what she called a rule of order. I googled it and it’s not really a term. There’s something that’s called the special rule of order, which interestingly is how parliaments

and Negri’s *multitude*, desiring a more complex way of organizing in collectivity, these were early impulses that led to *Parliament’s* discovery.

Michael moved to Greece at the height of the economic crisis. The social fabric felt fragile. He had the sense of witnessing and being present within a wound breaking open. He was tear-gassed at protests; he began to absorb the situation. Not speaking Greek gave him, perhaps, a loosened gaze, a view of the shape of the rupture. Everybody in Greece knew who to blame, he thought. The lawyers blamed the judges, the judges blamed the politicians, the politicians blamed Europe. Diagrammed, it would be a network of pointing fingers. This, he thought, is the system we’ve created, as a collective, and we can no longer imagine our way out of it. Like the persistent proscenium orientation in photographs, we can’t vision ourselves logically into a new world.

are ordered—but she’s talking about deep order, the way that we are ordered as human beings. For example, if you look at *Parliament*, it usually takes about twenty to twenty-five minutes before anybody lifts their arm above their shoulders. It doesn’t make any sense. But that’s how long it takes to socially negotiate to the point where it’s okay, nonthreatening, for anyone to lift an arm above shoulder height. That’s what Badiou calls “the state of the situation,” referring to the state reproducing its politics, but I think it goes much, much deeper. It’s not just evolutionary, it’s the whole shebang, of living and its history, that is placed in us. This is what my student was calling the rule of order.

The crisis in Greece was an interruption that produced a *wish for*—for what? A solution, a response to this system that was stuck in recursive blame. Michael stayed with this problem. As a guest professor at a number of different universities, he had plenty of opportunities to try out scores, or series of instructions meant to be enacted, and so he began to do so, informed by cybernetic systems theory and choreographic ideas. Three years of testing propositions against reality, cleaning them up, and making them more functional honed the scores until what Michael had wished for without knowing what form it would take started to emerge.

The first time that something happened that could be called *Parliament* was on a rooftop in the port of Hydra, a little Greek island with no cars but countless cats scarred from skirmishing over fish tossed up from the boats. Michael’s dramaturg,

Steve Valk, took part, as did Vitoria Kotsalou, one of the original artistic team. The other seven or eight participants were mostly fellow artists and locals drawn from cafes on the port, just before beginning the score. Permission to use the rooftop, too, was granted spontaneously. Michael says they set it all up in thirty minutes, with his wife, a filmmaker, documenting. It ran for about two and a half hours, spanning sunset. Later *Parliament* sessions would have between twenty and forty-five participants and would generally last between six and ten hours. “They are long,” Michael says, “long.”

Michael Kliën, 2010
Image courtesy of the artist

2010



the unknown / perception (8&10)

the radical presence of relations (811)

2 writing / a dance (Nurturing Fields)

to build (GBAH)

to reflect (Linen)

to negotiate one's place (SOSM)

to offer

to govern

shared spaces (C4B)

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MALLORY CATLETT

The *Parliament* rule that was a revelation to me was *no resolution*. These two words together were critical to how I was to participate. In the negation they expressed, there was something for me to do. Some point of focus. Something within myself to track that was both invisible and completely palpable, something I am sure I have been battling with my whole life. Until now, I had never been given permission to proceed without it. Or to try to proceed without it. This was a gift, similar to meditation, but within an art-making context. Many things became possible. I have since asked my acting students to try and proceed without this need for resolution, and the effect is quite striking. Total confusion. A confusion that sort of slows them down, makes them unsure enough to just listen.

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／ LEADERSHIP VACUUM
／ THE SCORE SURFACES
IN FRAGMENTS
／ SHOE FETISH
／ WEB OF RELATIONS
／ A CAGE OF TIME

As *Parliament* starts, it feels clear exactly how this would go if Michael were in the room. Because the first feeling is a leadership vacuum. We want to turn to someone or something for the rules, but there is simply nothing to fill that space. The closest thing might be the clock ticking away high above us, between windows of the tech booth, which we'd have taken down if we could. And the exit signs. Beyond us we are all lost. I remember sitting quite still, feeling calm, ready, and as if I might stay that way forever, in a state of active meditation. We are vulnerable now. We've collectively opened a space of possibility, and the rules we agreed on before opening it keep and hold this calm uncertainty. The space of possibility itself isn't unique. It's there in the streets, at a protest or action. It's there before a meeting begins, it's there on the first day of

class before the teacher walks into the room. It's there at a party, sometimes. But in such situations there's an expectation of leadership, an event, direction, and if one doesn't come the people assembled either create it or go home. Here, in *Parliament*, we know no leadership is coming and we have agreed to stay with the trouble for the next three hours. The only thing to look to, the common ground and goal here such as it is, is the score, which surfaces for me in fragments, never whole. *Observe yourself observing. Sediment—allow things to return. Do not perform. Do not judge. Act?* Is that one of them? There is something about doing, acting. This first stage lasts for forty-five minutes or so. I have some sense of time here, because I'm not fully in it, none of us are, and so we feel awkward, as you do when you know there are rules and you know you are somehow just not getting them. So I look at the clock, sometimes. I watch myself watch the clock. I don't judge myself, or what's happening: I release that clenching.

The first time someone touches me, it's after I had taken a place in the center of the space; seeing that others were avoiding it, I was tapping into old Viewpoints training. Remembering it now I imagine my head must've been down; knowing my body's habits, I probably was sitting with my knees up and arms folded in a shelf on top of them, forehead resting on forearm. There was then a hand in my hair. I looked up, the angle was acute, the body of the person who was touching my hair was very close to me. Looking towards her face was like looking up a rocky cliff from the base trying to see what's at the top, or craning my neck to peer around a riverbend. Her knees,



breasts, chin, all topology that controlled and determined the angle at which my eyes and her eyes could meet, and when I did find them I saw in them that she was elsewhere. And I wondered if I'd be able to get there, too, I wondered and worried I wouldn't. This moment felt too soon, as if a drug had kicked in for her that hadn't yet for me. Later I'd learn this person touching my hair was one of the few people in the room that day who had participated in *Parliament* before.

The touch is not a caress. I sit with that. It is one material engaging another. I lean against the leg near my head and I immediately feel conscious that I've turned this all into a recognizable gesture, something maternal even. I've broken a rule of the score. I try to let that knowledge enter me without judgment, and I observe myself, and observe myself observing. The entire system is taking in what's happening, adjusting. I start to sense how sensitive it is, the system. How aware I myself am of everything, everywhere, of areas of movement and stillness, occurrence of energy, potential, intent. A noise ripples through the group of us as we amplify and repeat the soft sound made at the contact moment between someone's body and floor. And I do, without noticing precisely when, enter into a different state.



From the *Book of Comments* collected after the *Parliament* session
at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, 2014

Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gormly



**IMAGINE
A CASUAL BASKETBALL GAME,
THE KIND PLAYED
ON COURTS
IN PUBLIC CITY PARKS.**

CORY ✓

It's in the setup of *Parliament* that you're asked not to interact with objects. If you notice yourself wanting to get a drink of water or wanting to fix your clothes or getting really engaged with a line on the floor, just let that go.

MICHAEL ✓

Notice, though, that it's not in the score. It gets brought up almost as an after-thought: Oh, by the way, don't do that.

Nobody wears numbers and many of the players don't know one another, or don't know each other well. New players step onto the court to wait their turn, to form an ad hoc team, to heckle or practice. There's an expanded field that contains everyone on the court. Now imagine someone new, someone who doesn't know what this space is, maybe someone who doesn't even know what basketball is, enters the court. Even if the new arrival isn't playing, they are now in the field. They're part of the game no matter how confused they are.

Parliament, when there first was finally something recognizable as *Parliament*, established itself through itself. Each time *Parliament* is run, this act of self-establishment gets performed over again by all of the people in the field. When *Parliament* is done with what would by some accounts be considered an audience, it pulls the audience into the same

CORY /

But it's actually deeply important.

MICHAEL /

It's super central.

CORY /

It's deeply important. There are acting exercises that in some ways are similar, where participants are asked to be present in the space, and interact with people; versions of Viewpoints. But, because it's so hard to engage with other people, the first thing you do is get really interested in your shoe or the lines on the floor or the wall or something. I've done it myself. I've seen my acting students do it. It's much easier.

MICHAEL /

If you look through all the photographs from *Parliament* over the years, the obsession with shoes is striking. An alien would think there must be a shoe fetish in our society. But it's like that because

kind of negotiation you might engage in when, at the park, you walk up to the basketball courts and ask, "Is it okay to play with you?" Sometimes it doesn't even need to be negotiated verbally. You make a gesture. A player gestures back: a wave, gathering you in. And in you go, and you play.

Parliament has no outside. As soon as you enter it, you're *in* it. This happens whether you've heard the instructions or not: you, the structuring propositions, the space itself, it all behaves as a field. It's unavoidable; you are in a space together, which means you're in relation to one other in ways that are highly choreographed. Everything our eyes communicate without our knowledge. Distance, for example. *Do not come into my kinesphere; don't stand behind me too close; don't breathe in my direction.* All negotiated speechlessly. Our lives are extremely choreographed. Making it through any given situation, no matter

the shoes are the only thing you can get to; people tend to take their shoes off, meaning the shoes are the only things in the space while *Parliament* runs. So people build these relationships with shoes, which I don't disallow, either. I don't say *don't do it* in the score; the score is constructed out of *dos* and *don'ts*, but that isn't one of them. What I do say is: throw yourself back onto the other. Now you could question that using affect theory and posthuman theory and object-oriented ontology, which all argue in their way that for us to explore the web of relations, we have to ask how you create meaningful relationships to the nonhuman. But in *Parliament*, I don't feel like that's an issue. In this discovery and how it *feels*, how it *works*, the internal workings, these terms disappear. Everything has spirit inside of *Parliament*. The whole world becomes alive, in my

how mundane, involves walking a tightrope. The reason you don't notice the balancing act is that you have been training to do it since before you could speak. So when relative strangers meet in the context of *Parliament*, they meet within what is already a negotiated field of socially accepted behavior, structured by tacit agreements about what's okay and what's not okay. *Parliament* takes that, and quiets it, and starts building from a place of social nakedness. Like in a ballgame, its rules of engagement, based on the capacities of the human body but nudged away from aligning with unspoken social norms, create a defamiliarized situation. But *Parliament* is not a game, not a timebound push to achieve a competitive goal and then return to life. It's part of real life; it constructs life. You *are* the situation. You're not merely in it. You constitute it, whether you intend to or not.

experience of it. Through building these human relations, you become aware of the systems at work in your epistemology; not aware in a rational sense, but sensitized to systems. Not being part of what we refer to as humanism, they touch the nonhuman, extending to rocks, trees, floor, and sun. Human and non-human categories no longer hold in the space that the score generates. It's like an LSD trip. Everything becomes alive and in relation. It's not like having an interaction with an artwork in a museum, even an artwork that you enjoy deeply and you sit with for a while (which is what most of my other work is: a performance that you sit with). *Parliament* is some other animal. It depresses you, or it makes you euphoric, but the effect is different than drugs because it doesn't feel induced. Or maybe . . . does it? It sort of *does* feel induced, I guess. I don't

know. Does it feel induced? You do come out after four or five hours feeling like . . . If somebody were to say to you, “You took a pill,” you’d say, “Yeah, probably.”

CORY ✓

It felt that way to me. It’s not something you can replicate without *it*, on your own. Also, there’s the fact that you can talk about a particular effect that this particular structure has. That’s part of what makes it feel like it’s a discovery, or it’s a *thing* rather than just an event. The repeatability. Even if it doesn’t affect everybody in exactly the same way, there is a “*Parliament effect*” that a lot of people agree on.

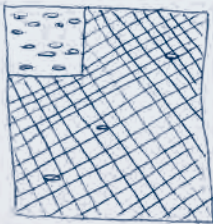
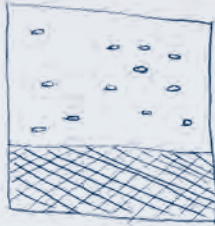
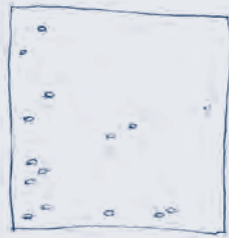
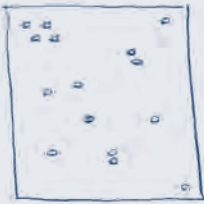
MICHAEL ✓

People talk for years about it. The reactions are so persistently similar, across different cities and different states and different countries, that I feel more and more convinced that it’s a discovery

of something fundamental about how we construct our social relations. How culture is built, and how we sense ourselves into the world. Not as individuals, but as a collective. The magic happens between people in *Parliament*. It doesn't happen in a state of meditation, with me experiencing my own disclosures while I sit by myself for four hours. You feel the tentacles of human relations. This incredible weaving happens. You start out as relative strangers that have already negotiated about a billion things without speaking before *Parliament* even starts. You strip down, you have a space to take off your social relations, and then you start building and then — [*Michael makes a rapid unfurling sound*] it's like everybody's Spiderman and the web of relations emerges in front of you; but it isn't the ordinary one. It's slightly different. It allows you to move differently.

From the *Book of Comments* collected after the *Parliament* session
at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, 2014

Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gormly



Parliament
Nicholas Vamvakidis

BLYTHE DAVIS

In a cage of time, I slept and then I awoke. We tessellated the space, the three of us: a pair of feet on the left side of my head and another pair of feet on the right. If I had floated up and out of my body, I would have seen our symmetry, a giant claw on the floor.

I had long since memorized the ceiling rafters and the angles of the lights. The place was a cage of light, too: it was entirely possible that it was dark outside, or that the sun had set and risen again. We performed micro-rhythms to replace the circadian cycle from which we were sequestered. A clap on one end of the room would trigger a hoot on the other, and bodies in between would jump and stomp, then settle again.

I saw how conversation could buzz. Between the room in which we moved and the outside was a transitional area, a lobby or a waiting room,

NASHER MUSEUM
DURHAM 2018

from which snippets of talk escaped. "Thank you," someone said, precipitating a memory of a song underscoring movie credits playing on a boxy television set, my brother small next to me on a navy leather couch, a dog on the carpet.

I stood. My neighbors stood. I stepped over a puddle of hair and clothes, someone's head on someone else's belly, legs in pants draped over bare legs, affection, function, or just sleep. The memory dissipated.

I counted electrical sockets in the wall.

In the center of the room, a man lifted one foot and balanced, and those of us who were awake mimicked him, each of us making eye contact with another. After a few seconds, the stares became uncomfortable, but after a few more, they were routine.

A body fell and the formation dropped.
The singular attention of the room broke.
We spun out.



／ SLEEPING
NEXT TO STRANGERS
／ THE REALER REAL
／ MOVING CRADLE
OF RELATIONS
／ A BAD TRIP
／ SCHOOLING
DEEP AWARENESS

CORY TAMLER /

Some time later, I'm lying on the floor. My head meets something, or is touched by something, another hard mass, another head: two heads pressing on one another. Again I'm looking towards the source, our two heads roll across one another, measuring surface against surface with firm, affirming oppositional pressure. I meet the eyes of the head's owner, seen over the ridge of my eyebrows, along the sightline of my nose. These heads are joined now. The bodies attached to them begin to move across the floor after a while, the heads maintaining contact, and I notice how this is beginning to make me feel safe—this contact in this pairing. We roll and we roll across the floor. There is suddenly no limit to what's possible, meaning not that we can do anything but rather that the permutations afforded by our two exploring bodies are endless

THE SEGAL CENTER /
NYC 2018 /
PART 4 OF 6 /

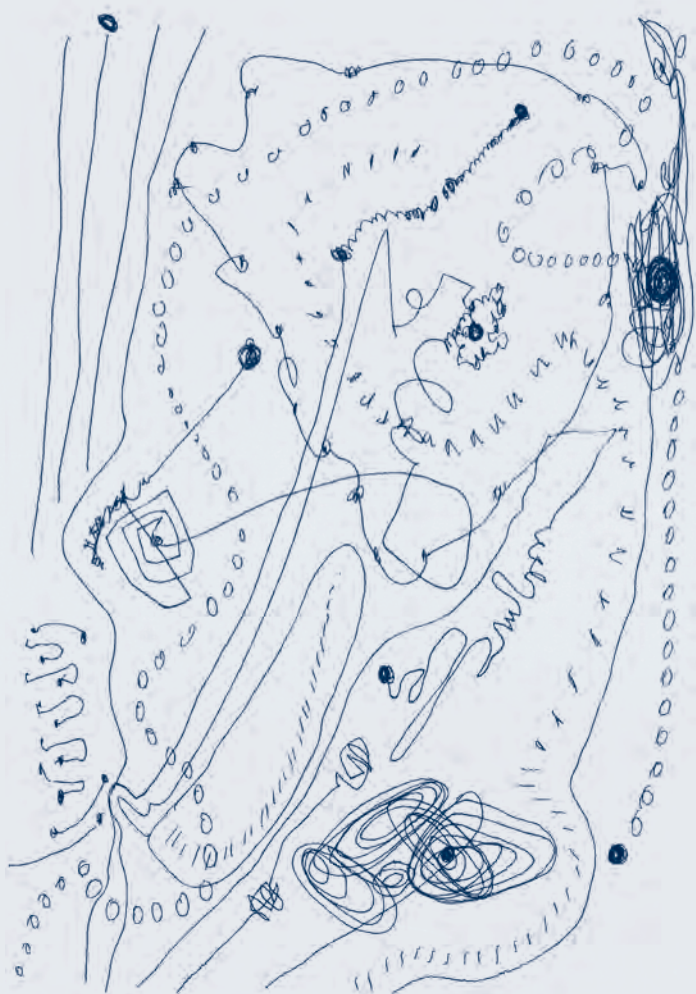
and unpredictable in spite of the rules of the flesh we are in. Our heads bring us to sit. Our full backs touch. Heads continue their exploratory roll, now with newly available terrain: the region between ear and shoulder where I never knew a head fit so well, with the sensation of grounding and intimate weight. The feeling of intimacy is in fact beginning to consume everything. Sometimes it is too much, I look around, wondering if there is an out, something I could or should escape to, or sometimes the motivation is something more like boredom, wanting more or other than what this being could offer. But I'm drawn back in, out of renewed curiosity or a sense of commitment. This has become a relationship. Now we're standing: locked together still, back to back, negotiating how to move across the floor like this, head still the focal point of contact, one head rolling down to nestle into that haven between shoulder and ear—we discover the relief of leaning, one partner giving their entire weight and will over to the other and how this enables further movement. And because there is intimacy and trust, it isn't frightening to give up control.

And then we divorce.



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Floor Grootenhuis, 2021
Image courtesy of the artist



**DESCRIPTIONS OF PARLIAMENT
(BLURBS ON MUSEUM AND THEATRE WEBSITES,
PARAGRAPHS SENT TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS)
ARE, IN MICHAEL'S OWN WORDS,
TAME:**

***Parliament* (1st NY session)
with Michael Kliën (Austria)**

The Segal Center is proud to present the CUNY version of *Parliament: A choreographic site for citizens*. *Parliament* is a pioneering work of situational choreography and exploration of ecological aesthetics. The work offers participants a critically needed withdrawal from normal modes of social action and provides instead an innovative site for 21st-century experimentalist cooperation. Embedded in the immediacy of Kliën's choreographic framework, citizen-performers, working in silence, come together to bear witness to and hold council amidst the elemental phenomena and fundamental concerns of collectively lived experience. Pointing towards unseen and unexperienced modes of social organization, *Parliament*

MICHAEL

When you're in there, you are affected, but you also affect people whether you want to or not. Any action you take, even if it's an action that seems passive (stand there for four hours, or sit down, or lie motionless, or sleep), affects other people and how they behave. It forces you to ask yourself, what are you doing? What is your contribution? And I think that sleeping is an important contribution. People

always get very confused when I say that. But it changes the space, if people sleep. It brings in different dynamics. If you sleep next to a stranger in a space on the hard floor, and you wake up to a stranger, and you wake up together—it changes everything. What you're going to do next is deeply affected. There is no shortcut, nor is it something you could invent consciously. You cannot achieve the same thing by saying to someone, "Hey, let's pretend we just slept next to each other, and we've just woken up; and let's do what we'd do next." It doesn't work like that. To get there, you have to sleep on the floor with a stranger. In fact, sleeping next to strangers for the entire stretch of time would be a valuable pathway to take through *Parliament*.

CORY/

What you were saying to me earlier about embossing *Parliament* on professional

traverses, probes and navigates the paradigms that animate our present-day political relations.

The verbal setup, the score, doesn't give much away, either. But there's a buzz around the work, and the unofficial word is that *Parliament* is a real trip. In part because of this reputation, Michael says that people have been damaged in *Parliament*. These are people who have been unable to find a way in, and the feeling of being left an outsider intensifies as the session continues. It isn't hard to understand why this is disconcerting. You show up to have what you've heard is a new social experience, and then you find yourself unable to have any experience at all, while all around you are people engrossed in a reality you can't seem to access. Basically, you can have a bad trip. It can be bad enough that the *Parliament* dream feels like a nightmare and the effect is inverted.

dancers and then putting another score on top of that—I found that really interesting; it's a different way of looking at the kind of training that you would have to have in order to have a particular performance style. Back when I met you, doing the *Excavation Site* with Graham Company, I hadn't realized that it was actually a layering of several scores.

MICHAEL ✓

Of experiences. I used *Parliament* as an experiential dream and then, on top of it, I built another structure that the dancers could refer to.

CORY ✓

You participate a lot.

MICHAEL ✓

Yeah, yeah, a lot. I love it. It lowers my threshold for bullshit, massively. It makes me behave differently in social situations. It makes me more connected to others and yet also reduces the extent

You start to feel even *more* alienated from everyone around you, and by extension from society, because you can't find what you are searching for and it starts to seem as if you're in a room with people who are just behaving like animals. *What are they on*, you wonder, *and why am I the only one who isn't on it?* Though this inverted path through *Parliament* is something Michael would like to minimize, he has not found a way to solve it that doesn't diminish the mystery of what happens for everyone else.

What *does* happen? It brings out a different way of relating, a different way of listening-again. It brings out a different way of thinking of ourselves within an ecology: understanding our own belonging within it, rather than thinking ourselves out of it and behaving as if we are not a part of it.

Everybody in the space, even a person having a bad trip, has agency. There are people who stimulate

to which I care about what they think: I might whistle on the bus or sing in the streets, even dance, a little dance whenever I am. It loosens the constraints that I feel. If I were to do *Parliament* every day, I would become different. I'd behave differently in the social sphere. My big wish is that *Parliament* actually startles you, that it delivers a psychedelic thunderbolt straight into your consciousness that takes you so far out of your normal social setup and rattles you so deeply that you are more inclined to do something about it. That's what it does for me.

There is a real lushness to life within *Parliament*, as well as the lushness and potential of human relations and exploration, and love is there, and everything is there, and life's just *not it*. This is realer than the real. This is the realer real. The real seems so pale, insane, and unhealthy, and the realer real seems so

the entire system without wanting to—in fact, precisely by *not* wanting to. Even in their resistance they are full of agency, and there is no escape.

“It should make you feel that at no point are you meaningless,” Michael says. “You always have meaning. There's nobody who escapes. Nobody. You cannot escape. Sit in the corner, look away, break the rules, and you will agitate everybody. The simple fact is that there is no invisibility.”

Awareness grows in the system of the agency distributed throughout it, concentrated in each thoughtbody and at the same time diffused among them. This is the source of the psychedelic thunderbolt many people experience in *Parliament*. On a good trip, you are blasted out of your psyche and out of your normal, normative awareness, and this expands what you thought was possible and what you perceive to be happening.

Parliament comes out of a felt urgency that things are just not sustainable, and, too, out of feeling like nothing ever changes no matter how hard you try. For those who agree that climate change is real, oppression is real, that the system does not work, there is still the question of *how* to do anything about it. Familiar sentiments that have grown even more mainstream as we enter the third decade of this millennium: the system is so powerful and all-encompassing that thinking outside of it is impossible. Individual human minds are out of alignment with a kind of collective, ecological (following Gregory Bateson) mind. What kinds of steps can entice these systems to (re-)align? Michael and Steve refer to Roberto Unger's writings on equipping the imagination for the project of social reconstruction. It's a core concern of *Parliament*. Imagination, in the neoliberal framework, is a mythical substance

real. The question is whether that rupture is enough to entail a will to change.

Parliament is a prelinguistic magma, a moving cradle of relations, out of which the new can slowly solidify into the real. The realer real of *Parliament* is a hermetically sealed experience chamber. You go into the realer real to do *Parliament*, which stays on the magma level the entire time. What I'm interested in, though, is its effect on the real. One hope is that it could *clean* human relations as we train our imagination for new social systems and the new economy. We'll have to glean that stuff from somewhere. We have to find experiences that allow us to imagine that stuff.

readily available if you *just imagine*. In fact, Michael tells me, perception and sensibility *create* the realm of imagination. “The idea that you can ‘just imagine’ something leads to Facebook. If you just imagine shit, you end up with shit.” Imagination without training leads to the same old solutions in an apparently new form, and entrenches them further. The first step towards meaningful change is, therefore, schooling deep awareness. *Parliament* does this by pausing, listening; it wants to suspend.

CATHERINE CABEEN

Most of my dance life I feel like a spy. I have inhabited communities that are suspicious of modernism's hierarchies as often as I have inhabited communities that are based in them. I don't really drink the kool-aid in either camp. In improvisation jams, I've been told that my pointed toes and straightened knees show that I am not being "honest" about how I really want to move, that I am not moving "naturally."

But here I was, calling the ancestors from *this* space and community, surrounded by other humans whose vessels have been similarly sculpted to fall into classical alignment. Deep within us was a love of the intersection between the body and sacred geometry, and an unrelenting faith that dance can align us with spiritual forces through technical precision. We were in a space and a community that is rich

EXCAVATION SITE:
MARTHA GRAHAM USA
(A SCORE LAYERED ON
A PARLIAMENT SCORE)
GRAHAM STUDIOS
NYC 2016

with ancestry. Through the four-hour experience I found myself in conversation through dance between the present and a loaded past.

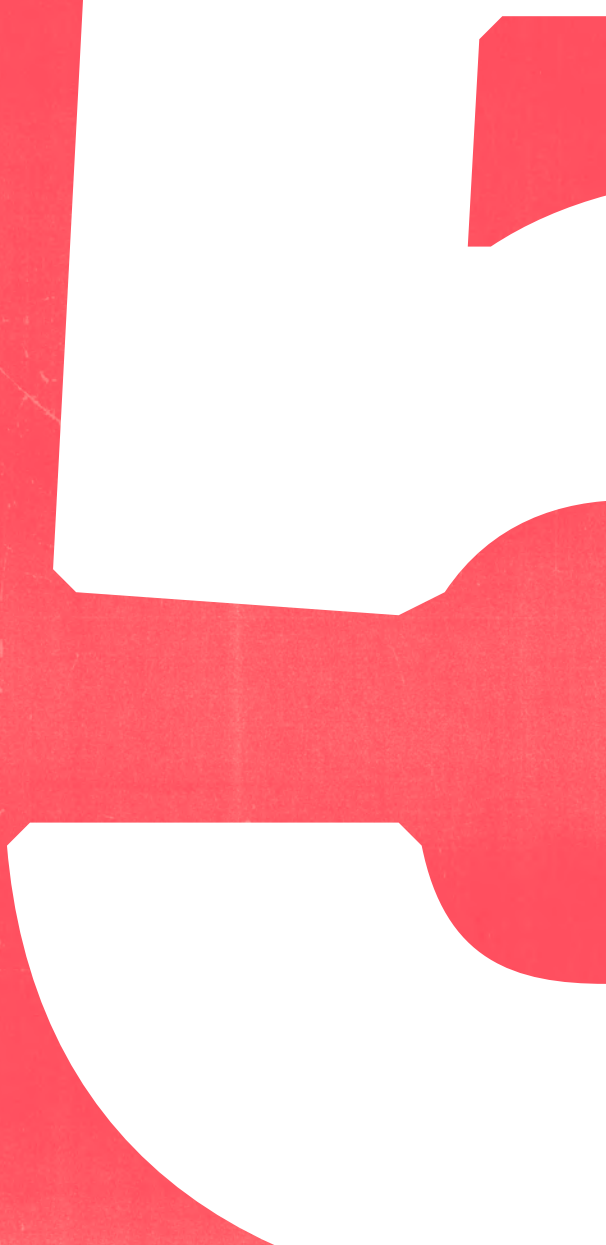
When I would start to hear the voices in my head saying that I was surely doing too much, that the aesthetics embodied by my “uptown” physicality are “wrong” for this sort of experimental performance practices, that my embodied “old school” aesthetics represent tyranny and ignorance—I let myself drop that shame and observe myself in a precarious balance, being stretched into physical lines that cut through the space. It was an incredible luxury of permission.

In our mediated age, eye contact alone is intimidation enough to send a fellow human into the void of the present moment. I would fall into eyes that I have looked into through tears and laughter, toil and success. The next moment, I would find myself drowning in the deep pools of eyes of someone I have never met. It was all an invitation into the infinite, breathtaking possibilities of actually being together without judgment or agenda.

The intimacy was terrifying.

Across the room I saw two dancers of my generation frozen, forehead-to-forehead. These were women I have known through triumph and transition. Their gesture radiated love. I was pulled into a new dance in which the sediment of all our digging led to gratitude for what we share through time and space, without language and without shame. We who know each other, and we who are strangers, all caught up in this dance between stillness and momentum. The love was there. Even in this history of drama and power plays, it was ours to invite.

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／ ASSEMBLAGE OF US
／ SILENCE
IS BIG MEDICINE
／ NO ONE'S TURF
／ IN THE ZOO OF ONE'S
OWN THINKING
／ AT THE END
OF THE SECOND
OR THIRD DAY,
SHE STOOD

We divorce. We try out separating. We come back together. We separate again.

I see the body of this past-and-present partner of mine in full for the first time.

The standard way of forming intimacy is to move from a desiring gaze that emphasizes the gulf between you and the other, towards enough courage to venture across it. Sight, separation—an illusion, projection, fantasy. You cross. You crash into one another, at sometimes unbelievably high speeds fueled by longing, and you disintegrate, and re-form into one another.

But I knew this person first as a hard pressure against the back of my head, as a bunch of ontological questions our bodies' speechless sleep asked one another. I loved them for their being in that call and response with me, I loved the assemblage of us. And now we've broken

apart, and I wonder at their reality separate from mine, but the way our bodies have marked one another is not something to question. I feel some jealousy, I think, some, but I also know—in a way I've never known at the end of any other relationship—that I can't be replaced.

Does this sound hyperbolic? It's been two years and these feelings still have depth. I feel more alive towards this person than towards all of the short-term sexual partners I've had since then. We were completely bare with one another.

**PANEL REFLECTING
ON THE PARLIAMENT
AT THE NASHER MUSEUM,
DUKE UNIVERSITY
IN 2018:**

Panel participants

Nina Be, MindBody Centering Yoga and LiveGlobally Inc. / Brian Hare, Evolutionary Anthropology, Duke University / Faisal Khan, Carolina Peace Center / Negar Mottahedeh, Literature, Duke University / Dr. Jennifer Francis, Vice Provost, Duke University / Barbara Dickinson, Dance, Duke University / Wayne Norman, Kenan Institute for Ethics

Moderated by

Hannah Bondurant, Philosophy, Duke University

MICHAEL ✓

Here we are, nobody knows why, nobody knows what we're a part of. What the fuck's going on? There's pain and suffering in the world and that seems to be intimately connected to our existence. But it's also super pleasurable. Living, loving, eating, being in the world is great. But nobody is okay with it. We have not learned to be okay with the deep unknown of *is it turtles all the way down*

or not. We have no idea what's going on, what reality we're standing on. We have no idea if we are part of something larger—and that's something we probably never will know, and shouldn't know. For me, the big question is: why is it not okay to not know? Why can't we live with this unknown quite comfortably? There is so much that's good. What about the strategy to just live well, and protect that experience? It does bother me that nobody's okay, that everybody's so damaged.

James Hillman, a prominent U.S. American psychologist in the last third of the twentieth century, argued that psychotherapy was going wrong because it was teaching people to cope with a deeply broken system. Nobody should feel healthy working under neon lights all day. Nobody's meant to do that. If you were unable to cope, your anger would take over and you'd start tearing things

*Cory's notes while watching the archival recording
(numbers are timestamps)*

no rules
like colonoscopy
pure play, just for itself
Survivor meets Lord of the Flies
observing until you break down structures
gravitate to self or other 14:54
knees on shoes 15:00
observing how culture is made 15:40
connectivity 16:30—initially individuals, find place
pre-verbal, causing trouble 19:20
discomfort from “pondering not thinking” etc 19:40
group hum 20:30
was I going to be able to follow instructions 21-ish
start to behave as w/apes, headstand / non-imitation
w/chimps 22:50
about an hour in started having fun 24-ish

From the *Book of Comments* collected after the *Parliament* session
at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, 2014

Image courtesy of Jeffrey Gormly



down, but instead we have all these coping mechanisms. Psychotherapy and the arts are both grappling with whether they are active practices or merely sedatives that help us to cope, as individuals, with the bullshit that's going on in the world. Mindfulness, which is on the tip of every tongue today, has to answer for itself similarly. I don't want *Parliament* to be another coping mechanism, and I hope that what takes it into another category is that it gives you this cathartic experience of exhaling and releasing, being held by others and by yourself, and by the universe. It gives you a spiritual disclosure, but at the same time it makes you resist more because it creates a problem. It forces you to ask yourself, *if I like this so much, what does that mean? Why is my life not like this?* And I struggle with this myself—and I'm an artist. I'm not even a banker. And

FREEDOM (24:40) in Parliament: given by others
 Dutch philosopher Huizinga 25:45 on play
 wouldn't happen w/random segment of population
 26:35
 how do you engage 27:50 w/o encroaching on desire?
 deep sense of caring 28:53
 intrusiveness of small talk 31:00
 layers of domestication 32:10 that separate me
 VERY POLITICAL 32:49—silence is big medicine,
 been waiting for decades for silence to be supported
 seeking permission 33:55 begs larger political q: how
 free are we? policy vs psychology
 isolation, fingertips over palm, social conditioning
 34:15
 Katie sitting beside me 36:00 little signals
 leaders, rebels, comforters—natural roles
 starters of sound/movement 37:40
 curious & cheeky ones 38:45—global permission

still I have that sense, that if my life's
like this in *Parliament*, if life can actu-
ally be this wonderful and life-giving,
why isn't it like this always? Isn't this
what I should be working towards?

humans have group identity 40:15
late, didn't know why these ppl were doing this 42:25
impulses 44:05—very interested in how nervous
systems were interacting, bellies, field, static
opportunity to express our rebellion 45:10
is their behavior predictive? Meyers-Briggs? 46:00
lover role 47:25 (& yoga teacher)
didn't feel at all awkward looking into strangers' eyes
for hours at a time (48:30)
inability to talk but strong sense of feeling 41:20
language out of patterns 50:10
a lot of rules, do nots 50:40—consent 51:30
group responsibility & commitment 52:20
feelings & desire to connect 54:45 after, I felt
elevated, it was therapeutic
no resolving/problem solving = very nourishing
56:50
Greek theater > civic duty

58:45 creating culture together, play is revolutionary
how do you require it? reintegration of mind/body is
salvation 59:50
voluntarism is important 1:00:50
jury duty 1:01:30
experiment to bring communities together? 1:02:30
fight my schoolmarm identity 1:05:00
being observed snapped me out 1:06:20
camera was whole other thing 1:07:40
observation didn't matter to me 1:08:00
Parliament lets you take advantage of attraction to
intra-group strangers <1:11:00
basic vs learned trust 1:14:15—w/in first hr my brain
wasn't functioning normally, re-acquire language
1:15:05
trust comes w/level playing field (1:17:00)—no one's
turf without even weapon of language
ecstatic dance 1:19:25 vs seeding self-inquiry

mediator role? 1:20:40

it can take hours to negotiate w/a person 1:21:40

the group creates a field 1:22:30

again fear expressed over non-screening 1:24:40

you have a lot of time 1:24:50

power of the ppl that seem isolated <1:26:30

smile really powerful 1:27:30

Michael Kliën, undated
Image courtesy of the artist

be the son of one's own thinking

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BARBARA DICKINSON

NASHER MUSEUM
DURHAM 2018
AND OTHER SESSIONS

We go willingly into this experience. It is not something that has been assigned to us.

The beginning: individuals separately sitting, standing, or lying down around the space—we are not allowed to lean on the walls.

Occasionally, there are pairs or small groups close together, if they entered as friends.

The end: groups draped over each other, pairs standing close together, many physical connections of all kinds.

Talk gets in the way of so much sensing that passes between one person and another. Being called upon to respond without the conditioned linkage of language with physical attitudes and actions, we are able to communicate more directly, in a sense. Who are we, really, when we strip away language and signifying gestures, leaving only our physical presence?

I have vivid sensorial memories of interactions with others from these sessions. They are so present within me that I can call them up with ease, immersing myself in that time and place as I relive them.

One young woman seemed always to be sitting and observing in isolation as the three-day *Parliament* in the Nasher Museum progressed. But at the end of the second or third day, she stood, rose on the balls of her feet, placed her hand in front of her as if in prayer, and stayed there. Her connection with everyone in the room was powerful. I was immediately compelled to move close to her and dance.

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**／ A TASK AT HAND
／ PRESIDENT
SHOULD BE A DANCER
／ FALSE NECESSITY
／ TECHNOLOGY
FOR OUR TIMES
／ PERMANENT
CONFERENCE
OF CITIZENS
IN A STATE OF DANCE**

After the session ends, we find one another, laughing at the shyness we're both experiencing. We speak to one another, but very little; the world where we met didn't have words. They are a decade younger than me at least, a BFA student, the age of my students. Back to coded ways of communicating, we make steady, wondering eye contact, smiling, for a long time.

In our conversation after *Parliament*, Michael started talking about the patterns that arose across sessions, the things he'd observed or that people talk about. "Entire relationships take place," he said. "People meet, fall in love, break up, come back together, cheat on one another, divorce . . ."

"That happened to me," I told him.

For some time I glowed through my days. I had been a thing among other things, moving

and being moved. It left me handling life with wonder. I wanted to keep it but it started to get thinner, of course. I wanted to find a way to get some of it back, but what's *Parliament* that isn't *Parliament*? We live on a set we've constructed to make ourselves people, rather than things, among things. For a time I was able to see it with double vision, but without another hit, the memory left my body, became something once removed: an experience I could try to describe but could no longer feel.

A week or two after doing *Parliament*, while the glow was still coming and going, I was telling someone from who I was still struggling to separate about the experience. As with every conversation I'd had with him in recent years, I was trying to shake free of him by getting us both to see our situation in and through something else, to alienate myself from it. We were at the Brooklyn Museum. Across the bright canned air of the gallery I saw my partner from *Parliament*, looking at a painting with another slight-framed kid. We walked straight to one another, I think we both felt the other there before our sight caught up. Our companions watched us like strangers watch their dogs circle one another. Something must have passed between us verbally but I have no memory of what. "That was the person I was telling you about," I whispered to my ex as we walked away, but fell quiet after that. In almost a decade of closeness it was the first thing I knew I'd never be able to explain to him.

STEVE VALK

The term “magic crowd” was used to describe the cover for the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which was, for its time, the most expensive album cover ever made. The group of historical figures on the cover is not a collage, as it might appear at first glance; it’s a photograph. All of those figures are life-size cutouts. They *made* the room, as a set, with all of the flowers and everything else. Imagining that the Beatles are actually standing in the crowd of people they picked out to be on the cover—Einstein and Marilyn Monroe and Anton LaVey and William Burroughs and Mahatma Gandhi—changes things. It gives you the sense that these voices come from somewhere. The magic crowd, the assemblage, is a kind of parliament.

The absence of the “author” in *Parliament* is like a Japanese *koān*, a mysterious little phrase

that you say that twists your mind. It focuses you on a level of not knowing, a state that the piece wants to activate. It's negative-space choreography. The "maker" is not there, in the room, and it falls to you to find your way through the work—the work is connected to the person, but the person is outside. By contrast, my own job, as dramaturg, is to be outside and inside and outside and inside and outside, like a Möbius strip. I try to take that swerve, that curve, outside of the way even Michael as the artist is thinking about it and working on it. Dramaturgy focuses on context, a work's place in the world. For me, it means creating a potential field. The magic crowd association is one contextual image that comes out of thinking about the work, and together with other such imagery and pieces of language, a larger framework of potentiality emerges. *What did it do for you?*, I ask people who have come into contact with the work. This is a way of asking about its potential. What did it instigate? What did it move? What did it affect? The task of being *Parliament's* dramaturg is to create language and images that expand the potential field, in the direction of action: literally, I hope, to the point of political action, or the creation or transformation of institutions.

If you want to have an organic transformative consciousness at the core of your society, then the deep, embodied phenomena that are evoked in *Parliament* are of the nature of how you would have to think about civic life. Because it's the same, whether you are an individual or an institution. You have to go in with yourself (with who you are, your space, your living space) and be *available* to others

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in a way that would normally not happen. *Parliament* can be extrapolated endlessly in this way. It's an experiential field, and you have to enter into it with a different consciousness.

There is a task at hand, and we need to equip the imagination for it. Dance is an act of imagination connected to all other kinds of acts of imagination. William Forsythe's definition of choreography is that it is always overturning previous definitions of what choreography was. Culture comes from cultivation, which means overturning the soil. That's what the arts do. They overturn your thinking.

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Michael Kliën, undated
Image courtesy of the artist

Parsonian stage

being in the world
|

to create
cognitive frames

How ← by patient observation

↳ absolute
gaze

| of self
of others

↳ quieting the mind

→ release the hold of the situation

→ elder Paragonia
of mind

|
↳ community

exchange / sedimentary
processes

→ co-terminable

**AFTER
THE FIRST PARLIAMENT ON HYDRA,
THE PROJECT
SPENT TWO WEEKS
IN THE BENAKI MUSEUM,**

one of the major arts institutions in Athens. Then it began to take on its own life, accumulating participants at a dozen or so sites. When I visited Michael at Duke we looked through his *Parliament* archive together. Referring to it that way is a bit of a joke, because it's just a couple of flat boxes in his office, like most artists' personal archives, with notebooks and paper scraps and playbills and posters, other ephemera. It's not all *Parliament*, either, there are other projects and musings mixed in. We set aside some sketches and notes for me to copy and take home. We came across a long scroll of paper and unfurled it to find a *Parliament* score, and Michael tried to guess where it was from. In the corner was written *Cairo*. But Michael was sure they had never done *Parliament* in Cairo. Had they? He had no memory of it. But they must have, on reflection, they must have. He gestured to his drawer, where a hard

MICHAEL ✓

It takes a lot of time to sense. People who have real pressure to function in the system—to make a living, to survive for their kids—they do not have that time. That's the reality. So, is *Parliament* egalitarian? I don't know. Who has that kind of time? That's a real question.

CORY ✓

It's very real. Even if you had a *Parliament* constantly running in every city

accessible to everyone in theory, people who are working two jobs and have kids, they can't make it.

MICHAEL ✓

It would have to be paid. At the moment, a large *Parliament* aimed at broad participation attracts two primary sets of people. The first is the entitled. The second group is the disenfranchised. These are people who, in some way, have no role in society or are denied one, and as a consequence they don't know what to do with their time. They might be scraping by on social security, they might be artists doing their thing. They're a certain kind of social outcast. Looking at what parts of the social spectrum are addressed, the middle is left out, and the reasons for this are largely economical. Most of the middle, for example, would need to take a day or multiple days off of work to participate, which for many isn't

disk with Gideon Koppel's video documentation of the private session with Martha Graham Company in New York City sits, unedited. When he joined the faculty at Duke he brought *Parliament* with him as his introduction, where it ran for a week at the Nasher Museum, with students and professors from across fields of knowledge as its primary participants.

As we sifted for a few days through partial records and half-memories of these *Parliaments* past, we allowed ourselves to dream about *Parliaments* future. We shared the conviction that it could be put to work in the world and we talked big game, about how this thing *does it*: it creates other human animals and other institutions and other ways of relating and other ways of loving, even, and other ways of being in relation. It questions the model of the family, it questions everything. Sometimes we would stop as if shaking ourselves, look around Michael's office, blink awake

under the fluorescents, and wonder what the hell we're talking about. We are asking too much of this *Parliament* thing, we'd say. We'd start to sound ridiculous to ourselves. But then we would stop ourselves again, remembering, of course, these fluorescent lights aren't okay. We aren't okay, nobody around us is okay, and *Parliament* is part of the reason we know that. We would remember the fractal universe within it that makes it a thing beyond itself, and stepping back into its sediment, it made sense again. After all, part of the reason attributing so much power to an art project sounds ridiculous to us is that we're both products of the system that *Parliament* threatens.

Michael and I have spent a lot of time talking about how a dysfunctional system can nevertheless maintain itself, and in fact be a highly functioning system when it comes to doing so. This can happen at any scale, from a family unit to institutions like

desirable and for many others isn't even possible. To solve that would require strong curatorial, organizational, and managerial choices wherever you place it.

CORY /

It's like jury duty. You get a notice in the mail: you have to come do *Parliament* this week, and you get paid minimum wage to do it.

MICHAEL /

I would want to live in a society that does that. A permanent *Parliament* is, in a sense, a proposition to make attuning one's awareness and becoming conscious on a deep, relational level into a civic duty.

CORY /

And what about the flip side? Getting politicians into the room?

MICHAEL /

I used to say that the president should be a dancer. If the president were to

always *dance* the things that they talk about, something new would be made sensible and visible. Back then, it was meant as a joke, or a provocation, suggesting that people who have relational knowledge should hold government positions: a ministry for relational knowledge. But now, I mean it seriously. It doesn't seem so outrageous when you think of the enormous influence the church system has. The difficulty of getting politicians or people of higher social standing to take part in *Parliament* is an indicator of how threatening it is. It's much harder to get the president of Duke to do it than it is a professor; and much harder to get a professor than it is a student. You will never see a senator doing it. They cannot allow themselves to drool. They cannot allow themselves to be seen with their head nestled in a teenager's

theatre and dance and schooling systems, to a world socioeconomic order. It might be possible to say that a nation's economy is growing steadily and well, meaning that the system is a functioning system *for that economy*, but it isn't functioning for any living organism; that's the kind of state you end up in when you don't examine what it *means* to say something is functioning. This constitutes a theoretical problem. "It's possible for the system to be highly functioning *and* to produce highly problematic symptoms," Michael says; "to function doesn't mean to be healthy." These functional dysfunctioning systems produce symptoms of their dysfunctionality, and the symptoms are disastrous. But everything we do, where we find value and meaning, our thoughts, our imaginations, all of it has been produced by the particular system from which we're not separable, as part of its effective efforts to maintain itself.

armpit. There is a necessary suspension of accepted reality in which they cannot participate because it is incumbent on them to maintain the *real* outside. Follow that to its logical conclusion about society and what it shows is that there are no spaces where you can say and do according to your impulses, even if a safe environment has been established.

CORY /

We were talking earlier about being able to see the weight of representation on people who are elected representatives, like really observe how heavy it is to represent in the way an elected official's body moves, and that seems related to why you can't get a politician right now to participate in *Parliament*. It makes me think of Murray Bookchin and communalism, or Abdullah Öcalan's concept of democratic confederalism that comes out of his reading of Bookchin—you

This is related to what Unger calls false necessity. For example, in the North American and European systems in which these conversations are embedded, and which the “we” of this text will now increasingly come to mean, we believe the internet is necessary. And in some sense it is; but it isn't a necessity in a fundamental sense. If you try to do any of the things for which you think you rely on the internet without the internet, you find, in most cases, that you can do them. False necessities are so ingrained that they feel like reality, but there's a tell: if you don't dig in your heels when that reality completely changes, you also see that you're still okay. As an example Michael points to a shift as he experienced it over the course of his own lifetime: “what was biological sex is suddenly gender is suddenly not binary anymore. It happens quickly, integrates itself into your reality, and you're totally okay with it. Those are big changes.

replace elected representatives with delegates who can be re-called.

MICHAEL ✓

That's a great way of thinking about it: a delegation system for *Parliament* in which you have participants by proposal, who act as delegates from a shared reality. It's not about negotiating interests on the behalf of others, either. It's actually living out, and being with, on your behalf. That may be why I'm naturally drawn to the United Nations when I talk about implementing *Parliament* at a political level, because the representational nature of parliamentary governments would create a lot of problems for *Parliament*. If you tried it in Ireland's parliament, the Dáil, they would stand around, they would not move; and they would be irritated and angry. This field cannot be entered by a person with this kind of representational weight

We are capable of these changes," he says. "Of course they 'threaten' identity and all that, but once you go with it, it isn't threatening at all. It just is. *Parliament* makes you experience all these false necessities by giving you the negative space of relations. When you're in it, you experience a complete alternative reality of being, and yet it seems very inhabitable."

In Michael's words, *Parliament* is a technology for our times. Like all technologies (computers and cameras, navigation devices and microscopes, writing and language), this one has a variety of potential applications, most of which have not yet been explored. Steve thinks about such applications a lot as part of his dramaturgical role; Michael and I talked about some too. What would it do if taken out of the arts-related or educational contexts in which it has mostly, until now, been used? What about in political process? What would it do in

on their body. This, in turn, illuminates something about politics. If you have so much political-representational weight on your body that you cannot move anymore, you will be unable to communally create a living organism. Yet it's these representational bodies that are supposed to create that living body. They are the ones writing the legislature for the state. If they don't feel like they can live, the whole thing will be dead.

CORY

We distrust politicians who attain a certain level of political visibility because we view them as built out of all of the compromises they've had to make, in order to represent enough people, to get to where they are. They can't really move. Politicians at a high enough level of government are all essentially moderate because in order to get to where they are, they *have* to be moderate.

places or situations of conflict? Could it belong to a transformative justice process? With some distance from these conversations, I think, aren't speculations like this exactly what Michael meant when he told me that we can't "just imagine" our way out of our own mess? They begin to make it sound like applied theatre, in the vein of Augusto Boal for example, whose Theatre of the Oppressed techniques have been used to communally affect and enact legislation and are regularly put to use by practitioners working in conflict zones. There's resonance in the thinking, around rehearsing for reality and the link with Ancient Greek theatregoing as an act of citizenship, but applied theatre, it seems to me, starts from the social or political structure as a given and tries to alter it by injecting its logics with performance techniques. Michael's technology is something different. It is the discovery that a group of people temporarily

MICHAEL ✓

Meeting and getting to know quite a few politicians has been fascinating to me. How their bodies are just so weighted down by not being able to move in their own ways. And that penetrates to their thinking as well. To give them the benefit of the doubt, I have also been impressed by politicians' genuine wit. It's a sacrifice to not move anymore. It's a sacrifice to be so representational, to represent everybody in your movement, so that as few people as possible feel *this person doesn't represent me.*

When we observe politics, we think we're outside of it, and we are not in it. We say: "they" do such-and-such to us, and "they" do so-and-so to the environment, and "they" do something to each other. I think that gets right to the bottom of the problem. It's a much more fluid border than that. *You are part of politics.*

organizing themselves differently, in this certain way, produces a sensation endemic to the world.

When Michael talks about "discovering" it, he is thinking back to Gordon Lawrence's visit to Daghda Dance Company in Ireland, which Michael directed from 2003 until its disbanding. Lawrence is the founder of social dreaming, a psychoanalytical method for group relations and group analysis, in which he trained Daghda during his visit, and in discussing the method with them he would say that he discovered it. This struck Michael as odd. Isn't a method something you develop or create? Eventually, he came to understand that this is the perspective of psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis, existing dynamics of the mind are under study and you discover how to replicate them, along with associated behavior. *Parliament*, it seems to him, is like that. It taps into human dynamics already

and you have agency—or not! But it's
your responsibility to feel that recursive
relationship to the larger whole.

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at play beneath the surface and replicates them consistently, the way every dog park is home to the same familiar sniffing and greeting, play styles, and tussles. Michael couldn't have predicted what happens in *Parliament*—the behavior, how it's felt, how deeply this thing provides the grounds to feel and sense things for the vast majority of participants, how it shakes you as a participant into a kind of awareness that you wouldn't have thought possible.

Technologies change forms of communication, systems, whole societies. Writing is a technology that changes the human relationship to language but also to memory, for example. Putting *Parliament* to work as a technology doesn't mean it's clear what the effects would be, and that's a good thing for the project of making a future that's a real departure from the system within which Michael discovered it. The resulting realizations are destabilizing. It is

uncontrollable, and it's something Michael does not want to control. He talks about Rilke, who says that poets always write for two civilizations in the future. Their work will never affect the now; it first becomes meaningful for a future civilization. Michael wants *Parliament* to be both, working in the now by having an acute effect on those who partake, and on its surrounding field; but also developing the imagination of those of us raised not to question capitalism's inevitability for what's coming after the next catastrophe, after the collapse of capitalism. How to rebuild; *what* to (re)build. In this way, it enters politics through a different door. Where I found Michael's statement that the president should be a dancer appealing, a friend, responding to a draft of this text, told me her takeaway from reading about *Parliament* had been that there should be no president. What we feel and what we allow each other to feel, what we

determine to be sane and what we determine to be insane, all of it is political, and all of it constitutes, in the end, the real reality that we have to inhabit.

Hardt and Negri write that revolutions are for monsters, because after revolution, the ones who caused the revolution don't know how to inhabit the new space. It's for other, monstrous consciousnesses to inhabit. Fantasies about specific applications of *Parliament*, interesting as they might be, are still the imaginings of non-monsters. Lifeboats are one of Michael's recurring symbols, and *Parliament* is a lifeboat, carrying the non-monsters towards what comes next, maybe along the way training us to co-exist with the monsters who will understand how to live there.

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JEFFREY GORMLY

“Giving to the situation
the power to make us think”

Isabelle Stengers, *Introductory Notes
on an Ecology of Practices*

“The process started
by constituent power never stops”

Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power
and the Modern State*

TEN-DAY PARLIAMENT
BENAKI MUSEUM
ATHENS 2014

we play being blind

we become hyper aware of the attention
of others . the sense of being stared at .
when the gaze falls too heavily . when you
want to look with the lightest of touches,
but find you can't . you can take away the
eyes . head wrapped in a scarf . hoodie worn
backwards . go blind . reconstitute sense of
touch . telepathy . kinaesthesia . neutralise
the spectacle . because we're not in a show .
you can't figure it out with just your eyes
see with hands . feet . learn to see with
your body . your organs . your softness

we play oracle

retreating into the cave . interior
darkness . womb . temple . source of dreams
visions inspirations . prophetic not-seeing .
Teresias blind and far-seeing
speaking as an oracle . one can speak truth .
of self or situation . group or governance . earth
or gods . dream or intuition . mystery . void
leadership and wisdom . become a
gesture . an instance . emergent . one can
speak|move . as|with authority . without
naming or invoking god . master

we spin

turning on feet . eyes closed or open .
arms out or up . weaving like an airplane .
alone or with a partner . whirling like a
dervish . whirling for release . to be soothed .
to be moving without constructing a path .
to be flowing . to become dizzy . enlightened .
pure sensation . pure thoughtbody
the vortex or spiral is a natural form .
energy pathway . structures growth .
expansion . exchange of information . flow

we shape

in *parliament* square . large or extended
movement can tend to the circular . walking the
perimeter . sometimes hours without stop .
a 'skin' forms on a developing *social organism*

we stir

play with the skin . speed up . contract
the perimeter . cut through the centre . walk
patterns . walk formations that ripple around
others . stirring up the collective body . pulling
others upwards off backs . asses . knees

we grow skin

a game . try to stay 'in relation with'
everyone else . moving . being moved .
according to an ever-shifting constellation .
it can start with just one . then other
points of contact . get folded in . until one
is being 'with' . each body present
and with something else . ecology of mind .
has begun to crystallise . mindful . tuned-
in-ness . sensitivity to . responsibility for .
whole system . an organism . remembering .
creates flesh . sedimenting . what happened
before . builds a self . remembering is
collaborative . happens in our bodies . body .
morphic field of choreography . grows .
learns . evolves . notice . what persists

what gets constituted

something else . [em]bodied . social
organism . body politic . demos . what the
Athenians meant '*as village, the collective body
of the people, and the assembly of citizens*'

a being in|of itself . grows a *constitution* .
sustains a living process . of negotiation . of
original human relations . 'original' because
each time re-excavated . newly minted . out of

the encounter . with the mystery . of other
beings . culture can form . emergent . dancers
as cells . swarming . a super social organism

is skin

so the skin we grow . isn't a boundary .
between inside parliament . and outside .
but skin as in a social membrane .
a sensitive . sensing . organ . of the social
inside parliament . we grow . this
new organ . of perception . on behalf of
the village . global village

an institution

ever since then . I have been thinking .
the institution of the twenty first century .
as skin . membrane . surface for sensing .
organ of communication . connective tissue

of parallel [political] process

there is room . in the doing of politics .
for embodied practice . citizen not-
knowing . dancer knowhow . without
negating . legislative process . in a space .
in your house of representatives . in
the basement|courtyard|roofgarden .
a parallel process . that returns authority .
to body . biomass . other . mystery

is a permanent conference

in the desert of the real . is a cave . in the
cave . a spring . *demos* comes to drink . is
refreshed . finds its body . the makings of one
the well becomes an oasis . image of
irrigation . participants become carriers of
a special frequency . embody a new spirit
of democracy . return to the well regularly .
refresh their creative authority . authorship .
citizenship . replenishment . drink deep .
this new liquidity . in human relations

of citizens in a state of dance

dance . state of . lightness . movement .
change . spontaneity . creativity . truth
of the body . intelligence made flesh .
communication . flexibility . grace . beauty

dance . state of . a nation or territory
organised . self-organised . self-organising .
emergent . a process space . a dancefloor,
not a stage . a learning surface . an ecology
of practices . an ecology of mind . a school
without teachers . movement without
leaders . a chorus of oracles . truth without
masters . a progressive composition .
a technology of belonging . a matrix .
a swarm . an open multiplicity . pattern
unceasing . pattern and possibility

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Jeffrey Gormly, 2014
Image courtesy of the artist



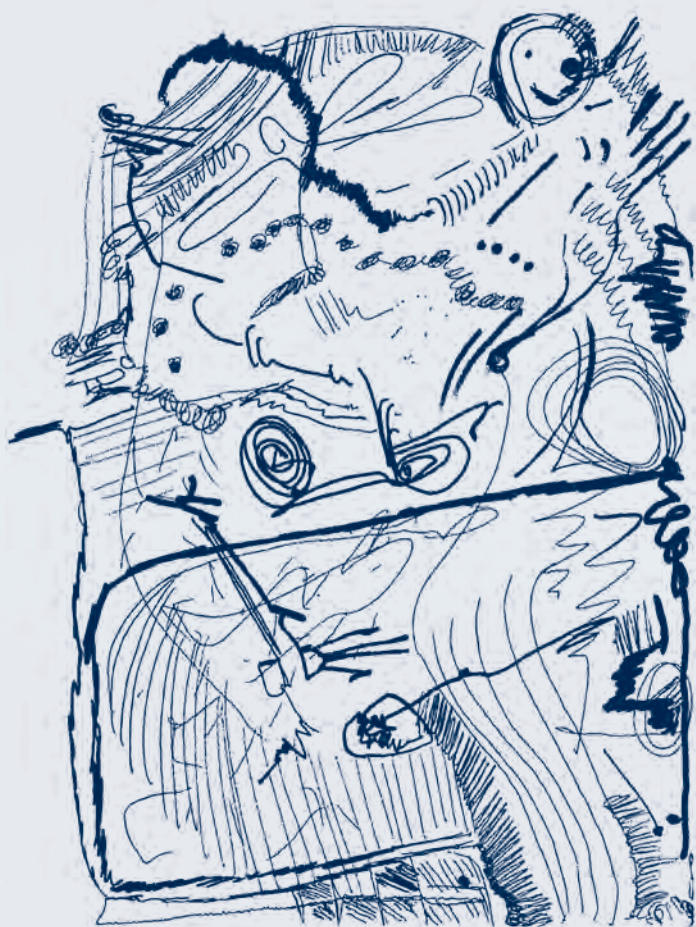
"one is in a tent so large + thick
that at midday one can see from it
the stars. But one meets with
another, undivided like oneself. There
will be good fortune."

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WHAT WE CAN IMAGINE
IS POLITICAL
LIFEBOAT
INTO THE NEXT
PROBLEM
OF THE FIRE SPRINKLER
STEP AWAY,
EVERYBODY

Floor Grootenhuis, 2021
Image courtesy of the artist

“The first drawing [page 101] is based on my memory of my participation in *Parliament* [at the Segal Center in 2018]. I re-read the score, took a few moments to recall and then drew from there until it felt complete. For the second drawing I re-read the score, took some time with it, put it away and gave myself a timer of 22 minutes and 22 seconds to enact the score again, alone at home (with the blind dog that lives with me). Immediately after the time ended I drew until I felt the drawing was complete. I was initially going to do only one drawing—but as I started this is what happened.”



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THE COLLECTIVE
PSYCHIC
AND ECONOMIC
SHOCK
OF THE PANDEMIC

led to an immediate restructuring of life around the world that has been, at its core, about bodies and relations. It has been enabled by the rate and volume of global human travel—there is no clearer proof that we make the world by our movement through it. Though they rarely acknowledge it, the new policies and business practices that attempt to control the spread of the virus while maintaining the world economic order all stem out of questions about bodies in relation: what is a body, where are its limits? How do we perceive our relation to the whole, the accumulation of countless individual actions or refusals to act, and how do we then act rightly? What needs to change about the web of human and nonhuman relations to stop oppression from replicating itself within it? How can we tear down entrenched social relations, strip away all that's become encrusted on them over the history

MICHAEL ✓

When you build an opera house, you're building it in the architectural sense but also in the structural, institutional sense. Who's running it? Who's who, what is the hierarchy of workers? That's all contractual work. All the agreements, and social agreements, and unspoken agreements, and an understanding of how you relate to the actual physical architecture. This whole network of institutional relations

has to be established in order to bring an opera house into existence. But this, then, is finite. We used to have this great advantage, as a culture, that across the centuries, these opera houses would always burn down. Ironically, that was a real blessing. But then they invented the fire sprinkler. That's a real systemic problem. Now those institutions no longer burn to the ground, meaning we don't get the chance to rebuild them. When you build something finite that burns to the ground every hundred years or so, you then build something new when it burns. The new institution is still finite, but you've had the chance to rethink it to align better with the current situation; there's at least a *seasonal* change; there's a permanent renegotiation of those human structures. But now we're stuck with these opera houses and fire regulations are getting

of capitalism and the legacies that drive it—from colonialism and slavery to ecological extraction and over-consumption? How do we identify, and leave behind, our false needs? How do we equip our imaginations to approach all of these issues if we are among those whose imaginations themselves have been trained up by a system that seems too massive, too heavy, to move?

These questions are urgent but the answers, if they are to constitute true alternatives, can only emerge slowly, from a place of experiment where nothing is familiar and we are unable to fall back on our old habits as an escape. Because these questions are fundamentally about the body, both the individual body and the body of the multitude, the answers must be sought from within a renegotiation of bodies in relation. It will also be necessary to understand what has happened

to the body as a result of isolation, masking, mourning, empty time, death, asymmetrically distributed violence, the demands of labor deemed essential, and other COVID-19 side effects. A diagnostic and a way forward are both needed.

The set of instructions given to participants when a session of *Parliament* begins creates a space where—without words—social relations are broken, estranged, and stripped away. It does so by slowing things down and asking participants to exist in the slowness. In the first hour of nearly every *Parliament*, no one knows what to do. The disorientation is total. Together, participants melt into a magma that consumes the crusts of handshakes, smiles, embraces, nods, winks, crossed arms; of tacit assumptions about personal space, touch, silence, and the pace of relating to one another. Eventually, as the magma moves, heats, swirls, and cools, new

better and better and we're stuck with theatres, and operas, as if this is what it is. It becomes accepted as reality. It's the most bizarre thing. More and more, we buy into these finite, defined, brutalistic cultural building blocks. But we celebrate them rather than actually making them work for us. The recursive epistemological perspective is missing. It doesn't make sense for us to create in a black box, I would argue. The notion that we should be creating in a void of relations makes our problems worse, because there is no such a void. This metaphysical thinking has caused huge damage to the planet. We have to stop it. This shit has to go. Theatres have to go, opera houses have to go. It all has to go. They are finite structures that don't work any longer. They're lovely, they're great. They've given me a lot of meaning in my life. I see a great deal in them that I love,

but that's not good enough. Sometimes, no matter what you do, a relationship stops working. The relationship between this culture and our cultural institutions doesn't work at all anymore. The fire sprinklers, the fire, the water system have all gotten too good and these things no longer burn down. Then what you get is this conservationist mentality, which says that the longer you can keep them from burning down, the more important they become, these things. Of course nobody wants to burn down the Vienna Opera House or the Paris Opera; they're nice. But these are not infinite structures. We can build these anew. We can burn them, metaphorically at least. I love what Joseph Beuys says: we need to be in a permanent conference. It's a constant negotiation. It never ceases. The idea that we can build something and then have it in perpetuity, that's

forms of relations begin to solidify out of it. It is less an artwork than it is a technology for cleaning social relations. It delivers a psychic thunderbolt that, by jarring participants out of what they have come to accept without question as the real, unfurls a potential realer real. Participants leave *Parliament* with the ability to imagine ways of relating that have previously been inaccessible to them.

The pandemic, too, has been such a psychic thunderbolt, this one on a global scale. In a matter of weeks it broke down social relations beyond recognition, and with such finality that it became almost immediately a shock to watch a film and see people in crowds, or visiting one another in private homes, or eating in a restaurant, or embracing on the street. It has had the effect of slowing down the pace of human life. In all of this it is like *Parliament*, a massive parliament that envelops all

so bad for us and for the planet. We have to get radical about this stuff. You cannot go on and on and on and say, yeah, but, yeah, but . . . No. Everything has to end. We make a big party. We serve good food at a safe distance and we burn the opera house. Symbolically.

CORY ✓

The way a forest fire needs to happen or else it will kill people when it happens.

MICHAEL ✓

And we use the warmth-energy somehow, so that this symbolic burning morphs the opera house into something else. I am thinking about how what were once palaces belonging to Austrian aristocracy became the passport offices of an emerging republic. To break through into the realer real, we can't stop with just burning this stuff down, because what are you going to build then? Another opera house, probably. It's a knee-jerk

of us. We feel, too, the effect of each of our actions, whether we obey or resist the quarantine, whether we take the vaccine or not. The impossibility of withdrawal is clear, whether we live in a big city whose hospitals have been overwhelmed or a town with few cases whose economy has tanked. But politicians and big business frame the new reality as a temporary pause. Soon we will be back to normal. Soon our lives will be able to continue as before, perhaps with a few minor adjustments.

To do *Parliament* now, as a conscious response to this global destabilization, is to insist on living in this slowing and re-orientation differently. It joins other calls to refusing return or the wholesale shift of life to a virtual space, focusing instead on the individual and collective body as the cradle of social relations and the space from which a new way of being together must emerge. The political reference

response: "Oh, we'll build a cultural center." And the first step towards doing that is to research other cultural centers, in similar communities, with similar goals, and then in the end it looks exactly the same, plus another window or something. This is desperate innovation. It's not radical, not urgent innovation. It's not experimental culture. *Parliament* should push us towards experimental culture. Imagine we'd abandoned those theatres as we have done with our coal mines, and acknowledge that they belong to a different era, that their offerings can no longer address this distressed civilization. Let us transform these tired colossi into catalytic spaces of engaged, and creative, civility. Everybody step away. Just step away, everyone, and we let it burn.

in the title is no accident: what we can imagine, beginning from our relations, is political. But how to situate it, to allow it to be bigger than its origins but not the answer to everything? As I edit I'm noticing, and trying to roughen up, the ease with which I slip into universal-sounding statements about this thing which has, yes, shown many times over that it has a consistent and powerful effect, but within the very specific testing grounds of arts and university spaces. What kind of a technology *Parliament* might be, where it should be applied, remains open. One friend suggests it might be a medicine for whiteness, against whiteness. For people who occupy ruling bodies and for people who still desire to live in ruling bodies. A whole lot of people are in need of a technology that could clean such forms of human relations if they're going to sense their way into the next. By no means everybody. But a lot. I count myself among them.

From my current view of the temporary stable pattern, what holds firm is that *Parliament* works on both the now and the next. It has an acute effect on those who partake, and on the web of relations to which they belong. At the same time, it develops the imagination for what comes after the catastrophe. How to rebuild? What do you rebuild? *Parliament* is one lifeboat into the next.

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Adapted and expanded from
Introductory Remarks to Kliën's Parliament
at the Segal Center, 2018

Here is what happened when Michael Kliën came with *Parliament* to the Segal Theatre Center in New York City in 2018: About thirty dancers and audience members sat on the floor in a room without chairs. It was not obvious who was a professional dancer and who would, in most situations, think of themselves as an audience member. The artist himself is not present in the room. In the tradition of instruction-based art, Kliën provided for a certain amount of time, a space and some rules: Start out lying on the floor. Don't talk. Move slowly. Discover your own movement. If you like a movement made by someone in the space, react to it. Follow it, for as long as you want. Modify the movement. Maybe others will follow you. Everyone is a dancer. There are no hierarchies. There are no experts. Everyone is asked to be an equal member of this group of explorers researching the inner and outer landscape

of movements, within a new field Kliën discovered alongside fellow artists and thinkers: the field of social choreography. Written at my suggestion after the Segal *Parliament*, this book is, in part, an entry into this field with *Parliament* (as an instance of social choreography) acting as the door.

Michael Kliën is one of the most innovative choreographers working in the U.S. today. What is radical about Kliën is the way he asks dancers and audience members to participate in movement together. Kliën made a decision to work with quiet, democratic, unspectacular dance as a reaction to the conventional presentation of dance on a stage, where audience members and dancers are separated; where experts with great bodies show the skill they developed over decades to the untrained, passive audience who pays money to see it. He is inspired by masters of modern and contemporary dance like William Forsythe (with whom he worked) and Martha Graham—but Kliën's context can only be really understood in the context of his dialogue with visual art: John Cage, the heritage of Black Mountain College, and Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture.

Beuys famously said, "When an artist goes to buy a canvas and a wooden frame, he makes the first mistake." Man Ray, the great American Surrealist and Dadaist, started out as a landscape painter. I once went to an exhibition of his early landscapes of Ridgefield, New Jersey, where he moved in 1912. His paintings were magnificent. Yet Man Ray reached a point where he realized he could no longer pretend to just be a painter like generations of painters before him. A traditional landscape, according to Ray, could no longer truthfully represent the new, contemporary world. The invention of the typewriter, the automobile,

the airplane, the gramophone, the projector, the movies—the world had changed. Physically and stylistically Man Ray felt that in order to be truthful in art he had to move away from oil landscapes, into abstraction, photography, installations. In the very same way—by moving into the field of social choreography and away from his conventional dance work as an established, working choreographer—Kliën has made a serious, conscious choice. Kliën's definitive turn away from his early years with Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt, with its presentation of a company on a stage, represents one of the most interesting experiments in contemporary art. It thus also bridges dance, theatre, performance art, and visual art, and needs to be seen in an expanded network of ideas that encompasses them all.

Among these, I count Bertolt Brecht, pioneer of twentieth-century political theatre, who pointed out that we need new forms of theatre and dance appropriate to the times we live in; Kliën's radical and experimental participatory dance-workshop-sessions are as radical and innovative as Brecht's own *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays, a theatre without an audience.

I also think about French philosopher Jacques Rancière and his call for radical equality in art and politics. I have never seen a better artistic answer to Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* than in the work of Kliën at the Segal Theatre Center, where company members of the Martha Graham Dance Company were lying together on the floor with people who had never taken a day of dance lessons in their life, exploring time, space, rules, and movement. It is the only time I have ever experienced a performance by a master choreographer without a fourth wall; an experience of a social, political, and artistic utopia that felt real.

Kliën's work is a comment, not just on dance, but on the world as a whole. Artists often anticipate the future, and so it may be some time before we understand what it is that Kliën's working with. I am with the Minimalists: I don't want to be a Michelangelo *manipulating* bronze. I would like to see the surface of the metal, experience its materiality. What is *simply there* is more significant than me, as a master artist, manipulating material. *Parliament* works with what is *simply there* in the social body. Like all theatre and dance, it stands for something both symbolically and for real.

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Parliament is medicine
Medicine for the choreographer's mind
or the mind of choreography
Medicine for the mind of dance
or for dance

It is what nature would do: turn the branches
towards the light

It is a cure for the absolute illness: the lies
or numbness within, that dead body of our world

It works for every living organism
the wind the dogs the kids the blind the performers
the doctors the lawyers the homeless
those who share a tongue those who share no tongue

It works for any group mixed
or homogenous

It works for any hour of the day

It works, during its course, for any manner
of thought, action or way of sensing



It is pure democracy as it has never existed
It unfolds the mechanism we each obey,
and surrenders it

It releases the toxin
and guides it through the door

It shows us where we are
and where we need to get to

It is a navigation tool for survival

It offers the possibility to rebuild the temple
within between and around

Parliament is medicine that works

A social cure

An arrow striking the centre

Capable of returning ecological equilibrium

A cure for us sick cows

Individually collectively spiritually

It opens a space that exists no more elsewhere

Between us

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The zeitgeist demands that we discover and acknowledge and generate connection: to weave anew the society of wo|man in an age of ubiquitous technology, infinite information, and global consciousness; to recuperate the data generated by fractal specialisation and technological development into an embodied, connected web of wisdom and *techne*; and to develop a feeling for context that qualifies and safeguards this endeavour: a new ecology of ideas that serves and sustains a society of life into our future.

The contemporary dancer, working within her own practice, freelancing and learning and modulating and developing and also creating her own work, is actually working on the frontline of the new field of epistemology: an examination of what we know, how we know what we know, and how knowledge is constituted and validated and mobilised;

knowledge as a power of the mind and a gift of the body, as subjectivity and intersubjectivity and territory shared between one human and another, between human and non-human entities.

Parliament calls dancers to model this capacity; their particular skills with contact, presence, embodiment, and negative capability come into their own in the choreography. *Parliament* makes of every participant a dancer; makes citizenship a skilful dance.



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NAME WORK OFF SEA

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These sources and their annotations are derived from various contributors to this volume. Some of the annotations are transcriptions from private interviews or public discussions in direct relation to *Parliament*, and might represent loose interpretations of the works, from memory: how the work has sedimented with/in/for the speaker. Others are extracted from pieces of writing, and are therefore more precise. Still others are direct quotes from the works themselves (these are always demarcated by quotation marks). Many thanks to *Program for a New Politics* (2018) compiled by Steve Valk as a companion to the *Parliament* at the Nasher Museum, which is excerpted here as well, denoted with PNP.

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

(Gormly)

“By ‘the Flesh’ Merleau-Ponty means to indicate an elemental power that has had no name in the entire history of western philosophy. The Flesh is the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity.”

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

(Tamler)

Ahmed writes about the invisible hand: if you’re walking down a street where everyone else is walking in the other direction, you feel how difficult it is to walk. But as soon as you turn around and start walking with the crowd, it’s as if there’s an invisible hand that has lifted. You continue walking and you don’t even feel that there was a hand, and if the hand were to stay there, you wouldn’t notice it anymore. That becomes an analogy for queerness, always having to walk against traffic. *Parliament* makes the hand more feel-able for people who are not so used to constantly walking against traffic.

Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. New York: Continuum, 2005.

(Kliën)

“The state of a situation can either be said to be separate [or transcendent] or to be attached [or immanent] with regard to the situation and its native structure. This connection between the separated and the attached characterizes the state as metastructure, count of the count, or one of the one. It is by means of the state that structured presentation is furnished with a fictional *being*;

the latter banishes, or so it appears, the peril of the void, and establishes the reign, since completeness is numbered, of the universal security of the one.”

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

(Kliën; PNP)

Bateson is the most important thinker you’ve never heard of. He was an anthropologist and one of the intellectual godfathers of 60s counter-culture. He researched widely in ecology, encompassing alcoholism, encompassing dolphins. Deleuze and Guattari took the notion of plateaus in *A Thousand Plateaus* from Bateson. Bateson is one of the founders of family systems theory, which tells us that the system that is problematic is very good at preserving itself. A family is a highly tuned system. Though it may be completely dysfunctional, the system that maintains the dysfunctionality is highly functional at maintaining itself; but it produces symptoms of its dysfunctionality, and the symptoms are disastrous. He understood systems; he didn’t think they were limited to any one organism or species, but saw the (inter)play happening in the way the living interacts with the nonliving—whatever the nonliving is. Long before relational art was a thing, Bateson was writing about, for example, recursive epistemology, which has to do with becoming fully engaged in your own making of knowledge, relations, the situation, and of your own *doing*.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
(Tamlar)

Bennett defines *vital materialism* as a field of being within which all forces and flows either are, or

can become, lively, affective, or signaling. This is Bennett's way of addressing the human-nature divide. A human body may be affective and it may speak; this does not make it radically different than other nonhumans within this field, which also signal and have affect. In engaging a history of vitalism Bennett turns questions of agency into questions of creativity. Her aim is explicitly political, claiming that "the appropriate unit of analysis for democracy is the heterogeneous group of agential beings that forms around a problem," rather than a human individual or collective. In order to understand that the world changes in response to itself, we need vitalism, a history in which she includes Thoreau and his idea of the Wild: she wants vitalist forces to count as materialist.

Beuys, Joseph. "Free International University (FIU)." *documenta 6*. Kassel, 1977.

(Kliën; Valk)

German artist Beuys' notion of a *permanent conference* and of *social sculpture* are both touchstones for *Parliament*, a key part of its artistic lineage. At *documenta 6*, Beuys held a permanent conference open to all for the duration of the festival's hundred days: a conversation with representatives of the most diverse social groups about a possible social model of renewal.

Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982.

(Tamler)

In Murray Bookchin's communalist proposals, you replace elected representatives with delegates who can be re-called. The idea of being able to see the weight of representation on people who are elected representatives, like really observe how *heavy* it is to represent in the way an elected official's body moves,

seems related to why you can't get a politician right now to participate in *Parliament*. Would a delegate be more likely to do *Parliament* than a representative?

Brecht, Bertolt. *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*. Translated by Stefan S. Brecht. New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1977.

(Hentschker)

In Brecht's learning plays, factory workers and their bosses were asked to act out, together, a scenario Brecht provided as instructional material. And thus, together (or at least this was the idea), they would discuss serious concerns about equality, class struggle, decisions, rules, and exceptions. No onlookers.

brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press, 2017.

(Tamlar)

A book that was particularly influential in activist circles at the time of the NYC *Parliament* session, *Emergent Strategy's* argument is that, in order to create macro-level change, we need to embody that change and enact the vision we want to see at the smallest micro-level: starting from one-to-one relationships, and then within smaller (activist) organizations, and then we scale up from there. The book also explicitly takes ecological and systems-based metaphors as the impetus for its approach. It thus operates on both the level of embodiment and the institutional level.

Davis, Angela. Lecture delivered at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. February 13, 2014.

(PNP, Kliën)

"You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." In a way it's an argument for having a permanent *Parliament*. The idea resonates with the civic

nature of theatregoing in ancient Greece. Greek citizens had to go to the theatre as part of their civic duty.

Forsythe, William. "Choreographic Objects." In *William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography: It Starts from Any Point*, edited by Steven Spier. New York: Routledge, 2011.

(PNP)

"What else besides the body could physical thinking look like? Nowhere and everywhere at the same time. The blind French resistance fighter Jacques Lusseyran, writing about the inner sense of vision which enabled him to see and manipulate forms and thoughts, famously described it as being like a boundless mental canvas or screen which existed . . . The blind mathematician Bernard Morin described his envisioning of the process of everting a sphere in a similar manner. And so it is with the choreographic object: The choreographic object . . . is a model of potential transition from one state to another in any space imaginable. A choreographic object, or score, is by nature open to a full palette of phenomenological instigations because it acknowledges the body as wholly designed to persistently read every signal from its environment. I make this comment in relationship to Lusseyran and Morin to introduce the manifold possibility of our practice. Lusseyran's inner vision enabled him to see topographies and project strategic movements of groups of people. Morin saw an event in the space of his mind that he then translated with haptic skill into sculptures and subsequently into the universal yet somewhat hermetic language of mathematics. Their quite substantial bodies, put into action by the force of their ideas, left very discernible traces of those ideas in the real world; from nowhere to somewhere, not everywhere, and no longer exclusively within their bodies."

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

(Tamler)

Haraway's title is the problem from which she sets out: how to stay with the trouble of a world that seems to be doomed. Following her means taking joy and pleasure in being children of compost, which is to say that everything decays and in decay is life. Making kin is a form of entanglement, as the Chthulucene is the domain of the tentacled ones, entangled with one another. Where Timothy Morton wonders what we will have thought if we survive, Haraway is not interested in defeating or saving ourselves in advance. In the chapter where she meditates on her dog-kin-companion Cayenne who, in aging, is prescribed supplements made from horse urine, she unfolds the entanglements that underlie any decision we make to keep living in this world (economic/big pharma, ecological, ethical) and shows through our inescapable interrelation that everything is lively, has agency. The Chthulucene, Haraway explains, requires *sym-poiesis*, or making-with, rather than *auto-poiesis*, or self-making.

— **“Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms.”** In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman, 157–87. **Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.**

(Anonymous *Parliament* participant)

At some point (during the *Parliament* session) I was thinking a lot about a text that Donna Haraway wrote. She's talking about how she really enjoys going to the zoo, to see how humans talk about the animals, because she feels that when humans are talking about an animal, she's actually getting to know those humans better. When I was inside, I thought of the text,

but then I thought, oh, wait—I am an animal, too. That was the realization I had. My psychedelic experience.

Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri. *Empire*.

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

—, ***Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.**

—, ***Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.**

(Kliën)

“This revolutionary process of the abolition of identity, we should keep in mind, is monstrous, violent, and traumatic. Don’t try to save yourself—in fact, your *self* has to be sacrificed! This does not mean that liberation casts us into an indifferent sea with no objects of identification, but rather the existing identities will no longer serve as anchors. Many will pull back from the brink and try to stay who they are rather than dive into the unknown waters of a world without race, gender, or other identity formations. Abolition also requires the destruction of all the institutions of the corruption of the common we spoke of earlier, such as the family, the corporation, and the nation. This involves an often violent battle against the ruling powers and also, since these institutions in part define who we now are, an operation surely more painful than bloodshed. Revolution is not for the faint of heart. It is for monsters. You have to lose who you are to discover what you can become.” (*Commonwealth*)

Hewitt, Andrew. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

(Kliën)

This book came out completely parallel to us. Steve and I had never heard of Andrew Hewitt before. The first time I tried to read it, it was far too dense, I gave up on it, left it in the corner for a couple of years.

And then I picked it up again. It actually deals with what we're talking about; and deals with it very thoroughly, but discusses it in a completely different way, very theoretical. But he has this great definition of it: that *choreography is always the rehearsal of utopian, nevertheless real, social situations*. Because you're embodied in that situation, you're actually rehearsing it. Whatever you rehearse. It could be an army marching, you know, you're never that close to people, you're never all over people. So you're rehearsing a kind of new way of being in the world with other people that otherwise just wouldn't happen. This makes it sort of utopian, but it's also real. Rather than just having that as a side note of choreography, I feel like this is a pretty important realization. It should become much more the center of choreography, in my field, especially in my practice. Because that notion can really go to work in the world. These strategies, these new rehearsals of utopian and social structures where we can actually cultivate a new kind of imagination. We *can't* imagine what comes next. So we have to find ways to get our awareness to expand upon the imagination.

Hillman, James. *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. New York: Random House, 1996.

(Kliën)

Hillman, a prominent U.S. American psychologist in the last third of the twentieth century, argued that psychotherapy was going wrong because it was teaching people to cope with a deeply broken system.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. 1938. Reprint, Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016.

(Nasher panelist)

This Dutch philosopher's work discusses the possibility that play is the primary formative element in human culture.

Kilsgaard, Ellen. "Notes on Experiments in a Relational Field #2." August 2009. www.ellenkilsgaard.com/choreography-of-communication. With a commentary by Jeffrey Gormly.

(Gormly)

a surface for the other | a learning surface

"In the game of politics,
when we enter negotiation,
we are entering the relational
but are we becoming available?

. . . becoming available means at once
retaining one's individuality
and being able to be moved by the other.

Becoming available means
to offer oneself into a meeting place
and simultaneously become receptive to the other:

When I have the ability and interest to accept
and use the consequence of my output:

to enter into a wheel of exchange,
allowing myself to be moved by the other
and simultaneously being fully autonomous
and in possession of choice,

by allowing attentive listening and sensibility
towards principles of the movements of exchange,
there is a chance of getting insight
into patterns of engagement.

There is a chance of being able to use them,
change them,

begin to dance with the 'situation.'

This is an active act
of letting things be intact in themselves
and yet engaging fully with what there is

This material could be understood
as a kind of learning surface.

. . . a kind of pattern, formation
or 'thickening' of energy:

different patterns, qualities and intensities of
movement
are the actual concrete manifestation
of the content produced”

**Latour, Bruno. “How to Talk about the Body?
The Normative Dimension of Science Studies.”
Body & Society 10(2-3) (June 2004): 205-29.**

(Gormly)

articulation

“... to have a body is to learn to be affected,
meaning ‘effectuated,’ moved, put into motion
by other entities” (William James)

“[a body is] an interface that becomes more
and more describable
as it learns to be affected by more
and more elements.

The body is thus what leaves a dynamic trajectory
by which we learn to register and become sensitive
to what the world is made of . . .

Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise
that produces at once a sensory medium
and a sensitive world.

. . . bodies are our common destiny . . .

Articulation thus does not mean
ability to talk with authority,
but being affected by differences.

. . . these different actors [dancers] can be defined
as bodies learning to be affected
by hitherto unregistrable differences
through the mediation
of an artificially created set-up.

It is not inappropriate to say
that the ~~odour~~ kit [choreography]
‘articulates’ pupils’ perceptions . . .

What we say, feel and act,
is geared on differences registered in the world.

... the more contrasts you add,
the more differences and mediations
you become sensible to ...
The more you articulate controversies,
the wider the world becomes.

I have acquired the habit of using
the word *propositions*
to describe *what* is articulated.
The word 'proposition' conjugates
three crucial elements:
(a) it denotes obstinacy (position),
that (b) has no definitive authority
(it is a pro-position only)
and (c) it may accept negotiating itself
into a com-position
without losing its solidity.

With articulated propositions,
this progressive composition of a common world
becomes at least thinkable.”

Lawrence, W. Gordon. *Introduction to Social Dreaming: Transforming Thinking*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

(Kliën)

When I talk about “discovering” *Parliament*, I’m thinking about Gordon Lawrence, the founder of social dreaming, which is a psychoanalytical method for group relations and group analysis. He visited my company Daghdá and he trained us and talked to us, he was very old at that point; and he always said he “discovered” social dreaming, which struck me as a very odd way of talking about it, until I understood that, in psychoanalysis, they “discover” these things. Because you look at mind dynamics that are already in place, and you can replicate those dynamics, that behavior, by putting a framework in place and enabling them to happen.

Lepecki, Andre. *Singularities*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

(Tamler)

Lepecki treats performance-making as theory (underlining its multiplicity, strangeness, irreducibility) and puts into practice a method of critique that deeply believes that scholarly and choreographic theories are always co-made. The five directions of expression for choreography his method considers—thingness, darkness, animality, persistence, solidity—frame contemporary experimental choreography as an attempt to make choreography itself just another thing in the world. Lepecki's treatment of archive resonates with sedimentation, and in the chapter on angelology, he wades into flow vs. solidity of bodies. If modern choreography is a world of idealized laminar flow, then society becomes a collection of individuals arranged so that they're tangential to one another, never touching, not accumulating. Modern choreography is based in classical physics' conception of bodies as pure, ahistorical flow, accumulating no memory; dancers become neutral vehicles through which movements flow. Lepecki opposes this with contemporary choreography's solidity, its marks on bodies.

Manning, Susan. "The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze." In *Meaning in Motion*, edited by Jane C. Desmond. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

(Cabeen)

In her essay, Manning refers to Dempster's assertion that "social and political values are not simply placed or grafted onto a neutral body-object like so many old or new cloths. On the contrary ideologies are systematically deposited and constructed on an anatomical plane, i. e. in the neuro-musculature of the dancer's body."

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

(Kliën; Gormly; PNP)

Affect theory as formulated by Brian Massumi comes down to this: there is a power to affect and be affected, which is a potential to move, act, perceive, and think. In a word, powers of existence. He takes the basic definition from Spinoza, for whom the twin powers to affect and be affected are what defines a body and a life. We are always *part of*. It isn't possible to just affect, or to just be affected. What you have is a mess of relations, a mesh, a field, and to make that felt is part of the *Parliament*-ary process.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

(Kliën)

At the time I came up with *Parliament*, I was fascinated with *The Road*. It really resonated in my own fears and situation. I was a new father as well. There's a deep longing in it to find an answer to our dystopian reality. McCarthy was asked in an interview if he thought that any of what he writes in the book will happen. His response was, no, I don't think it will happen; it's *already* happening. It's just not happening in *your* life.

Müller, Heiner. *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*. Edited & translated by Carl Weber. Baltimore: Performing Arts Journal, 1984.

(Hentschker)

German playwright Heiner Müller felt the world could no longer be truthfully represented in a traditional play on a stage. Müller created his iconic *Hamletmachine* as a reaction to the greatest artistic invention of the twentieth century—the collage—by Cubist artists like Juan Gris, Georges Braque, and

later Robert Rauschenberg. Müller, the master artist, no longer generated pre-thought meaning for audiences. He collaged material, asking directors to organize and to present it to an audience that creates its own meaning as an equal to the artists.

Negri, Antonio. *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

(Gormly)

constituent power

“... constituent power is absolute process.
all-powerful and expansive, unlimited
and unfinalized ...

... the absence of preconstituted
and finalized principles
is combined with the subjective strength
of the multitude,
thus constituting the social ...
in the possibility of freedom.

emerging from the vortex of the void,
from the abyss of the absence of determinations,
as a totally open need.

This is why constitutive strength
never ends up as power,
nor does the multitude tend
to become a totality but, rather,
a set of singularities, an open multiplicity ...

Lack of preconstituted assumptions
and fullness of strength:
this is a truly positive concept of freedom ...

... constituent power as the matrix
of democratic thought and praxis.

... the sense of an overflowing
constitutive activity,
as intense as a Utopia but without its illusion,
and fully material.

But what does this freedom become?
It becomes public space,
constituting a communicative relation,
its own conditions of possibility,
and therefore its own strength.

It is the polis—
'Independent government
and the foundation of a new body politic'
—this is what it means 'to be free.'

The active elements are resistance and desire,
an ethical impulse and a constructive passion . . .
not to seek institutionality
but to construct more being
—ethical being, social being, community.

The desire for community
is the spirit and soul of constituent power . . .
as a fundamental act of innovation,
and therefore as absolute procedure.

The process started
by constituent power never stops.”

**Öcalan, Abdullah. *Democratic Confederalism*.
Translated by International Initiative. London:
Transmedia, 2011.**

(Tamler)

“In contrast to a centralist and bureaucratic understanding of administration and exercise of power confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils. This understanding of democracy opens the political space to all strata of the society and allows for the formation of different and diverse political groups. In this way it also advances the political integration of the society as a whole. Politics becomes a part of everyday life. Without politics the crisis of the state

cannot be solved since the crisis is fuelled by a lack of representation of the political society. Terms like federalism or self administration as they can be found in liberal democracies need to be conceived anew. Essentially, they should not be conceived as hierarchical levels of the administration of the nation-state but rather as central tools of social expression and participation. This, in turn, will advance the politicization of the society. We do not need big theories here, what we need is the will to lend expression to the social needs by strengthening the autonomy of the social actors structurally and by creating the conditions for the organization of the society as a whole. The creation of an operational level where all kinds of social and political groups, religious communities, or intellectual tendencies can express themselves directly in all local decision-making processes can also be called participative democracy. The stronger the participation the more powerful is this kind of democracy. While the nation-state is in contrast to democracy, and even denies it, democratic confederalism constitutes a continuous democratic process.”

Pickering, Andrew. *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

(Tamler)

“The mangle of practice” is how Pickering refers to the push-pull-push-pull spiral of agency in every thing. Pickering’s idea of the mangle seeks to understand agency and emergence through scientific practice, using his key concepts of resistance and accommodation. He identifies the representational vs. the performative idiom in science, both of which have to do with how science corresponds to nature. The first conceives of nature/reality as a collection

of facts and rules, the second conceives of it as full of agency and something that's constantly acting on "us." Pickering seeks to develop a performative idiom that exists in a posthumanist space, where human and nonhuman actors are inextricably entangled. In a performative image of science, science is a "field of powers, capacities, and performances" out of which material agency surfaces in instances of machinic capture. Pickering's examples from across science and mathematics include the bubble chamber, which for him is a locus of non-human agency, and Sibus's reconstruction of Joule's experiment. Hamilton's discovery of the quaternion serves to illuminate his idea of conceptual practice as a dance of agency that on the human end combines both free and forced moves. "Metaphysics, like everything else, is subject to mangling in practice."

**Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*.
Translated by Gregory Elliott. New York: Verso,
2011.**

(Hentschker)

Rancière asks for bold and innovative democratic interventions as a practice of active citizenship.

The time to be active only within given limits and with given forms is over, Rancière tells us. This is true not only for the political, but also for the arts.

**Rogers, Carl. *On Becoming a Person:
A Therapists' View of Psychotherapy*. London:
Constable, 1961.**

(PNP)

Subception (subliminal perception) is a process emphasized by Rogers in which a stimulus is experienced or responded to without being brought into awareness. According to Rogers, the mind applies unconscious strategies to protect the individual from a negative stimulus before it enters consciousness.

Rothschild, Babette. *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

(Cabeen)

In my experience, classical techniques, and the social/political values inherent to them, are similarly grafted into the facial container of a dancer's body. Martha Graham's interest in spirals, contraction/release, and shift of weight, are movement experiences that become lenses for a Graham-trained dancer, through which to contemplate, and respond to the world. The technique isn't "in" our bodies any more than our bones are. Rather, this specific kinesthetic intelligence "is" our body. The body of a dancer is a multi-faceted process, always unfolding and redeveloping itself in relation to what needs to be honored, what needs to be dismantled, what needs to be said. We can build new aesthetics out of deepening how we consider our training, but we can't drop it. The body remembers.

Sheldrake, Rupert. *The Sense of Being Stared At: And Other Unexplained Powers of Human Minds*. Rochester: Park Street Press, 2013.

(Gormly)

"The morphic fields of all species have history, and contain inherent memory given by the process I call morphic resonance . . . Morphic resonance works across space and time, from the past to the present . . . Through morphic resonance, each member of a species both draws upon and contributes to a collective memory of the species."

Stengers, Isabelle. "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices." *Cultural Studies Review* 11(1) (January 2005): 183-96.

(Gormly)

a social technology of becoming

“a political ecology would be a social technology of belonging, assuming coexistence and co-becoming as the habitat of practices” (Brian Massumi)

“What I call an ecology of practice is a tool for thinking through what is happening ‘giving to the situation the power to make us think’ . . .

An ecology of practices aims at the construction of new ‘practical identities’ for practices, that is, new possibilities for them to be present, to connect . . .

When you are about to act,
do not rely on any general principle
that would give you the right to act.
But do take the time to open your imagination
and consider this particular occasion.
. . . what you are responsible for is paying attention
as best you can,
to be as discerning, as discriminating
as you can about the particular situation.

Social technology of belonging
can and must address people
from the point of view
of what they may become able to do
and think and feel
because they belong.
conferring to a situation the power to matter
in its particular way . . .

. . . there is no neutral, extra-territorial way
of defining what matters in the situation.
[an ecology of practices] implies,
for each involved party,
different risks and different challenges . . .
because diplomats [dancers] know
that they are all at risk
and that they cannot share the other’s risk.

Diplomacy [dance] as a practice
is a technology of belonging.
[dance] means the event of the production
of a new proposition,
what is true is what succeeds
in producing a communication
between diverging parties,
without anything in common
being discovered or advanced.
Each party will indeed keep
its own version of the agreement
her [the dancer's] effect is enacting the relation
between belonging and becoming,
producing belonging as experimentation”

Stevens, Jay. *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987.

(Kliën)

Storming Heaven, which is about LSD in America in the 1960s, and other books like it have been influential in my own thinking, because it's obvious that LSD *did* something in the 60s. In the reports, there is a sense that through the use of LSD people were on the cusp of changing a communal mindset, but it backfired, and swung around in the other direction, entrenching the established mindset more aggressively, because capitalism has gotten much more aggressive since the 1960s. Substances are vulnerable to the critique that the experience they create isn't real. Anyone threatened by it can say it was all “just LSD” and therefore has nothing to do with real life. But *Parliament* is not a substance you take. It's a sensation endemic to the world that is produced by a group of people temporarily organizing themselves differently, and the resulting realizations are destabilizing.

Tarde, Gabriel. *Les lois sociales: esquisse d'une sociologie*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1898.

(Yoshida)

In his theory of the laws of imitation, Gabriel Tarde makes a point about commodities production and re-creation and alternative currencies. He found that the material moves an affection in the social and the “moving” vibrates the other person’s consumption in the condition of imitation. In the case of *Parliament*, imitation explores how diverse and anonymous people participate in these performances. The imitation of form and structure of choreography communicate body, matter, and movement to participants, and they produce society.

Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

(PNP; Kliën)

Under a particular formative context, routines are established and people come to believe and act as if their social worlds were coherent wholes that are perfectly intelligible and defensible. They come to see the existing arrangements as necessary. Unger calls this false necessity. In reality, these arrangements are arbitrary and hold together rather tenuously, which leaves them open to resistance and change. This opposition Unger calls negative capability. This thesis of negative capability addresses the problem of agency in relation to structure. It recognizes the constraints of structure and its molding influence upon the individual, but at the same time finds the individual able to resist, deny, and transcend their context. Unlike other theories of structure and agency, negative capability does not reduce the individual to a simple actor possessing only the dual capacity of compliance or

rebellion, but rather sees him as able to partake in a variety of activities of self-empowerment. “We are not exhausted by the social and cultural worlds we inhabit and build, they are finite. We in comparison to them are not, we can see, think, feel, build, and connect in many more ways than they can allow.” Unger has kind of a salvational tone in that quote, but it’s a very simple observation: we built those worlds out of different needs. Opera houses, for example.

Vujanović, Ana & Bojana Cvejić. *Public Sphere by Performance*. Berlin: b_books, 2012.

(Tamler)

This collaborative artistic/scholarly research project critiques political ideology’s manifestation in public space, not through discourse but through performing bodies, built on examples from Serbia, neoliberal capitalism, and a history of fascist and communist regimes. The authors propose a history of the public and the way the body appears in it through four case studies reaching back to Socrates to show an evolution of relation between the individual and the political. As two instantiations they look at social choreography (through which ideology’s normativity is revealed in moments of stumbling/rupture) and social drama (which reveals the conflicts that underlie society). The third part critiques the dance solo for its hallmarks of neoliberal capitalism: celebration of the author, soft hegemony.

Wolin, Sheldon S. “Whose Utopia?” *The Universitas Project*, Emilio Ambasz. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972.

(PNP; Kliën)

“At this time in history, social and political blueprints are doomed to failure. The weight and immobility of existing structures render blueprints futile. Fortunately, these structures have their

vulnerabilities. Accordingly, I should like to offer not a blueprint but a strategy: the general strategy can be described as the strategy of de-structuring . . . It requires a vow of hostility toward the major forms of concentrated power—political, economic, educational, and cultural—and a commitment to seeking new forms of decentralized, localized autonomy. What is at stake is a post-bureaucratic future.” *Parliament* is a breeding ground for the vow of hostility, one that you didn’t even know you had taken, simply by giving you an experience of something that feels saner than your sanity and feels realer than your reality. It’s richer in its potential, and that creates the vow. In a way, *Parliament* is my own reaction to the vow of hostility. I don’t earn money through *Parliament*. It’s something that I *have* to do, my action in reaction to that continuous vow of hostility towards concentrated power structures. I’m not someone who needs to deconstruct power wherever I see it. I think the world is hierarchical and that’s totally okay. I can surrender myself to somebody, for example, that I accept as a healer, and accept their agency over my being in particular aspects of my life. I do it all the time. Who teaches my kids? And so on. It’s not: everybody’s in charge of everything everywhere. But the negotiation of the multitude is ripe for intervention.

The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center (MESTC) is a non-profit center for theatre, dance, and film affiliated with CUNY's PhD Program in Theatre and Performance. The Center's mission is to bridge the gap between academia and the professional performing arts communities both within the United States and internationally. By providing an open environment for the development of educational, community-driven, and professional projects in the performing arts, MESTC is a home to theatre scholars, students, playwrights, actors, dancers, directors, dramaturgs, and performing arts managers from the local and international theatre communities.

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www.gc.cuny.edu/theatre-and-performance

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Journals include *Slavic and Eastern European Performance* (SEEP), *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* (JADT), and *Western European Stages* (WES).

Books include *Four Melodramas by Pixérécourt* (edited by Daniel Gerould and Marvin Carlson—both Distinguished Professors of Theatre at the CUNY Graduate Center), *Contemporary Theatre in Egypt*, *The Heirs of Molière* (edited and translated by Marvin Carlson), *Seven Plays by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* (edited and translated by Daniel Gerould), *The Arab Oedipus: Four Plays* (edited by Marvin Carlson), *Theatre Research Resources in New York City* (edited by Jessica Brater, Senior Editor Marvin Carlson), *Comedy: A Bibliography of Critical Studies in English on the Theory and Practice of Comedy in Drama, Theatre and Performance* (edited by Meghan Duffy, Senior Editor Daniel Gerould), *BAiT: Buenos Aires in Translation: Four Plays* (edited and translated by Jean Graham-Jones), *roMANIA AFTER 2000: Five New Romanian Plays* (edited by Saviana Stănescu and Daniel Gerould), *Four Plays from North Africa* (edited by Marvin Carlson), *Barcelona Plays: A Collection of New Plays by Catalan Playwrights* (edited and translated by Marion Peter Holt and Sharon G. Feldman), *Josep M. Benet i Jornet: Two Plays* (edited and translated by Marion Peter Holt), *Czech Plays: Seven New Works* (edited by Marcy Arlin, Gwynn MacDonald and Daniel Gerould), *Playwrights before the Fall* (edited by Daniel Gerould), *Timbre4* (edited and translated by Jean Graham-Jones), *Jan Fabre: The Servant of Beauty and I Am a Mistake* (edited and foreword by Frank Hentschker), *Quick Change: 28 Theatre Essays and 4 Plays in Translation* (by Daniel Gerould), *Shakespeare Made French: Four Plays by Jean-François Ducis* (edited and translated by Marvin Carlson), and *New Plays from Spain: Eight Works by Seven Playwrights* (edited by Frank Hentschker).

In memoriam

Daniel Gerould (1928–2012), MESTC Director of Publications

Martin E. Segal (1916–2012), MESTC Founder

The Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University brings together students, faculty, and community members in the energetic pursuit of the good: the good life, the good community, the good society. These pursuits take many forms: transformative educational experiences for students that encourage reflection on meaning and purpose; outward-facing programs that drive civic engagement and explore ethical issues through the arts; and research that helps us understand how moral attitudes are formed, or what ethical approaches in areas such as technology and environmental justice might look like. In all these endeavors, we combine research, teaching, and practice focused on determining what the good is—and how we should live—as one species among many on a planet of increasingly fragile systems.

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NOTES FROM WITHIN
MICHAEL KLIËN'S PARLIAMENT,
A SOCIAL CHOREOGRAPHIC
TECHNOLOGY

Thousands of people have participated in *Parliament* sessions from Athens to New York City. Yet *Parliament* resists both definition and authorship. Choreographer and artist Michael Kliën prefers to say he discovered it, or wished for it, from within “a felt urgency that things are just not sustainable.” In 2022, artist and writer Cory Tamler produced a container for *Parliament* to write out of itself by combining her own and other participants’ memories, excerpts from conversations with Kliën and his personal archive, as well as theoretical propositions situating *Parliament* in a rich matrix of ideas. This is an experiment in writing about performance from the conviction that our entire beings make theory; a book for readers who are interested in how the social is formed. This book’s second edition coincides with *Parliament*’s first full-scale exhibition at the Benaki Museum in Athens (June–July 2025). Over seven weeks, *Parliament* transforms the museum into a living organism, daring us to envision an alternative ethics, a soul-governance, enacted through the body without words.

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