

The Politics of Undoing: The Movement of Activist Sense¹

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Introduction

How does affect relay at a distance? How can one consider research as a militant practice and witnessing as a form of intervening in another time-space? Which role does sensuous experience play in forms of political struggle? And where does an act resonate across different strata of sense and the sensuous? What constitutes an act in the first place?

Let's start in the supposedly concrete: During a conversation with a friend in Montreal, we came to discuss the events of the so-called Maple Spring (*printemps érable*) in 2012 – a large-scale confluence of different political interests which achieved the resignation of the Liberal provincial government in Québec through massive forms of social protest. One of the strong resonators for us were the casseroles, a practice used in Latin American protests of the 1970s and since deployed in many social movements around the globe. My friend told me, how it blew his mind, or rather senses, when people of all backgrounds went out on the streets, banging their pots to express their disagreement with the government's passing of Bill 78, an emergency law against picketing or protesting near universities that requires police approval for public protests (larger than 10 people) throughout Québec.² I remember the banging pots and protests going viral on streaming-media (live and recorded) and myself, not living in Montreal at that time, being completely fixated by the sound.³ The sound of banging pots and pans

1 I want to thank Aikaterini Genidogan for her very thoughtful and precise reading of an earlier version of this essay pushing me to be more careful and time-sensitive. I also want to thank Sophie Peterson for bringing up the importance of "fugitive community" in relation to this chapter.

2 For further information see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Quebec_student_protests, last access 2.14.2020.

3 Together with Roberto Nigro and Gerald Raunig, we explore some of these affective dimensions through Félix Guattari's concept of post-media (Brunner/Nigro/Raunig 2013).

reverberated and resonated from the balconies, streets, and screens of 2012 into our embodied present and presence in a café eight years later.

During the G20 summit in Hamburg, 2017 (July 7-8), I was involved with organizing the alternative international media center, FC/MC, housed in the Ballroom at St. Pauli Stadium, in close proximity to the Hamburg Fair where the summit took place.⁴ Before and during the summit, the city was zoned by the police to guarantee so-called ‘transportation corridors’ for heads of states and diplomats, leading to massive displacements of people unable to access their urban environment, with many leaving town. From above, the sound of at least three or four helicopters penetrated the entire inner-city area; wherever you went, a searchlight appeared in the night’s sky and the banging sound of the spinning rotors reverberated. This sound haunted those of us who inhabited that zone during the heart of the summit for months after the event. Ever since I am immediately brought back to this violent seizure of urban life by the police and other military operators whenever a helicopter flies over my head.

The sonic resonances which effect and capture through the bodily capacities for sensing are what amplify a *politics of affect* (Massumi 2015). Rather than addressing the sonorities as mere phenomena subjected to human perception, their materiality as resonant matter opens up an affective field of sensation which exceeds the individual human capacity to perceive sound. The following exploration of the term *activist sense* pertains to how a field of sensation, rather than individual meaning structures in “deliberative forms” or “reasoned argument,” play a constitutive role of what Judith Butler terms alliance and supported action.⁵

I conceive of the term activist sense as both a description of a specific movement in thought and an analytic tool for better grasping contemporary affective politics. In this framing analysis does not mean revealing foundational truths but rather functions as a *pragmatic device* for the construction of an affirmative affective politics. Such politics acknowledge the power and activity of truth-making as part of contemporary mediated politics. However, the struggle over truth can become abusive from either side: from the predators of fake-news-talk and from the identity-fraction propagating a normative conception of truth. In times of a reactive, redundant, and deeply reactionary deployment of affective populism, affirmation designates a specific engagement with embracing complex relations as

4 A good overview of its function and structure can be found in (Bergerman/Grimm/Keil/Leis-tert 2017). I explore the work and activities of the FC/MC in two longer articles (Brunner 2019, 2020).

5 On the role of affect in public protests, see the insightful publications on “affect space” and “the zombie public” by Eric Kluitenberg (2015, 2017, 2020).

a non-predetermined activity of sense-making rather than truth-making, that is, activist sense.⁶

I want to stress that many contemporary political struggles and social movements engage in practices of naming, identifying, and calling out forms of violence, subjection, oppression, and repression. By doing so, they do not merely constitute alternative truths but weave different stories and narratives attentive to aspects of earthly survival expanding the scope of human rights towards a differentiated account of living and co-inhabiting (Haraway 2016). Without wanting to devalue the relevance of struggles based on human rights and the more recent shift towards transformative justice, the emphasis of activist sense resides in the way activity and the power of activation through the sensuous enable an expanded conception of politics and political struggle attentive to affective relations as key to building transversal forms of resistance. I perceive such shifts integral to academic writing in the works of Saidiya Hartman (2019), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Kathryn Yusoff (2018) as well as recent discourses on pluriversal perspectives of non-Western decolonial ontologies (Rivera Cusicanqui 2018, De la Cadena et al. 2018) and their dialogues with North American pragmatist conceptions of the term (Vallega 2014). Both the redressing of the power of narrative and the pluriversal ontological politics (Escobar 2020, xv-xvii) provide a veritable ground for thinking activist sense beyond (but not without) the 'human' in relation to sense and sense-making. While the main discussion of this chapter engages with the work of Judith Butler and draws on affect theory, I want to stress the political alliance and resonances with decolonial thought and black studies in their multidimensional engagements with alternative modernities and their specific temporalities of the more-than-human. A shared point in these perspectives is their redressing of the concept of what constitutes the realm of the human, where a categorial difference between the human and the inhumanI propels a racializing modernism, while the pluriversal notes points of differential cohabitation as constitutive of human as a factor which always exceeds modernist capturing. Without promoting a divisive opposition between strands of thought, I am interested here in the affective and activating powers of existence (Massumi 2011) which foregrounds a resistant life "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016) and "blackness" (Yusoff 2018) as "fugitive community" against colonial capture (Harney/Moten 2013, 29-30).

In the following I will engage with processes of sensuous activation and their more-than-human capacities in the writings of Butler on social movements and their mediated states. I will look at her concepts of spaces of appearance, support, and alliance in order to carve out a relational thinking of sense and activity as temporalizing political procedures. Rather than a performative materialism, I conceive

6 On the relation between affirmative politics, affect, and activism, see Braidotti 2009.

of Butler's politics of the streets as one possible step towards a politics of undoing which occurs at the fringes of an event's sensuous and sense-making.

Preliminaries on Undoing as Perishing

To begin from a more-than-human point of departure, I wish to think of act, activism, sense, and sensuous as placed along an affective-relational continuum. This continuum, being extensive (Whitehead 1987) and relational (James 1996), defines experience as neither just a singular experience, a particular instance of perception or a moment, nor just a person's experience of "being-in-the-world", meaning exterior to embodiment.⁷ Worlds do world – forming a worlding of sorts (Haraway 2016; Stewart 2010) in polyphonic (Guattari 1995, 6; Bempeza et al. 2019) and pluriversal (Escobar 2018) ways. They do not provide a ground or offer substances for action to seize or build upon. Rather, they engage an overall processual container through which action as mode of experience becomes felt. This is a non-linear and non-causal logic of the event. Experience designates the very ground or fabric through which "matter comes to matter" (Barad 2003) across the sensuous, social, and physical modes of existence constitutive of many worlds. In their eventful contractions, these matters make sense while resisting a hegemonic capture of the human perspective of what is designated meaningful. The art of an affirmative affective politics or activist sense pertains to the modes of participating as quasi-humans in the welter of experience, activating specific resonances, and thus co-fabricating collectively potential forms of sense.

In this processual account of worlding with and through experience, 'being' defines a minimal zone of a passing and fleeting present in which 'things' seem to happen (cf. Massumi 2011, Deleuze 1993).⁸ This passing, however is neither a fleeting present of 'one's' experience, nor does the sphere of politics define it exclusively. It is shot through with a pastness and futurity that are constitutive of the actual occasion of an experience without having to actualize one. They are an activating lure for actualization. "In-acting" (Manning 2013, 21), temporalities of the not-yet and

7 For a clarifying note on the difference between worlding in this more posthumanist conception of experience and difference from a Heideggerian phenomenological subjectivism, see Haraway 2016, p. 11.

8 Deleuze explores the difference between ideal events and states of affairs in relation to temporalities, focusing primarily on the difference between Chronos and Aion, in *Logic of Sense* (1993).

have-been are the real immanent spheres of a politics of becoming, not a politics to come but what I call a *politics of undoing*.⁹

Undoing means opening, unknotting, to cut but also to relay in that very process. Undoing is like a “perishing” (Whitehead 1987, 60), which differs from vanishing. An undoing is a terminus (James 1996, 13-14; Massumi 2011, 140; Manning 2009, 224; Manning 2013, 12), the most actualized state of an event before it renews into a different becoming. In perishing it gives its immanent power to the time of the past and future, ready to inhabit another present. Perishing describes the undercurrent of a present’s movement into a different state, not in a successive manner but in a folded temporality of process lines conjuncting and disjuncting.¹⁰ A perishing is the marker of an event to maintain its own shape shifting active as a mooring in a worlding process always under way – it manifests the event as a singularity beyond actual states of affairs. It is a *local sign* of an event’s activity as moving through experience (Massumi 2011, 128). The local sign might be the aesthetic variant of what Haraway terms situated. A tying of relations into a concrete manifestation whose relational ecology nevertheless seeps through the actualized form of an event. In perishing, this undoing of the event makes the sign flash in all its texture as a felt and embodied experience that cannot but be sensed without being rationalized. The time-form of undoing is not an instance in the overall event but the qualitative tonality that renders an event felt in a particular way (in French it would be *sens*), thus eluding chronological temporalization through its own affective power of existence.

Undoing as perishing is a process that celebrates a completion without closure. It is this very process of a perishing of the events’ actualizing dimension, where it becomes palpable both as a felt and embodied experience and in its tending towards a different emergence in experience.¹¹ Operating on the thresholds of perishing means constantly reworking the future-past tendencies of matter informing concrete embodied experiences (that is, effects). This is what Massumi, in a speculative-pragmatic gesture, terms the “*politicality of process*” (2011, 13). Such

9 In the following, I will further explore the question of act and action in the work of Judith Butler. I do sympathize with her writings on undoing in *Undoing Gender* (2004); however, I will not further engage with that particular aspect of her writings.

10 On William James’ conception of conjunction and disjunction in digital media, see Anna Munster 2013 and Adrian Mackenzie 2010. Elsewhere I explore this power of what might be called a “concatenated commons” in relation to activist media platforms (Brunner forthcoming).

11 It is crucial though to not confuse events with actualized, empirical states of affairs. In *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze opposes the ideal event as singularity to the Platonic notion of essences and thus revolts against a split between the empirical and the ideal, which he continues to problematize in Kantian empiricism (and aesthetics, I would add) and Husserl’s phenomenology (1993, 51/96-97).

a speculative pragmatism of process foregrounds a sense of activity and potential activation as immanent force in a field of sensation. Affective politics engage an “alter-accomplishment” (Massumi/McKim 2009) to the repetition of events as the same, not as a rupture in the ordinary, but a lure for the sense of difference in the midst of habit.¹² While in human perception, we come to name and classify such changes as after-effects, as a denotation of what happened, and how such happening yields concrete effects, *sense* follows its own operational logic. In sense, undoing hints not at a simple more-than or difference from concrete states of affairs – both are simplified conceptions of potential – but point at a time much smaller and much more extended than the time of human perception. Undoing is the cleaving of an openness in the apparently homogenized structure of empirical worlds, not as a mere rupture but as that which was always there and will always become, a difference beyond mere distinction – a becoming. How to embrace such temporalities of undoing as activating and sensed complexity of worlding? And how could such politicality of process become an ethics in the making?

Brace for Activity

The two examples outlined at the beginning highlight what I call an “affective relaying” of mediated events through the bodily capacities of sensuous experience and their distribution across different platforms (Brunner 2013). The complex nexus of mediated experiences creates a relational field (Brunner/Fritsch 2011) through which practices of political struggle are shared and, as Judith Butler claims, only gain their translocal relevance in times of globalized media infrastructures through mediation (Butler 2011). In the following I want to further unpack and mobilize Butler’s work on politics in the streets and the role of action and sense as part of what she develops through her understanding of alliance. While Butler wants to rework the question of what constitutes spaces of appearance in a (post-)media era of global social movements and their media ecologies, my interest in developing the notion of activist sense will foreground the temporal layering immanent to affective politics. I will do so by drawing on Butler’s thoroughgoing engagement with Hannah Arendt. At the same time, I aim to extend their theories towards a

12 The ordinary is a crucial term which could not be further developed here. It hints at a ground of affective relationality in mundane experience as the locus of ontological politics of different modes of existence in a pluriverse. It also links to the remarks on Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman and their writings as engaging in modes of narrating the ordinary of (mostly female) black existence and the erasure of this mode of existence from hegemonic discourse. On the ordinary and affect see Stewart and Berlant (2019).

more-than-human dimension tied to the temporality of undoing in the politics of affect.

Butler pitched her conception of bodies in alliance during the lead up to the Arab Spring and just before the major events of the Occupy Movement in 2011 and 2012. Working through Hannah Arendt's political writings on the polis, which she calls "space of appearance" (1958, 199), Butler carefully recasts Arendt's conception of the public. Arendt conceives of the polis as the realm in which a public can be constituted by those who appear and speak. Butler contends that these spaces are based on a presumed social dimension of "appearing for another," an act exclusive to male citizens in Ancient Greece (2011). Butler emphasizes that this notion of appearance, requiring a "divine performative allocated to the human form," is opposed to the material, physical, and institutional practices on which the value of this form of appearance is based. Her critique of Arendt pertains to the very power and act of appearance itself. In contrast to Arendt's rather human-centered intersubjective concept of relationality, Butler conceives of the space of appearance as utterly embodied, material, and reliant on the support of the physical environment as well as the care for bodies to walk on them in a protest. These material and embodied conditions effectuate spaces of appearance as the performative instance of political struggle.

Arendt's conception of the space of appearance is tied to speech and human action. She writes: "The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be." (Arendt 1958, 198) Butler gently subverts Arendt's argument, insisting on embodied and physical matter (the physical location) as supportive infrastructures of action to occur. She wants to ensure a situated and embodied hold against unbounded abstraction through language. The concern of action, while taking on organizational qualities in Arendt and pertaining to an enabling materialism in Butler, nevertheless holds on to the power of human individuals in either conception of the term. As Butler states "acting together [...] opens up time and space outside and against the temporality and the established architecture of the regime, one that lays claim to materiality, leans into its supports, in order to rework their functions [...] such action reconfigures what will be public, and what will be the space of politics." (2011) A sense of togetherness and participation in such action moves through Butler's notion of the body, as developed in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). These are bodies as related to non-human life, their very organic and in-organic composition.

Public protests, as analyzed by Butler, render "the material insurgencies of the body the political concern of the square." (2011) I wonder, if this conception of the body, whether material or social, remains on a liberalist stratum in Butler's writings, taking the body and the surrounding space as support for action that is a

volitional human action? At the same time, the “constituent power” (Negri 1999) immanent to both Arendt and Butler in their understanding of appearance underlines the temporal and translocal potential of the act of emergence of such a “space of appearance.” Appearance, the way I would like to think following Butler and Arendt, is different from representation. It pertains to temporal activations that come to the fore in collective forms of organized struggles. These activations have constituent power since they insert a shift into the tonality of an overall event that resonates across different bodies. The constituent power in Arendt and Butler’s conception of appearance becomes a felt and sensed activation through which a different “sense” of the overall event occurs. The task for thinking activist sense pertains to adhering to such constituencies while refraining from their reduction to an inter-subjective social act amongst human individuals.

On the one hand Butler states that participating in the spaces of support generates action in alliance “precisely between those who participate, and this is not an ideal or empty space – it is the space of support itself – of durable and livable material environments and of interdependency among living beings.” (2011)¹³ On the other hand, she claims “that the alliance is not reducible to individuals, and it is not individuals who act.” (2011) When the alliance is what acts, and acting together constitutes action, then such notions of act and action require a radical alternation from the human confinements at the heart of Butler’s proposition. Shifting from human action to bodies in alliance adds a materialist foundation of intra-individual interdependence to Arendt’s notion of action. Butler further extends this intra-individual dependency to “living beings” and claims to include the material environment as the supportive ground. What remains less explored in Butler’s recasting of action into a more-than-human domain is the mode of relationality at stake when it comes to participation. Participating as human subject becomes possible through the support for action which is bodily and material, dependent on physical space and its affordances, all of which constitutes a space of appearance. In relation to the temporality of undoing, I wonder how “those who participate,” as Butler writes, are really including not only human and living beings but also the temporalities imbued in the matter that surrounds those beings. Put differently, how can we account for a theory of assembly as constitutive of spaces of appearance in the sense of embodied manifestation of a public based on the temporalities of

13 In this respect, it is worth visiting Arendt’s own deployment of the term “support”: “It is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country, and this support is but the continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with ... All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.” (1972, 140) Butler extends Arendt’s social conception of support towards the material environment but does not change the overall conception of action beyond the human embodied subject.

activation and their capacities of rendering felt and making sense differently from the normative enclosures of late liberalism?¹⁴

Arendt writes: "The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end." (1958, 233) This is because action "though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every action becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes [...] the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation." (1958, 190) Two readings of such a conception of action and deeds arise in Arendt. Deeds, while boundless, are human deeds or deeds that constitute social interdependence as the basis for spaces of appearance and the material support required to make sense of human activity. On the other hand, such boundless deeds and actions extend beyond the human realm granted that one considers politics in the polis a more-than-human activity to begin with. Butler follows this temporalizing line without necessarily picking up on Arendt's remarks on action in relation to unpredictability and irreversibility (1958, 232-233). I want to stress Arendt's terms as crucial for a politics of undoing. While Arendt certainly talks about 'man' and 'his' deeds as yielding unpredictable effects and their irreversibility, the processual undertones can be cast beyond the human actor. Thinking of the pluriverse as a continuous relational field of activity levels the asymmetry between human and non-human – the reason why I prefer more-than-human. The materialist conception of embodied and supported action in Butler requires a further affective supplement. It is the temporality of affect, as I will explore in the next section, that extends the more-than-human not only to all life-forms and physical matter. The activation of the sensuous and its differential ways of making sense require a continuous affective temporalizing infrastructure as part and parcel of the material and embodied alliances and assemblies that Butler explores. The local sign of a successful mediated social movement, as I outline at the beginning and the way Butler stages such movements in her writings, cannot sustain its relevance if it does not take its affective envelopes into account. Appearance is not only a spatial affair but comes with a whole relational field of temporalities that constitute an assembly of bodies along their situated and timely capacities to affect and be affected. Action and activity underline the movement character of an affective field while nudging its potentials into embodied and material effects. The relaying of potentials for activation and their actualization defines the key operation of activist sense in relation to multiple temporalities.

14 Such a refined and ecological conception of participation can be found most prominently in the work of Gilbert Simondon (2005, 29).

The Powers of Affect

The force of emergence in action, if considered a more-than-human force, resonates strongly with the way Brian Massumi emphasizes the autonomy of affect (1995). Affect ensures a sensation of progress or time as passing present, that is, of materialized bodies in time and space while itself remaining a potentiality. While such informing procedures towards the making of a time that is the embodied and felt present arise through an affective relational field, the autonomy of affect maintains that we cannot know how such a relational field will cause effects. Affect engages the bodily and physical realm as a becoming, a process. Process is a mode of activation which ensures that each instance of the present as bodily felt emerges from and recedes into an affective and actively temporalizing field. Put differently, affect is not of the body or the senses but defines a field of sensation capable of activating situated forms of perception, thus rendering perception a relational force constitutive of subject and world. Affect is then an aesthetic operation because of the way it generates relays between movement, perception, and embodiment as intensive time-forms. Act and activity engage this affective aesthetic field in its capacity to process the key operation of a field of sensation. This fielding operation provides an outline of emergence in time and space as contractions of affective forces acting in resonance.¹⁵

Considering affect as autonomous does not mean it is relative. On the contrary, if conceived as a field activity, affect is relational and thus always engaged in matter, that is, forces relating under specific conditions. Affect enables emergence while eluding the very passing of such emergence in its embodied effects. Action and activity are the movements of affect entering instances of sensation constitutive of the time of bodily experience. This movement however, is exactly what is constantly shaped and reshaped and defines the operation of an affective politics (Massumi 2015, 117). Activity and processes of activation exceed the sensory-motor scheme of action-reaction, inserting a sense of the field of sensation's multiple, temporal textures. These textures become affectively felt through the more-than-human relationality of different materials acting in alliance, as Butler outlines. From an affective angle we need to include to these processes of material support for actioning a temporalizing quality which casts the moment of action, of bodies in alliance and the politics of the streets, beyond its representational value. Appearance as emergence resonates not just throughout the mode of sensation across different bodies but also their felt temporalities – often leading to variations of making-sense of an embodied experienced over time.

15 On the notion of the field, see Massumi (2011, 160-163/2015, 116). On the specific aesthetic understanding of affect see Deuber-Mankowsky (2017, 68-71).

Arendt's irreversibility concerns the necessity of actualization as the processual vortex through which potentialities activate; its degree of quasi-order imprints an affective-relational signature onto a specific realm of experience in time and space. Arendt's conception of the term action resonates with Deleuze's and Guattari's (Guattari 1995, 59/96; Guattari 1996, 180; Deleuze 1988, 88/97/126-127) deployment of the concept of finitude as borrowed from the work of Michel Foucault (1989, p. 340-346). Finitude is not finite. It is a tendency of emergence to move towards a certain completion or fulfillment in expression – a terminus becoming felt in a processual undoing. In this temporal relaying, an affective yet material conception of action or activity occurs where indeterminability courses through all modes of existence. It is action fabricating a time of felt experience and its variations of memory as a fleeting present informed by a future-past. Such future-past defines a time-form of its own, where the contemporaneous is not a mere contraction of a past towards a future, but where process as duration activates a time of affective consistence immanent to subjective embodied experience. At the same time, these affective enablements of emergence become finite in the way that they pertain to a completion or actualization, that is a manifest expression with concrete bodily effects. The mutual entanglement of affect and expression, indeterminability and irreversibility, are the very movements through which undoing receives its political relevance. Attending to undoing as the interval between indeterminability and irreversibility renders it activist as power *sui generis*, beyond human action but not without its capacity for activation through the more-than-human. The pragmatic question I would like to outline for the rest of this text pertains to how to engage creatively with such activating forces of activity without reducing these forms of engagement to a notion of participation and agency tied to identified entities and their mere inter-connection?

The Matter of Sense

Butler writes about different practices of care and support during the first wave of the Arab Spring at Tahir Square in Egypt. She emphasizes practices such as “making the material insurgencies of the body the political concern of the square” rather than a mere discursive and perceptual concern, that is phenomenological and discursive, as would be the case in Arendt's spaces of appearance (2011). Butler herself provides a crucial opening beyond human deeds through a temporal conception of act, action, and alliance:

“The bodies on the street redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy – and just as they sometimes fill or take over public space, the material history of those structures also work on

them, and become part of their very action, remaking a history in the midst of its most concrete and sedimented artifices.” (2011)

The practices of political struggle move through the fielding operation supported by the affective materiality of the physical environment and its ingrained temporalities. Rather than just hinting at the historical semantics of such situated activity, for instance the role of architectural history of urban spheres, the different temporalities amplify and augment each other, constituting an affective field of political struggle through mutual activation. Such activation equally includes the time of individual memories and sensations and the time of gathering on the streets and protesting. Bodies redeploying the space of appearance means inserting a quality of collective resonance which builds on the material-temporal support of bodies and physical space into an affective field as much as constituting a quality of alliance that extends the possibilities of resistance. Alliance then is a crucial term if considered beyond its intersubjective tendencies.

When Butler writes “it is the alliance that acts” while stating “action in alliance happens precisely between *those* who participate in the space of support itself” (2011, emphasis added) her position potentially contradicts the very potential of alliance as more-than-human constituent power. As far as Butler is concerned, *those* who participate are acting in alliance. Such alliance beyond consensus pertains to the works of Jacques Rancière on dissensus (2010) and Chantal Mouffe on agonistic politics (2016). However, both retreat into a human-centered idea of the *who* that participates in these practices. While Rancière allows for a somewhat sensuous expansion through his notion of the “distribution of the sensible” (2010, 36 *passim*), the forces of that distribution pertain to the human faculty to perceive as the basis of contemporary politics.

I want to suggest including the more-than-human elements into Butler’s conception of alliance. An affective politics, as I want to develop here, moves not only beside or underneath the human relationality of alliance, dissensus, and agonistic politics but defines a relational movement constitutive of but not finitely tied to material expression. With the activating field of affective forces as the foundational movement of expression, the question of alliances resides in the way a situation or a field enables openings for participation in a sphere where participation is the constitutive plane for alliance to emerge. Put differently, the fielding power of affective relationality becomes the plane through which one has to address questions of alliance and participation. Such alliances are based not on willful decisions by subjects but on the capacity to attune and amplify the affective field’s potential for certain expressions to constitute an appearance. However, and this is crucial, the appearance is not for the human, for human perception, but first and foremost for itself. It is existence “self-enjoying” its very occasioning (Whitehead 1967, 177). Participating in that general “creative advance” of existence, in its duration,

means to conceive of alliance as something beyond ideological alignment (Whitehead 1967, 210). Such processes of “differential attunement” to an affective fielding operation is both immediate and determined (Massumi 2011, 123). Different from total contingency (relativism) the process of a differential attunement is processually open, towards a different becoming, while expressing itself in a determined manner as a concrete situation. A politics of undoing as a temporal invention pertains to the capture and opening of affectively constituted alliances in their very movement. Undoing is not an individual act but the interval where shifts and openings in the field can be engaged with, where potential alliances grasp the bodies and support alternate futures. These waves of amplification nesting in the undoing of an event are the immediate and immanent affective lures towards an alter-engagement or alter-effectuation, a counter-power, against dominant and redundant forms of capture in hegemonic politics (Massumi 2015b, 42).

The temporalizing role of digital media provides a vital ground for exploring the durational modes of participation towards different temporalities as affective alliances in a politics of undoing. Before the lacuna of writings about the relation between social movements and social media (for instance Gerbaudo 2012), Butler stages the importance for spaces of alliance to resonate beyond specific territories, thus contributing to such events to make sense through the sensuous. Media are not just forms of mediation and representation of the protests; they activate new modes of making sense through the sensuous by putting localized protests into a globalized perspective of alliances (Brunner 2018). Butler writes:

“The street scenes become politically potent only when and if we have a visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live time, so that the media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action; indeed, the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions” (2011).

The shift from media as conveying or communicating content to its co-constitutive powers in relation to live-time for the composition of spaces of appearance is another hint at the more-than-human assemblages at work in social movements’ expressive powers. While liveness defines a potential for affective engagement in a political event it disregards the multiple temporalities which digital media actually enable (cf. Munster 2006, 2013). The relaying capacities of digital media allow for both live amplification and temporal shifts before and after the event. By doing so they become archives of the immediate as much as multiplications of temporalities informing the present through sensuous mattering. In relation to the introductory example such a temporal folding and its affective relays come to the fore. While we both were live witnesses of the events in 2012 in Québec, the translocal connection through mediation allowed for us to converge on differential points of the overall event envelope that is termed *Maple Spring*. The actual embodied encounter in a

café in 2020 and our respective memories revolving around the lived experiences adds new temporalities to this texture. The question of activist sense then is how to make the relays felt beyond a specific notion of liveness and move it towards a lived continuum of resistant practices and their shades of sensation.

While Arendt promotes the emergent character of space constituted by speech, Butler expands this casting materially and in reference to the temporalities immanent to such material environments. The bodily matters of support and action are human as much as more-than-human, but they remain tied to their constitutive spatial connotations. Both Arendt and Butler tie a conception of becoming to a space – once emerging through discursive subjects and once as materially given. Butler's notion of support is the key to a what I call a *transductive conception of alliance*, but not if it remains tied to the material or to actions as subjective deeds. Support – as transductive and temporalizing force – resides in the activating power that moves through the mattering effects of sensation. The mattering effects of sensation constitute bodies in alliance while at the same time eluding them in their material expression. Such a notion sensation exceeds the human as much as the mere appearance in a perceptual or perceived present. An insistence on the “time of the interval” and a cast of appearance as a “necessarily morphological moment where the body appears” as well as the proposition of “acting in the midst of being formed” provide a vital ground for a more-than-human conception of becoming at the heart of a politics of undoing (Butler 2011). Linked to the mediated reality of contemporary forms of protest these expressions cannot be reduced to mere processes of making present or live time. Alliance occurring as support and in the interval of acting in the midst of being formed all contribute to medias' activating powers:

“The media constitutes the scene in a time and place that includes and exceeds its local instantiation. Although the scene is surely and emphatically local, and those who are elsewhere have the sense that they are getting some direct access through the images and sounds they receive. That is true, but they do not know how the editing takes place, which scene conveys and travels, and which scenes remain obdurately outside the frame. When the scene does travel, it is both there *and* here, and if it were not spanning both locations – indeed, multiple locations – it would not be the scene that it is. Its locality is not denied by the fact that the scene is communicated beyond itself, and so constituted in a global media; it depends on that mediation to take place as the event that it is. This means that the local must be recast outside itself in order to be established as local, and this means that it is only through a certain globalizing media that the local can be established, and that something can really happen there” (2011).

On the one hand, Butler addresses the different modes of production and perception that constitute a translocal linkage, generating a mediated event all of its

own and thus constituting a sense of locality. The temporalities at work in these processes require equal consideration. If we want to extend Butler's theory of mediation as a constitutive event, we have to take the media infrastructures and their own operational qualities into account. This media mode of mattering bears potential for temporal cracks to occur in the overall perception of an event, here the undoing is felt as potential lure for difference. The affective capacities of media assemblages, which activate and resonate with human bodily capacities of sensing and sense making, rework and modulate temporalities. The live time relays of mediation are actually *life-time*: They contain a certain activating vitality of affecting and thus constitute alliances without the requirement of mediated connection (Parisi 2019).

Sensation and the practices of sense making through support and alliance foreground processes of becoming and their affectives, which is temporally potentiating, defining the core of a politics of the streets. Shifting the spatial constraints of locality and mediation towards processes of activation and undoing affords a general ontological shift of how to conceptualize relations. Rather than connecting different entities such as bodies, affect, as time-sensitive and a movement of sensation, defines the relational tissue through which an actual embodied experience comes to materialize as a becoming and not a filiation, the way Deleuze and Guattari differentiate the terms:

"[...] becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns *alliance*. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation." (1987, 238, emphasis added)

The challenge posed by an alliance as a double movement without descendance can be transfigured onto the tension between the time of the interval and the space of appearance. Constitutive of the public are performative acts which generate "scenes", in Butler's terms, and arenas, in the writings of Arendt and Mouffe. Scenes, however, are composed, whereas arenas are rather fixed. Butler then engages such a double movement when she writes: "The media requires those bodies on the street to have an event, even as the street requires the media to exist in a global arena." (Butler 2011) If scenes were only the mediated representations of localities, one where bodies gather and one where the gathered bodies are situated through the media, then it would hardly be imaginable why my friend and I were both moved by the same event while encountering it differentially. What moved each of us was not tied to the filiation of actual bodies in alliance but a specific temporality of undoing. In the semblance of a livedness on screens, I was a participating affectively just as much as my friend in Montreal. The event moves

relationally across spaces and times, thus shaping the event's contour through a proliferation of sensational lures, of activations that lurk in the cracks of multiple becomings. These becomings share a capacity of participating in a relational field which is the support for alliance.

I want to read Butler's theory of assembly through an operational logic of affect's temporal powers of becoming. Arenas, agoras, spaces of appearance have a tendency to privilege discourses of representation – a presence and present as the face value or currency of truth (cf. Lorey 2016). *Alliance in becoming* exceeds a politics of the immediate or mediated, built on the past and leading towards a (better) future or connecting spaces on and off screen as loci of protest. In the same manner Deleuze and Guattari refuse both regression and progression as part of a conception of filiation that is opposed to the temporal logic of becoming. For them, regression would lead to something “less differentiated” whereas progression would mean “something more differentiated”, of which neither provides a proper definition of becoming (1987, 238-239). In their proposition of a “creative involution,” (1987, 164) rather than evolution, they criticize the chronological temporality immanent to both progression and regression. Instead, they emphasize that the temporality of the event of becoming is contemporary, not as a singular but as “other contemporaneous possibilities” (1987, 273). This notion of contemporaneity is quite different from using the ‘making present’ or ‘making real’ of mediated participation to demarcate an event as real. Deleuze and Guattari thus complicate the temporality adequate to becoming as being of a different kind than the coherent time forms of past-present and future. Creative involution describes the element of concrete form that breaks away and escapes its spatio-temporal confinement in order to open up an unattended difference which nonetheless was immanent to its existence. This time-form of undoing harbors a becoming, a way of escaping the form and eschewing the location, of a movement-character rather than a definite type. It is creatively involutive because it moves neither forward nor backwards but sideways (a double movement).

The assumption of progressive politics being more differentiated might be misleading if it is not considered in relation to the temporal specificity of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari explain: “but to *involve* is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations.” (1987, 239, emphasis added) Beneath assignable relations there is of a relational field a not predetermined but emergent quality that is differential. Deleuze and Guattari use of the notion of alliance designates a temporal emergent collectivity as quality in itself, as becoming, and not the becoming-together of bodies, matter, and spaces. Involution is the time form of differentiating becoming, whereas the activity of involving shifts participation away from a willful act. It is more a process of being drawn into a line or situation which is neither active nor passive. Conceiving the power to involve as a mode of participation means to open the body to “an inhumanity

immediately experienced in the body as such [...] outside the programmed body” (Deleuze/Guattari 1987, 273). The inhumanity is not a nonhuman matter but a becoming which falls outside of time through human sensuous embodiment. It is inhumane or more-than-human because it cannot be grasped other than through sensation.

Activist Sense as Practice of Undoing

Recalling the initial array of a shared and felt activist continuum at the beginning of this text, I want to close with turning towards the temporality immanent to the process of undoing as an instance in a process where the creative involution, the differential act, becomes a lure for “other contemporaneous possibilities.” How can we make sense of the temporal folding of activity immanent to media ecologies as a key aspect of contemporary social movements? In the introductory examples the power of relaying felt experiences across time and space defines but one aspect. The narration and sharing of felt embodied states, recalling the events of the Maple Spring from a disjunctive time and space – my friend living in Montreal, me being glued to the screen in Zurich – makes up one key element of a politics of undoing: The affective event-envelopes reactivate memories and provide embodied experiences with a rich and layered *sense* as constitutive of the contemporary. In the emergence of a memory, as *local sign*, the affective texture of activist modes of existence unfold their extensive continuum across bodies, times, and spaces.

Undoing means to fold and insert, to attend to the edges of an embodied experience as it verges towards its own remaking. The politics of undoing are not tied to human-ordered attentiveness of the perceiving subject in the usual phenomenological sense of the term.¹⁶ The subject and perception are of the situation and become with it, thus shifting the shape of the event towards an ecological operation that is utterly more-than-human. The more-than-human pertains less to an orchestration of human, non-human, organic, and nonorganic agents (into an alliance, as seen from a human perspective), but to the differentiating contributions of temporalities to the fabrication of the contemporary. It is the “concatenated union” of the fleeting present felt at the brink of its undoing, where politics of the event *make sense* (James 1996, 107-108). Such sense-making follows a logic of becoming that moves in a non-linear fashion, constituting contemporary alliances – alliances beyond entities and inclusive of temporalities undercutting a chronological coherence.

16 On the general rejection of the subject-centered phenomenological take on sense, see Foucault’s “review” of Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense* in his text “Theatrum Philosophicum” (1998, 351).

The problem of an agential and mediating image of thought is its leaping back into a casting of action tied to a subject. *Sense* defines the power of the event to seep into perception while circuiting through multiple (sensuous) matters in their capacities to contribute to the event. It is here, in the midst of occurrent sense (as becoming felt and making sense) where undoing unleashes its political potential. The power of culmination without determination, a crystalline and diffracted image that weaves together the contemporary, underlines the movement of becoming which is felt when the situation takes hold of the present. It is a fleeting and emergent present as contemporaneity that expands what can be felt and how to move forwards if the making of sense suspends any preemptive categorization while taking account of the temporalities of a past informing such a present.¹⁷ In this way, Erin Manning states:

"I think that the biggest mistake we make is to pretend that we can categorize and compartmentalize events according to pre-established criteria. This is just too clean. I think that art can do the work of keeping experience complex by creating an open field for thought in the making. All open fields eventually get captured in all kinds of ways, but this capture does not negate the trace of the process [of becoming]." (Manning in Massumi 2015, 145)

What exactly becomes activated through the perceptual and embodied encounters with such an activist continuum and how does it make sense while moving through the sensuous? *Sense* the way Deleuze unravels the term lies before any actual sensuous experience. It inhabits the surface, as he writes, a contour of the event's potential unfolding without being resembled by the event. The sonorous contours of the banging of pots and the helicopter rotation, or the banging of protection shields of police in riot gear charging the protesting crowd, enter the experiential realm not as appearance but through an *involvement* in fields of experience. Such an involvement occurs disjunctively, that is, it activates in resonances with a plethora of other activations across differentiated bodies, times, and spaces. There is no deduction or regression possible in these situations – they seize relationally and carry bodies in their sensuous capacities with them. In this whirling of an unfolding event, the surface moves in resonance, underneath, without projecting or being actualized. Sense is a temporality all of its own – *Aion* or becoming. This temporality shapes what comes to pass as present but is never grasped other than in its movement across and underneath. Such a temporality is at work, when the temporalities of past and present events draw on forces of a life beyond the human-body-sensation-nexus. It is a futurity as contemporaneous. There is nothing but the event. But the

17 The notion of "taking account" could also be read in the way that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes about the "art of noticing" (Tsing 2015).

event is never that what the present assumes it to be, and the present orders and confines powers, enabling and disabling.

So, how does a politics of undoing play into these temporal complexities? The media assemblages which accompany and shape social movements around the globe are far more than amplificatory devices in support of appearance. They carry the affective powers of “non-sensuous perception.” (Whitehead 1967, 182)¹⁸ Non-sensuous perception is “the immediate past as surviving to be again lived through in the present.” (Ibid.) Rather than a mere linearity of a past conditioning a present, non-sensuous perceptions are the relays between an event’s undoing and its shift towards the formation of another event. To lodge this process in perception is a way to circumvent consciousness as the driving operation of such transitions. Put differently, Whitehead poses non-sensuous perception as the key-activity in the process of making sense through the sensuous by applying an affective activation before conscious recognition puts things into an order. It is here, where Manning places the power of art, and which I would extend to the general realm of aesthetics, as the relay between sensation and sense-making. How does such an activist sense operate through the non-sensuous relay of an undoing to become crucial to a politics of sensation in activist media ecologies?

The media’s capture of social movements for the most part bifurcate. On the one hand, they are part and parcel of the serious business of calling out acts of state-directed violence against the freedom of assembly and speech. Here the notion of “alternative media” and investigative journalism derive their relevance from contributing to the play of politics of appearance and recognition in an overall distribution of the sensible throughout different media outlets and platforms as well as archives and juridical procedures, human justice, and human rights practices.¹⁹ On the other hand, the preemptive power of media, mostly tabloid and mainstream social media, focuses on the logic of violence, the front line (Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger calling), and what is widely known as “riot porn.”²⁰ Such logics of violence capture the discourse at the barest level of activation, harnessing it towards a proto-fascist aesthetics obsessed with a linear logic of time, of future catastrophe or danger, as a crucial element of a politics of fear moving through sensuous activation.²¹ A future fact that predates how it will be cast after the event has happened – the

18 I want to thank Diego Gil for making this important comment.

19 Recognition is another central term in the works of Butler that cannot be further engaged with due to a lack of space (cf. Willig/Butler 2012).

20 On the obsessive relation to the front and its powers of activation in Schmitt and Jünger see Wills 2016, 179 passim.

21 Without having further space to elaborate, such a linear logic of future threat or war-mongering liberation has been celebrated by Italian Futurism, most notably, Tomaso Marinetti, but also occurs in more recent sense-modulating strategies of post 9/11 state-of-emergency politics as deployed by the George W. Bush administration (cf. Massumi 2005).

pitfalls of the regressive and progressive. In the midst of these bifurcating lines the more ambivalent but also more experimental terrain of artistic-activist creativity offers an affirmative version of activist sense as a becoming.

A politics of undoing extends the artistic-experimental beyond the institutionalized confinements of art. Turning towards aesthetic practices, such experimentations permeate activist media practices and forms of protest (cf. Reed 2019). Beyond the primary reactive conception of alternative media, as a response to mainstream media and their dominant refrains of violence and opposition, another mode of aesthetic activation arises. The activating powers of different temporalities, specifically different modes of living and resisting binary captures of opposition, define a crucial aspect of activist sense in times of redundant refrains of populism. Rather than just engaging in forms of protest and counter-narrative in order to obtain recognition, be it social or legal or even a common cause entering the discourse of politics, these modes of activation operate through the power of undoing. Undoing is an affirmative process that honors the accomplishment of an event becoming a concrete and embodied situation, an effect, while accounting for the differences immanent to such a situation that are felt in their potential. Affirmation is not an act but a state of openness. It courses through each instance of an embodied experience, expressing a sense of movement as defining character of an event's singularity. Such potentiation is the work of affect and non-sensuous perception. It accounts not just for the imaginary that 'another world is possible' but also for the unbounded potential for activation in the midst of the contemporary.²² While it is crucial for social movements to build on reliable infrastructures, to support bodies in alliance and in the streets, such activities are paired off with an entire array of differentializing (micro)-perceptions with and through the media-shaped temporalities that make up such embodied experiences, both disjunctively and conjunctively. What is shared collectively through alliance, the alliance Deleuze and Guattari hint at, is an alliance in the feeling of undoing, the power of existence through becoming. Becoming is returning. Becoming is the eternal returning of differentiation in its very own manner, not constituted entities being different.

Acting in alliance, "acting in the midst of being formed," (Butler 2011) pertains to the insertion of sense into a collective sensing of becoming, a heterogeneous force operating through the "joy" of sensuous emergence. There is neither a pre-fabricated alliance among humans or between humans and non-humans. What accounts for the more-than-human is the very process of sense(making) as the temporal powers between thinking and feeling, moving and being moved, motion and rest. The affective politics at the heart of activist sense can be felt in the very

22 In a more extended version of this article, I would engage in Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stenger's more speculative embracing of the protest slogan "another world is possible" dating back to the global social movements stated in Seattle in 1999 (Pignarre/Stengers 2011).

powers of undoing. Undoing is the potentiation for the banging of pots to reactivate the present, the contemporary, as my friend and I shared eight years after the Maple Spring. It is the trauma of the helicopter noise haunting my memories while feeding the affirmation of experienced trauma being shared in resistance without sharing the traumatic experience. While there is singularity to each of these felt instances of actualization, activist sense as a politics of undoing allows for sharing an activist continuum across times, spaces, memories, and existential territories. It is the transtemporal and translocal conception of the spaces of alliance that builds on the disjunctive power of becoming beyond retroactive analysis of urban forms of protest and their mediated states. It is in this artful activation with and through sense that a polyphonic bundle of life-forms occur and that do not react but activate, affirming a different line of life in the present of future-past memories in the folds of non-sensuous perception. Such life is not free of capture. It will be captured, but only after its undoing has moved somewhere else, towards a different and differentiated contemporary.

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