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# Choreographies of Power
## The Public Movement Collective

Francesco Spampinato

C o-founded in 2006 by Dana Yahalomi and Omer Krieger, the Israeli collective Public Movement is a performative research group that stages public choreographies and rituals such as parades, referendums, dances, and games (most of the times in public spaces) to explore how political power structures aestheticize daily life to produce identification and consensus to the status quo. This community-based practice rooted in discussions and interviews, dubbed by the group "performing politics," aims to produce collective awareness through art and play. The group's performances are place- and time-specific—or rather context-specific—and therefore unique. As in the tradition of performance art and Happenings, they are usually not repeated; their success relies precisely on the unexpected effects they produce on the audience.

The group's work could be distinguished in two areas, determined by the two different types of audience addressed: a generic and a specific one. The generic audience mostly consists of anonymous passersby who behold and sometimes participate in choreographed public performances based on celebrative events or simulating real-life situations, like emergency procedures and joyful gatherings inspired by Jewish youth organizations. A specific audience, instead, is addressed during debriefing one-on-one sessions conducted by a so-called "double agent" in a formal setting, or in conferences opened to many people. Their critique of representational democracy is a way to empower the audience in understanding how choices are determined and the role of the individual within a community and the state.

Halfway between visual arts, theatre, dance, and activism, Public Movement is part of a new generation of genre-defying groups that emerged in the early twenty-first century that employ performance to explore social and political dynamics. Analogies could be traced, for instance, with such entities as Chto Delat (What Is to Be Done?) from Russia or the Berlin-based Rimini Protokoll,

both practicing forms of investigative theatre based on pre-existing documentary material, often involving non-professionals, and resulting from the collaboration with insiders, experts, or representatives of specific fields or organizations. Recurring issues addressed by such groups include the conditions of labor, soft power, and bottom-up forms of political struggles, usually addressed from a leftist perspective and aimed at disclosing cases of social injustice.

What characterizes this new generation of performance collectives is the multidisciplinary background of their members, ranging from visual arts to theatre to political science to philosophy. Add to this the countless temporary members and consultants from the most disparate fields for an idea of how many diversified competences come into play. The production of these groups is striking in the degree of mimesis with factual reality they are able to reach. In *Spring in Warsaw* (2009), for instance, Public Movement led a walk in the Warsaw Ghetto not unlike one of those pilgrimages organized periodically by Jewish youth delegations. The ritualistic march, which involved about 1,300 people, was in fact a metalinguistic event: it worked as a real march and at the same time, being framed as a work of art, functioned as its representation.

Invited by cultural institutions, besides Israel, Public Movement has also performed in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Ukraine, Australia, Taiwan, and the United States. Collaborating with local authorities such as police precincts, military units, firefighters, medical services, and government representatives, the group's actions represent situations of unity, resistance, choice, debate, or obedience. The performances, which aim to stimulate the audience in psychological terms and sometimes involve them physically, range from organizing trainings in emergency preparedness (i.e. *Emergency*, Tel Aviv–Jaffa, 2008) to referendums (i.e. *Census*, Bat-Yam, Israel, 2010), from public interventions (i.e. The Łódź Actions, Lodz, Poland, 2008) to cultural summits (i.e. *Make Art Policy*, Helsinki, Finland, 2014).

Since 2011, Public Movement has been under the sole leadership of Yahalomi. Although collectives are usually structured as horizontal entities, it is meaningful to use the term "leadership" when referring to Public Movement. Its hierarchical structure doesn't have to be considered anti-democratic though, but is itself part of the tactic of mimesis conducted by the group to explore how governmental organizations produce consensus. "Everywhere power is institutionally structured into organizations," Yahalomi affirms. "We are working with widely exercised power structures but then challenge them."[1] Hence, even the group's internal structure is at the same time functional and representational, a methodology and a critique of those utopian ideals associated with the very notion and modes of collectivity. And the same could be said for its name.

Public Movement, *University Exercise*. Created by Omer Krieger and Dana Yahalomi. Heidelberg Theatre, Heidelberg, 2010. Photo: © Stefan Kresin.



Public Movement, *Performing Politics for Germany*. Created by Omer Krieger and Dana Yahalomi. Hebbel-Am-Ufer Theater, Berlin, 2009. Photo: © David Schmidt.

Public Movement actions are usually performed after months of intensive research and negotiations with state institutions. *University Exercise* (2010), for example, staged at Heidelberg University in Germany, involved forty firefighters and sixteen special unit policemen instructed to conduct physical inspections, questionings, and even arrests. Students felt so intimidated that many protested and some improvised a sit-in. Announcements of a Public Movement intervention were made before, but not many were informed about it or expected that an artistic performance could materialize so realistically such a dystopian reality. The boundary between life and fiction, freedom and oppression, was re-established only when a fire brigade turned an emergency evacuation into a street party.

A recurring activity conducted by the group is collecting data, as in the case of *Census* (2010), which consisted in a door-to-door survey to screen the residents of Tel Aviv's Ramat Yosef neighborhood. The performance's goal was not the actual data though, but to simulate an activity through which political or economic entities exert their power—that is, by reducing individuals and communities to a data set that would be employed to customize either marketing strategies or political propaganda. Again, the event worked as a real census on one side, and its representation on the other, as proved by the documentation of the project made available on the group's website, which consists in infographics and pictures of the group's members, all dressed in white clothing, smiling reassuringly and holding blue notepads.

The use of white and blue is not accidental, as this combination of colors is that of the Israeli visual identity and flag, and for this reason symbolizes the country's collective unconscious. In most of Public Movement's works, the performers dress in white while blue is employed for flags, posters, and leaflets. The white clothing suggests a feeling of cleanliness and innocence at first sight, but it also represents a uniform, symbolic of values of order and discipline, echoing a functional society at times, a totalitarian regime at others. The recurring use of choreographies based on mechanical movements in many of the group's performances reinforces the dichotomy: the uniform as a symbol of community bonding or a constriction that annihilate the individual in the name of a group?

Portraits of the group, sometimes produced as self-standing works, recur in Public Movement's portfolio as well as in that of many art collectives working today, for whom the very choice of coming together stands as a declaration of intent. In an untitled group portrait of 2008, nine of its members lie down on the floor of a public square, one leaning on the other. Most have their eyes closed for the strong sunlight, which enhances the plasticity of the group, its sculptural quality recalling that of socialist realism, the style through which post-revolutionary Soviet Union idealized the citizens of its cohesive society where everyone was

equal, fierce, and heroic, yet enslaved to an ideological dogma. Another apparently acritical and disenchanted act of mimesis could in fact be read as a conceptual operation aimed at revealing the dogmatic nature of Israel.

Originally conceived for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, for fifteen times from 2011 to 2013 the group staged the performance *Positions*, a choreographed game based on the ritualistic act of voting that invited the audience to take a stand on binary issues. In November 2011, I had the opportunity to take part in the one organized for the performance art festival Performa in Washington Square, New York. As part of a group of about forty passersby and art world insiders, I found myself making choices and taking positions, not having to argue them, between Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, gay and straight, or Israel and Palestine, occupying one or the other "side" of the designated area accordingly. In enacting the very basic mechanism of democracy, the playful performance reminded beholders of their potential as active participants, in art as in real life.

The audience is not always involved directly. Many times performances consist simply in public choreographies in uniform featuring props like executive cars, flags, flaming torches, and burning signs. Examples include: staging a car accident (i.e. *Accident*, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2006); posing for imaginary branding campaigns (i.e. *Operation Free Holon*, Holon, Israel 2007; *Performing Politics For Germany*, Berlin, Germany, 2009); leading rallies and marches (i.e. *Rally*, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2007; *Spring in Warsaw*, Warsaw, Poland, 2009; *Cross Section*, Kiev, Ukraine, 2014); staging dysfunctional dance ceremonies (i.e. *Also Thus!*, Acre, Israel, 2007; *Summer 2011*, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2011); and performing fights (i.e. *Public Movement House*, Bat Yam, Israel, 2008).

Working collectively, performing politics, and being from Israel, one would expect the group to address the delicate issues of the longstanding antagonism between Israel and Palestine from a specific, even radical viewpoint. In most cases, Public Movement's position is ambiguous though, ambiguity being not a type of abdication but an effect of their tactics of mimesis. The same could be said regarding the aura of authoritarianism and militarism, which one could accuse the group of glorifying in their productions. In fact, as Daniel Miller suggests, Public Movement "works to camouflage their malevolent mission by focusing on the level of their actual activity on the intersections between art and politics, their mutual overlaps and unexpected exposures, rather than authoritarian militarism as such."[2]

The idea of "camouflage" here is close to the concept of "over-identification" theorized by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek to explain the practice of Slovenian music and performance group Laibach, known for borrowing symbols

and choreographies from the iconography of totalitarian regimes like Nazism and Communism. In order to criticize contemporary politics, Laibach doesn't use traditional forms of resistance, suggests Žižek, but take "the system more seriously than it takes itself seriously."[3] Interestingly enough, when in 2010 the Slovenian art collective IRWIN—that together with Laibach is part of a larger network called Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)—organized a project at the Israeli Center of Digital Art in Holon, Public Movement helped them stage a public ceremony to celebrate their fictional nation NSK State.

With different backgrounds that range from folk dance to Israel Defense Force combat tactics, the group's members act as an organized unit: performing in group formations, in white uniforms, sporting a flag that is a variation of the Israeli flag, and organizing performances that look like ceremonies. Public Movement intends to stimulate political imagination, exposing the strategies through which politics produce consensus in forms of propaganda, or we should better say, nation branding. To over-identify with the State of Israel, means for Public Movement not only to collaborate with official state institutions but also to become itself a state, an autonomous entity that borrows formal traits from pre-existing states in order to find its own identity (i.e. *Promotional Video*, 2008; *Fifth Anniversary of Public Movement*, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2011).

Assuming an identity is less a goal than another act of camouflage; the utmost priority for Public Movement is the investigative process enacted and the repercussions it might have on those involved in their real-life situations. On a smaller scale, it is through their so-called "debriefing sessions" and public symposia that the group addresses more specific issues and takes a position on the delicate issue of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. A case in point is the project *Birthright Palestine?* (2012), which challenges, although not directly criticizing it, the Birthright Israel program, which was initiated by the Israeli government in 1999 to bridge the gaps of the Diaspora by offering a free ten-day trip to Israel to young Jews (18–26 years old) who live abroad in order to strengthen their bond with the motherland.

In five "salons" organized in February 2012 for the Triennial exhibition of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York—that year aptly titled "The Ungovernables"—Public Movement discussed the possibility of a *Birthright Palestine* program together with members of the city's Jewish and Muslim communities: left-wing intellectuals, human rights lawyers, Birthright Israel alumni, UN consultants, students, artists, and journalists. The project contrasted with the basic idea promoted by Zionist thought, namely the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in the "Land of Israel" despite the pre-existing sovereignty of Palestine. In addressing such a controversial issue, the New Museum salons

offered a new angle for interpreting Public Movement as a group that is critical of Israeli government.

The *Birthright Palestine?* symposia developed into the controversial project *Rebranding European Muslims* (2012), which consisted in inviting three design agencies—from Amsterdam (Metahaven), Stockholm (Love Tensta), and Vienna (Demner, Merlicek & Bergmann)—to develop a proposal for branding the increasing presence of Islam in Europe. The project called attention to strategies of soft power and processes of migrants' integration, in a moment in which migrations were becoming a dramatically urgent issue in Europe. Produced for the 7th Berlin Biennale, it then developed into a proper competition culminating in a gala-like event at the Steicher Herbst Festival, Graz, Austria. The Viennese agency won the votes of the audience and its campaign was shown on billboards in Graz.

Branding campaigns, deliberate or subliminal, are at the core of the soft power strategies employed today by countries like the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, Korea, South Africa, and New Zealand. Existing only since 1948, nation branding is a priority for the State of Israel, not just for attracting tourists or improving exports but to become the home of all the Jewish people living around the world, a nation built over the pre-existing nation of Palestine with whom it maintains a complicated relationship, characterized by harsh forms of control proper of an ongoing war. To speculate on branding processes for Palestine and European Muslims has been a way for Public Movement to criticize Israeli politics and give voice to Israeli left-thinking, using art to trigger political imagination.

Considering the re-emergence in Europe of right-wing xenophobic political parties and the intransigent position of the State of Israel against Palestine, the *Birthright Palestine?* and *Rebranding European Muslims* sounded highly controversial, both as artworks and political actions. In an interview that followed the Graz gala, Yahalomi asserted:

> Left-wing art-world discourse is governed by a reiteration of the post-colonial question: who is eligible to speak, about what and on behalf of whom? […] Public Movement's position is that creating arenas in which the public can perform as a political body, engage and debate social trauma and political ambition, and embody ideological conflict on the level of their individual experiences, is productive because it creates an intimacy with issues that are normally kept at distance.[4]

In order to realize the *Birthright Palestine?* salons, the group had to pass through a series of difficulties chronicled in detail in the script for a debriefing session featured in the book *Solution 263: Double Agent*, edited by Yahalomi and Alhena

Public Movement, *Rebranding European Muslims*. Stierscher Herbst Festival, Graz, 2012.
Photo: © Wolfgang Silveri.



Public Movement, *Honor Guard*, 4th Asian Art Biennial, Taipei 2013. Photo: © Hagar Ophir.

Public Movement, *National Collection*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2015. Photo: © Kfir Bolotin.



Public Movement, *Cross Section*. Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, 2014. Photo: © Sergey Illin and Alexander Pilyugin.

Katsof and published by Sternberg Press in 2015. The event takes place in a hotel lobby where a double agent in a suit, joined by a secretary and two bodyguards, recites a twenty minutes monologue in which he tells the participant—defined an "emissary"—about the project and the various vicissitudes, misunderstandings, acts of censorships and sabotage involving the online forum Arab List, the Birthright Israel program, the American-Israeli lobby, and the two institutions that supported the project, namely the Israel Lottery and Artis, a New York-based non-profit organization for the promotion of Israeli art.

Highly romanticized by Hollywood movies, the double agent is someone simultaneously in contact with two intelligence services but working only for one: a spy. In the context of Public Movement practice, the double agent is a metaphor for the artist, and the act of spying a metaphor for art itself. It is thanks to the debriefing sessions that an artist, impersonating the fascinating persona of the double agent, is able to produce an unmediated political discourse and, in this way, entail a possible, albeit small change in society in the name of social justice. In line with the idealized notion of art as being the conscience of society, as a double agent conspires against his/her own country, the artist does so against his/her own culture. What for the double agent is just a job though, for the artist is a life mission whose utmost aspiration is to elicit critical thinking.

Another area of interest for Public Movement is the bond between art history and the story of the State of Israel, which, interestingly enough, was proclaimed with a ceremony at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1948. When in the fall of 2015 the group was invited to do a project for the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, this was the most logical subject to address. The resulting production, titled *National Collection* (2015), consisted of a series of performances that took place over six weeks in various areas of the museum. Often taking the form of guided tours, the performances exposed the inadvertently political power of Israeli art. In parallel, the group organized a series of debriefing sessions during which double agents recounted to anonymous emissaries detailed stories of pre-1948 Palestinian art, providing thus a counter-discourse.

During the one-on-one guided tours the visitors were informed and shown that some paintings had a red sticker on the side of their frames, which marked those to be evacuated to the shelters in times of war, as it happened during the 1991 Gulf War. The performance progressed with a choreographed demonstration of the evacuation, marches and dance moves symbolizing aggression first and then protection, and declamations in unison such as: "Underneath us is a political mission. Imagine the museum is a country and in this country there is a museum." A highly symbolic moment was a procession, in and outside the museum, of performers carrying around the painting of a beach landscape with

trees, of which neither title nor author was communicated, but that, according to the group, was on display when the State of Israel was proclaimed.

Following in the footsteps of artists whose practice is referred to as Institutional Critique, from Hans Haacke through to Andrea Fraser, Public Movement here addresses the museum as an institution that while it officially preserves and valorizes art as the highest form of human expression, in fact uses it also as a tool of nation branding and a symbol of communal identity at the expense of other nations and populations kept in a subordinate position. The fact that a history of pre-1948 Palestinian art was told from double agents to emissaries only during private debriefing sessions is symptomatic of how histories, including art histories, are built from the perspective of those currently in power, while the histories of those kept under control, Palestine in this case, are not being simply ignored but kept secret.

The group adopted a similar method for *Choreographies of Power* (2016), a thirty-minute procession performed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York as part of the exhibition *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Art of the Middle east and North Africa*. The performers enacted a choreographic march punctuated by dramatic gestures of violence, which in the group's intentions echoed the museum's hidden political apparatus and the power relations implied in building such a massive and renowned collection. The performance included a reenactment of the Tel Aviv procession—using a copy of the same painted landscape chosen to symbolize the birth of the State of Israel—alluding thus to the geopolitical relations between Israel and the United States, and so also the pivotal role of a Jewish family like the Guggenheims in modern art history.

Proposing aesthetics and performance as tools to temporarily reflect on social mechanisms to which we subjugate without questioning, the concept of "conflict" becomes in the group's hands "a productive means of shifting power" or, rather, an autonomous territory to explore democracy, political persuasion, and ideological dissent.[5] While focusing recurrently on the specific context of Israel, Public Movement simulates strategic forms of propaganda to enact political imagination and suggest alternatives. What makes the group's work so unique is the way in which tactics of simulation give way to a conspiratorial conduct, which highlights that as much as art could be exploited as a symbolic tool of national identity, its innate power remains that of putting into crisis whatever certainties are taken for granted.

## NOTES

1. Francesco Spampinato, *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2015), 172.

2. Daniel Miller, "Performing Politics for Germany," *Frieze Blog*, July 13, 2009, https://frieze.com/article/performing-politics-germany accessed September 14, 2018.

3. Slavoj Žižek quoted in Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 110.

4. Elen Feiss in conversation with Dana Yahalomi, "Artists at Work: Public Movement," *Afterall.org*, April 11, 2013, https://www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-public-movement#.WP-WCVPyjq4 accessed September 14, 2018.

5. Spampinato, 172.

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