Solidarity in Performance: Considering activist processes in neoliberal times
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In September 2020, in a public talk at London's South Bank Centre, American political activist and philosopher Angela Davis (2020) discussed the challenges of achieving economic, racial and gender justice.[{note}]1 She referred to the conjuncture of the environmental crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd. Davis outlined the need to try to make sense of the given situation within the broader context of racialized capitalism and questioned its historical emergence and what forces are at play in sustaining it. The protests, Davis noted, unfolded at a time when people's awareness of being grounded in community had been heightened due to the pandemic, posing a challenge to neoliberal individualist structures of living. She also emphasized the opportunity that the conjuncture of crises provided in producing an acceleration of ideas.

Davis explored these currents and tensions framed through the question of how transformative change towards social justice can be achieved. Working collectively across established ideological formations and also generations would allow to draw from the wisdom gained over decades of activist struggle and resistance. A key problem in seeking to effect social change, she argued, is that what is done in the name of change tends to genuflect before the prevailing order. Too many movements initiated by people seeking to enact change have ended up reaffirming existing structures. Consequently, the scope of change is narrow. Davis identified the tendency to cling to familiar structures and ideas as the common problem and pitfall in such activist practices. In the context of calling for a focus on the *processes* by which change might be initiated, she also mentioned the essential role of the arts as a space in which the not yet known and available in discourse can be explored.

I listened to Davis following a series of gatherings I had co-curated, with Noyale Colin, under the umbrella title of 'Performing Solidarity': over the course of 2019–20

we brought together UK-based artists and activists committed to a range of activist agendas, to share their approaches and reflections on the ways that solidarity forms part of their respective practices and its potential role in creating social change with a commitment to striving for social equality.[{note}]2. While Davis did not mention solidarity per se, her talk honed a series of issues and questions that had crystallized and accentuated across the globe since we had initiated the series a year earlier. This also meant that Davis's perspective as a US-based researcher and activist resonated with the UK context in which new issues related to social justice and equality had emerged due to recent events: prior to the pandemic, the Brexit referendum in 2016 heightened hostile discourses regarding otherness in various contexts and led in addition to the establishment of tight protocols that changed the rights and conditions of many people seemingly overnight. The changes also further accentuated an existing harsh neoliberal environment with weak social support structures in which individualist values characterized by competition and marketization are emphasized and social inequality is on the rise. These developments have more recently further intensified due to Russia's war on Ukraine and the accelerating cost of living crisis; they also extend far beyond the UK across the globe.

What follows is structured as one response to Davis's appeal to revisit the processes of seeking to effect social change – in the sense of working towards social justice and equality – as approached through the lens of performance practice and its wider conceptual and theoretical field. I approach the Performing Solidarity series as a contemporary archive on the ways that solidarity practices have been conceived in recent times by UK-based artist activists. Drawing on a selection of activist practices that were shared and discussed as part of the series, I explore how social change might be approached through the notion of solidarity as a way of challenging existing structures of social life marked by neoliberal values, through critically rethinking the very formation of the socio-political subject. Since solidarity tends to be expressed as something that is 'felt' and 'enacted', I consider the notion in terms of what it might mean to 'feel and act for and with others in mind'. I further outline the ways in which working through the logics of performance constitutes a site for experimentation in which alternative subject formations and relations among people can be explored, newly formed and rehearsed. I situate this enquiry in a broader critical posthumanist approach, as put forward by Rosi Braidotti, as one that engages

in 'forward-looking experiments with new forms of subjectivity' (2013: 45) and constitutes a space of development of 'political and ethical accountability, for collective imaginaries and shared aspirations' (102). The issues of time, money, individuality and space – all in themselves key notions in the neoliberal capitalist system – are explored here in the context of accounts of arts activist practices.

Drawing closely on Judith Butler's (2020) writing, I approach this discussion through connecting solidarity to the issue of (inter-)dependency – a notion, I argue, that not only holds a central position in wider society and is undermined in neoliberal conditions, but is also acutely at stake in performance practice through its insistence on the embodied gathering of people. In doing so, I seek to contribute a renewed validation of the discipline of performance within wider activist practice that strives for social equality.

Solidarity in the neoliberal environment: Beginning with adversity and failure

As a political and economic project dominant since the late 1970s, neoliberalism structures human action according to economic criteria and free trade ideology. Freedom is emphasized over social values, with responsibility and ethics defined by economic judgement (Dean 2009: 51–2).

The neoliberal subject is characterized by an individualist and entrepreneurial conception of the self – the individual is fundamentally independent and autonomous from the wider social environment (Gourdazi et al. 2022: 8). This ideology is directly reflected in Margaret Thatcher's famous statement that 'there is no such thing' as society but only individual men and women (ibid.). Thatcher further explained that the object of the neoliberal economic project was 'to change the heart and the soul' of people (Thatcher cited in Butt 1981). This change has occurred through the neoliberal environment structurally producing and driving a set of ideological values, norms and beliefs that follow the principle of individual merit, which sees resources and rewards distributed according to criteria such as an individual's effort, ability and productivity (Goudarzi et al. 2022: 1–2). Overall, competitive aspects are stressed in relationships with the neoliberal individual being invested with self-interest. Such an emphasis on competition and individuality also means that structural connection and interrelation among people is compromised. This ethos is supported and

complemented by an emphasis on privatization alongside notoriously weak social support structures in neoliberal societies. The neoliberal conceptions of fairness and justice in view of distribution of resources as based on merit are in contrast with equality- and needs-based principles. The former is based on an ideology of equal distribution among all, whereas the latter considers the specific needs of individuals and is most closely aligned with solidaristic communities based on shared culture or beliefs (6).

As Steinar Stjernø observes in Solidarity in Europe: The history of an idea, 'in an age of individualism, the idea of solidarity seems to be threatened and on the defensive', with market ideology making 'collective arrangements and the ideas on which they are founded more precarious' (2004: 2). Discussing the characteristics and structures of neoliberal capitalism in the United States, in Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies Jodi Dean describes the 'failure of solidarity' in the dismantling of the welfare state as the left's 'betrayal of fundamental commitments to social solidarity' (2009: 33). They assert that this situation came about since

we [the left] have been unable to give voice to values of collectivity, cooperation, solidarity, and equity strong enough to counter neoliberalism's free-trade fantasy. It is also because we can't imagine how we would realize, enact, bring about such a vision. (Dean 2009: 73)

Dean further emphasizes a lack of vision with regard to how alternative values to neoliberal ideology might be enacted. This echoes Davis's frustration with many activist processes ending up inadvertently reaffirming existing structures due to clinging to familiar ideas, as stated above.

Embedded in neoliberal structures is not only a lack of solidarity, but also an undermining of it through its appropriation as diversion techniques and use in marketing materials in political and economic contexts. As Stjernø points out, political parties often refer to solidarity in vague and nebulous terms, so as to hide or compensate for a lack of solidarity in their party practices (2004: 22). Moreover, solidarity statements from major institutions have been critiqued as tokenism, which was also thematized in the Performing Solidarity series. Curator, activist and teacher Jane Trowell, who has worked for the organization Platform in London since the 1990s, commented that 'activism has never been more sexy', referring to its

appropriation by major arts institutions in the UK. Trowell warned that there are dangers in taking up invitations to work on 'so-called activism' when activism itself has become institutionalized: 'You have to flee or disrupt that space' (Trowell cited in Performing Solidarity: Making common cause 2019). The critique offered here directly questions whether specific activist agendas might constitute a disguised reaffirmation of – or genuflecting to, in Davis's terms – the neoliberal social order. How can we make a distinction then between the kinds of actions that structurally reinforce neoliberal values and those that foster a potential for actual social change, in the sense of achieving an alternative to neoliberal values? Which actions inadvertently reinforce neoliberal values in the name of activism and where might we find a potential for concrete social change? How might we evaluate their potential for broader social change, considering that activist practices tend to be situated within and oriented at specific contexts?

A further consideration is that the neoliberal environment is heavily accentuated by the use of social media, which is perhaps too widely conceived as a potential activist weapon and space for intervention. Not discounting the networking powers that social media can afford in some instances, over-reliance on social media for activism has been revealed to further perpetuate and reinforce the neoliberal infrastructure. As Braidotti asserts, neoliberal markets seek the 'informational power of living matter itself' (2013: 61), which any engagement with social media inevitably supports.

Dean's examination of the ways that social media are used in the name of political action affirms that even in those instances in which specific social media campaigns have led to concrete action, those tend to be short-lived. Considering the example of the US MoveOn campaign in 2003, in which more than a million people in 130 countries staged a candlelight vigil against the Bush administration's Iraq War, Dean argues that such actions tend to only lead to a temporary raising of awareness and fail to 'contribute to the formation of political solidarities with more duration' (2009: 47). Actual change in terms of a political reordering is not achieved – to the contrary, existing hegemonic structures are all but reinforced:

Communicative capitalism strengthens the grip of neoliberalism. Our everyday practices of searching and linking, our communicative acts of discussing and disagreeing, performing and posing, intensify our dependence on the information

networks crucial to the financial and corporate dominance of neoliberalism. Communicative capitalism captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment – <u>we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter</u>. (Dean 2009: 49, emphasis in original)

The trap of 'feeling' politically involved, but effectively not doing anything that 'really matters', leads to stopping short at taking action necessary to achieve transformative change. As a consequence, the actual problem is 'neglected, left to continue along its course, undeflected and unchanging despite the massive amount of interest and energy it has generated' (Dean 2009: 32). As Dean further asserts, creating alternative structures to this system is very difficult since '[o]ur very supposition of democracy … entraps us in the inequalities of communicative capitalism' (73). Bearing in mind Davis's appeal to consider the processes through which people mean to effect change referred to above, centring activism on the use of social media runs the risk that impulses for political action may get diverted, diffused and for these in the end only to evaporate.

With neoliberal ideology conceiving of the individual as unique with their identity to be developed through marketization and competition parameters, activist impulses enacted within neoliberal infrastructures can readily be turned into all but a mirage in an environment that seeks to perpetually monetize and reinforce capitalist values and inequalities. Solidarity, and crucially our conceptions of it, can then lose its strength as a social value when it is 'sold' to arts consumers and activists as a feeling of purported 'radical' engagement. Such operations take place on a variety of commercial platforms and institutions, further perpetuating a social imaginary that is centred on individual competition.

Yet, to be sure, to be overly suspicious of institutional engagement would be simplistic and counterproductive. Such change is certainly desirable and there are many initiatives that have constructively instituted alternative structures that challenge the hegemonic order. What I propose is to consider more closely the ways that actions taken relate to the wider structure they seek to challenge, so that rather than merely focusing on the message or ideas to be conveyed, the <u>processes</u> by which such actions are taken are considered more closely and respectively aligned.

Given the adverse conditions for solidarity in neoliberal environments, what does insisting on its values offer in view of working towards greater social justice and

equality? What sorts of actions can lead to transformative change in the sense of disrupting the existing hegemonic order? What does the field of performance – both as a practice as well as its related theoretical discourse – offer vis-à-vis the processes through which we seek to effect change?

Challenging neoliberal ways of conceiving of time and money: Solidarity as acknowledging inter/dependency

Helena Suárez Val, a researcher activist from Uruguay who spent many years in the UK from 1996 onwards, works on issues related to feminicidio/feminicide through mapping gender-related crimes. At Performing Solidarity: Making common cause (2019), Suárez Val explained the importance of connection in her work as the basis of how she understands solidarity. Referring to the International Women's Day march that used the slogan 'If you touch one, you touch all of us', she extended the idea of connection to the genealogy of women and feminists who came before her, citing the importance of solidary relations across time and generations. This approach directly resonates with Davis's call for working across existing ideological formations and generations, which allows to draw from the wisdom gained from past struggles (Davis, see above). What comes to the fore in Suárez Val's comment on the ways that solidarity forms part of her work is an acknowledgement of interdependency with others. Her project on feminicide draws on a feminist agenda that connects through the vulnerability of women.

Suárez Val's connection across generations was mirrored in a further initiative mentioned by Annie Jael Kwan – the Radical Ancestry project – as part of which several artists considered how they could be radical ancestors: instead of focusing on their own survival, their project was motivated by creating solidarity across time to future generations through a heightened consideration of what one leaves behind. Initiated by Nicola Triscott, Kwan was invited to join the collective enquiry of the project and to undertake a curatorial residency at FACT Liverpool where Kwan curated Future Ages Will Wonder. As Kwan states:

> [This project] explored how technology might provide the means to thinking about scientific advancement and genetics experimentation, but at the same time, ideas of advancement and progress must be questioned. Instead of focusing on an

extractivist approach or obsessions with 'origin' and frontier, we might think of ancestry in more inclusive and communal ways – thinking about intergenerational connections and solidarity. (Kwan 2022)

In considering time in relational terms to generations past and future, these activist practices propose and manifest an alternative to the experience of time in everyday life under neoliberal capitalist parameters marked by endless temporal acceleration, competition and profitability, which are constitutive of the neoliberal individuality invested in economic interest. Lauren Berlant highlights a stark tension between the experience of time as structured in everyday life that emphasizes daily tasks, quarterly capital and fiscal years, in contrast to the short- and long-term urgencies that we are faced with (Berlant and Greenwald 2012: 85). The activist projects of Suárez Val and Kwan bring such ethico-political urgencies to the fore – those of feminicidio and future ancestry underpinned by wider social justice arguments respectively. Drawing from the wisdom of past generations and bearing in mind the ways that future generations depend on our actions of today engages a form of solidarity that actively acknowledges a dependency among people not only in the here and now, but across generations.

The notion of dependency deserves further exploration. In Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (2015) and The Force of Nonviolence (2020), Judith Butler refers to dependency in the context of a broader critique of individualism. We all are dependent on other people, wider structures of support and the environment. Butler calls into question the delusional imaginary of anyone's self-sufficiency when they emphasize that 'no one actually stands on one's own, no one feeds oneself' (2020: 41). Degrees of dependency inevitably vary over a lifetime in line with changing circumstances. The notion of dependency also brings into sharp focus sets of privileges that some parts of a population hold over and above others, as in, for instance, those who have or can afford good healthcare or education. This places the notion of dependency right at the heart of social life, yet the neoliberal order precisely undermines such systems of support that can potentially guarantee for everyone to be able to lead a 'livable life' (Butler 2015: 21). With social support structures notoriously weak in neoliberal societies, the dependency of many people in need is neglected and left unanswered. Considered from the position of a concern for social equality, such an environment severely compromises social life at large.

It is also in this space that solidarity can emerge as a way to compensate for a lack of structural support. Beginning with the premise of dependency as a basic condition of social life is already in and of itself an acknowledgement of relations, or of 'one self [being] implicated in another self' (Butler 2020: 9). In the absence of solid support structures in neoliberal societies, solidarity then constitutes one specific way to acknowledge and action this relationality, with each act of solidarity constituting a critique of a selfish form of individualism as predicated in a neoliberal environment. Butler approaches the notion of dependency by emphasizing the relational aspect among people – rather than seeing dependency as something that needs to be 'overcome' so as to work towards self-sufficiency as in the neoliberal logic, they call for accepting 'interdependency as a condition of equality' (Butler 2020: 47).

Moving from the previous examples of solidarity as an act of acknowledging a form of dependency across generations, in Performing Solidarity: Making common cause (2019) Trowell offered a concrete example on the ways that solidarity can form the ideological basis for organizational structures, as in the example of her work with Platform. These concern the ways that structures of interdependency are enacted in decision-making processes as well as in financial matters. The organization Platform describes itself as follows: 'We combine art, activism, education and research in one organisation. This approach enables us to create unique projects driven by the need for social and ecological justice' (Platform, n.d.). Platform is horizontally organized without any hierarchies, with no director position and all decisions made together by the group. The organization engages in ethical fundraising and the team has adopted a socially just waging system that is based on an acknowledgement of every individual presenting different backgrounds and needs. Staff salaries are structured around a base rate per year, with increments and also de-increments in place, depending on individual circumstances, thus deliberately avoiding and counteracting hierarchies of pay.[{note}]3 As Trowell explained, the system is sensitive to each individual's situation – while one person might be the beneficiary of inherited wealth, another might need to care for a relative, for instance. In this example, the former's salary will be adjusted with a de-increment and the latter will receive respectively more. There is also an emergency waging system in place for times of financial hardship, which means that any cuts are discussed collectively. Trowell further underlined the importance of developing new economic models in the community, to decide principles together and to take action

to redistribute income and resources. According to Trowell, money is not talked about enough in wider society and through more conversations and more attention to how money is distributed, revolutionary change could be initiated. She proposed that considering the varying resources that people can offer, such as time, money, space or imagination, can be transgressive and invigorating, as part of a process of 'constantly reinventing how we are in community, as well as on our own journey' (Trowell at Performing Solidarity: Making common cause 2019). Platform's model of distributing salaries enacts a relational view of the team that responds to the varying degrees of dependency among its members.

In the context of discussing solidarity practices, Trowell further commented on the practice of democracy as under-performed and compromised in many institutions, including educational settings that are measured by audits and league tables. Based on her experience at Platform, she described acts of performing democracy as requiring patience, using and needing to develop protocols and agreements of listening and a readiness to learn new skills. She further sees her background as an artist as informing her work at Platform: 'I see it as a constant practice in the sense that a musician practises or a performer practises.' Trowell further offered the example of Platform's approach to work according to consensus-based decision-making:

I have been involved for nearly thirty years. We do our decision-making by consensus, but in the case of major or complex decisions, a voting system might be used at the end of the process. This ensures that everybody's position is formally noted down, indicating whether we are For, Against, Blocking [demand further discussion] or Standing Aside [don't feel strongly, will go with majority]. There are protocols and techniques you can use to help do that: anarchist practices and feminist practices have many methods. I think this is very performative for me. But it's not performative in the sense of pretending, it's performative in the sense of embodied politics, [in] that it requires practice and constant rehearsal. And that is what builds resilience, I think. It's not everybody's cup of tea. When some people leave, they say 'I love this politics but I can't do it, I need to work by myself or I want to be in a hierarchy…' and that's fine. (Trowell at Performing Solidarity: Making common cause 2019) [{note}]4

The methods and practices enacted by Platform, as described by Trowell, constitute, on one level, enacted contestations, a calling into question of the moral ideal of self-sufficiency as part of neoliberal rationality (Butler 2015: 9, 14). They also work affirmatively in revealing a vision of the sort of lived structures of a possible world through emphasizing the interdependency between self and others. Butler likens the neoliberal entrepreneurial ethic of individuals needing to take responsibility for themselves to a 'war on the idea of interdependency' (67). They further draw attention to the forms that resistances take: 'the way communities are organized to resist precarity, ideally exemplifies the very values for which those communities struggle' (ibid.). Such modes of organization come into a particularly sharp focus through the lens of performance practice in that it offers the opportunity to experiment with ways of embodying, creating, curating and relating. Through these relational aspects, performance inherently relies on and works through inter/dependency, offering a potential for change in and through this very space.

Solidarity as per/forming relational subjectivities

The ideas and activist approaches that emphasize interdependency resonate strongly with the field of posthumanism. As an influential theorist in this field, Braidotti has argued for an affirmative approach to creating change as centred on the formation of a posthuman subjectivity, which critically reconstitutes the human as relational, thus challenging the Humanist and anthropocentric conception of a Eurocentric, masculinist unitary subject (2019: 43). In The Posthuman she critiques Eurocentric humanist paradigms based on the 'classical ideal of "Man"' (2013: 13) that posit '"difference" as pejoration' (15). The reconstitution of the human is bound up with a direct acknowledgement of and engagement with the 'messy contradictions of the present', proposing a conception of the human as 'situated, perspectivist and hence internally fractured and potentially antagonistic'; Braidotti then further proposes that it 'demands some sort of acknowledgement of solidarity with other humans but also an embrace of the non-humans' (Braidotti 2019: 38).

In her approach to redefining the human, Braidotti posits that 'we are (all) in this together but we are not one and the same' (52), presenting a perspective of heterogeneous multiplicities. This proposed collective and heterogeneous subject

constitutes an alternative to the conception of the Vitruvian 'Man' as the measure of all things, through embracing positions of vulnerability and also relations forged across difference. The ethical basis for this grounded and situated perspective is the creation of a 'we' as part of processes of social transformation through actualizing 'the unrealized or virtual potential of what "we" are capable of becoming' (54). The critical posthuman subject is non-unitary in being defined by multiple belongings; it is a relational subject that works across differences, yet is internally differentiated. Importantly, it is grounded and accountable. As Braidotti elaborates in her article 'On putting the active back into activism':

> An affirmative ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth others'. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It implies a new way of combining self-interests with the well being [sic] of an enlarged sense of community. (Braidotti 2010: 47)

Braidotti places an emphasis on relationality and community-building as affirmative through 'a renewed claim to community and belonging by singular subjects who have taken critical distance from individualism' (2010: 48). There are close parallels between her concept of inter-connection and Butler's notion of interdependency. Where Braidotti ties this concept into her broader approach of affirmative ethics, which is forward-looking and seeks to generate a 'new' subjectivity, Butler considers what has always made human life possible in highlighting that 'we are never fully individuated' (2020: 46).

Such notions of relationality and interdependency are explored in the field of performance by live artist Jamal Harewood who creates what he calls 'temporary communities' through audience-led participatory events that focus on ideas of identity and race. As part of Performing Solidarity: Making common cause (2019), Harewood discussed his debut work The Privileged, an interactive performance that has toured the UK and internationally since 2014. The seated audience initially encounter Harewood wearing a white polar bear costume.

[{figure1}]

A series of numbered envelopes contain instructions for the audience to carry out – these are composed in such a way that audience participants will be confronted with needing to make ethical decisions. As Alice Saville writes in her review of the work, the instructions

> become more and more uncomfortable, making the group decide whether to follow them – and in doing so, comply with cultural stereotyping of/institutionalised violence against young black men – by force-feeding him fried chicken, or stripping him naked, or wrestling him to the ground. (Saville 2017)

As Harewood pointed out, the performance provokes audience members 'to decide whether they treat it as real life or performance'. In the way it is composed, the work provokes the formation of a community among participants who are bound together by the particular situation and their negotiation and decisions on how to relate. In one instance, as Harewood explained, the audience decided they could not go ahead and stopped the performance. Most events involved heated group discussions, walk-outs and other emotional reactions:

> If they come in and think it's just a performance, we're going to get it done. But if people see it as real life, and they don't want to be seen as racist … the first performance, an argument broke out early on. No one wanted to tell me to eat because of the implications of telling a black man to eat chicken. (Harewood cited in Saville 2017)

The performance engages audiences in considering their complicity within an environment marked by systemic racism and confronts them by demanding to decide how to deal with their own potential violence in relation to an other. Saville (2017) observes that she 'never felt so white, or so uncomfortable about it'.

[{figure2}]

Harewood's piece confronts its audience participants with a complex ambivalence that demands from them decisions on how to enact their ethical

orientation. Structurally the piece presses for participants to generate an ethics of relating between self and other and presses for the building of a temporary heightened relationality, generated around the question of how to respond to the instructions provided. The focus here is on relating, negotiating and acting, in relation to one another and wider social structures. In other words, the performance asks its participants to consider their solidary alignment as part of triggering a process of questioning their respective participation in the kinds of systems of inequality that exist in social life. It brings the issue of social justice to the fore in creating and working through a structure of interdependency.

The performance structurally heightens these questions and presses for immediate answers through its live format. The performer and audience participants find themselves in a shared physical space, for a relatively short duration of time. During the passing of time, second by second, the situation develops, entirely dependent on the actions of everybody present. Acting and not acting take on meaning through a heightened focus on embodied action. These conditions present an acutely attuned space in which a 'temporary community', in Harewood's terms, is forced to consider who they are together, how they relate and how their ethics align. Harewood provides the conditions for the participants to explore and work through ethical and political issues in a set-up that already presents their interdependency as a given and insists on relational subjectivities to be formed and enacted.

Solidarity and the creation of new imaginaries for social equality

Yet how might solidarity be built in order to enact social change? In her book <u>On Revolution</u>, Hannah Arendt delineates solidarity as 'partaking of reason', revealing its capacity to conceptualize a multitude, such as a class, nation or even humankind (2016 [1963]: 84). She states that while solidarity can be evoked by suffering, it is not guided by it and can seem cold and abstract in comparison to pity, since solidarity 'remains committed to "ideas" – to greatness, or honor, or dignity – rather than to any "love" of men' (84). Yet while solidarity in this conception appears as a relation that is characterized by a degree of detachment, this very detachment offers the potential for action to be taken vis-à-vis perceived injustice and can lead to the formation of a 'community of interest' – considering its Latin root 'differ', 'interest' offers the

potential to create relations across difference. In Arendt's words, '[t]erminologically speaking, solidarity is a principle that can inspire us and guide action' (ibid.).

In The Cultural Politics of Emotions, Sara Ahmed refers to solidarity in her discussion of the sociality of emotions with a similar emphasis on emerging despite and across difference:

> Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 189)

Recognizing the 'common ground' across difference that Ahmed refers to here as involving work and commitment relates to Arendt's emphasis on involving reason in the creation of a common interest, or a community of interest, in Arendt's words, where interest is defined by a common concern.

Conceiving of solidarity as embracing difference also resonates with Lauren Berlant who in the context of considering the forming of relations and alignments in political action states that 'it does not require substantive likeness to repair a broken world' (Berlant and Greenwald 2012: 86, emphasis in original). Here Berlant refers to solidarity as 'organized by a recognition of a problem that does not require us to line up affectively in relation to each other or to ourselves' (87). They further state:

> Bound in the structure of solidarity, we need minimal affective likeness – we are free to be ambivalent about whole sets of things while attending to the transformation of the thing/scene/problem that has brought us together. For us to cultivate new kinds of affective collective ground we have to embrace the sheer formalism of solidarity, the affective freedom to be different but mutual amid the risk-taking of changing structure through practice; because we, as workers for social change, have to fight the scary fight over what we'd be willing to lose in order to take the leap into the new social formations we want to bring into being. (Berlant and Greenwald 2012: 87, emphasis in original)

The emphasis in Arendt's, Ahmed's and Berlant's approaches here is placed on the ways that new action and new social formations can be created. To bring Butler back into the discussion at this point seems pertinent in that they call for a new imaginary 'that would disorient us from the givens of the political present' (2020: 64).

A final example from the Performing Solidarity series serves here to explore how alternative values are enacted through curatorial practices in posing a challenge to the existing order and offering a new imaginary. Annie Jael Kwan and Joon Lynn Goh discussed their work with Asia Art Activism (AAA) (Performing Solidarity, 2019),[{note}]5 an intergenerational interdisciplinary network that was launched in May 2018. AAA was created with a mission to confront the invisibility of different kinds of 'Asianness' and to complicate the paradigm of Asia in a contemporary UK context in which, due to its colonial history in South Asia, smaller Asian communities do not find adequate representation. Kwan and Goh explained that one of the initial impulses to form the network was the question of what it would mean to 'take up space', based on a situation in which there is a lack of space and articulation of East Asian and South East Asian histories and representation, with many spaces in the UK being either mainstream white, or aimed at black or brown communities. AAA took residency at Raven Row in London and initiated a series of activities and events through continually rearticulating questions concerning 'Asianness'.

Within this framework, Kwan curated the experimental performance programme Being Present in response to the exhibition Speech Acts and in conjunction with the symposium 'The LYC Museum and Art Gallery and the Museum as Practice' at Manchester Art Gallery (2018–19). It included performances by artists Ada Hao, Bettina Fung and Nicholas Tee.

[{figure3}]

In her curatorial article 'Taking space for Asian diaspora narratives', Kwan states that

[f]or the performances at Speech Acts, it was fundamental that the AAA artists were present and took up space – both physically and in terms of attention – aligning their contemporary practices with the longer trajectories of British art

history and British migrant art history. (Kwan 2019)

Seeking to counter a lack of representation of diaspora, migrant and immigrant art in the UK, the event directly challenged the dominant narrative on British art and its history, reconstituting it as inclusive of a migrant history. As Kwan stated at Performing Solidarity: Making common cause (2019), while works by artists of colour might be purchased, they tend not to be exhibited: 'what isn't shown, what isn't exhibited, isn't preserved, isn't conserved. If something isn't talked about, it's not in our public consciousness'.

In her article, Kwan refers directly to Butler's politics of alliance and cohabitation in describing the work of AAA as follows: 'AAA finds and forms resistance by bringing migrant and diaspora bodies together, in times of increasing precarity and hostility, simply by being present and taking up space.' Referring to the work of the AAA artists as part of Speech Acts, Kwan further describes this 'taking up space' both in physical terms as well as 'in terms of attention – aligning their contemporary practices with the longer trajectories of British art history and British migrant art history' (Kwan 2019).

[{figure4}]

The curatorial concept of Speech Acts constitutes a critique of the current hegemonic order and in so doing also creates an affirmative social justice argument. The act of 'taking up space' also places the body into the centre, with the various performances assembling bodies that act together – particular bodies that do not adhere to the white hegemonic norm. The statement is made between these particular performing bodies and in relation to those who watch. Their presence and actions make a clear and direct demand for social equality. What Butler states with regard to embodied performance in demonstrations also applies here in the curated arts space:

> [I]t is not the immediacy of the body that makes [a] demand, but rather the body as socially engaged and abandoned, the body as persisting and resisting that very regulation, asserting its existence within readable terms. It acts as it its own deixis, a pointing to, or enacting of, the body that implies its situation: this body, these bodies; these are the ones exposed to violence, resisting disappearance. These

bodies exist still, which is to say that they persist under conditions in which their very power to persist is systematically undermined. (Butler 2020: 196–7, emphasis in original)

Solidarity is at play here in various ways – as a curatorial concept and method, in aligning a particular group of artists in relation to an activist agenda and also in the ways that the performances on the whole have the potential to let solidarity emerge among its audiences, to widen the community of interest around its argument for equality. The exhibition presents and enacts a new imaginary that presents a critique of and alternative to the socio-political environment with its existing inequalities concerning the representation of East Asian and South East Asian artists. In this regard it supports Butler's quest for 'an egalitarian imaginary that apprehends the interdependency of lives' (2020: 203).

Concluding remarks

In this article I have sought to embrace the challenge that Davis posed – to consider the very processes of activism that seek to challenge rising inequalities in the neoliberal environment – through exploring the potential role of performance as activist practice as well as the lens it offers as a conceptual field for considering activist practices. Certainly, performance can easily reaffirm and perpetuate existing values and often does so. Yet, as I have argued, I consider it to hold potential for contributing to the creation of alternative structures of life.

The activist approaches discussed here, a selection drawn from a range of practices represented at the Performing Solidarity series, offer concrete examples of acting for and with others in mind. They draw on, work with, work through and call for an acknowledgement of the interdependency that makes us human. Their methods, in terms of their ways of organizing and curating, draw on solidarity – both in the form of enacting a critique of current circumstances and also in creating new imaginaries of a world underpinned by social equality.

The various works of the artists and activists discussed might meet a critique of constituting all but minor acts that in the greater scheme of things border on insignificance. The methodology that I have taken here might further be critiqued for

idealizing particular instances of practices. In this regard I wish to revert to Butler again who reminds us that 'of course there are many reasons to be suspicious of idealized moments, but there are also reasons to be wary of any analysis that is fully guarded against idealization' (2015: 89). I suggest that our conception of these practices needs to be attentive to their processual aspect, as Davis has called for (above). This also means that these practices will all but fail any quantitative measure of immediate impact, perhaps in terms of statistics, on social equality. Instead, however, I propose that any theorization of these practices needs to move along with them and attend to the transformative aspect inherent in these. Such an approach will support and enhance the sustained commitment that many artists and activists offer in acknowledging the interdependency between manifold initiatives unfolding in multiple modes and on multiple sites. It is in this way that they might 'contribute to the formation of political solidarities with more duration' (Dean 2009: 47), as mentioned above. These activist approaches collectively 'think beyond what are treated as the realistic limits of the possible' (Butler 2020: 29) within the neoliberal framework. They form a refusal of meeting the world from the basis of a self-interested individuality. They also constitute affirmative actions, in Braidotti's sense, that rework and challenge the core of the neoliberal project that aimed at what Thatcher termed the 'heart and soul' of people (Thatcher cited in Butt 1981).

Not only does activist performance practice offer a space for the development of new social imaginaries, including the creation of social justice and social equality arguments, but it can also create concrete and lived interventions in social life through its very reliance on shared presence, interaction and experimentation with ways of relating. As an affectively charged space, performance and activist practice can establish critical alternative structures to neoliberal ideology, systems and processes, in that they foreground and enlarge a sense of interdependency and communal relation. Such practices offer a potential site for reconsidering the politics of relating through the creation of new forms of relational subjectivities, which are solidary in nature. Butler proposes the following:

> Perhaps we could say that the body is always exposed to people and impressions it does not have a say about, does not get to predict or fully control, and that these conditions of social embodiment are those we have not fully brokered. I want to suggest that solidarity emerges from this rather than from deliberate agreements

we enter knowingly. (Butler 2015: 152)

Performance and activist practice can create spaces for experimentation in which such exposing of people and impressions are heightened, where relations between people can be explored, rehearsed and newly formed. In this regard it can offer a public site that is political, situated and differentiated, where new forms of subject relations can be engendered through a future imaginary coexisting with the present. Such experimental activist practice relies on the conception of the subject-in-formation, rather than holding on to preconceived identities.

Over the past few decades, which saw the rise and spread of neoliberal capitalism across the globe, the performing arts not only had to adapt and change, they also continually need to reassert and redefine themselves in this environment. The ways that the wider field of performance can contribute to social change is through the ways it thinks, exists and acts. In its insistence on live(d) embodied practices and gathering, performance offers a framework to work through issues, ideas and questions in a shared presence that can allow for new solidary relations to emerge.

Notes

1 Davis's talk was hosted by Brett St Louis. I paraphrase Davis's ideas based on selective notes I took during the event.

2 The series Performing Solidarity was composed of four events, organized in collaboration with the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) in London, Middlesex University London and the University of Winchester: 'Making Common Cause', 'Self-Organising, Self-Instituting', 'Dissensus and Compromise' and 'Ethics and Responsibility'.

3 For details visit: https://platformlondon.org/about-us/funders-ethics/

4 The text was slightly modified in email correspondence in 2020.

5 Annie Jael Kwan and Joon Lynn Goh contributed to different events of the Performing Solidarity series. Also see the contribution by Asia Art Activism in this issue.

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Captions

Figure 1. Jamal Harewood <u>The Privileged</u>, SPILL Festival of Performance 2015, produced by Pacitti Company. Photo Guido Mencari.

Figure 2. Jamal Harewood <u>The Privileged</u>, SPILL Festival of Performance 2015, produced by Pacitti Company. Photo Guido Mencari.

Figure 3. Bettina Fung, Towards All & Nothing (in memory of Li Yuan-Chia) (2019), part of <u>Being Present</u> at the Manchester Art Gallery. Image Andrew Brooks.

Figure 4. Nicholas Tee, Yellow Peril (2019), part of <u>Being Present</u> at the Manchester Art Gallery. Image Andrew Brooks.

Performing Solidarity artists and activists:

Joon Lynn Goh
Jamal Harewood
Annie Jael Kwan
Jane Trowell
Helena Suárez Val