



My Body, Our Protest

From performance practices towards political activism

Oona Laitinen

BACHELOR'S THESIS
April 2025

Degree Programme in Media and Arts
Fine Art

ABSTRACT

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu
Tampere University of Applied Sciences
Degree Programme in Media and Arts
Fine Art

LAITINEN, OONA:
My Body, Our Protest
From performance practices towards political activism

Bachelor's thesis 37 pages, appendices 1 page
April 2025

The thesis explores the intersection between performance art and activism. It focuses on how performance art and the body can be utilized as a tool for political activism and what these concepts have in common.

The theoretical framework of the thesis was built upon theories of the body, 21st century discussion on the similarities of performance art and activism, as well as Hannah Arendt's theory of action in general. Arendt's key concepts of action, *arkhein* and *prattein*, were introduced. *Arkhein* means to 'begin' or 'to lead' and *prattein* is the completion of that action. Later, Arendt's concept of *arkhein* was used to analyse two performance pieces: one by Carlos Martiel and another by CASSILS.

These two case studies examined how the two artists utilized their bodies as a political tool in their performances that were highly socio-politically charged. The author's performance, *WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work*, served as the artistic project of the thesis. The aim of the performance was to examine labour and refusal of work through art and criticize performative nature of wage labour in our society. A link between ideology and wage labour was introduced as a result of *WORK_LIVE*.

Many similarities between performance art and activism were found. For example, how the usage of one's body in performance as well as in a protest are similar to each other—both are bodily interventions that happen in a certain space and have a set duration in time.

The results of the thesis suggest that the body is something that unites performance art and political activism together. By utilising the body as stage for different power structures, many different cultural and societal discourses can be criticized. From the author's artistic project rose the idea of ideology of wage labour that could be examined closer in further research. Collective action can be used to challenge ideological practices and performance art can be seen as a form of collective action. This could help with, for example, with the ideology critique of labour in the future.

Key words: performance art, the body, political activism, refusal of work

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	4
2	ABOUT PERFORMANCE	5
2.1	Performance as a tool for political action.....	5
2.2	The body and performance	6
3	FROM PERFORMANCE PRACTICES TOWARDS COLLECTIVE ACTION	9
3.1	Arkhein.....	9
3.2	Arkhein and a performance.....	10
4	RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMANCE ART AND ACTIVISM	12
4.1	Embodiment.....	12
4.2	Duration	13
4.3	Relation.....	14
5	CARLOS MARTIEL: SEGREGATION (2015)	16
5.1	Analyse of Martiel's performance.....	18
5.2	Arkhein and Segregation.....	19
6	CASSILS: BECOMING AN IMAGE (2012).....	21
6.1	Becoming an image and <i>arkhein</i>	23
7	WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work	25
7.1	Refusal of work.....	26
7.2	Performance in Ylioppilasteatteri	27
7.3	Final artwork in Gallery Himmelblau	32
8	CONCLUSION / DISCUSSION.....	34
9	REFERENCES	36
	APPENDICES.....	38
	Appendix 1. Link.....	38

1 INTRODUCTION

My thesis explores the relationship between the body, performance and political activism. In my research, I aim to outline various ways in which the performing body can appear as a stage, a frontline, for resistance and collective action. The question arises: what similarities does the performing body in performance art have with the body in political activism?

First, I theorize performance as a concept in general and explain further the concept of the body. Second, I expand my reflections by examining Hannah Arendt's concept of action and beginning, *arkhein*, to understand human action better. In the fourth chapter, I discuss political activism and performance and what they have theoretically in common. I introduce the concepts of embodiment, duration, and relationality, which I use to analyse two different performance art pieces.

Two art works that I analyse in my thesis are Carlos Martiel's 'Segregation' and CASSILS' 'Becoming an Image'. In both works, the body, its presence, and the political message are combined in an interesting way. To demonstrate the topic of my thesis, I included case studies of performances because they are both excellent examples of how performance art can address pressing political issues and provoke public dialogue. Additionally, my own performance work *WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work* explores the boundaries of wage labour and refusal of work, highlighting the potential of performance art to critique and transform societal structures.

By examining the intersections between performance art and political activism, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how art can function as a catalyst for social change. Through the lens of embodiment, duration, and relationality, this study seeks to illuminate the ways in which the performing body can enact resistance, foster collective action, and inspire new beginnings.

2 ABOUT PERFORMANCE

Performance itself is not a medium. It is not something that artwork can be, but rather a set of specific question regarding people and the wider social world, and how these set questions relate to the wider socio-political context and human life. (Westerman 2025.) Understood this way, performance art has close relation to political activism, protesting and collective actions.

Altogether, performance can be understood as a practice that seeks acts that unite the self, the performer, to the world and to world's issues. Therefore, the existence of a body in a performance is essentially political. (Pagnes 2017.) There is a long history between performance and political action. Performance art and social mobilisation tend to feed off of each other—indeed several forms of performance art find their origins in performative political action. It is also worth considering the internal politics of such forms of action if we want to understand *why* and *how* performance can enact change. (Serafini 2020.)

Paula Serafini (2020) also argues, that in performance actions artistic and political objectives are usually understood as having a tension between them. Different interest groups constantly negotiate what they want to achieve through a performance. Sometimes the aesthetic possibilities of performance are not seen as an end in themselves, but rather as an instrument for achieving political objectives and change. (Serafini 2020.) Therefore, the most powerful performances tend to be those that consider art for conducting social and political change, using art as a tool for political actions, activism and creating new social practices (Serafini 2018).

2.1 Performance as a tool for political action

Serafini (2020) also theorizes how performance art can be used as a tool for collective action and protesting. Serafini writes that especially in the context where many protest meet violent repression, engrained media bias and governments that refuse to listen to the protesters, performance actions can open spaces for communication as well as transnational movements building of off empowerment, of resistance, of solidarity, and of organising. (Serafini 2020.)

Performance art can also criticise conventional dichotomies that underline our everyday lives. At the core performance art examines the oppositions between, for example, objects and processes, presence and absence, authenticity, and inauthenticity and so on. Beyond these dichotomies lies the lived and shared reality of people, and therefore the possibility of action and activism. (Rossen 2023.)

Historically some examples of performances that collapse existing dichotomies include performances like Marina Abramović's "The Artist is Present," in which the focus is not on a tangible artwork but on the process of interaction between the artist and the audience. In the performance Abramović sits at the table and strangers are invited to sit with her there for a set duration of time. Unknown to the artist herself, her previous partner and lover decides to take part in the performance, even though the couple has not seen each other in twenty years. The emotional reunion is captured in the film that was shot from the performance. Abramović's performance collapses the dichotomy of objects and processes by demonstrating that the value of art lies in the experience and engagement rather than in a physical object. Traditional art often focuses on the final product—the object—while performance art emphasizes the process and actions involved in creating the art.

Other example, that I will examine further in chapter 4, is a performance that collapses the dichotomy between embodiment and disembodiment. Performance art often centres on the body, using it as a site of resistance and transformation. The embodiment of the artist in the performance space contrasts with the disembodiment experienced by the audience. In Carlos Martiel's "Segregation," the artist's naked body becomes a powerful symbol of anti-racial politics, embodying vulnerability and resistance. This performance collapses the dichotomy by showing that the body is both a physical presence and a political tool, bridging the gap between personal experience and collective action. I will delve into the performance by Martiel closer in chapter 4.

2.2 The body and performance

But what do we exactly talk about when we talk about the body and embodiment? Maurice Merleau-Ponty captures the essence of embodiment when he states, "My body is made of the same flesh as the world... this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world. They are in a relation of transgression and of overlapping" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 248). This perspective underscores the connectedness of the body and the world, giving the body essentially a materialistic base.

Being embodied means, on the one hand, to be material, visible, and subject to the physical laws that govern causality. Having a physical body means I am finite, exposed, and dependent on others and external forces, and thus vulnerable, as is later emphasized by philosopher Judith Butler for example. As a living (human) being, one also lives, feels, and suffers through the body, in virtue of which one is not only vulnerable, but also open to the world. (Jansen et. al., 2018.)

Judith Butler (they/them) (1989) argues that bodies are constituted within specific cultural or discourse/power regimes, and there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of these regimes. However, their theory relies on a notion of genealogy, appropriated from Nietzsche, which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean "forces" that are repressed and transmuted by mechanisms of cultural construction external to the body. (Butler 1989.) Therefore, to follow Butler's notion on the body, we must abandon the Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body is inherently materialistic. To Butler, the body does not exist in a "pure" material form, rather it is always a set of specific power relations that imprint themselves onto the body.

This notion of the body as a medium for cultural inscription is further explored in the context of performance. As Kirkkopelto (2025) notes, when the human body appears onstage, it usually forms part of a larger performance, work, play, choreography, dramaturgy, composition, or event. This is the case even when there is only one person performing. Although the same body is present all the time and drives the performance forward, the performance still has its dramaturgy, its choreography, its composition, of which that body is both a part and a medium. From a phenomenological perspective, the body on stage is not merely flesh and blood but becomes the body of the word, as Kirkkopelto

suggests. The body seen on stage, the theatrical body, is thus the body of the word. This implies that the word gives the actor a body or calls it forth. Phenomenologically, it is meaningful to ask whether the actor even exists before the moment of the word's theatrical embodiment or without this purpose. (Kirkkopelto 2025.)

In performance art, the body is both the medium and the message. It is through the body that the artist communicates, and it is the body that is inscribed with cultural, social, and political meanings. This aligns with the idea that we all have a certain theatrical understanding, which allows us to recognize performative situations and imagine and evaluate them. This understanding develops very early in life and is rooted in our unique way of encountering acting and speaking human beings. It is the only point in our sensory field where mimetic and linguistic processes, body and word, coincide and where their relationship can be observed and controlled. (Kirkkopelto 2025.)

In conclusion, the body in performance is a site of inscription, a medium through which cultural values are both expressed and contested. It is through the embodied experience of performance that we can explore the interplay between the physical and the cultural, the individual and the collective, the material and the symbolic. Simply, there would not be a performance without the body. The body is simultaneously on the stage and *the* stage. It is *the* stage for societal and political questions that arises from the performance and where those questions imprint themselves. The performing body, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for understanding and challenging the structures that shape our existence.

3 FROM PERFORMANCE PRACTICES TOWARDS COLLECTIVE ACTION

3.1 Arkhein

To understand the philosophical nature of performance and its relationship with collective action, I draw upon Hannah Arendt's thought on *arkhein*. The concept of *arkhein*, stemming from the Greek word meaning "to begin" or "to lead", is interesting to me. *Arkhein* is central to Arendt's philosophy of human action in general. She positions *arkhein* within her broader concept of natality, which means the human capacity to initiate new, unprecedented actions. Unlike work or labour, which often produce predictable, safe, outcomes, action—and by extension, *arkhein*—is inherently unpredictable and transformative. (Arendt 2017.) In Arendt's philosophy this capacity for beginning is deeply tied to the political action, where individuals come together to act and create meaning collectively. It is important to notice, that Arendt politics is not merely about governance or stable institutions but about the dynamic space where freedom, plurality, and action manifests.

Hannah Arendt's concept of *arkhein* is an exploration into the nature of action and its relationship to beginning (something). As Markell (2006) illustrates, Arendt uses "beginning" not just to denote the disruption of established patterns, but to highlight the responsiveness and attentiveness required to engage with the events in the world.

Arendt's understanding of *arkhein* draws on its original Greek meaning, which includes both "to rule" and "to begin". The dual nature of the word is crucial to her argument, as she reframes *arkhein* as the freedom to initiate action and set something in motion, rather than simply an exercise of command or authority (Arendt 2017; Markell 2006). This kind of understanding of *arkhein* is completed and complimented by the term *prattein*, which historically referred to the completion of an action. Together, these terms encapsulate the mutual vulnerability of action—a key aspect of Arendt's philosophy (Markell 2006).

The interaction between possibility and actuality is central to Arendt's conception of beginning. As Markell (2006) notes, when an event moves from being a possibility to becoming and actuality, it shifts from being casually explainable event to a meaningful occurrence. Such occurrences demand responses and engagement, transforming them into occasions of new beginnings. The transformation itself underlines the novelty of a beginning, which emerges not from its departure from what came before, but from an agent's adaptation or integration as an irrevocable event. In a way beginnings, *arkhein*, acts as points of departure, full of potential to redefine the context in which they arise from.

Most importantly, beginnings are not acontextual. Beginnings are always situated with specific circumstances, agents, or audiences. (Markell 2006.) Whether in the realm of political activism or performance, beginnings ask for responses that would bring them to life. In performance art for example, the act of beginning is carried out by the relationships between performer and audience. This means that the performance does not happen without audiences' presence, nor does it begin if it is done without someone perceiving the performance. This very relational dynamic of the audience and performer highlights Arendt's notion that the structure of beginning is temporal and depends on its reception.

Finally, Arendt positions action as a phenomenon that is fundamentally worldly. Action does not exist in isolation but emerges through the uncertain and dynamic exchange between agents and their audiences, either face-to-face or impersonal. This ongoing exchange of responses fulfil action with its meaning, making it an integral part of shared human experience. (Arendt 2017.) In both political and artistic context, Arendt's understanding of action provides a powerful framework to examine action and the dynamics of beginning, *arkhein*.

3.2 Arkhein and a performance

Arendt's *arkhein* also carries a performative dimension. To act is to bring something into existence that did not exist before. This act of beginning creates a rupture in the status quo, introducing new possibilities and redefining existing structures. Arendt's emphasis on the public and participatory nature of action

aligns with the temporal and relational qualities of performance art, which likewise seeks to create transformative experiences. (Arendt 2017.)

The intersection of performance art and political activism offers a fertile ground for exploring *arkhein* as a generative force. Both forms rely on performative action to engage with the public, challenge authority, and initiate change. Performance art, when used as a form of activism, becomes a form of resistance that embodies the spirit of *arkhein* by creating spaces for new beginnings and disrupting established narratives. Performance art embodies the principles of *arkhein* through its focus on live, ephemeral, and participatory elements. It challenges traditional notions of art as static or commodifiable, instead prioritizing process, engagement, and the act of doing. Like Arendt's concept of action, performance art emerges in the public sphere and is dependent on interaction with an audience or community.

4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMANCE ART AND ACTIVISM

Next, we shall return to the body for this chapter and see what the body, performance art and activism all have in common. Ventsislavov Rossen (2023) theorizes three different dimensions of performance art that utilizes the body as a special creative and revolutionary force. The first dimension is the usage of the human body in the context of presence—body is something that is real and ‘out there’. The second theory revolves around de-centring of art objects in favour of time-space-based processes. This means that a performance as well as a protest always happens in a time-space-based manner, and it deconstructs the importance of an art object, an idea of an object in a white cube. The third dimension is the relation of audience and the body. In a performance the audience is invited to respond, even interrupt, the performance in different ways. (Rossen 2023.)

A protest also starts from the body. Human body’s presence is almost a necessity in most forms of protest. Body’s march, occupy streets, push against barricades, and get dragged by the police. Rossen’s three aspects of performance art and the body distinguishes performance from other forms of art, but also ties performance art together with more orthodox, common forms of political activism. Embodiment, duration, and relationality are also relevant, they are most definite of performance art, even though they are also found in other forms of art. Rossen also writes that human body is at the forefront of creating affective charge and urgency in protest. (Rossen 2023.)

4.1 Embodiment

Rossen draws on Quinn H. E.’s essay *My Protest Body: Encounters with Affect, Embodiment, and Neoliberal Political Economy* to articulate the role of the body in performance and protest. Quinn theorizes that the body mediates in two ways: first, as an "interface of powers of resistance," and second, as a phenomenological bridge between subjective and structural dimensions of experience (Quinn, 2018). Important part is that the human body becomes the literal frontline of political conflict, the site and flesh of protest. Conflict

materialises itself in the body. This is what happens in most protests, and it is also relevant in the context of performance art.

Embodiment in performance art and protest have several commonalities. Both contexts understand the body as a medium for expression and resistance, emphasizing the physical presence and actions of the body to convey messages and challenge norms. In both performance art and protest, the body serves as a frontier through which resistance is enacted. The physical actions and presence of the body challenge existing power structures and create spaces for alternative expressions and meanings. McAllister (2010) describes the body as a site of resistance, capable of disrupting the social order and shaping new patterns of intellectual and bodily action. This aligns with Quinn's notion of the body as an interface of powers of resistance.

Quinn (2018) argues that the body acts as a phenomenological bridge between subjective experiences and structural dimensions of power. Through embodied actions, individuals can connect their personal experiences with broader social and political contexts. Tapias (2006; 2015) argues that to understand society, we need to first examine the lived-in body, as it is through the body that we know the world. This perspective highlights the importance of embodied experiences in both performance art and protest. The body in performance art and protest is not merely a passive object but an active participant in the creation and contestation of meanings.

4.2 Duration

The second dimension that performance art and activism share is duration—both actions unfold in time. There is much, however, about this unfolding that defines and supports one's stance as political. The durational aspect of performance art allows for modes of artmaking and spectatorships that often explicitly question the commodification of art. (Goldberg 1984; Rossen 2023.)

One could consider a strike as an example of disruption in the duration of an action as an activist tool. Public strikes gain their power from subversion of normative durational expectations. Strikes are known to operate in fits and starts

in a choreography of political and economic contingency—halting the regular flow of productivity in capitalism and restarting it against the will and “better judgment” of consumers, corporations, and governments (Rossen, 2023). Strikes are inherently disruptive, challenging the normative flow of time and productivity.

Performance art unfolds in time, creating a temporal experience for both the performer and the audience. This unfolding can challenge normative notions of time-based productivity and temporal causation. The durational aspect of performance art allows for extended engagement, reflection, and interaction, which can subvert conventional expectations and create new meanings. Sometimes performance art also plays with our concept of time and what is acceptable duration for an art piece. For example, some performance pieces last throughout months or even years, and sometimes audience members cannot choose whether they can leave the performance or not when they want.

4.3 Relation

Performance art is inherently relational, occurring within a shared space that invites spectators' engagement. Rossen (2023) theorizes how performance art collapses the traditional directionality between art object and spectator. Performance art humanizes space and transforms interaction by positioning the audience as active participants. This relationality ties the body and duration of a performance to its audience, fostering a shared responsibility for its meaning. It is important to note that the same dynamics of relationality that take place in performance art, defined by the space, shared responsibility, and durational engagement, are also at work in political activism (Rossen 2023). It is important to mention that not every performance piece work in the way Rossen theorizes. For example, my thesis work plays into the idea that artist (and the body) specifically is an object in a white cube. We will dive deeper into my thesis work in the last chapter of the thesis.

In the next chapter, I will use these three different dimensions of performance art and protesting—body, duration, relation—and analyse the works of Carlos Martiel and CASSILS. I will also bring forward Arendt's concept of *arkhein* and aim to unite theories by Rossen and Arendt to better understand the works by Martiel

and CASSILS. The aim is to better understand through examples the relations in performance art and political activism. I'm interested especially in how the body is mostly at the centre of these pieces and at the intersection between activism and performance art.

5 CARLOS MARTIEL: SEGREGATION (2015)

In 2015 Carlos Martiel (he/him) held a performance called Segregation in Samsøn Gallery, Boston, USA. Martiel wrote about the performance on his website:

I stood in the center of the gallery between two barbed wire barricades that separated me from the public and divided the space into two areas. Each area had an independent entryway: the first one permitted the entrance of U.S. born whites and Europeans, while the second one permitted the entrance of blacks, Latinos, Asian and Middle Eastern people, as well as any individual who was not European or born U.S. white. People were not allowed to mix for the whole duration of the performance. (Martiel 2015)



PICTURE 1: Carlos Martiel's performance Segregation (Nabeela Vega 2015)



PICTURE 2: Another view of Segregation by Carlos Martiel (Nabeela Vega 2015)

Martiel's performance "Segregation" serves as an excellent example of a performance that also functions as a stage for political activism. In this performance, the body emerges as a symbol of anti-racial politics and as a dualistic time-space barrier that simultaneously separates and unites.

5.1 Analyse of Martiel's performance

The body and its vulnerability are at the core of Martiel's performance. The body, particularly Martiel's black body, serves as a powerful symbol within the performance, embodying various power relations and cultural narratives. To understand Martiel's performance better, we should circle back to Butler's idea (1989) that power relations and cultural narratives attach themselves onto the body. This attachment is evident in Martiel's performance as well. For instance, viewers are classified based on skin colour, without the opportunity to choose how society categorizes them. This classification dictates how and where one experiences the performance.

Martiel's body has a dualistic nature in the performance. Towards the white audience, it simultaneously appears as a symbol of resistance, considering its

placement in the space, with other racialized bodies positioned behind Martiel. On the other hand, the barbed wire suggest that the racialized bodies (the other part of the audience) are enclosed behind the fence, suggesting imaginary of a prison. This setup on its own critiques society's treatment and classification of individuals, particularly in the context of the United States' prison policies.

Another dualistic approach to Martiel's body can be found in the spatial positioning and the obstacle or barricade formed by the body and barbed wire fence. One way to view Martiel's body as a political tool, is to see it as physically maintaining segregation between two groups of people. It is impossible to pass by, go over, or through his body in the space. Violent barb wire combined with his vulnerable body prevents this. In the performance, it is impossible to unite with the other side, and one cannot choose one's place in the space. Thus, the viewers are forced to confront questions about their own skin colour and race in relation to others and broader political questions that the performance suggests.

Martiel's performance highlights the black body as an object in space, serving as a stage for anti-racial politics. His body is naked, exposed, vulnerable, presenting himself to the audience in an extremely vulnerable state, especially considering the context of the United States, where racialized violence against people of colour is somewhat commonplace. The vulnerability and the spatial divisions in the performance critique existing power structures and aim to inspire social change. From dichotomies found in the performance, rises the social change that is represented by Martiel's body at the forefront. "Segregation" can be easily seen as performance as much as a practice of politics. Martiel's performance is a prime example of how performance art exemplifies art as a political tool and a catalyst for social change.

5.2 Arkhein and Segregation

Martiel's *Segregation* embodies *arkhein* by addressing the practices and systemic barriers that make racial and social divisions worse. In his performance, Martiel's naked body stands as a stark presence, confined within a closed space and visibly separated from the audience by barbwire. The act of placing his body as both subject and an object of the performance disrupts the viewer's passive

engagement, compelling them to confront the realities of segregation and exclusion. Through his vulnerable body and immediate presence, Martiel initiates public dialogue about systemic oppression, drawing upon Arendt's understanding of beginning, *arkhein*, as an action that introduces new ways of seeing and engaging with the world around us.

Carlos Martiel's performance directly addresses the systemic inequalities that are rooted in racial hierarchies. By isolating himself within the space where the performance happens, Martiel provokes the audience to grapple with their own roles in worsening or challenging the phenomena of segregation in society. This act of visible separation highlights the relational aspect of *arkhein*, as the performance's impact on audience.

6 CASSILS: BECOMING AN IMAGE (2012)

In CASSILS' (they/them) work *Becoming an Image* (2012-present) the artist attacks a 2000-pound pile of clay with using only their naked body as a tool to convey emotions and vulnerability of the body. The performance is shot using cameras with flashes and the audience can only observe the performance when a camera flash. CASSILS (2025) themselves describes their work likewise:

CASSILS' art contemplates the history(s) of LGBTQI+ violence, representation, struggle and survival. For CASSILS, performance is a form of social sculpture: Drawing from the idea that bodies are formed in relation to forces of power and social expectations, CASSILS' work investigates historical contexts to examine the present moment.

In the core of CASSILS' work is the body. The body in question conveys emotions and serves as a platform for understanding the power relations and social convention that are associated especially with bodies of trans and gender non-conforming individuals. In CASSILS' work a queer body is the stage and place of resistance and existing power structures in which, like Judith Butler (1989) suggest, the existing questions of struggle and power imprint themselves on. CASSILS' body serves as a stage and materialistic base, where the broader questions about LGBTQI+ violence, politics and struggles adhere. These actions and questions are mutually connected with the acts of force, even violence or labour, that CASSILS uses toward the clay monolith.

In CASSILS' performance, the central theme is the body and its relationship to societal power dynamics and social conventions, symbolized by the clay mass. The 2000-pound clay mass can be seen as representing all societal and monumental realities that feel unyielding, difficult, and invincible—power dynamics within which every trans person must live and navigate. In the performance, the body attacks, destroys, detaches, and touches the clay, but never fully succeeds in destroying it; something essential always remains. The predominant emotion conveyed through the body in the performance is rage. The rage is directed at this societal reality that the clay mass represents.



PICTURE 3: Cassils and the clay mass (Cassils)



PICTURE 4: The clay that remains



PICTURE 5: Cassils and the clay again

The camera flashes, through which the audience sees the performance, represent the tip of the iceberg of the destruction and power dynamics that trans people struggle with daily. Cis people see only small glimpses of the violence and power dynamics that trans people endure. The duration of the performance is particularly interesting in terms of what remains after the performance: a half-destroyed clay mass and images of raw violence. If we keep in mind the metaphor of clay as societal power dynamics, we can conclude that the performance does not manage, or perhaps does not intend, to destroy the clay mass—something always remains. Instead, what remains are memories and photographs of violence and protest. The viewer is left with an image of an individual who, with the full force of their body, violently attacks societal power dynamics; violence is the predominant image that remains from the performance. This gives us the notion that individual's protests often appear as violence to the uninformed or people who do not take part in protesting.

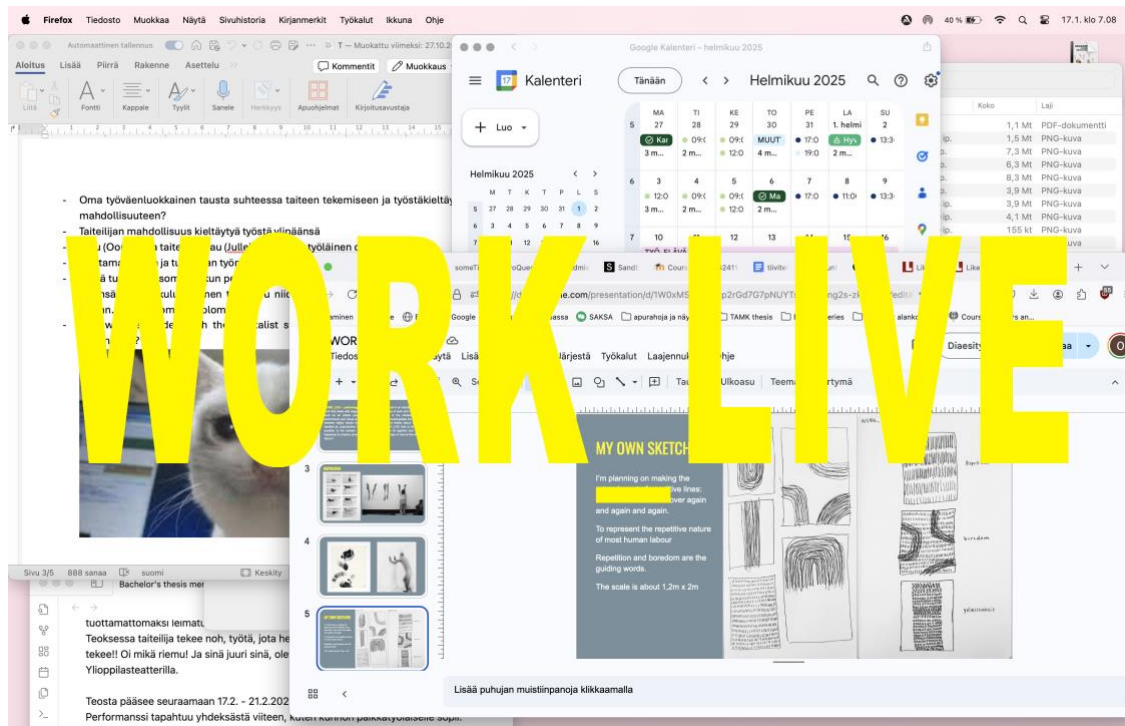
6.1 Becoming an image and *arkhein*

Similarly, CASSILS' *Becoming an Image* enacts *arkhein* through a visceral and transformative exploration of identity, violence, and visibility. In this performance, CASSILS' physical interaction with a massive clay block—rendering visible the impacts of their strikes in a space lit only by camera flashes—creates an ephemeral yet lasting impression on the audience. The act of shaping the clay while embodying the forces of resistance and resilience reflects Arendt's idea of action as both relational and unpredictable. The performance's temporality and intensity emphasize the capacity of beginnings to disrupt established norms and open new avenues for dialogue about queer identities and societal expectations.

CASSILS' *Becoming an Image* transforms the act of performance into a visceral form of activism. The dynamic interplay of physical labour, fleeting visibility, and audience engagement challenges societal norms and opens a space for reimagining queer existence. By embedding their body within the performance's process, CASSILS exemplifies Arendt's notion of the capacity to begin anew, creating a powerful statement on resilience and transformation.

Martiel and CASSILS both demonstrate how performance art can serve as a medium for political and social change, embodying the relational and transformative potential of art. By confronting viewers with visceral, immediate experiences, their works open spaces for dialogue and reflection, reaffirming the power of art to initiate new beginnings and challenge entrenched structures of power and exclusion.

7 WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work



PICTURE 6: Firsts visuals for the project

WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work was an interdisciplinary work that dealt with wage labour, meaningfulness of work and performatives that we attribute to working. The piece moved in the intersection of performance and visual art.

The performance took place in two different parts. The first part was conducted in Helsinki, in the studio of Ylioppilasteatteri, because the space is an open concept studio space, which opened up possibilities to create a truly immersive performance experience that had an interesting interactive relationship between the audience and the performance itself. The performance consisted of the actual performance that I, as an artist, did during the one week in the studio, and everything else that happened in the lobby of Ylioppilasteatteri.

The second part of WORK_LIVE happened in Tampere in Gallery Himmelblau. The artworks that I created during the performance in Ylioppilasteatteri, were shown in the gallery space alongside with a video recording of the performance. I also created a small-scale version of the actual performance in Himmelblau for one day, which the audience was able to come and see. Next, I will theorize

refusal of work as a form of protest to give some theoretical framework to my artwork and delve into the first part of the performance in *Ylioppilasteatteri*.

7.1 Refusal of work

Usually, the first thing people associate work refusal with is subject's individual attempt to not work at all. However, this perspective is largely tied to individual's privilege, whether through capital, social security, or societal safety nets. The individualistic understanding of work refusal is closely linked to the notion that the subject can organize their life in such a way that work is unnecessary. This form of work refusal is relatively middle-class and quite selfish way of understanding work refusal, requiring either existing capital or good social security in the country of residence.

In recent years, the discourse surrounding work refusal has increasingly aligned with ideological critique, incorporating the idea of collective action aimed at criticizing the prevailing ideology of work through collective movements. In her article *Culture and Critique* (2017), Sally Haslanger writes that resistance can primarily be carried out by individuals, but there are many reasons why resistance is best implemented as collective action. It is more credible when many people simultaneously view a practice as harmful and unjust, therefore gathering mass support behind the movement for changing that practice. The resistance of a few individuals is easy to be overlooked, silenced, or eliminated, which is why resistance typically manifests as social movements rather than individual's protests. Changing social practices, therefore, is not merely about altering one's own refusal but about transforming cultural *tekhne*¹. The transformation of cultural *tekhne* refers to changing the social meanings in our environment so that new values, ways of life, and a more equitable distribution of resources can emerge. (Haslanger 2017.)

Refusal of work can be seen as an individual protest, but it would be more meaningful to strive towards a social, collective movement that aims to refuse

¹ *Tekhne* means 'art', 'skill' or 'craft' in Ancient Greek. as a philosophical concept *tekhne* also refers to making or doing.

work and criticize the ideology of wage labour. A key aspect of work refusal is understanding that work—not private property, markets, or factories—is understood as the primary foundation of capitalist relations that holds the system together (Weeks 2011, 97). Therefore, any significant change in the capitalist system requires a change in the organization of work and the redefinition of the social value of work. Collective work refusal is primarily about actions that promote a slow, ecologically sustainable life, seeking to break away from capitalism's prevailing ways of organizing wage labour through continuous growth.

Art also manifests collective change in the society. Art, in all its forms, is highly influential part of the culture. It can connect people, tell the stories that need to be heard, provide different experiences how to view the world and suggest ways of cultivating empathy and humanity. Art is a powerful instrument to serve transformation of individuals and societies. (Ricci 2023.) Therefore, ideology critique and art have something in common. Art, especially performance art, can bring audiences together to experience something collectively and share and experience that can possibly shape their view on the topic of the performance.

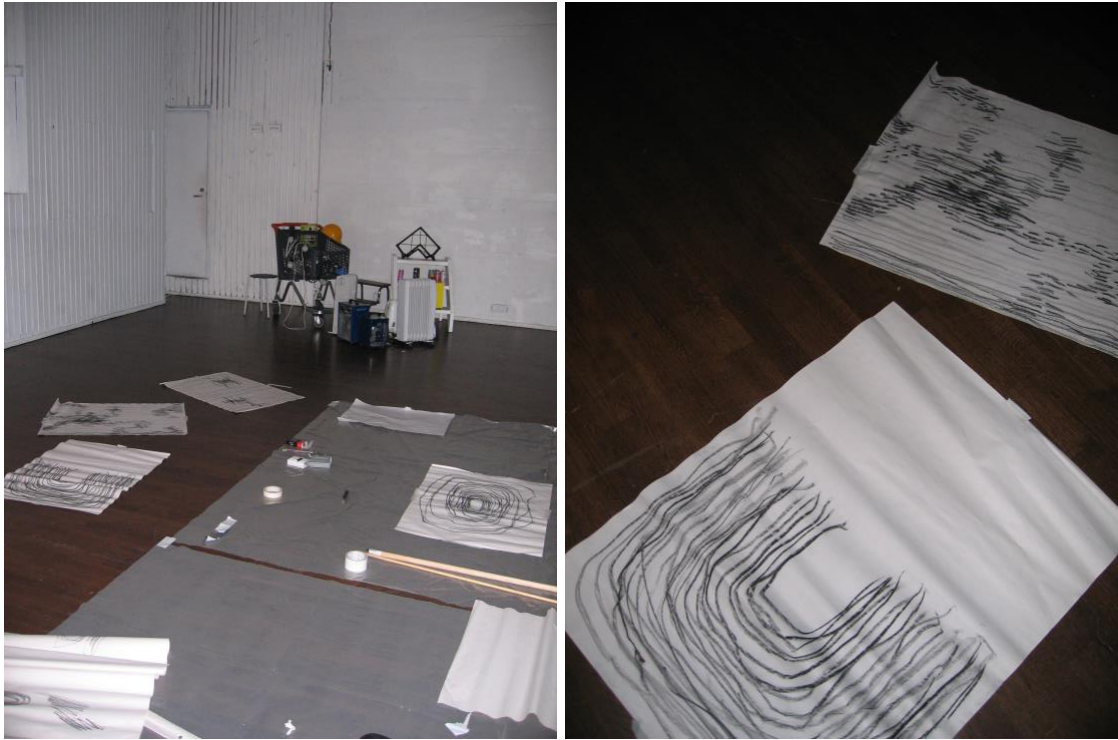
7.2 Performance in Ylioppilasteatteri

WORK_LIVE (Finnish: TYÖ_ELÄVÄ) expanded into an immersive theatre experience, in which the members of the audience had to partake in a makeshift recruitment process in the “office” that was the lobby of Ylioppilasteatteri. The performance started when the audience came in and they were given a recruitment folder with all the necessary information about the role they were applying for. The role was a supervisor position in the office. Soon the audience discovered that only one person remains in the office, a poor *Senior Assistant HR Consultant Workplace Environment Manager* who has been left behind when everyone else in the “office” went to Southeast Asia to do remote work or just took the route of quietly quitting their work forever.



PICTURE 7 AND 8: Marketing materials for WORK_LIVE

When the performance continued, the audience was asked to perform and participate in peculiar workplace actions in this empty pseudo-office. The audience was, for example, asked to do different recruitment tasks, join an imaginary Teams meeting and participate in an on-the-spot recruitment interview. The weirdness, sadness, and the lonely nature of the office unfolded to the audience a bit by bit as the performance went on. The language used in the performance mimicked the startup jargon and overly positive office language. There were motivational quotes like “Grindset mindset” and “Best workday ever” plastered all over the walls. One of the tasks for the audience was also to come up with their own motivational quotes for other visitors.



PICTURE 9 AND 10: Rehearsal period in Ylioppilasteatteri

The actual work, that the office was made for, happened behind closed doors in the studio of Ylioppilasteatteri. It was where I, an artist, was working on charcoal on paper works in the studio meanwhile the audience needed to take part in the recruitment processes. In Ylioppilasteatteri space the whole studio is divided into a lobby and an open concept studio space, which entrances you can block from the audience. There is only one spot, a balcony with windows facing the studio, where one can see what is happening in the studio. In the performance, the balcony served as a “supervisors booth” where, in the end, the audience was led so they could observe me working in the studio space.

The last stage of the whole immersion took place in the balcony. There, the audience had to watch me work for a period of time, drawing with gestures that mimicked manual labour for example mopping floors, cleaning, carrying things, dragging things et cetera. After a while the space and the nature of the performance changed with lights and theatre smoke, and that was when I frantically tried to finish the work, I was set out to do. In the final pieces it can be seen in the eradicate lines and uncontrolled marks of the charcoal.



PICTURE 11: Screen shot from the recording of the performance: first stages of drawing (Appendix 1)



PICTURE 12: From the recording of the performance (*ibid.*)



PICTURE 13: From the recording of the performance: fire in the studio (*ibid.*)



PICTURE 14: From the recording of the performance: me trying to finish the work (*ibid.*)

The performance in Ylioppilasteatteri was shown in total of 12 times in one week and most of the performances happened during “office hours”, meaning in between 9 am and 5 pm every day. Overall, the piece eventually expanded into an immersive theatre performance and a satire on wage labour asking questions of the meaningfulness of labour. Video recording of the final part of the performance was made and it is shown in the Gallery Himmelblau alongside the

charcoal on paper works that I created in every performance and some sketches that I made during the rehearsal period of the performance.

7.3 Final artwork in Gallery Himmelblau

The final artwork in Gallery Himmelblau consists of the charcoal on paper works I created during the performance, a video of the performance and some explanation what happened in Ylioppilasteatteri in February. The last part of the performance itself, my labour, was also repeated in Himmelblau during the exhibition time and the audience was welcome to follow the mini version of the performance. I recreated the performance in the glass cube that is in Himmelblau to mimic the audience-performer-relationship that we created in Ylioppilasteatteri.

Some thoughts I wrote during the replicated performance in Gallery Himmelblau:

I still usually choose to work. I like the comfort that work allows me. However, I've lived the last 4 years on a benefit similar to basic income and I've been reasonably healthy. And I wish the same for everyone. The feeling that life can be based on values (like education, art, knowledge, etc.) and not just the necessity to somehow survive. The need to pay bills and the need to go to work. Because that, if anything, wears you out. That society doesn't support your care or social reproduction. That society only supports the individualistic necessity to survive. And that's really tragic, and it can't end well. But why do I choose work then? Maybe I choose it precisely because it's not a necessity. Because I can and because work isn't associated only with negative things or just staying alive. But it's associated with having a bit more comfort and ease and makes living my life a bit easier.²

² Original quote in Finnish: "Kyl mä silti yleensä oon valinnut tehdä töitä. Pidän siitä mukavuudesta, jonka työ mulle mahdollistaa. Oon kuitenkin elänyt viimeiset 4 vuotta perustulon kaltaisella etuudella ja oon ollut kohtalaisen terve. Ja soisin jokaiselle ihmiselle saman. Tunteen siitä, että elämä voi perustua arvoille (kuten sivistys, taide, tieto jne.) eikä ainoastaan pakolle, että mun on pakko vaan selvitä jotenkin. Pakko maksaa laskut ja pakko käydä töissä. Koska se jos mikä kuluttaa loppuun. Et yhteiskunta ei tue sun hoivaa tai uusintamista. Että yhteiskunta tukee vaan sitä yksilökeskeistä pakkoa selviytyä. Ja se on tosi traagista, eikä voi päättyä hyvin. Mut miks mä sit valitsen työn? ehkä mä valitsen just siksi, että ei oo pakko. Koska mä voin ja koska se työ ei assosioitu vaan negatiivisiin asioihin tai siihen, että mä säilyin hengissä. Vaan se assosioituu siihen, että mulla on vään mukavempaa ja vähän helpompaa olla."

Other interesting notion from the Himmelblau performance was that people who came to see the performance wanted to talk to me and asked me about my aspirations in life and “what’s next?” even though my presence was very unapproachable and unpleasant. Imagine asking some clerk in Prisma about their aspirations in life, when they are beeping your groceries. Why was it acceptable to interrupt my labour and start asking about my dreams, goals, and the future, but it would be silly to do that in a grocery store? Maybe it was due to the fact that the performance happened during our graduation exhibition, where people might have bigger expectations for our student’s goals and future.

All in all, after some time to reflect on the piece I feel like it mostly expanded into a critique on the performative nature of labour in our society and how we do seemingly mundane tasks all over again and call it productive. After the performance I feel like the nature of many types of labour is just performative. For example, shaking the mouse to look like you are present in a Teams or browsing through excel sheets that have no real content, only look complicated. The question arises: why do we still work for mandatory eight hours a day, even when we could be finished after three hours?

8 CONCLUSION / DISCUSSION

Overall, this thesis addressed performance art, the body, and art as a means of political activism. Initially, I reviewed the theoretical framework of the thesis and clarified what is meant by the performing body, among other philosophical concepts that related to performance art and/or activism. Subsequently, I utilized the theoretical concepts introduced to analyse two performance works and introduced my own artistic thesis.

At the core of the thesis findings was the idea that the body connects performance art and political activism. The way the body exists as a medium and stage for power relations is similar in performance art and activism. Embodiment, relationality, and duration were three concepts that closely linked performance to activism, providing a meaningful way to analyse both, as well as Hannah Arendt's concept of *arkhein* which provided additional insights to analyse performance art pieces shown in this thesis.

My own artistic thesis differed from the pieces by Martiel and CASSILS because I did not exactly use my performing body in as vulnerable state as the other two artist presented in the thesis. Instead, my own body conveyed critique of manual labour and critique of performatives that can be found in wage labour and our cultural discussion surrounding it. In the future it could be beneficial to dig deeper into the critique of the performative nature of work, but to do that, we would need more theoretical tools for the critique itself. One way to achieve this could be through ideology critique and to investigate how wage labour could be considered to have features of ideology in it. In the future research the theory in ideology critique and action could be used to prove that co-operation and working together to change harmful ideological practices could work as a way to change existing (harmful) power structures and ideologies. Therefore, performance art as well as grass root political activism could work as a collaborative force that enacts change for better.

However, I feel like is worth noting that my thesis primarily revolves around the way the human body is experienced on stage, regardless of what is considered a stage. For future research, I aim to explore the ontology of the human body in

relation to the non-human, something beyond the human body, which is typically perceived as opposite or separate from the (human) body. How do the categories of body, space, and relationality transform when we consider the non-human as an agent, not merely as an object or a byproduct of performance? A good example is the agency of clay in CASSILS' performance; how it resists, generates physical counterforces, or is imbued with political significance from a human perspective. I am interested in the question of how the political nature observed in performance art can be extended to encompass all entities (understood as both human and non-human) and how performance art can be utilized as a tool to investigate the agency and political nature of the non-human.

The ontology and agency of the human and non-human are largely about power structures. Who wields power and defines whose body is an agent and whose actions are significant. The political nature of performance art could also be harnessed to dismantle and question these power structures—it indeed has the potential and all the prerequisites to do so. However, a world marked by ecological crises requires a mode of thinking that deconstructs and questions human-centred agency, as this is how we can build an ecologically sustainable world that considers all living beings as agents of change.

9 REFERENCES

- Arendt, H., Virtanen, E., Oittinen, R., Ellibs., & Ellibs. (2017). *Vita Activa : ihmisenä olemisen ehdot*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Butler, J. (1989). Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86(11), pp. 601–607.
- Goldberg, RoseLee. (1984). *In The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Haslanger, S. (2017). Culture and Critique. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 6/2017*. 91(1), pp. 149–173.
- Jansen, J., Wehrle, M., Fischer, C., & Dolezal, L. (2018). The Normal Body: Female Bodies in Changing Contexts of Normalization and Optimization. *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*. New York City: Springer International Publishing.
- Kirkkopelto, E. (2020). *Logomimesis : tutkielma esiintyvistä ruumiista*. Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto.
- Kirkkopelto, E. (2025). *Logomimesis: A Treatise on the Performing Body* (1st ed.). Lontoo: Routledge.
- Markell, P. (2006). The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê, and Democracy. *The American Political Science Review*, 100(1), pp. 1–14.
- McAllister, C. (2010). *Dissenting Body: Power, Space, and Violence in Embodied Acts of Resistance*. [Master's Thesis]. Warwick University. URN N/A.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1969). *The Visible and The Invisible*. Illinois, USA: Northwestern University Press.
- Pagnes, A. (2017). NOTES ON PERFORMANCE ART, THE BODY AND THE POLITICAL. *Research Catalouge*.
- Quinn, H. E. (2018). My Protest Body: Encounters with Affect, Embodiment, and Neoliberal Political Economy. *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, 9(2), pp. 51–65.
- Ricci, M. E. (2023). The Performance Art of Carlos Martiel: The Political Body and Social Change. *Mimesis Journal*, 12(2), pp. 159-173.
- Rossen V. (2023). Performative Activism Redeemed, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6/2023. 81(2)2, pp. 164–172.
- Serafini, P. (2020). 'A Rapist in Your Path,' Transnational Feminist Protest and Why (and How) Performance Matters. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, pp. 290–5.

Serafini, P. (2018). *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism* (1st ed.). Lontoo: Routledge.

Tapias, M. (2006). Emotions and the Intergenerational: Embodiment of Social Suffering in Rural Bolivia. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 20(3), pp. 399-415.

Tapias, M. (2015). *Embodied Protests: Emotions and Women's Health in Bolivia*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Weeks, K. (2011). *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Web sources:

Cassils.net. (2025). *Becoming an Image*. CASSILS. Retrieved: 13.12.2024.
<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-becoming-an-image#performance>

Carlosmartiel. (2025). *Works*. Carlos Martiel. Retrieved: 1.12.2024.
<http://www.carlosmartiel.net/>

Tate Gallery. (2025). *The Dimensions of Performance*. Johan Westerman. Retrieved: 14.12.2024.
<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/dimensions-of-performance>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Link

End scene of WORK_LIVE – performing body's desire to refuse work that was shown in Gallery Himmelblau
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g8ze8T1zYBVm_Yg8PuaC55socLB21OcA/view?usp=sharing

