The politics, science, and art of receptivity

Emily Beausoleil*
School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract
With so much attention on the issue of voice in democratic theory, the inverse question of how people come to listen remains a marginal one. Recent scholarship in affect and neuroscience reveals that cognitive and verbal strategies, while privileged in democratic politics, are often insufficient to cultivate the receptivity that constitutes the most basic premise of democratic encounters. This article draws on this scholarship and a recent case of forum theatre to examine the conditions of receptivity and responsiveness, and identify specific strategies that foster such conditions. It argues that the forms of encounter most effective in cultivating receptivity are those that move us via affective intensity within pointedly mediated contexts. It is this constellation of strategies—this strange marriage of immersion and mediation—that enabled this performance to surface latent memory, affect and bias, unsettle entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour, and provide the conditions for revisability. This case makes clear that to lie beyond the domain of cognitive and verbal processes is not to lie beyond potential intervention, and offers insight to how such receptivity might be achieved in political processes more broadly.

Keywords: receptivity; democracy; neuroscience; affect; performance

A formerly homeless theatre workshop participant searches out the right characters for his tableau; he scans the group, and points to me. He places me in the scene; he lifts my arm and shapes my hand into a dismissive wave; he adjusts my hips and torso; he sculpts my face with his fingers, gently, until I am scowling scornfully. He crouches low, cowering in front of where I stand, and we hold this image—I hold this stance, I become this character—I feel in my body how he sees people like me, I feel in my body that I am this character. My arm begins to ache; I try to look for cracks in the mold to overwrite this position of scorn, but I am frozen in character before the group. I am implicated.

Pluralist democracies take as given that difference is the very stuff of politics—that dominant meanings, values, and ways of life, and the political relations they maintain far from account for all citizens, and alternative possibilities might yet prove

*Correspondence to: Emily Beausoleil, School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University (PN331), Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand. Email: e.beausoleil@massey.ac.nz

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legitimate, viable, even preferable. As such, democracy requires that we not only make space for diverse ways of life, or simply ‘contain enough difference’—as if this were possible—but also remain open and receptive to the challenges and changes implied by such differences. Moreover, such receptivity is the very ground of democratic processes, and a determining factor in their effectiveness: societies with high trust and dense social capital also have democratic institutions that work, and deliberation works best when it is preceded by empathy and receptivity.¹ And yet these democratic moments are risky—they introduce what Mark Warren calls a certain ‘groundlessness’ regarding the very meanings and values that position, frame, and strengthen us.² And so, while these moments of encounter can open one up to more complex ways of seeing, they can also incite fear, defensiveness, and deepening entrenchments. As recent backlash against multiculturalism in Europe, growing anti-immigrant sentiment in Australia, and the polarisation of politics in the United States attest, this democratic demand might be the greatest placed on us and the most difficult to achieve in diverse societies.

Democratic theory, perhaps due to its emphasis on representation and reason-giving, has only in recent years seen a surge of interest in the affective dynamics of reception within political communication. Indeed, with so much work on the issue of voice, the inverse question of how people come to listen is only now being asked in earnest. Yet undeniably, as Gayatri Spivak, Sara Ahmed, and Susan Bickford also argue, a ‘politics of listening’ is equally integral to meaningful democratic engagement.³ Without openness to the unfamiliar or uncomfortable, the potentially undermining—what Romand Coles calls ‘receptive generosity’ and Jane Bennett calls ‘presumptive generosity’—political communication in diverse societies would be impossible.⁴

A burgeoning scholarship in political theory that engages both affect and aesthetics has begun to consider the role of receptivity in politics, and it is no accident why this is so. To acknowledge the role that affect and aesthetics play in political life is to move away from what Teresa Brennan calls the ‘foundational fantasy’⁵ in Western theory that presumes autonomy as the precondition of politics; it is to acknowledge that we are always-already affected and only ever in response to the world in which we are embedded. As a result, such scholarship has brought to the fore what has so long been assumed as political backdrop: that reasoning and decision-making are inseparable from affective and embodied processes; that the possibilities and contours of perception are shaped by the textures, intensities, and resonances of the affective ‘sounding chambers’⁶ in which they occur; and that this influence need not only be viewed with suspicion and despair but also engaged rigorously as a site of politics in its own right. This scholarship has opened up new sites and strategies for the cultivation of sensibilities conducive to ethical and political life, and frameworks for holding previously bracketed dimensions of such life to greater account.⁷

This article forms part of this strand of emergent theorising regarding the politics of reception. It is provoked by a sense of the political significance of the briefest of moments within encounters where we decide to close or open ourselves to ‘others’; that grainy point of friction where one’s frame of reference rubs up against another,
and one decides either to turn to familiar strategies of self-preservation against the intrusion of the foreign, or to truly listen as democracy demands of us. In the half-second delay between encounter and perception—what William Connolly calls the ‘fugitive flash point’ that is beneath cognition and beyond the reach of argument—what happens in this moment? What structures and shapes our responses, which are often so quick that we miss the moment altogether and see only what we recognise, recognise only what validates, and cannot hear that which exceeds our own frame of reference? Where encounters with difference are unsettling, uncomfortable, even undermining, what moves us to engage or to challenge the ground we take as given? And, far more challenging, what defines those moments where implication, even shame, in light of such encounters opens rather than closes us into defensiveness, deeper entrenchments, and denials? It is this delicate, tenuous, elusive moment of encounter with difference—that which prompts responses of both radical receptivity and fundamentalist entrenchment—that seems absolutely crucial to theorise in contemporary politics. This article explores the conditions of listening in politics as well as how these might be effectively harnessed to produce receptivity and responsiveness, using both recent developments in affect and neuroscience, and the case of Headlines’ 2009 after homelessness ... forum theatre project to do so.

THE CHALLENGE OF AFFECT

Conventional modes of civic engagement tend to privilege a speech culture characterised by directness, literal truth-telling, and abstract and reasoned argumentation. Here, the absence of emotion or physical movement is often taken as a sign of objectivity, and indeed, if either emotional or rhetorical displays are too pronounced, these are often seen to undermine the validity of truth-claims. And yet recent scholarship in affect and neuroscience has shown in various ways that these cognitive and verbal strategies are often insufficient to cultivate the receptivity that constitutes the most basic premise of democratic encounters across difference. This is because receptivity is, by definition, an affective state, and the decision to open oneself to alternative views is thus both a precognitive and embodied one. We are invested in certain truths and norms, attached to certain identities and relations; we experience visceral resonances and dissonances in contact with others and affective associations in light of such experiences, which through repetition shape our orientations towards and away from others. In this way, social configurations—who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are, as well as the ranking and movements of these bodies in relation—are shaped by what Sara Ahmed calls ‘affective economies’. These affective experiences and our interpretations of them create and sustain the very shape of politics.

Affect, though it underlies and structures thought, is in excess of cognitive circuitries; it is the embodied ‘nonlinear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion are subtracted, but also ... “a never-to-be-autonomic remainder”’. In fact, emotion, as affective neurobiologists have argued, is this embodied ‘intensity owned and recognized’, the brain’s subjective interpretation of ‘somatic markers’ such as hormonal levels, blood flow, digestive activity,
neurotransmitters, and other dimensions of cellular metabolism.\textsuperscript{11} This is further complicated by the role that both implicit memory and the autonomic nervous system play in structuring affective responses. Apart from our explicit memory, which we can consciously recall and use to narrate our lives, childhood memories and those with a strong emotional charge—particularly when traumatic—are processed unconsciously through the amygdala and stored in the body in the form of implicit memory. These implicit memories create enduring structural changes to the limbic and autonomic nervous systems that, in turn, function as an on-going template that constantly filters and shapes how present experiences are perceived and interpreted.\textsuperscript{12}

Perhaps most provocatively, this means that our responses to and decisions in light of experience often occur instantaneously and precognitively, shaped by past experience that is often beyond the reach of conscious memory. And when the autonomic nervous system is triggered—when we feel unsafe, anxious, or ashamed—the flood of cortisol and adrenaline this induces limits blood flow to the frontal lobes of the brain; it quite literally short-circuits our ability to access or remain reflective about our own knowledge, remain receptive to the unfamiliar, and create new responses and behaviours.\textsuperscript{13} Inversely, when the body senses it is ‘safe,’ the autonomic nervous system maintains a state of ‘open receptiveness’, the very state that is found to be necessary for learning and integrating new information. Indeed, psychotherapists have found that only in this state may new insights, behaviours, and emotional responses emerge.\textsuperscript{14}

**MEDIATED IMMERSION: MOVED IN SPITE OF OURSELVES**

What, then, might cultivate receptivity in the face of foreign or challenging encounters, if cognitive and verbal means are not enough? I offer that performative practices such as theatre and dance, using as they do both affective and embodied strategies to garner attention, can illuminate how such dimensions might play a role in political communication more broadly. These practices are, by their very nature, designed to gain and hold our attention even as they communicate foreign, challenging, or contentious positions across difference. As such, they work to cultivate receptivity and dissemble those limits to thought, action and relation that preclude more complex ways of seeing. How do they do this? I believe the forms of encounter most effective in cultivating receptivity and revisability are those that move us via affective intensity within pointedly mediated contexts. Here, the directness of both affective and physical dimensions of such encounters is supported by the indirectness of performance’s address; audiences are given the necessary space for receptivity rather than reactionism in light of the impact of affective encounters. When performative practices prove most disruptive and transformative, it is often through precisely such a balance of strategies.

The growing literature on the politics of aesthetics has explored this first condition of affective intensity in great depth. Aesthetic modes of representation are productive more than descriptive, evocative rather than assertive; when Jill Bennett states
that art is ‘transactive’ rather than ‘communicative’ in the narrow sense, it is because aesthetic–affective practices stimulate certain kinds of experiences of a vivid present more than they transcribe and relay a determinate message or represent an elsewhere. From Kant to Deleuze, this intensity and immediacy of aesthetic encounters has been linked to their ability to exceed and temporarily suspend recourse to our established terms of meaning-making, forcing us to assemble, provisionally and dynamically, what Jacques Rancière calls our ‘partitions of the sensible’ that mark the bounds for what can be heard as ‘sound’ rather than ‘noise.’ In this way, aesthetic–affective encounters can propel us beyond the familiar and self-affirming and make it possible ‘to figure the newly thinkable’—in Levinas’ turn of phrase, to ‘think more than [one] thinks’—even in spite of ourselves.\(^\text{15}\) Such experiences work politically not so much in how they convey political ideas, but by how they interrupt the perceptual field that bars the way to new thoughts or, perhaps more importantly, critical and creative thinking. In short, they can provoke receptivity. For this reason, Davide Panagia has called such sensorial encounters ‘radical democratic moment[s]’.\(^\text{16}\) While this is not to say that all aesthetic encounters are democratic, where they unsettle habituated behaviour and sedimented thought they open the field for the potential pluralisation of politics.

This claim has recently been supported by neuroscience and therapeutic research where specific embodied practices have been effective in cultivating the ‘open receptiveness’ that listening across difference requires. For instance, embodied practices that focus attention on internal and external physical sensations have been found to initiate a down-regulation of the autonomic nervous system, helping participants feel safe and relaxed and ultimately facilitating greater self-regulation of one’s affects in the longer term.\(^\text{17}\) Moreover, movement-based processes have been effective in surfacing implicit memory and latent affect, making these available for verbal and conscious processing and integration. Techniques such as the ‘body scan’, for example, have been used to recall implicit memories stored in the body, at times not only releasing forgotten traumatic experiences but also the physical pain or tension that had been the body’s means of storing them. Dance/movement therapist Kalila Homann notes that movement-based strategies can not only reveal but also change the emotional charge of implicit memories. By offering direct access to implicit somatic processing of perception and memory, such practices are used to restructure that which frames perception and response to present experience and yet remains beyond the grasp of verbal and cognitive approaches.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, where practices remain focused on right-brain processes—in other words, in imagistic, intuitive, or free association rather than verbal or analytic strategies—they have been more successful in creating the conditions for the emergence of new insights, syntheses of information, and interconnections between different areas of the brain.\(^\text{19}\)

Subtle shifts in physical posture or movement also profoundly impact our affective responses: to give only one example in this vast field of study, we are more likely to be pleased by what we observe when holding a pen between the teeth, and disapprove when it is held by the lips, as these gestures engage the musculature of a smile or frown, respectively.\(^\text{20}\) Likewise, our ability to identify and empathise with the affective state
of others is significantly improved when taking on their physical posture. Posture, facial expression, and physical activity have also been found to influence our cognitive and communicative capacities. When physical or gestural movement is inhibited, we are less capable of retrieving words, conveying ideas, or even solving problems; and physical activity has been shown to greatly enhance brain functioning and learning by stimulating neural repair and intersynaptic growth, as well as improving mood, energy level, motivation, and capacity to focus. What is particularly promising is that such changes happen relatively quickly—either after several days or weeks of activity, or when acute exercise is performed immediately prior to learning. If both cognition and affect live in the body in this way, the subtest or briefest of shifts in posture, movement or gesture might prove instrumental in shifting entrenched perceptions and opening us to new insights. In theory and practice, it appears that if receptivity is an affective and thus primarily embodied state, then embodied practices might be among the most direct and effective routes to fostering it.

The case of Headlines Theatre’s 2009 forum theatre performance after homelessness … demonstrated in various ways the particular capacity of performative practices to cultivate receptivity across profound social difference and, indeed, uneven discursive and political terrain. It did so due to its affective intensity via strategic use of both concrete particularity and embodied inquiry but also—far less theorised in affect or democratic scholarship but just as integral—due to the indirectness of its highly mediated context. For while affective intensity can provoke the dissembling and revision of once-calcified routes of thinking that democracy requires, it is just as likely to prompt reactionary closures to this selfsame possibility—a potential far less acknowledged and addressed in the literature to date. To this difficult, delicate moment, aesthetic mediation offers a form of address that can reach and resonate in the most recalcitrant places precisely because it does not attack them head-long; it invites dissembling rather than defence precisely because such encounters speak opaqueely, invoke obliquely, implicate indirectly, and defer demand of responsive action. In this case, we see three particular forms of mediation—symbolic, fictional, and locational, each providing the necessary space with which the performance’s affective intensity could provoke receptivity rather than defensiveness or denial. It is this constellation of strategies—this strange marriage of immersion and mediation—that enabled this performance to surface latent memory, affect and bias, unsettle entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour, and provide the conditions for revisability.

HEADLINES THEATRE’S AFTER HOMELESSNESS …

The Vancouver-based after homelessness … project brought together 22 participants who represented a diverse range of experience regarding homelessness and mental health, to develop a play that would generate a community dialogue to explore the root causes of and innovate solutions to the city’s homelessness problem. Participants spent six days together in October 2009, six of whom had been chosen as cast members and who spent the following weeks creating and rehearsing a play drawn from the workshop as well as their own experience. The final play reflects this
diversity of voices: the recovered Katie who is determined to move up the wait-list at the government Housing office and escape the SRO; the drug-dealing Cloud and crack addict Shawna living on either side; a manic Bob who has just lost his downtown apartment; Otis, taking great pride in his ‘home’ under a tarp on the street and who cannot bear the thought of being moved on again; and Nico, a young recovered addict recently arrived at the SRO. Following Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed model, the play was designed to culminate in unresolved crisis, to then be performed again, this time with the invitation to audiences to stop the action at any point, take the place of the character whose struggle with whom they identify, and try to change the course of events. In total, the 15 performances engaged over 1600 audience members and a conservative estimate of 11,000 via webcast and live television. All of the resulting insights and policy innovations were collected and collated into a Community Action Report by the project’s Community Scribe, housing expert Gail Franklin, and submitted for consideration to eight government and research organisations who had agreed to receive it.

The project sought to be ‘as true a voice as possible, to stimulate as deep a community dialogue as possible, to affect housing policy’; but as opposed to other democratic processes, it did so by ‘creating the best theatre possible’. Here is a very different notion of ‘truth,’ in contrast to that of conventional political discourse: it is, as artistic director David Diamond would say, an ‘artistic fiction that tells certain truths’ drawn from lived experience, ‘but it isn’t real life, it’s theatre’. And because theatre artists expressly seek to create the conditions for reception that will enable participants and audiences to be affected and changed by what they encounter, the means through which theatre represents these truths of marginalised difference can often prove as, if not more, effective than conventional modes of testimony and deliberation.

DISSEMBLING COMPOSITIONS: IMMERSION IN THE VIVID PARTICULAR

Like other forms of narrative commended by Iris Young, Angelia Means, and others to articulate what is yet pre-discursive or ‘noise’ within dominant discourse, the starting point for theatrical narrative is the concrete particularity of lived experience rather than general claims. But this theatrical mode of narrative goes further than stories told at a remove in conventional forums by seeking to stage such realities through a vivid and immersive experience; from heroin needles in the couch to autumn leaves and the scent of toast emanating from Otis’ tarp on the street, this initiated an—albeit mediated, albeit constructed—account that transformed often abstract realities and general issues into a lived experience of its own, at a level of

1Single Resident Occupancy buildings (SROs) are a form of low-income housing where suites may hold no more than one, at most two, tenants often in one-room dwellings. They are a common first—and transitional—home for those coming off the streets, and often a site of substandard conditions.
detail and degree of concreteness that verbal accounts simply cannot capture. For many in the audience, this was the first time they had witnessed—and, in intervening, experienced—a reality normally at the distance of fleeting televised images, the rhetoric of stakeholders or journalists, or the bare and surreal numbers of statistics. Regularly, this allowed people to connect with, care for, and be impacted by what they saw, whether the project’s Community Scribe who felt ‘unprepared’ for how the experience ‘shook’ and ‘gripped’ her despite years of experience in the field or the three organisational recipients of the Community Action Report whose first-hand experience of the project gave them ‘that goosebumpy sort of thing’ that they ‘had kind of lost touch with’.27 Audience members, whether in tears following the performance or in letters written in the days that followed, repeatedly shared that they were ‘getting it, for the first time’, that ‘their relationship to the homeless issue will never be the same’, and that they could not ‘stop thinking (or talking)’ about the experience when so many others had faded.28

As scholars of affect also argue, many of the report’s recipients noted that information alone is not enough to motivate action and incite change; with a whole society and the federal and provincial agenda aware of the issues surrounding homelessness in Vancouver, this capacity to, as two housing officials noted, capture voice and personal experience that are often lost from view ‘in a way that’s visceral . . . being able to engage in an empathic way . . . moves the conversation forward’.29 As Diamond said to forum audiences, ‘if we could all feel it, we’d be able to do something’, and this is precisely what artistic practices can do: if it affects action or changes a life, ‘it is not by handing out a recipe for the applying but rather by disturbing us emotionally, mentally, because it finds us’.30 The theatrical mode, in its vivid specificity, enabled audiences to encounter the concrete reality of these issues and, equally significant, feel the humanity within them across cultural and class differences, often for the first time.

**EMBODIED INQUIRY: A DIALOGUE OF ACTION**

The affective intensity of the *after homelessness* ... project was due not only to its use of the vivid particular; it was also because it was highly embodied. The first two days of the workshop were conducted almost wholly without verbal language, sometimes without sight, and participants expressed and explored core experiences, values, and facets of social issues all through embodied practices. Although each workshop activity was followed by a brief discussion of what it brought up for participants in the context of ‘after homelessness,’ Diamond was quick to curtail extended verbal dialogue, insistent that this energy should be channelled back into further embodied and theatrical explorations. And, of course, during the forum phase of the performance, rather than debate or hypothesise possible solutions from one’s seat in the audience, people quite literally stepped into the world that was depicted onstage in what Diamond would call a ‘dialogue of action’ or Boal calls ‘learning by experience’.31
In working through the body, the process allowed unconscious knowledge, bias, and affect to emerge. Diamond stressed to the group that ‘you don’t learn it here [in your head], you learn it through your body’, and participants noted over the course of the workshop that these embodied exercises brought long-forgotten memories and feelings to the surface because, as in one person’s words, ‘I can feel it in my body, in a new way’. This was equally true within performance interventions: in one instance an intervener, despite the initial intention to create community, surprised herself by urging others to physically assault the police, flooded by personal memory and strong emotion normally kept in check; in another intervention taking the place of the police officer during the tarp eviction scene, an elderly woman found herself choosing to taser Otis even though she had begun with the express intention not to. These moments brought to the stage what often underlies but remains unspoken—even unconscious—in conventional political forums, and in doing so helped to reveal what Wittgenstein calls the ‘picture [that holds] us captive’ as well as explicitly address those contentious perspectives that are often silent factors in conventional sites.

As well as bringing to the surface what often remains subliminal or unspoken, this ‘dialogue of action’ exposed and challenged presumptions and misconceptions that shape and limit our encounters with others. As one audience member exclaimed on stage, ‘whoa—this is really different once you’re up here . . . ’. By entering the struggles the characters are engaged in, by being guided by the specificity of the context, interveners repeatedly found themselves trapped and at a loss, or unable to cope with the challenges they thought easy to address, or that the solution they had thought so clear does not work; and the ease with which, in one cast member’s words, one can ‘speculate . . . [when you] just sit there from the armchair or your couch watching TV and say, what the hell’s wrong with these people’ suddenly became impossible.

In these ways, then, the community gathered through the forum was confronted with latent beliefs, affect, and knowledge that underlie and inform perceptions of the encounter and are too easily lost within other discursive modes, and all a result of the embodiment of the encounter. By catching us off-guard, by creating ‘uncanny’ or surprise encounters, by employing communicative modes for which we have the least developed defences, artistic practices can bring to the surface and make available to intervention those affective and cognitive challenges that are among the greatest precisely due to their invisibility.

**INTIMACY VIA DISTANCE: THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF MEDIATED ENGAGEMENT**

While both concrete particularity and embodied inquiry play a vital role in creating the dissembling experiences that affect scholars describe, one of the most significant aspects of performative encounters in this context is the fact that these dissembling, ungrounding moments are highly mediated, creating the conditions for receptivity and revisability rather than defensive closure. In fact, artists are among the most finely attuned to the fact that often the most direct route to transforming beliefs and
behaviours is to approach the matter *obliquely*. Making use of symbolism, fiction, or the liminal space of the theatre itself, what is normally heard only as white noise or met with rejection might very well sneak in through the cracks.

**SYMBOLIC MEDIATION**

The symbolic played a key role in this project’s mode of engagement, where the concrete—a tarp, a newspaper, a bug-infested mattress—was taken as evocative of multiple readings, for as Diamond would say, ‘everything is symbolic’. In fact, he would explicitly prevent performers from explaining their intended meaning, as this ‘would limit your creativity’ and ‘this ambiguous space is a very rich place’. In doing so, the concrete as symbolic functioned as a form of *polyphony*, able to represent and engage multiple perspectives without demanding conflation or consensus. In doing so, it was able to capture the complexity of experience and bring to light latent tensions, contradictions, and interrelations often occluded in other forms of representation; one could see the parallel between being mugged and being arrested, between pacing in a single-room transitional home and a prison cell; one could hear the irony of the automated government Housing call centre’s claim that ‘your call is very important to us’ as Katie leaves the office empty-handed and defeated; a tableau of two people with their backs to a third could at once be a fraught parental relationship, a shield of friends while lighting a crackpipe, the power of the status quo, the silencing of one’s inner child, or the indifference of society at large. This capacity to evoke and hold multiple readings thus also drew attention to relations between micro- and macro-levels, the systemic nature of these issues, and demonstrated that our often linear and siloised approaches to such issues are part of the problem.

Connected to this, the evocative enabled the articulation and engagement of meaning and identity in the absence of certainties: unlike literal discourse in which such collective inquiry often requires that knowledge be ‘a fixed, knowable, finite thing’, to be evocative in meaning is also, as Julie Salverson and others argue, to generate a container in which a space or ‘gap’ exists that can represent ‘risky stories . . . in such a way that the subtleties of damage, hope and the ‘not nameable’ can be performed’; it can, as Boal argues, ‘tell the truth, without being absolutely sure’.34

But the evocative use of symbolism does more than reveal these truths: it performs the critical work of foregrounding the act of *interpretation* entailed in understanding, relaxing the grip of absolute claims that preclude other ways of seeing even as identities and issues are given shape. The performance—its characters, its dialogue, the materials on stage, and what happens there—is multivalent. This is accentuated even more by the breaking apart and reforming of the very script in light of external interventions: both the identities so represented and the meanings audiences come away with are explicitly multiple, dynamic, and open to contestation. As a result, the symbolic’s ‘absence’ and ‘excess’ of meaning simultaneously signal the limits of one’s understanding and the agency of the one so represented; it complicates the basis for a simplistic empathy by presenting complex others who cannot be wholly pinned down, whose identities are ‘diffuse and ungraspable’, and open to resignification.35
In sharp contrast to the clarity and directness of theoretical argumentation or declarative testimony, here the evocative provides the ‘opacity and obscurity [that] are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communications’, as they offer a space ‘for the unmarked, or Other, or dissenter, to remain ... [a] space across which the familiar and the strange can gaze upon each other’. In so doing, the evocative also enables affiliation, even coalition, through what Boal and Jan Cohen-Cruz call ‘analogy rather than identification’, attentive to the complexity and particularity of the other’s experience even within intense moments of resonance. This was most apparent in the workshop, from the capacity to connect multiple and even contradictory experiences through the same tableau to the formation of skit-building groups via gestures or sounds.

The performance phase, conceived by Diamond as a ‘mirror of reality’, moved away from this generative place of the evocative and into more literal claims; though audiences were invited to intervene in evocative terms, these scenes and particularly the actor’s expertise of lived experience that held them in check emphasised a literal reading, which, in turn, introduces all the risks of the what Julie Salverson calls ‘lie of the literal’: encouraging literal identification with and replication of ‘fixed’ historised roles; misportrayals of one actor’s responses and reflections as either ‘innocent’ and objective, or ‘speaking for’ a far broader and diverse range of possibilities—for, inevitably, should a different actor be in the same place, different responses and realities would be brought to the stage; as well as the illusion of fully ‘grasping’ another’s experience by standing in for them on stage when the position is understood literally. However, where the evocative was used to articulate experience and generate affiliation, the spaciousness it generated provided the means to do so with a care for the diversity, complexity and even trauma of the truths it represented.

**FICTIONAL MEDIATION**

A second form of aesthetic mediation that proved significant in this case was the use of fiction. Theatre’s mode of truth-telling is, as Boal notes, at once actual and fictitious, ‘belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image’. Though drawn from lived experience, this was an act of collective story-telling; in fact, though personal narratives were a part of the workshop phase, Diamond would at times limit these disclosures, emphasising that they were in the process of crafting ‘collective truths’ that were ‘owned by the group’. Likewise, actors played characters they understood, and responded honestly from that experience rather than ‘pretended’ on stage; however, this was always in the context of an explicit, group-generated fiction, which had a number of significant effects. First, it enabled a critical distance from the immediate everyday as participants observed themselves in action on the stage, ‘oblig[ed to] both to see and to see himself’. Such aesthetic distancing, as Sue Jennings also observes, ‘paradoxically allows us to experience reality at a deeper level’, as identities and actions are externalised and worked out on the stage.
Second, the fictional mode allowed participants at all stages to not only observe but also imagine themselves differently, in what Boal calls ‘subjunctive theatre’: ‘a mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image’, changing ‘the vision of the world as it is into a world as it could be’.\(^42\) Judith Butler notes the difference between theatrical and social performance in much the same terms, stating that ‘performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions’ because they lack performance’s theatrical conventions that ‘delimit the purely imaginary character of the act’.\(^43\) Unlike conventional publics, performance is designed to temporarily suspend the otherwise largely seamless flow of daily performances of identity, norm, and meaning, and the material relations they legitimise, and engage in the serious play with possibility. It asks for the ‘suspension of disbelief,’ and invites the spectator to play with the norms, codes, laws, and customs that govern one’s life beyond the stage. While all performance is ‘subjunctive’ by stimulating observation, critique and imagination, this project, by building to an unresolved crisis, inviting audience intervention, and rehearsing possible solutions, allowed participants to ‘practice (and not simply imagine)’ alternative possibilities.\(^44\)

Moreover, precisely because performance is set apart from everyday life and does not directly invoke one’s particular context, this invitation is more likely to be met with curiosity and receptivity, and a willingness to experiment. Within performative engagements, my identification with and thus investments in the course of events, the laws of physics, and norms of politics are not as great; I do not so easily feel personally attacked when a character with whom I share ground is challenged precisely on that ground. As a result, this aesthetic distancing also works to create a \textit{psychic distance} that lowers the stakes; it becomes just a little more tenable to engage with the foreign, ambiguous and challenging. The liminality of these theatrical spaces opens up what one performance artist calls ‘demilitarized zone[s] in which meaningful “radical” behaviour and progressive thought are allowed to take place, even if only for the duration of the performance itself’.\(^45\)

This was certainly true in the Headlines case at both workshop and forum phases, where participants stepped into a specific character in a fictional scene, and thus into a highly mediated context in which, as Diamond explained in the workshop, they could ‘process stuff they’re going through at a really deep level in a really safe way’. Here, even interventions that involved mourning or led to conflict or violence could be experienced safely; as Diamond shared with the workshop group, ‘it’s better to try an idea and get beaten up \textit{theatrically} than in real life’.

This mediation via artistic fiction is essential in creating this feeling of safety, particularly where sensitive, often vulnerable aspects of identity, emotion, and experience are disclosed and explored—particularly when the process involves marginalised communities and experiences of personal trauma. We saw this at work in the evocative nature of these accounts, where representations are spacious enough to hold meaning and identity without ‘too literal [a] representation, or too tight [a] container’.\(^46\) As collective fiction—as character, or crafted scene—these accounts work akin to certain ritual objects that Michael Taussig notes are effective
insofar as they ‘display little likeness to the people they are meant to heal or bewitch’. It is, as many theatre and trauma scholars note, through the gap in resemblance that psychic distance and safety—and, by extension, receptivity and revisability—are possible. This was clear on day five of the workshop when groups moved from ‘tilling the soil’ of lived experience to generating extended plays; one participant described it as ‘when you go from the shitbox to the sandbox’, where there was a marked shift in the feel of the room to greater emotional distance and a heightened sense of play, experimentation, and confidence.

Opening up this emotional terrain within mediated contexts also allowed audiences to do the same: on two occasions, audience members took the place of Nico in the final scene and chose to sit down and—not problem-solve, not rail—but rather, simply, mourn. This opened up a powerful space to discuss the need to feel this emotional underbelly that is often shielded in everyday experience or bracketed in conventional discourse. The space of the theatre, set apart from the everyday and mediated through artistic fiction, provided such a space, and allowed these hidden layers of emotional reality to emerge, signaling the pressing need for such spaces, despite—perhaps due to—their dearth elsewhere.

Fourth, like the evocative nature of symbolism, fictional portrayal facilitates receptivity by portraying its truths as performative. Whereas the ‘lie of the literal’ can through the illusion of direct access lead to reduction, objectification, and conflation of social difference, theatrical accounts tell ‘one’s created truth’, and so construe the account as ‘interpretive labor’ rather than mirror of reality—as situated, interpreted, and non-exhaustive for both artist and audience. This is made clear not only through its evocative nature or fictional mediation, of course, but also through the embodied nature of the theatrical gaze: as Diana Taylor writes, in the theatre, ‘[w]hat becomes immediately visible are the specificities of our position and the ensuing limits to our perspective. We can’t see everything; we can’t occupy the visual vantage point of those located somewhat differently in the frame’. And while the performativity of the account was at times lost from view in an emphasis on its literal ‘mirror,’ where this fictional mediation was maintained it worked to chasten knowledge-claims about those so represented, by situating the observer and gesturing to the inevitable absence and excess of their particular interpretation.

But this overt performativity also has another effect: when understanding is explicitly interpretive, the meanings it generates for viewers are by nature open-ended rather than directive, through a dialogic rather than didactic tirade. Boal and Diamond, along with other contemporary theatre directors and scholars, view this dialectic mode of communication and the critical agency it gives observers as integral to the forum process. By representing these experiences through the fictional enactment of them—not as an argument, or a lesson, or an exercise in blame, nor even one perspective as in the case of personal narrative—this account was a story at-a-remove which audiences could watch unfold without being told what to think or how to respond. Without a determinate and heavy-handed message, these encounters thus open up rather than foreclose meaning, do ‘not so much reveal truth as...’
thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry’. In this way, it is, as Rey Chow argues regarding literature, ‘quite opposite to the clarity and forthrightness of theoretical argumentation. ‘The more the opinions of the [artist] remain hidden, the better for the work of art’: a very different kind of power for producing change, in other words, is at play.’

**LIMINAL ZONES: SPACES FOR REVISABILITY**

Beyond the particular mode of communication, the publics that performance instigates are also highly mediated. All artistic encounters generate an ‘in-between temporality’, a ‘stillness of time and a strangeness of framing’ that mediates other realities and possibilities in the specific moment, ‘bridging the home and the world’. However, it is in performance, which so closely resembles other forms of public engagement, that we can see the distinct contributions such mediated dynamics make to public engagement most clearly. Unlike static art forms and similar to conventional public spheres, performance is a physically and temporally demarcated space where artists and audiences meet; in this way, performance works like other forms of democratic engagement to create a degree of what Kenneth Baynes calls ‘reflective distance’ from the context in which one is usually immersed, so enabling participants to consider a range of values and courses of action. However, the liminality of performative engagements is far more pronounced than in these conventional publics, so much so that the widely held definition of performance is in terms of such liminality—a ‘spatial, temporal, and symbolic ‘in-betweenness’ [that] allows for dominant norms to be suspended, questioned, played with, transformed’.

These publics are mediated in two notable ways. First, they are distinguished from one’s immediate contexts: the audiences of performance are ‘thrown together,’ to use Iris Young’s term, and as opposed to the communities to which one feels immediately accountable—those in which one would feel most ‘caught out’ when found to be wrong or implicated—this public at-a-remove provides a certain breathing space for quiet, unsettling, transformative moments, where implication or shame can lead to a turning-towards rather than a turning-away. One has space between, in this liminal zone—often even in the cover of darkness—to admit to oneself what is difficult to acknowledge publicly. One is not immediately accountable, nor even visible, in moments when one is exposed, challenged, and compelled to revise.

Second, this public does not demand an immediate response. At once ‘both real and not real’, these experiments have, as Baz Kershaw writes, ‘no necessary consequence for the audience. Paradoxically, this is the first condition needed for performance efficacy’. This is not to say that art is not consequential; however, it effects this change through the way that it opens up spaces for reflection and revision, and it does this in part through the lack of immediate demand on those so engaged. When action-oriented perceptions necessarily form faster than conscious thought, encounters that do not require an immediate response hold greater potential for tectonic shift of infraconscious habits, sensibilities, and dispositions that prevent more complex or pluralised modes of seeing. This pause between encounter...
and concomitant action creates a temporal breathing space for the dissembling and refiguration of one’s thought in light of what is encountered, both within and following the event. For while these encounters—and the half-second journey from sense to perception within them—may entail so much in a fleeting moment, these moments are not isolated from a much longer trajectory that facilitated their emergence, nor the through-line that surges forward in light of the event. By deferring the demand for public response or direct action, such practices provide for more prolonged attention to the unfolding genealogies of provocation and transformation. In this way, engagement with artistic practices does not end with the immediate encounter but expands into further evaluation, discussion, and integration. Indeed, perhaps due to the processural nature of the understanding it initiates, performance presents a means through which such revisability over time is facilitated in a way that other political forums that demand immediate response have difficulty achieving. In these ways, the indirect nature of artistic forums can create the conditions wherein those very positions to which we are most attached and identified with can be unsettled and revised.

[O]nce the performance is over and people walk away, my hope is that a process of reflection gets triggered in their perplexed psyches. If the performance is effective (I didn’t say good, but effective), this process can last for several weeks, even months. The questions and dilemmas embodied in the images and rituals I present can continue to haunt the spectator’s dreams, memories, and conversations. The objective is not to ‘like’ or to ‘understand’ performance art, but to create a sediment in the audience’s psyche.

— Guillermo Gomez-Peña

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the democratic demand for receptivity on both normative and practical grounds—despite the fact that it underlies all democratic processes by grounding the capacity to listen—the question of how such receptivity might be actively fostered remains a marginal one. Recent findings in the fields of affect and neuroscience might be cause for further deterrence, as they show that receptivity remains the domain of that which political scientists have overlooked for centuries. However, as clarified in this case, confirmed in neuroscientific and therapeutic research, and supported by an emergent political scholarship on the ‘tactics and techniques’ that directly engage the pre-ideational dimensions of thinking, to lie beyond the domain of cognitive and verbal processes is not to lie beyond potential intervention.

While conventional democratic forums likewise gather affected communities in sustained political dialogue and deliberation, we have seen that performance offers distinct resources for democratic engagement of difference. By grounding accounts of political experience in concrete and vivid specificity, profoundly affective encounters that can motivate political change are possible. By employing embodied modes of investigation, often unspoken—even unconscious—memory, belief and affect can find their way to public discourse. And by mediating engagement of the
difficult knowledge of marginalised experience through symbolism, fiction, and performance’s liminal space, this discursive mode heightens capacities to observe, reflect, and experiment with aspects of political reality, provides a psychic distance that makes it safer to do so, and foregrounds both the interpretive and partial nature of understanding essential to hearing what lies beyond our present terms.

In light of how precarious and difficult receptivity is to maintain in encounters with difference—particularly those encounters in which we are implicated, feel exposed, and scramble to shore up our defences—this case’s ability to depict marginalised experiences that implicate and invoke the broader community without provoking these usual responses seems especially valuable. The two organisational recipients of the final report who also attended the performance noted this was the performance’s greatest impact, that its representation of well-worn issues was refreshing and persuasive precisely because it worked ‘without any hidden agendas’:

it allowed people to express their views in a way that we’ve not seen before. It’s always been … A bunch of egghead academics sitting in a room with the mayor talking about what you should do, a bunch of citizens screaming at you at a public hearing – to actually sit back and have an honest-to-gosh chat that’s moderated or a play where you can stop the action and ask a question, I think that’s pretty cool.

When both the ‘screaming’ of, in City Councillor Kerry Jang’s words, ‘the same ten people’ and the academic research that dominates policy discourse have become, to some extent, ‘noise’ to those working in the field, the at once immersive and highly mediated nature of this theatrical performance enabled such noise to become sound.

What does this mean for democratic theory and practice? For while this case highlights that such aesthetic practices enable forms of political intervention we seek in democratic politics, one might wonder how transferable these insights and strategies are to more conventional sites. Primarily, this research supports a growing field of inquiry across disciplines that finds traditional notions of thinking limited to cognition—and theories of encounter reduced to the politics of recognition—do not capture the far more complex relationship between these processes and the affective and somatic layers of experience that underlie and inform them. It confirms that these precognitive dimensions cannot be addressed with argument alone, and contributes to current efforts in this emergent scholarship to address these ‘infra-sensible conditions’ directly via affective, aesthetic, and somatic means: it shows the need to provide conditions for the regulation of the autonomic nervous system if challenge is to be met with curiosity and receptivity—if we are to feel ‘safe’ enough to risk ourselves; it shows the need to employ embodied practices that surface and engage layers of affect, bias, and memory that shape how the present is perceived; and it shows the fecundity of working with the senses and communicating through the evocative to call us into the present and catalyse intensities and resonances when reason-giving is not enough.

But this work also contributes to this emergent scholarship by speaking to the potentially undemocratic responses to affective intensity. The encounter just as likely provokes dogged retreat as radical opening, and by considering the mediation of such
moments—methods of indirect address, from symbolism and fictionalisation to spatial and social liminality and temporal deferral—we might in such moments facilitate, though by no means determine, the receptivity democracy demands of us. In so doing, it speaks not only to the democratic potential of the immediate encounter emphasised in the literature but also to some of the contextual factors that shape how such provocations are received, and might be used to facilitate preparedness for the event. At the very least, in making use of such strategies aesthetic practices generate ‘receptively accented activity and experience’ that enhances neural and somatic capacities for future receptivity in more conventional political contexts.62

But in broadening the terms of what counts as relevant to political theorisations of the dynamics of encounter, there are also intimations here of how these tactics might be taken up in democratic processes more broadly. In truth, it brings to the fore key dimensions of communication that are not only characteristic of performative practices, but are at times already at work in conventional democratic processes and might be strategically developed within such sites. If the body is always-already present in moments of encounter; if affect and implicit memory are inseparable from and integral to meaning-making; if knowledge-claims are always performative, partial, and situated, we cannot shy away from interrogating how these dimensions of reception are at work in all political sites. How might visual, affective, and physical aspects of communication be more effectively identified, harnessed, and applied within conventional democratic processes to cultivate the conditions of receptivity that democracy requires? For they might certainly play a greater role than currently envisioned.

I am reminded of the role that images played in the 1978 Camp David Accords: on day 13 when negotiations had broken down and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat were ready to return without an agreement, U.S. President Jimmy Carter joined Begin in his cabin and placed photographs of the three politicians to be signed and given to Begin’s grandchildren into his hands. Carter recalls that Begin read the names of his grandchildren at the top of each image, vocalizing each out loud; ‘[h]is lips trembled, and tears welled up in his eyes’, and Begin began to share a little about each grandchild with Carter as he held the photographs inscribed with his grandchildren’s names. Merely 5 minutes following this encounter, Begin emerged from his cabin to ask to look at the peace proposal again.63 Here, circuitous address via a seemingly unrelated act opened a once-foreclosed route to the dissembling impact such images held.

How might the strategic use of imagery and sound, spatial arrangements or periodic movement—whether postural changes or change of physical locale as in what Romand Coles calls ‘traveling’ and ‘tabling’64—affect the dynamics and outcomes of democratic processes? How might approaching political issues indirectly through fiction, symbol, or liminal spaces, or evocatively through multimodal means, help to unsettle the ‘partitions of the sensible’ in ways that direct address and reasoned argument often cannot? Indeed, this research has shown that sometimes the most effective way to challenge and transform entrenched thought and behaviour is to approach them obliquely. How can we cultivate the patience and creativity to
design processes with this in mind, to critically intervene in these ‘fugitive passages from unthought to thought’?65

Neglect of these subtler yet pervasive dimensions of encounter inadvertently perpetuates patterns of exclusion, reduction, and devaluation that run counter to a democratic ethos. Indeed, I would venture that this work has shown why, in great part, conventional processes that rely upon reasoned argument and direct address are often insufficient in capturing the complexity, nuance, and interrelation of social difference, cultivating relations and forms of coalition in these terms, and fostering the receptivity such a politics of difference requires. To take the aesthetic seriously in democratic theory is to open up a crucial if yet largely neglected terrain regarding its role in all sites of politics; to do so enables greater inclusion in, and indeed a pluralisation of forms of, democratic engagement.

This case demonstrates that performative processes offer not only legitimate forms of alternative democratic engagement but indeed possess distinct capacities to foster a politics of listening that can be one of the greatest challenges in other political sites. When it is clear that receptivity may underlie all democratic encounters but lies beyond the grasp of conventional political strategies, this case reveals that affective and somatic dimensions of politics may be directly engaged through embodied practices even as markedly indirect approaches lead to responses of dissembling and revision rather than denial and defence. However fraught with its own risks, this particular constellation of seemingly contradictory approaches allows performative practices to foster forms of engagement that democracy at once demands and finds most challenging, and might yet offer vital insight into how this might be achieved more broadly.

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