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Alegría rebelde and performance (c)art: A comparative (auto)ethnography of contemporary absurd performance practice amongst activists and socially committed artists in Buenos Aires and New York City

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School of Culture and Creative Arts

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Abstract

This is an interdisciplinary study of contemporary absurd performance practice amongst activists and socially committed artists in Buenos Aires and New York City primarily informed by sixteen months of comparative ethnographic fieldwork. It centrally seeks to identify the motivations that drive different absurd performance practices amongst activists and socially committed artists across different socio-political contexts.

Following a brief, signposting introduction and outline of the key collectives worked with during fieldwork, this thesis begins with a consideration of how to define 'the absurd' and 'absurd performance'. The new theoretical framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism is proposed via combined contemplation of absurdist metaphysical philosophy and anarchist political philosophy in continual conversation with both my personal autoethnographic performance experimentation and reflection upon my ethnographic observations of others in Buenos Aires and New York City. From here, a new definition of absurd performance is outlined centering upon exaggerated counter-normative transgression. Elaborating upon the insights of growing literature concerning direct 'tactical performance' (Bogad, 2016a; Shepard, 2011; Duncombe, 2016) in relation to my ethnographic data, the counterpoint of more oblique supra-tactical performance is conceptualized, as is a spectrum of (supra)tactical absurd performance possibilities between these two ideal types.

An account of my comparative ethnographic methodology and how it contributes fresh insight to the study of this topic and to Performance Studies more broadly is followed by a distillation of the key cultural and political characteristics of Buenos Aires and New York City that were observed to be influential upon absurd performance practices.

Reporting and analysis of ethnographic data is then split into two primary sections. The first substantiates earlier theoretical claims by exploring the ideological underpinnings of different (supra)tactical orientations of absurd performance between those defining as activists and those defining as artists in each fieldsite. The second illustrates how the particular socio-political histories and actualities of Buenos Aires and New York City differently restrict and enable different forms of absurd performance. Here the need is outlined for further cross-cultural research on this topic in order to continue to fill the gaps in knowledge left behind by the ethnocentric over-concentration on Western activist case studies within the currently dominant academic literature.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Hugh Sillitoe

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hugh Sillitoe". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and slightly larger than the rest of the letters.

Chapter One - Introduction

1. Thesis outline

Cracking open papier-mâché eggs full of automatic poetry alongside a penguin, a giant eye, a cat in boxing gloves, and a princess; wheeling around a dead mouse covered in glitter on a tea trolley; setting a birthday cake on top of a coffin; swaying in a nude, masked crowd whilst throwing oiled asparagus at onlookers; walking the streets with a knee length beard full of questions attached by clothes pegs; parading as part of a pack of otherworldly creatures pushing towering, interactive garbage sculptures built in shopping carts...

Many have asked me why I have been involved in such activities during the course of my (auto)ethnographic fieldwork. This is a pertinent question - *why?* - being a centrally desired provocation of the artists and activists with whom I work, often counterpoised against its equivalent: *why not?* Sometimes these performers answer such queries; oftentimes no. These (non)answers, as this thesis will show, come in many contextually contingent forms, as the two eponymous terms of this text exemplify. *Alegría rebelde*, which translates as 'rebellious joy' in English, is a term I observed to be omnipresent amongst collectives creating absurd performance in Buenos Aires (BsAs), embodying a spirit of laughing in the face of power despite horrendous realities of oppression that I often saw fire the kinds of irreverent intervention listed above. Performance (c)art, meanwhile, is a label adopted by the artists with whom I worked in New York City (NYC) to both literally describe the public creation of performance art using shopping carts filled with sculptures made from incongruous trash items and metaphorically capture the ambition of making the world a broadly less normatively restricted place that often drives forward such spectacles. I choose these terms for the title of this project due to their prominence amidst the cacophony of further motivations for absurd performance noted within the over four hundred thousand words of fieldnotes recorded during my sixteen months of ethnographic research. Despite the documentation

of such a frenetic reality of absurd performance characterized by multiple simultaneous strains of occasionally seemingly contradictory (anti)reasoning, the assumption persists that it is my role as a researcher to take the above question - why? - and explain it, though I wager that, at least in relation to absurd performance, explanation and problematization are not such distinct terms.

In any case, I do come with a set of three neatly formulated primary research questions:

1) Why do activists and socially committed artists engage in absurd performance?

2) What differentiates artist and activist absurd performance practice?

3) How are both modes of absurd performance impacted by socio-political context?

Of course, these questions in turn necessitate consideration of further points, such as definitions of the absurd and absurd performance. The combined conceptual framework and literature review of chapter two deals with such definitions, unveiling the theoretical contributions of this thesis in the process. Here I reflect upon how Albert Camus' (1942/2013) consideration of the unidentifiability of fundamental meaning for existence may be read as a marker of an inherent base equality of all beings within shared inconsequentiality. Considering this in combination with Michel Foucault's (1984) mapping of malleable yet inescapable webs of power/knowledge domination, I differentiate between two major classifications of absurdity: existential absurdity and socio-political absurdity. Both these concepts, drawing on the etymological root of the word 'absurdity' within the Latin word 'absurdum' meaning disharmony, describe disharmonies between what is perceived 'to be' and what is perceived

‘should be’. The former is the recognition of the inability to locate an absolute reason for being despite the desire to do so, whilst the latter describes the persistence of power disparities despite the fundamental equality within shared base meaninglessness implied by the former. Combining this politicized reading of absurdist metaphysical philosophy with a review of anarchist political philosophy, as simultaneously informed by continual reflection upon my ethnographic data to be analysed in depth in chapters five, six, and seven, I suggest the new hybrid theory of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism. Here the fundamental equality of all beings within shared existential absurdity is argued to render all power ultimately unjustifiable and contain an anarchist imperative to resist all hierarchy, as necessarily mediated by pragmatic acknowledgement of the actual inescapability of unequal power/knowledge dynamics that characterizes socio-political absurdity.

Considering how this new pragmatic absurdo-anarchist perspective may reframe our understanding(s) of absurd performance practice, I identify the exaggerated transgression of dominant normative frameworks as an inherently political act that engenders disharmonies between the performance itself and dominant distributions of the sensible (Rancière, 2004). Such acts thus potentially undermine hegemonic ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1984) and provoke reflection upon intertwined existential and socio-political absurdity. This is my novel working definition of absurd performance, as shall be further theoretically explicated in chapter two, and empirically evidenced in the data analysis of chapters six and seven. As such, I demonstrate how we might take academic analysis of the absurd within Performance Studies in a new direction, moving away from classic restriction of the term within concentration upon the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ (Esslin, 1961/2001) by proposing this broader definition of absurd performance centred on exaggerated transgression. In this step I am facilitated by a growing body of literature investigating the creation of transgressive theatrical interventions by activist communities, often already couched in terms of absurd performance, exemplified by Larry Bogad (2016a), Ben Shepard (2011), and Stephen Duncombe (2016), amongst others to be discussed further throughout this thesis.

However, this body of scholarship, which I refer to throughout this text as the ‘tactical performance literature’, revolves around a uniting explanatory concept of tacticality that my ethnographic data problematizes. The central notion of these studies is that absurd intervention constitutes a new ‘tool’ within the Social Movement Studies concept of the ‘repertoire of contention’ (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). This is the idea that those wishing to provoke socio-political change draw from a predefined list of potential actions, absurd performance being pegged on as another such option to be calculatedly deployed. This has become the dominant academic frame for interpreting political absurd performance, adopted by numerous scholars, as shall be discussed further in chapter two (Farrar and Warner, 2008; Lechaux, 2010; Boyd and Mitchell, 2012; Routledge, 2012; Kauffman, 2018). Recognizing a tendency for tacticality within some of my fieldwork observations, I question its application as a totalizing explanation, observing in addition the possibility of absurd performance that operates outwith dominant frames of means-end rationality without direct aims or clear rationales. Thus I problematize the underlying obligatory positivism suggested by the tactical performance literature, critiquing this as a product of the ethnocentric overconcentration of such studies upon Western activist case studies.

In response in chapter two I outline two opposing ideal types¹ of absurd performance - tactical absurd performance and supra-tactical absurd performance - and a blurry spectrum between them of contextually contingent (supra)tactical absurd performance possibilities. These concepts are drawn primarily from extended reflection upon my ethnographic data, intertwined with interrogation of the dominant tactical performance literature, and may be considered central findings of this research. I present them near the outset of this thesis rather than await the conclusion so as to facilitate the interpretation of later data analysis chapters that have been structured in order to substantiate this new conceptual framework with the ethnographic evidence from which it has been devised. As such, I introduce the notion of a spectrum of contextually

¹ Wherever I make reference to ‘ideal types’ within this thesis I am alluding to Max Weber’s (1904/1949) heuristic framework for designing and interpreting social research in relation to an imagined model exemplar of the subject at hand in contrast to the reality observed. For further information on the history and use of this concept, see Lindbekk (1992) and Swedburg (2018).

contingent (supra)tactical absurd performance possibilities as the loose data-driven frame through which I analyse my ethnographic observations in chapters six and seven, and which I propose may fruitfully be applied in future studies within the new line of inquiry of cross-cultural comparison of (supra)tactical absurd performance that this research exposes.

To conclude chapter two I outline the attempted pre-fieldwork autoethnographic translation of my pragmatic absurdo-anarchist conceptual framework into my personal practice as a performance maker. Through reflection upon the interventions of the artist-activist-cutlery collective Howling Spoon, I illustrate how this conceptual framework may spring forth from the page and howl, offer you a plate of vegetable curry, assist you in the christening of a cardboard cow, and, perhaps, expose through action the ultimate foundationlessness of hierarchy.

As the above central research questions make clear, this study sets out to explicate, as far as possible with such an obfuscatory practice, the motivations that drive different (supra)tactical absurd performance practices amongst activists and socially committed artists across different socio-political contexts. In the account of my methodology in chapter three, I shall clarify what I mean by 'ethnography' and where my own ethnographic practice sits in relation to the many subtypes of this research practice. From here I will detail why I selected BsAs and NYC as my case studies and elected to conduct a comparative ethnography within these fieldsites as the best way to answer the above research questions and fill gaps in knowledge within the currently dominant tactical performance literature. Here I outline how I decided upon NYC as a fieldsite primarily to be able to enter into more direct dialogue with the tactical performance literature upon which this project expands, much of this previous research having held NYC as a geographical focus. I then sought a comparative non-western fieldsite with a notably different culture and political history to be able to address my third research question concerning the impact of socio-political context upon absurd performance practice and counteract the ethnocentrism that I identify within the existent literature. According to

multiple considerations of comparative suitability and practical feasibility including the presence of relevant active collectives creating absurd performance and language training possibilities, to be fully detailed in chapter three, BsAs emerged as the most fitting comparative fieldsite.

Chapter three then proceeds to detail my exact research practice from sampling processes to day-to-day ‘deep hanging out’ (Rosaldo, 1989; Clifford, 1996; Geertz, 1998) and fieldnote taking practices to the management of research conversations and finally my methods of data coding, analysis, presentation, and performance experiments during the writing process in combining the subject of study with its reportage. Here I show how I used intimate day in day out participant observation within activist and artist collectives across my contrasting fieldsites to enable a uniquely nuanced four-way comparative assessment of the interrelated ideological and contextual motivations for creating absurd performance amongst the four subgroups under study: activists in BsAs, artists in BsAs, activists in NYC, and artists in NYC. The precise groups worked with are detailed in the second section of this introduction chapter, before being discussed throughout the following text. No other method would have allowed for such long-term, intimate immersion and subsequent richness of data across diverse groups. This study thus exemplifies the potential for this traditionally anthropological method to be fruitfully applied within Theatre and Performance Studies and the Arts more broadly. Here my work throws meat to the arguments of Dwight Conquergood (2013), Richard Schechner (1985), and Victor Turner (1987), to be addressed further in chapter three, that a focused analysis upon every stage of performance production is necessary to more fully understand any given act in question. Thus this study may help catalyse the development of rich new ethnographic avenues of inquiry in Performance Studies.

In chapter four I offer an overview of the different central cultural, historical, and political influences that I observed upon absurd performance practice in BsAs and NYC. This lays the groundwork for my reframing of the analysis of absurd performance upon the observation that the unique socio-

political contexts of a given fieldsite are paramount to interpreting any absurd performance occurring there. Here key details are provided of the significance of reified notions of the 'European' and the 'Latino' to cultural identity in BsAs as compared to the generalized cultural exceptionalism within popular perceptions of NYC; histories of the 1976-83 dictatorship and 2001 economic crisis and social uprising in Argentina in contrast to ongoing discourses of 'culture wars' and white supremacy in the USA; and the consequences of right-wing populist governments in both fieldsites with the presidencies of Mauricio Macri and Donald Trump. These details are then referenced throughout data analysis, becoming especially important in chapter seven where I focus in on comparing how I observed these contrasting contexts to divergently impact absurd performance practices.

In the data analysis prologue of chapter five I seek to throw readers in at the ethnographic deep-end by offering, pre-analysis, two extended ethnographic vignettes, one amongst activists in BsAs and the other with artists in NYC. This is intended to recreate microcosmically the immersion I experienced as the fieldworker, engendering greater empathy with the intellectual and emotional intensity of this research process whilst conveying the constant messy mixture of influences upon different (supra)tactical absurd performance practices that I was confronted with in the field. These chaotic realities are unpicked in the following data analysis chapters in relation to both these introductory vignettes and many new examples. However, by first foregrounding dense ethnographic description, I work against the possibility of readers sliding into the misconception that ethnographic observations are straightforwardly categorizable which the conventions of academic presentation that I work with and against might otherwise appear to suggest. Thus I place a reminder at the outset of data analysis that the trends that I identify are just that, trends running through a messy corpus of activity like diffuse veins just about visible through ever-changing flesh, sometimes tense, sometimes goose-pimpled, throbbing at different rhythms.

In chapter six I substantiate my identification of opposing tactical and supra-tactical tendencies within a blurred (supra)tactical reality of absurd performance through the presentation and analysis of multiple ethnographic vignettes to have informed this conceptual framework. Analysing these differences in concordance with the primary (un)professional² identifications of each subset under study, I demonstrate activists in NYC as an example of a strictly tactical absurd performance orientation, activists in BsAs as also more tactically inclined yet with greater lenience for some more supra-tactical experimentation, artists in BsAs as crossing the bar into being more supra-tactically focused yet still with some notable tactical drives, and artists in NYC as veering closest to the supra-tactical end of the spectrum and showing little interest in tactical calculation of the impacts of their absurd interventions. Alongside this demonstration I will detail the varied primary ideological motivations I observed underlying these divergent absurd performance practices, relating these back to the pragmatic absurdo-anarchist framework outlined in chapter two.

In chapter seven I illustrate the impact of the socio-political contexts outlined in chapter four upon the different absurd performance orientations illustrated in chapter six. For example, amongst a plethora of themes too numerous for it to be helpful to outline them all in this introduction chapter, I assess how norms of reverence surrounding the history of dictatorship in BsAs or race relations in NYC differently moulded the possibilities of absurd performance in each city. Here I synthesize much of the material outlaid above via analysis of the ethnographic evidence that informs my assertion that (supra)tactical absurd performance practice varies dependent upon its socio-political context. The central contributions of this research to its field of inquiry of proposing the spectrum of (supra)tacticality as a new flexible lens for the analysis of contextually contingent absurd performance, and the centrality that must be lent to this very cultural contingency for previous ethnocentric pitfalls and fallacious universalization to be avoided, are thus solidified.

² I use the semi-parenthesized term '(un)professional' throughout this thesis to encompass the variation I observed between endorsement, ambivalence, and rejection concerning occupational expectations of supposed 'professionalism' amongst the activists and artists I worked with, as shall be explicated further in chapter two.

Finally, in the conclusion of chapter eight, I harness this synthesization of the threads of the preceding chapters within chapter seven so as to clearly summarize the major (non)answers to my research questions illustrated by this investigation alongside an evaluation of its limitations and the avenues opened for further research. Here I reflect upon how my demonstration of how absurd intervention varies between tactical and supra-tactical poles of orientation establishes balance where current dominant literature over-emphasizes tacticality. Juxtaposing this tactical performance literature, disproportionately informed by occidental activist case studies, against my own comparative ethnographic observations, I identify and work to fill gaps in existing knowledge concerning cross-cultural variation of (supra)tactical absurd performance practices. Here I foreground the moulding impact of different socio-political histories and actualities upon always contextually contingent absurd performance practices. I argue that the trends identified within the tactical performance literature reflect the contextual location and historical moment of the observations that inform them, not evidence of universal practices as they have often been presented. As such this study opens the door for further research investigating how activists and artists differently mobilize absurd performance across a broader spectrum of socio-political and cultural contexts worldwide. Meanwhile, I underline that, by using comparative ethnographic methods to open this new research pathway, I simultaneously contribute to the introduction of an enriching new methodological vantage point within Performance Studies.

2. Overview of research co-performers³

Before commencing the thesis as delineated above, I present here an overview of my four core comparative subsets of research co-performers.

³ As shall be justified further in chapter three, following Dwight Conquergood (2013: 82), I use the term ‘research co-performers’, rather than other less-inclusive terms such as subject, informant, or participant, to describe those with whom I conducted this ethnography so as to reflect the ‘acting-together’ of fieldwork.

Throughout this thesis I shall make repeated reference to these collectives, their central locations of activity, and to specific individuals within them. This section may then be referred back to at any point should a reader wish to refresh their grasp of a given set of research co-performers. My original intention here was to also offer a summary of the main roles and demographic characteristics of key individual research co-performers, yet, given the large numbers of people worked with during fieldwork, it became clear during drafting that this initial plan was untenable. To present each dynamic individual to have informed this comparative ethnography within a reasonable word count for an introductory chapter, without lapsing into reductive contrivance, would be impossible. As such I detail here an image of the networks of my ethnography as a whole, declining to reduce the many vibrant individuals to have enlightened my studies to an introductory register list that could never express their spirits. Rather, I leave this to shine through within later ethnographic anecdotes, readers meeting each research co-performer as I did, in action. For now I simply outline the collective infrastructures within which these characters shall later be shown to have demonstrated their distinct approaches towards absurd performance.

2.1 Buenos Aires

2.1.1 *La Escuela de Teatro Político*

La Escuela de Teatro Político (ETP) (Political Theatre School) provided me with a receptive group of research co-performers creating absurd performance within the activist sphere of BsAs. ETP is an anti-capitalist, volunteer-run collective of popular education and performance creation established in 2013, exploring through discussion and practice the possibilities of theatre and performance to provoke socio-political change. Quantifying exactly the membership of ETP is difficult as there are many individuals who dip in and out of participation, alongside others who follow a regular schedule of taking and/or offering classes and workshops. Across all levels of participation, during my fieldwork there were approximately sixty participants, with ambitions to expand

membership. Participants typically occupied one of four roles within the collective dependent upon their length of involvement and major responsibilities undertaken. These were *primeros* (first-years, those who had participated for under a year), *segundos* (second-years - those who had participated for between one and two years), *egresados* (graduates - those who continued participation beyond two years but had completed all core workshops), and *profes* (teachers - those who facilitated the core workshops). These roles occasionally exerted some informal hierarchical influence yet were generally fluid. For example, a *primero* could still propose their own series of workshops within the collective organizing assembly through which ETP was run, and, if approved, thus become simultaneously a *primero* and a *profe*, as was my role during fieldwork. Additionally there were numerous collaborators who did not fit any of these categories comfortably, such as musicians or sound technicians participating in occasional interventions.

Themes of core workshops included Theatre of the Oppressed, Brechtian theatre, history of Latin American political theatre, community theatre, community singing, and clown. Encouraged to do so as part of the popular education model of the collective, I also facilitated a series of workshops surrounding political absurd performance as part of my participant observation. Typical class sessions would take place in the headquarters of ETP, the occupied theatre *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa* (The Other Thing Popular Theatre). These sessions would involve theatre games, discussions of texts, and the devising and preparation of street interventions or performances for weekly Friday and Saturday night shows in *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa*. Participation in this entire process and any subsequent performances is what informs most of my fieldnotes concerning ETP. I also worked with the subgroup *Tumbarrati Frente Cultural del Movimiento Popular La Dignidad* (*Tumbarrati Cultural Front of the Popular Movement of Dignity*) that functioned as an interconnected collective responsible for planning and executing further public interventions. *Tumbarrati* is a portmanteau combining *tumbar* (to knock over) and *rati* (derogatory slang for police).

ETP was founded by and continues to operate under the umbrella supervision of the nationwide anti-capitalist network *Movimiento Popular La Dignidad* (MPLD) (Popular Movement of Dignity). The label *movimiento* (movement) operates to distinguish the group from a *partido* (political party) or *sindicato* (union), signifying its grassroots activist orientation and relatively greater autonomy and inclusivity. The central slogan of MPLD is “*construyendo el poder del pueblo*” (constructing the power of the people). MPLD is a broadly socialist organization, yet, unlike many socialist groups, many associated members do not subscribe to this ideology, or even actively subscribe to another, most prominently anarchism. The organization offers no figures of its membership, which on a larger scale to ETP, yet in a similar way, is too flexible to be reliably counted. However, it is clear that across Argentina, MPLD involves several thousand people running hundreds of projects such as *comedores* (free open kitchens), services for those with drug and alcohol addiction, initiatives to improve health and security in marginal areas, teaching drives to improve literacy, and, notably for my research, one space in BsAs of political theatre and popular education surrounding performance that occasionally experiments with absurd intervention. ETP operated within an activist milieu in BsAs where performance, often with absurd elements, was widely embraced as an aspect of activist practice. Inter-related BsAs activist performance groups with whom I established looser research ties include *Fin de UN Mundo* (FUNO) (End of A World) known for large-scale politicized dance flashmobs; *Fuerza Artística de Choque Comunicativo* (FACC) (Artistic Force of Communicative Shock) who staged numerous vigils dressed as crows and playing discordant music outside sites symbolic of political corruption during my fieldwork; *Lo Inesperado Sucede en la Calle* (The Unexpected Happens in the Street) who throw unpermitted street cabarets; and numerous ‘*frentes culturales*’ (cultural fronts) of broader activist organizations such as *Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores* (MST) (Socialist Movement of Workers) staging performances as part of their parent organizations’ campaigns.



Fig 1-1: Members of the ETP en route to an intervention.

2.1.2 *Etcétera*

The dadaist/surrealist arts collective *Etcétera* and their sub-project *Internacional Errorista* (International Errorist) were the artists who I worked with in BsAs. *Etcétera* celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their foundation in 1997 during my fieldwork, launching an autobiographical book concerning their history and development of the philosophy and practice of ‘errorism’ (*Etcétera*, 2017). The group began as a self-described “*tribu de jóvenes artistas*” (tribe of young artists) squatting the former printing press of Argentine surrealist artist Juan Andralis and using it to set up proclaimed laboratories of experimental art in which they mixed music, performance, poetry, and visual art. From here the group began to collaborate with H.I.J.O.S. (*Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* - Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence) in performances known as *escraches* denouncing unprosecuted members of the dictatorial military junta of 1976-83, which will be detailed further in chapter four.

Following the notoriety garnered by their creation of such mass spectacles, the group began to receive attention from the international art world, and today often operates within this sphere, having exhibited in recent years in the Biennales of São Paulo, Taipei, Istanbul, Athens, and Jakarta. Significantly for my research, this international arts activity remains complemented by ongoing interventions within street protest in BsAs. Regardless, some original members referred to the collective as dead, distasteful of the perceived conversion of the group into a vehicle for the arts careers of a minority of its founders. Still, others saw those who maintained the group in its current form as managing to preserve something that otherwise would have disintegrated, whilst generating greater global awareness of their past and current activities. These clashing perspectives, and their influences on the possibilities of absurd performance within the group, will be assessed during data analysis.

Etcétera remain a group of purportedly uncountable number, with many levels of involvement from fleeting to profound, actively rejecting the imposition of a figure upon their ranks. However, it is notable that with the transition to being more of an art world entity, numbers of core members during my fieldwork (approximately ten) were lower than those reported in the stories of their earlier activities. Previous apparent collective organization has transferred to general administration by the couple making their living as artists under the moniker - Fede Zukerfeld and Loreto Garín Guzman - commonly referred to in exhibition catalogues as the 'co-ordinators' of the group. In contrast to ETP, who have yet to receive scholarly attention, their international arts reputation means that Etcétera have already been subject to some investigation, though none specifically assessing their motivations for producing absurd performance (Battiti, 2005; Holmes, 2009; Scotini, 2010; Flores Sternad, 2011; Eilat, 2015; Kelley, Jr. and Zamora, 2017). In the journalistic book *Todo lo que necesitás saber sobre arte argentino* (All you need to know about Argentine art) (Ezquiaga, 2015), Etcétera feature prominently under the heading of 'art and politics', appearing similarly in a book produced by the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a series surrounding cultural heritage entitled *La Protesta: Arte y Política en la Argentina* (Protest: Art and Politics in Argentina) (2014).

My major research participation was as a member in the *Errasmus Mundus*⁴ programme of “*deseducación*” (diseducation) facilitated by Etcétera with a base in the independent gallery, *Experiencia Hiedra* (Ivy Experience), co-founded and managed by a core member of the collective, Jacinta. In these ‘(no)work(no)shops’⁵ that ran throughout my fieldwork period we discussed the socio-political possibilities of transgressive, absurd performance, feeding these conversations into the creation of interventions. This process and associated social activities informs the bulk of my fieldnotes concerning Etcétera. Within these sessions and associated performances, a four-fold level of participation could generally be observed with Fede and Loreto as the co-ordinators, a selection of longer term collaborators invited to lead (no)work(no)shops as *maestros errantes* (wayward teachers), committed participants in the whole series, which is the role I took on during fieldwork, and uncommitted participants who dropped in and out of involvement.



Fig 1-2: A street intervention co-ordinated by Etcétera.

⁴ A pun making a deliberate ‘error’ in the spelling of the European educational exchange programme, Erasmus Mundus

⁵ Written in this way, mocking the borrowed English word of ‘workshop’, “*porque no trabajamos ni compramos nada*” (because we don’t work or buy anything), Fede told me.

2.2 New York City

2.2.1 Patchwork of activist groups

In NYC I was not able to become so intensely ethnographically involved with one single activist performance collective as I had done with ETP in BsAs. During my initial weeks of fieldwork in NYC I discovered that some activist groups such as the anti-capitalist network Rise and Resist, queer anti-gun violence collective Gays Against Guns, or environmentalist and bicycling rights group Time's Up! were making occasional use of performance with some absurd elements. Meanwhile other established creative activist groups such as the anti-capitalist preachers and choral singers The Church of Stop Shopping (Lechaux, 2010) or culture jamming impersonators of corporate and political figures The Yes Men (Mouffe, 2008) maintained sporadic performances⁶. However, I soon noted that the level of research-relevant activist activity in NYC had dipped since the 00's swell of tactical performance literature detailing the exploits of groups such as NYC Reclaim the Streets throwing sporadic carnivals in public spaces, Billionaires for Bush sardonically lauding George W. Bush's protection of the super-rich at the expense of the poor, Absurd Response to an Absurd War reacting to the normalization of the Iraq war via counter-normative street intervention, or Missile Dick Chicks lampooning the patriarchal logic of war by performing with huge torpedo phalluses (Duncombe, 2002; Bogad, 2006; Farrar and Warner, 2008; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007). In contrast with the general significance I found lent to performance amongst BsAs activists, often experimenting with absurd elements, most activists I encountered in NYC were currently shying away from theatrical performance of any kind, concentrating more on assemblies, rallies, canvassing, and occasional marches and occupations. Meanwhile, such activities, whilst given more exclusive priority, were generally far less well attended than comparable actions in BsAs where participation in

⁶ In an earlier moment, these two collectives may have proven to be excellent ethnographic foci for this study. However, given the international reputations they have attained in recent years much of their activity during my fieldwork period occurred outwith NYC and as such my research interactions with them were limited to more occasional events in their base city.

activism was greater, a large march by NYC standards equating to a dismal turnout in BsAs.

In response to the relative absence of active activist absurd performance collectives in NYC, I had to modify my research design from its ideal formulation of ethnographic comparison of four distinct groups. In place of focused participant observation with a single NYC activist group, throughout my fieldwork in NYC I attended a diversity of activist events and hung out in different activist spaces such as the radical library Interference Archive, the anarchist organizing spaces of MayDay Space and The Base, the not-for-profit venue Starr Bar, and the Occupy ICE takeover of Foley Square. Here I engaged in in-depth conversations surrounding the historical and contemporary role (or lack thereof) of absurd performance in activism in NYC and potential reasons for the contemporary lull in such practice. However, unlike in the other areas of my fieldwork, I was unable to encounter one specific relevant active NYC activist network to join as an intensive, ongoing participant observer. My data with regards to NYC activist absurd performance then stems largely from extended conversations carried out throughout my fieldwork with members of multiple inter-linked anti-capitalist collectives across NYC. Still, when the opportunity arose, I was able to participate in occasional performance interventions with these collectives. In contrast to the other sectors of my ethnography, I did not build up sufficiently familiar research relationships with single individuals within the NYC activist milieu to be able to make repeated reference to solely their contributions. As such I do not characterise specific individuals from within the NYC activist scene within this thesis but rather refer to a broad diversity of less intimately well-known contacts by reference to the collective of which they formed part.

2.2.2 The Cart Department

In contrast with the difficulty of identifying activist performance collectives in NYC, I was able to engage in perhaps the most intensive

ethnographic participation of my fieldwork with the NYC anarchist, nihilist, dadaist performance art collective The Cart Department⁷. This loose ‘art-gang’, to use Moore’s (2011) term, began to form briefly before my arrival to NYC as a group of individual performance artists came together around their mutual interest in using shopping carts as bases for large, interactive sculptures made from garbage. These mobile trash monuments often served as the centrepiece of street interventions and performances within underground venues during my fieldwork. Marking its anti-establishment position and distance from mainstream cultural production, some members of The Cart Department described the avant-garde performance scene of which they formed part as “off-off-off-off-off-off-off Broadway”. The major hubs of this scene during my fieldwork, outwith the streets and subways where many interventions were staged, included the underground performance space The Glove, the art bars Flowers for All Occasions and Secret Project Robot, and the independent performance art gallery Grace Exhibition Space, all run by other members of the experimental performance scene within which The Cart Department operated. The core Cart Department group consisted of six artists, plus myself accepted as a central member during fieldwork, surrounded by an outer circle of approximately fifty less intimately involved collaborating performers, photographers, and organizers.

The Cart Department operated during my research period as an autonomous group, not formally tied as a group⁸ to any other collective, movement, gallery, or funder. Organizationally, I observed no fixed structure or protocol, plans made consistently spontaneously throughout fieldwork, with few performances involving more than two weeks of preparation, and many involving only a few hectic hours. The collective is a loose assembly of individual artists combining to create performances that would not be possible alone, united by some generally shared artistic practices and philosophical/ideological beliefs. In

⁷ This collective name emerged from a coalescence of factors. Another project of four members of the group is making puppet shows to accompany the ‘imaginary hardcore acoustic doowop’ band Pinc Louds, where they are known as ‘The Art Department’ of the band. Meanwhile, another member, Kalan, had previously coined the term ‘performance (c)art’ described above, referring to this practice on his website as “a miniature but triumphant parade against everything, a glitch in the matrix of being and purpose” (Sherrard, 2014). These two terms blended to form The Cart Department.

⁸ Some members were in receipt of funding for separate, individual work.

terms of shared practices the use of elaborate masks and costumes, sound poetry and noise, indecipherable symbols, puppetry, trash as a primary source of materials, and, of course, carts are all common threads. Speaking of ideological commonalities, core members emphasized to me - to different degrees - nihilism, anarchism, punk, and dada. I participated intensely in all Cart Department activities including regular street and gallery/venue performances, informal planning meetings, and prop, puppet, mask, and cart making sessions. I also regularly attended and participated in performances within the associated DIY avant-garde scene(s), within which most of the broader collaborators of The Cart Department operated. My fieldnotes concerning NYC artist absurd performance thus stem centrally from these interlinked activities and associated conversations.



Fig1-3: Some members of The Cart Department during a street intervention.

Chapter Two - Literature Review and Conceptual Framework: Defining the Absurd

1. Defining the absurd

Etymologically, ‘absurdity’, stems from the Latin, ‘*absurdum*’, meaning ‘out of tune’. Following this I define absurdity broadly as disharmony between what is perceived ‘to be’ and what is perceived ‘should be’. As stated in chapter one, my research circulates around two primary notions of such disharmony: existential absurdity and socio-political absurdity. In the combined literature review and conceptual framework that follows I will define these key concepts and delineate the pragmatic absurdo-anarchist theoretical position that I elaborate around them and which undergirds the expanded reading of political absurd performance beyond currently dominant frames of tacticality that I derive from my ethnographic data.

Philosophy forms only one of the components of this inter-disciplinary research project, which is primarily an anthropological Performance Studies investigation based upon ethnographic fieldwork. The theoretical framework sketched out in this chapter does not aspire to be a comprehensive review of thought regarding absurdity and absurd performance, but rather an overview of the ideas that have informed the design, practice, and analysis of my (auto)ethnographic investigation, just as my fieldwork has symbiotically re-informed my theoretical stance. Indeed, all the ideas discussed in this chapter are the products of a process of pre-consideration before fieldwork and continual re-reflection during and afterwards. Some concepts, such as existential and socio-political absurdity and associated theoretical framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism, stem more from earlier engagement with literature, whilst others, such as the differentiation between ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance forming the endpoints of a spectrum of actual (supra)tactical possibilities, emerged more from reflection upon my fieldnotes. However, all the ideas expressed in this chapter are

ultimately the result of a synergistic relationship between theorization and ethnographic observation. This is emblematic of my reflexive mobilization of a grounded theory ethnographic approach to be detailed further in chapter three. If it seems that I have given short shrift to any given literature or thinker, this is a product of my active decision to give precedence within the limited space of this thesis to the thoughts of my research co-performers, which is the unique insight and core of this study, as given full voice in later data analysis chapters.

As this chapter progresses, it will become apparent that in conveying the theoretical infrastructure of my research I make recourse to multiple semi-parenthesized terms such as (supra)tactical, (in)direct action, (un)professional, (pre)figurativity, or (anti)art. I formulate such terms in order to express three related dialectical conditions within a single shorthand: the ideal type of, say, the tactical; the opposite ideal type of, say, the supra-tactical; and the actual shifting liminal realities of, say, the (supra)tactical. As shall be outlined below, I am attempting to write about absurd performance that often centrally attacks the apparently rational basis of power/knowledge hierarchies. The apparently rational basis of language, in this case English, then perhaps ought not be exempt from assault in this intent.

Jacques Derrida critiques Ferdinand de Saussure's structural understanding of language as constructed upon apparently balanced binary oppositions, purporting an endemic logocentrism. This involves the necessary privileging of one term over its supposed counterpart:

[a]n opposition of metaphysical concepts (speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination (Derrida, 1982: 195).

As such within any given signifier remains a 'trace' of the supposedly distinct 'opposite' that allegedly defines it, and thus no signifier may be fully 'present' or 'absent', nor communicate any absolute meaning. Taking this on board, the key terms of my investigation of absurd performance are largely semi-parenthesized in recognition of both the fuzziness of the actual practice they

describe and the inability of falsely binarized language and thought to account for conditions outwith such rationalized frameworks. I do not pretend to have simply leapfrogged this dilemma of articulation with some innovative mid-word punctuation, but do hope to signal the destabilizing intent of my writing and the absurd performance it assesses.

1.1 Existential absurdity

Existential absurdity concerns human beings desiring an essential meaning, purpose, and justification for their existences, yet being unable to locate one. Disharmony rings between the human mind seeking fundamental meaning and the universe offering no verifiable response. Here, to evoke Friedrich Nietzsche (1882/2001), 'God', as symbolic of an ultimate explanation and reason for being, is dead, or at least undiscoverable. We exist without the possibility of identifying an overriding purpose for being that nonetheless we continue longing for. This, crucially, is not to state that we are absolutely meaningless, but rather fundamentally so. That is to say, despite lacking any distinguishable ultimate reason for being, patently our existences remain defined by diverse constructed meanings made from, for example, religion, family, or art. Such constructed meanings of, say, faith, love, or beauty are undeniable, they feel *real* and in this valid felt sense are *real*, yet nonetheless remain constructed without foundation. Nothing and no one intrinsically means anything, yet profound fabricated meanings may still surround and influence them.

Perhaps the most seminal text regarding existential absurdity in Western philosophy is Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942/2013). My mobilization of existential absurdity generally coincides with the notion of 'the Absurd' put forward here. Camus' metaphor of Sisyphus eternally pushing a rock uphill as emblemizing the equal fundamental pointlessness of all human action shall be shown during data analysis to be paralleled by many performances of my research co-performers that may provoke similar reflection. Centrally, Camus reflects on whether suicide is an apt response to acknowledgement of the

Absurd, suggesting, akin to Jean-Paul Sartre's "nausea" (1938/2000), that reflection upon fundamental meaninglessness is a source of anguish which must be somehow dealt with.

Fideism - the notion that religious faith overrides reason and explains that which reason cannot - has been a common response to a consideration of this perceived anguish of fundamental meaninglessness. This can be seen rooted in the Hebrew exhortation in Ecclesiastes that all is "*hevel*" - literally meaning 'breath' and elsewhere translated as 'meaningless' (New International Version) or 'vanity' (King James' Version) - leading to a conclusion that one ought to enjoy simple pleasures as unexplainable gifts from God. This is echoed in the 'negative theology' of Tertullian in the second and third centuries, often paraphrased as stating "*Credo quia absurdum*" or "I believe because it is absurd", advocating faith as a direct response to incomprehensibility and apparent meaninglessness (Harrison, 2017). In a similar vein is Søren Kierkegaard's (1844/2015) proposal of the potential for a leap of faith to transcend "vertigo of possibilities" and "dizziness of freedom". Fyodor Dostoyevsky's assertion also comes to mind that even if Christ were shown to be "outside the truth", they would nonetheless prefer to "remain with Christ" and avoid the perceived trauma of engaging with existential absurdity (cited in Cornwell, 2006: 7). Meanwhile Lev Chestov and Benjamin Fondane have been read as undermining reason in order to reinforce the authority of an unfathomable God (Fotiade, 2001).

More recently, self-proclaimed 'fideists' have argued that, rather than being antithetical to rationality, faith is "beyond" reason (Evans, 1998) or "supra-evidential" (Bishop, 2007) and fruitfully intervenes wherever the limits of conventional reasoning leave issues unresolved. Outside of Christian dominated European philosophy are other examples of faith advocated in response to or rejection of existential absurdity. Despite that, as Shabbir Akhtar points out, "[t]he leap of faith...as a desperate final and irrational step is foreign to Islam which sees itself as a rational faith" (2007: 70), such contemporary intractable certainty of superior belief may still be seen as directly influenced by historical

Muslim thinkers' contemplation of meaninglessness and their leap away from it. Abû Hâmid Al-Ghazâlî's (2000) eleventh century *Incoherence of the Philosophers* contemplates meaninglessness in order to present the standpoint that all events occur due to the immediate present will of Allah - a position, formulated in flight from existential absurdity, which undergirds current Islamic fundamentalism.

Camus rejected such attempts to eschew anguish through exhortation of a supposed greater meaning as "philosophical suicide" wherein the comfort of fabricated universal significance constitutes denial of absurd actuality, like a painted screen hiding the gallows (Camus, 1942/2013: 88). Thomas Nagel later elucidated this point as follows:

a role in some larger enterprise cannot confer significance unless that enterprise is itself significant...If we learned that we were being raised to provide food for other creatures fond of human flesh...we would still be in the dark as to the significance of the lives of those other beings (1971: 720/721).

Philosophical suicide aside, other thinkers have attempted to link recognition of existential absurdity with literal suicide and murderous chaos. This can be seen in the notion that, whilst it may be that there is no fundamental meaning for existence or behaving in any given way, for all human beings to admit this would equate to disastrous social disorder, or, following Hobbes, the "warre of every one against his [*sic*] neighbour" (1651/1996: 214). Hobbes entitled this inevitable perennial conflict in the absence of meaning and authority the "state of nature" and argued that for its prevention it was essential for a population to submit to a sovereign.

Later, Durkheim (1897/2002), similarly emphasizing the fabrication of contextually meaningful structures to preserve social order, proffered the concept of 'anomie' or normlessness as a major cause of suicide, suggesting that if individuals are not offered sufficiently instructional regulations by society, then the exposed underlying meaninglessness of existence may drive them to kill

themselves. Durkheim progressed to attempt to specify what social structures could be most conducive to a level of social order that would minimize suicide. Camus, on the other hand, also considering suicide as a response to the normlessness of the Absurd, rejected such conservative advocacy of social stability through deference to ultimately foundationless political structures, drawn rather to query whether suicide is in fact a justifiable response to acknowledged existential absurdity.

Avoiding denial, Camus evoked two major responses: suicide or revolt. Suicide is succumbing to the perceived despair of purposelessness, seeing there is no solid justification for being, thus ending one's being. Revolt is making the very same realization, but - as Beckett (1958/2009) might put it - "going on" regardless, in so doing embodying a freedom wherein the "only truth which is defiance" (Camus, 1942/2013: 53) functions to "transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death" (*ibid*: 62/3). In his later text, *The Rebel* (1956), Camus reconfigures the Cartesian formulation 'I think, therefore I exist' to "I revolt, therefore we exist", declaring that by rejecting denial or despair in response to existential absurdity, the 'rebel' affirms the right of all absurd beings to carry on living. Here revolt takes on a metaphysical as well as political significance, implying not solely rebellion against hegemonic order but also against assumptions of inevitable desolation in the light of fundamental existential meaninglessness. It is for this reason that Camus asserts that, whilst rolling a boulder uphill for eternity, "[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1942/2013: 119). In this investigation I seek to illuminate further how such existential revolt may intertwine with socio-political resistance, as connected to the contrasting paradigms of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance I observed during fieldwork to be defined below.

Existential absurdity has also been further explored outwith more traditional philosophical writings. Martin Esslin, coining the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' to categorize playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Adamov, Havel, and Arrabal, wrote:

[w]hile Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed...[t]he Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being (1961/2001: 24/25).

Esslin identified an embodied reflection upon our existential absurdity binding these playwrights together. Thus, whilst the absurd performance I research differs practically from Esslin's focus on theatrical stage productions, as I shall detail further below, the philosophical import of Theatre of the Absurd writers remains relevant to my work, their imagery constituting an influential articulation of existential absurdity. A close analysis and explication of the diverse manners in which such playwrights illustrate and explore the absurd is not the purview of this thesis yet does inform a ripe body of scholarship, which has undergone a recent resurgence that my research coincides with on a theoretical level in consideration of the contemporary relevance of recognition and representation of existential absurdity (Bennett, 2011; 2015; Finburgh, Lavery, and Shevtsova, 2006; Lavery and Finburgh, 2015; Cornwell, 2013; Gontarski, 2012; Lavery, 2013; Wong, 2013; Gavins, 2013). Running parallel to such critical analyses of the political, ecological, and/or philosophical ramifications of the Theatre of the Absurd, my research rather focuses on the intended political implications of counternormative performance amongst contemporary activist and socially committed artist collectives.

Kafka's stories too have been described as evoking the meaninglessness of existence particularly potently, where 'normality' is rendered as an unsettling, foundationless-yet-inescapable labyrinth (Camus, 1942/2013; Magny, 1946; Glicksberg, 1975). Milan Kundera argues that the "radical autonomy" of creative rather than academic writing "allowed Franz Kafka to say things about our human condition...that no social or political thought could ever tell us" (1988: 99). The point being that existential absurdity may be more holistically and emotively expressed outwith traditional academic forms of theoretical exposition, through art, which is simultaneously both more and less accessible as a philosophical conduit. This mirrors how I frame many of the performances

created and participated in during my fieldwork, which often offer a more potent and immediate expression of the philosophy overviewed here than this writing may attain, but which I attempt to textually elucidate to facilitate forthcoming analysis of such performances in concordance with this theoretical framework.

An important critique of an embrace of existential absurdity corresponds to possible naivety in relation to the differential impacts of structural prejudice upon different populations. For example, Sartre's⁹ (1948) formulation that "*existence precedes essence*", denoting that one's 'meaning' is constructed through one's actions, may be attacked for ignoring the limitations that, say, racism or sexism place upon the actions of those they stigmatize. This fails to recognize that more privileged social actors have access to a wider range of possible actions, including transgressive, absurd ones, and therefore a wider range of supposed constructed 'essences' too. During data analysis I will show how concern surrounding such inequalities moulded the absurd performance practices of numerous research co-performers. Within recognition of existential absurdity, no fundamentalist xenophobic doctrine suggesting the inferiority of a given race, gender, or other social stratification may be seen as legitimate, but this philosophical refutation does not negate the actual persistence of prejudice in lived reality. My concept of socio-political absurdity, to which we turn now, attempts to integrate recognition of political inequality lacking in previous philosophical examinations of the absurd, positioning intersectional power imbalances as an inevitable, though unjustifiable, accompaniment to existential absurdity.

⁹ Whilst Sartre is typically identified as an existentialist rather than absurdist, his thought remains pertinent to a consideration of the absurd, intertwined in both periods of friendship and enmity with that of his contemporary, Camus (Sprintzen and Van den Hoven, 2004; Aronson, 2004). The central notion of existentialism that each person creates their 'self' through their actions rests upon the notion that there is no inviolable 'self' nor 'meaning' outwith that made through (inter)action - that is, that existence has no intrinsic meaning but is rather the crucible of meaning construction. This coincides with my conceptualization of existential absurdity.

1.2 Socio-political absurdity

My notion of socio-political absurdity identifies a fundamental equality of all beings within their shared essential meaninglessness. No being holds a greater claim to ultimate meaning than any other and as such may not justifiably assert oneself as superior to any other. The disharmony that characterizes socio-political absurdity stems from the fact that power inequality and hierarchy persist, despite their basic illegitimacy exposed through a consideration of existential absurdity. Homelessness, hunger, and preventable illness await some; five star hotels, food waste, and high price health fads await others. In my reading, such inequality appears immediately obtuse given that all beings are ultimately equal within shared meaninglessness. Through this concept of socio-political absurdity, I reject readings that take shared meaninglessness as a justification for obedience to paternalistic religious or political hierarchies, as detailed above, or self-serving power-grabbing such as Max Stirner's egoism. For Stirner the concept of *'Eigenheit'* or 'ownness' relates to an aggressive autonomy wherein "you are nothing but - my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you...[w]e owe each other nothing" (Stirner, 1844/1995: 263). Here existences devoid of fundamental meaning are conflated with existences devoid of mutual responsibility, Stirner proposing that an inborn egoistic drive for self-betterment ineluctably dictates all human activity, a lack of fundamental significance being compensated by profuse self-importance. In response, I argue that recognition of the fundamental equality of all beings within shared existential absurdity renders such imposition of manufactured narcissistic superiority theoretically unjustifiable.

Through a consideration of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power, I argue that, like existential absurdity, socio-political absurdity is inescapable and ever-present. This equates to what Foucault terms the "omnipresence of power" (1978: 93) and "always open and hazardous reality of conflict" (1984: 56/7). As much as power disparity is baseless, it endlessly persists, no interaction being equal. However, as Foucault also notes, whilst the "heterogeneous, unstable, and tense force relations" (1978: 93) that nebulously

constitute 'power' are prone to distillation into state and legal structures, all power relations remain mutable. They are alterable precisely because, as Foucault expands within his blended concept of 'power/knowledge'¹⁰, these power relations rest upon dominant notions of what is considered to be 'known', and such constructed "regimes of truth" (1984: 74) may change, if never disappear. Normative frameworks informed by prevailing concepts of what is 'known' or 'true' thus intrinsically undergird accompanying power disparities, providing a semblance of foundation and 'sense' to actually foundationless, senseless inequalities¹¹. To undermine the distribution of power we must, then, also undermine what Rancière calls, in a term central to my research, "the distribution of the sensible". Here "the idea of a 'distribution of the sensible' implies...a polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in a space of possibilities" (2004: 42). This is the constructed normative framework of aesthetic-political possibilities that dictates dominant definitions of the 'normal', 'perceivable', 'acceptable', and 'possible', that is, the 'sensible'.

Linking directly to my research focus upon absurd performance, Rancière expands:

[t]he important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at...the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization. It is from this perspective that it is possible to reflect on artists' political interventions starting with the Romantic literary forms that aimed at deciphering society, the Symbolist poetics of dreams or the Dadaist or Constructivist elimination of art, and continuing up to the contemporary modes of performance (*ibid*: 18).

I shall expand upon this below in my definition of absurd performance and its relation to the "essential political problem" identified by Foucault of -

¹⁰ "power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1979: 27).

¹¹ I note that for Foucault power/knowledge is always also imbricated with pleasure within "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (1978: 45) yet I do not engage in depth with this side of his theorization here, focusing rather on his identification of the omnipresence and inescapability of power/knowledge as informing my conceptualization of ever-present socio-political absurdity.

ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth...not...emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but...detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (1984: 74/5).

Simplified: while power inequalities, based upon constructions of 'knowledge', are inevitable, less (or more) oppression remains possible at all times as notions of 'knowledge' may shift, allowing transformation of associated power structures. Translated into my terminology, the disharmony between essential equality and actual inequality that characterizes socio-political absurdity can never be removed but may be reduced or increased. The dichotomy that Marxist and Theatre of the Absurd playwright Arthur Adamov (cited in Esslin, 1961/2001: 122) suggested between "the incurable aspect of things" (existential angst) and "the curable aspect of things" (socio-political issues) is then not so clear-cut, since, whilst a world where, say, no one starved, wars ceased to be, and universal free healthcare existed is entirely conceivable, these potentialities remain never fully realized. Socio-political absurdity is feasibly 'curable', yet, at best, only temporary palliative measures seem occasionally achievable as power/knowledge relations shift. Still, the potential to partially combat socio-political absurdity, or at least prevent its exacerbation, is key to my research, driving forward many absurd interventions observed during fieldwork, as I shall illustrate during data analysis.

The notion of intersectionality, combined with reflection upon existential absurdity, is also central to the understanding of power that informs my concept of socio-political absurdity. Intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in response to two competing social justice discourses: on the one hand, reified identity politics that seek to empower disadvantaged demographics yet in turn often disallow consideration of intersecting identities such as women of colour or the queer working class; on the other hand, liberal discourses aiming to engender equality by attempting to drain all such identities, intersecting or otherwise, of any social significance. The latter goal would correspond with acknowledgement of fundamental equality of all beings beneath existential absurdity, yet becomes recognisable as an unattainable utopia

following reflection upon inescapable socio-political absurdity. The inevitable existence of power inequalities, in full intersectional complexity, must then be confronted. Here all forms of oppression within a given power structure intersect to form a “matrix of domination” (Hill-Collins, 2000: 18) encompassing the unique oppressions both suffered and exerted by any given individual dependent upon their position in relation to general poles of constructed power/knowledge. Surrounded by heterosexist racist normative structures, then, a black queer woman is likely to face greater cumulative oppressions than a straight white man, for example. This is not to diminish the oppressions faced by any given straight white man but rather to recognize their probable differential exposure to injustice in comparison with others with a greater confluence of characteristics undervalued within dominant normative scripts. The existence of such dominant notions of ‘the sensible’ correlating with ‘the desirable’ and ‘the powerful’, without foundation, is the above-stated root of socio-political absurdity. There is, patently, no justification for any demographic group to be considered superior to any other, yet deeply impactful matrices of domination continue standing, albeit upon nothing. An intersectional conception of power, read through an absurdist lens, allows us to acknowledge such webs of groundless-yet-impactful power/knowledge constructions, disallowing us from detachedly acting as if they were not there¹², whilst working towards the fullest, most liberating undoing of unjustifiable hierarchies possible. This is the practical implication of the pragmatic absurdo-anarchist conceptual framework generated within this research and which I turn to defining now.

1.3 Pragmatic absurdo-anarchism

Within my formulation of socio-political absurdity I see an anarchist imperative to resist all ultimately unjustified authority yet also a pragmatic recognition that power inequalities can never be wholly abolished. As essential equality follows on from essential meaninglessness, so political resistance may unite with existential revolt, all the while tempered by a pragmatic cultivation

¹² For critiques of the potential damaging consequences of such naïve liberal discourses of ‘colourblindness’ or the ‘post-racial’ see Brown et al (2003), Wise (2010), Neville et al (2016), Bonilla-Silva (2017), and Burke (2018).

of a more mitigated rather than utopic hope. This is pragmatic absurdo-anarchism - the title that I give to the broader theoretical framework that I innovate upon the above concepts of existential and socio-political absurdity, tracing a previously largely unexcavated relationship between absurdism and anarchism. Absurdo-anarchism shares much in common with accounts of poststructuralist anarchism (May, 1994), postmodern anarchism (Call, 2002), and post-anarchism (Rousselle and Evren, 2011; Newman, 2011; 2015), innovating upon these attempts to reconcile postmodernity and traditionally structuralist anarchism by establishing new links between absurdist metaphysical philosophy and anarchist political philosophy.

Despite its intense fractionalization, all strands of anarchism articulate a rejection of authority and a fundamental equality of humankind. Such ultimate egalitarianism has variously been seen as an end to be achieved through temporary hierarchical revolutionary means (Bakunin, 1866/1972), as a preferable condition for a self-interested union of egoists (Stirner, 1844/1995), or as the basis for a co-operative society of federated communities causing the withering of the state (Proudhon, 1840/1994), amongst many other interpretations. However, whilst exactly how hierarchy is to be rejected can be the source of bitter dispute, it remains a common thread. As George Woodcock summarizes, paraphrasing Sébastien Faure, “[a]ll anarchists deny authority, many of them fight against it” (2004: 11). In classical anarchist thought, this is commonly expressed in relation to anarchy being a ‘natural’ order with authority as an ‘artificial’ imposition denying the ‘absolute truth’ of equality. For instance, William Godwin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon were both confident that an orderly society without laws or government would be the natural state following the enlightenment of all rational individuals. Meanwhile, Mikhail Bakunin’s ‘scientific anarchism’ saw anarchy and liberty as outgrowths of ‘natural law’, as echoed by Peter Kropotkin’s systematic analysis of the shared dictates of ‘nature’ and ‘society’. Thus many anarchist thinkers have equated the essential equality of humankind with a natural or organic order, deserving recognition so humankind may be released from artificial restriction, thereby allowing the natural apex of human socio-political possibilities - anarchy - to flourish. However, such appeals to a reified notion of ‘nature’ differ little substantively

from conservative claims of the natural ‘correctness’ of right wing ideologies such as the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer (Offer, 2000), or even the asserted biological hierarchies of Nazism, as disturbingly foreshadowed by Proudhon’s anti-Semitism: “The Jew is the enemy of the human race. This race must be sent back to Asia, or exterminated” (cited in Marshall, 2010: 257).

Rather than problematically mirror the logic of fascists, then, a blending of anarchism and absurdism may offer a sounder basis for the assertion of fundamental equality - as found within shared essential meaninglessness. Here there is no way that anything naturally ‘should’ be and no naïve certitude of dialectic progression toward anarchy or any other socio-political condition, simply the inescapable incomprehensibility of existence as our starting point from which we might attempt to draw conclusions for what may be more just conditions within which to live out our equal nothingness. In combination with recognition of malleable yet omnipresent and inescapable intersectional matrices of domination, this absurdo-anarchism takes on a pragmatic realization that fully equal anarchist utopia is an unattainable chimera, whilst steps closer to and further from this unreachable ideal remain in constant dance. Within data analysis I will show how the absurd performances of my research were often motivated to attempt to make those steps towards the impossible a little larger and last a little longer, widening the dancefloor, opening extra space for the disruption of normative boundaries. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam equates “the queer art of failure” to “the embrace of the absurd” (2011: 187), occupying a similar pragmatic ground in renouncing the commonplace conflation of the impossibility of utopia and a supposed inevitability of present conditions:

[t]he dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed...yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing...animates all kinds of knowledge projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve (*ibid*: 52).

I talk of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism and not nihilist absurdo-anarchism because, although utopic hope is abandoned, mitigated hope of a partially,

temporarily more equal (dis)order is maintained. An absolute nihilist rejection here would throw the baby out with the bathwater. Being unable to reach utopia does not then negate the possibility to, in Beckett's (1983) widely misused terms, "fail better". These lines from *Worstward Ho* - "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." - have been transplanted without context into multiple settings including Richard Branson's business statements, the arm tattoo and personal slogan of grand-slam tennis star Stanislas Wawrinka, and countless internet memes (Beauman, 2012; O'Connell, 2014). 'Fail better' has even become a motivational corporate mantra in the start-up sphere, occasionally reiterated as 'fail fast' or 'fail forward'. I quote the phrase here, then, not to further its saccharine optimistic repurposing, but to speak to the boundless possibilities for the absorption of apparent transgression within normative frameworks, which informs my pragmatic abandonment of utopic hope, whilst also making a doubly-ironic wink at the constant possibility for failing both better or worse with regards to the redistribution of power.

Still, my theoretical framework borrows much from thought that may be labelled nihilist. The "nihilist incongruity" that philosopher John Marmysz identifies "between actual human capacities and the ideal standards against which those capacities are judged" (2003: 3) echoes the central disharmonies of both existential and socio-political absurdity. Distinctions between nihilism and absurdism are often blurry, such as Donald Crosby (1988) referring to nihilism in his critique as the "spectre of the absurd". Both schools of thought centre upon an acknowledgement of fundamental meaninglessness, yet, as aforementioned, it is not my interest here to attempt to fully unpick such complex philosophies but rather illustrate which of their residues have clung to and helped form the theoretical framework of this research. In this sense, whilst I do not adopt the label of nihilism due to common connotations of individualist abandonment of political consciousness incongruent with the anarchist imperative I identify within absurdism, my position remains rooted in a central idea often labelled nihilist - the recognition of ultimate nothingness.

Divergences of hopefulness between traditional schools of anarchism and absurdism may be illustrated through a comparison of two works with the same title: *Endgame*. In the undefined apocalyptic setting of Beckett's play, Hamm, emptily pondering riding a raft "south...to other mammals", asks Clov if there might be sharks. The reply: "If there are there will be" (1957/2006: 109). The brief fantasy of moving on to brighter lands, and any dangers of such transition, are thus matter-of-factly reduced to the actual uncertainty that surrounds any future, as further darkly undermined by the farcical thought of the blind and immobile Hamm embarking on a solo raft expedition. Utopian hope here is a barrenly dry joke. Meanwhile in the lesser-known text of anti-civilization ecological anarchist, Derrick Jensen (2006), a return of all humankind to communal agrarian societal organization is heralded as the inevitable and desirable consequence of impending chaotic climate change. Hot on the tail of these arguments, Jensen co-authored a text ambitiously titled *Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet* (McBay, Keith, and Jensen, 2011). Utopian hope here then fires a vivid vision of a perceived achievable future, akin to the historical anarchists overviewed above.

What my pragmatic amalgamation of absurdism and anarchism allows for is a tempering of the naïve and evidentially unsupported rhetorical optimism of many anarchists, whilst avoiding the slippage into political fatalism with which absurdism is occasionally charged. Where traditional schools of anarchism trumpet the equal significance of all, absurdo-anarchism suggests the equal insignificance of all, which is still a fundamental equality worth defending, whilst exposing the underlying bathos of grand claims of revolution. Mitigated political hope thus moderates existential despair whilst recognition of interrelated, inescapable existential and socio-political absurdity moderates utopic naivety. When assessing my ethnographic fieldnotes I noted a correspondence between the expression of hope by artists or activists in relation to socio-political resistance and/or existential revolt and the typical position of their performances upon the spectrum of (supra)tactical absurd performance that I extract from my data, as shall be more fully defined shortly. I note this intersection of ideas here as a further example of how my pre-fieldwork theoretical considerations and the conceptual outcomes of post-fieldwork data

analysis are mutually informative. The symbiotic outcomes of both intertwined processes of theorization are presented together within this chapter to facilitate later data analysis that is structured in relation to such simultaneously data-driven and philosophically-informed conceptual categories.

Outwith my theoretical conceptualization, a prominent colloquial sense of absurdity as a perceptual category is noteworthy. Here ‘absurd’ is used to disdainfully label anything an individual disagrees with¹³, often considered synonymous with other terms suggesting something ‘makes no sense’ such as ‘ridiculous’, ‘bullshit’¹⁴, or ‘nonsense’. The ubiquity of colloquial use of ‘absurd’ or ‘*absurdo*’ as a derisive and critical adjective across my fieldsites reflects general social orders wherein adherence to normative scripts is valued and deviance maligned. However, colloquial use of ‘absurd’ is unstable. Depending on the particular normative constructions at play, one person’s observation of ‘absurdity’ may signal ‘propriety’ to another. Adopting this schema, whilst one individual may interpret a homeless person facing prosecution for sleeping in an empty mansion as absurd, another would deem the same scenario as the appropriate protection of property rights. The notion of squatters’ rights, for the latter individual, would instead be perceived as absurd.

However, via pragmatic absurdo-anarchism, I argue we are able to renounce the unspecific use of ‘absurd’ as a vague label for iniquitousness as perceived from any given vantage point. Taking the above example, regardless of any individual’s perception of the situation, the property speculator’s claim to superiority and the infrastructural apparatus that enshrines this power disparity is socio-politically absurd as it denies the fundamental equality within shared existential absurdity of all beings. The very notion of property,

¹³ I have bookmarked hundreds of journalistic examples of this usage during the course of my research across a diversity of news sources. For an anecdotal selection from US media, see Jackson (2014), Messer (2016), Peralta (2015), Stossel (2018), and Tata (2018). Significantly for my cross-cultural research, a similar colloquial connotation is prominent in Spanish use of the word ‘*absurdo*’, see, for example in Argentine media, Clarín (2019), Crónica (2017), and Zaffaroni (2018).

¹⁴ See Frankfurt (2005) for specific analysis of ‘bullshit’.

suggesting the legitimate right of some beings to exercise power over certain areas or objects to the direct exclusion of others, is itself socio-politically absurd. Here, Proudhon's exhortation that "Property is Theft" (1840/1994) - itself oxymoronic, as Bakunin pointed out, since a concept of 'theft' relies upon an intact notion of 'property' - becomes rather 'Property is Absurd', or, more precisely, 'Power is Absurd'. Archetypal conservative grumbling about, say, the absurdity of immigrants 'taking over the country' then becomes not solely the expression of a perceived discrepancy between reality and their worldview, but also the inability to recognize one's shared absurdity¹⁵ with all other beings. As shall be illustrated during data analysis, I witnessed many absurd performances during fieldwork motivated by a drive to make this oft-hidden equality more manifest or, at least, disturb conservatives, giving them something else to questionably bemoan as 'absurd', often seen as an end in itself.

2. Defining absurd performance

Rather than follow established notions such as the 'Theatre of the Absurd' - whose full distinctions from my conceptualization shall be addressed shortly - I mobilize a model of absurd performance built directly out of the pragmatic absurdo-anarchist theoretical infrastructure outlaid above. Here I define absurd performance as exaggeratedly transgressive action that creates disharmony between what 'should be' according to hegemonic normative scripts and what 'is' within the performance, thus defying and que(e)rying the dominant '*distribution of the sensible*'. I emphasize the premodifier 'exaggeratedly' since, while the spectrum of norm transgression is expansive and may include mild deviations to fervent scandal, my notion of absurd performance focuses specifically upon overstated, tenaciously counter-normative interrogatory acts¹⁶.

¹⁵ One may note a similarity between the uniting of all beings within the common condition of existential absurdity and the concept of a common 'humanity' bonding human beings (Monroe, 1996; Gaita, 2000). However, absurdity links all creatures and beings, avoiding potential speciesism and xenophobic manipulation of the category of the 'human'.

¹⁶ This parameter of exaggerated transgression is purposefully loose, acknowledging that it would be obtuse to attempt to impose strict categorizations upon absurd performances often intrinsically opposed to claims of definitive meaning. I embrace overlap and ambiguity between my definition of absurd performance and other interrelated fluid categories such as queer, punk, dada, or avant-garde, recognizing that many of the performances observed during my fieldwork

As alluded to in the thesis outline of chapter one, this definition is influenced by recent scholarship assessing activist theatrical interventions, often in terms of absurd performance. For example, Larry Bogad emphasizes “absurdity, ludic action, and the ineffable” (2016a: 19) in his outline of the “serious but not solemn” (*ibid*: 62) practice of what he labels, in a term central to my own sub-classifications of absurd performance to be detailed below, ‘tactical performance’. This has become the dominant academic discourse within my field of study. Here in broad concordance with numerous other scholars of ‘creative activism’ such as Benjamin Shepard (2010; 2011), Stephen Duncombe (2016), Nato Thompson (2015), L.A. Kauffman (2017; 2018), Andrew Boyd (Boyd and Mitchell, 2012), and Yates McKee (2016), Bogad presents exaggerated performative transgression as a sub-option within a theatrical take on the sociologists Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow’s notion of the “repertoire of contention” (2007). This repertoire encompasses the full gamut of different methods which those wishing to provoke socio-political change have at their disposal, the task of aspiring change-makers thus being to implement the most effective options from this inventory in relation to their given cause and context. Such tactical performance literature in turn has motivated recent proliferation of ‘toolboxes’, ‘handbooks’, or ‘trainings’ offered by ‘movement incubators’ or ‘tactical labs’ such as Beautiful Trouble, Center for Artistic Activism, A Blade of Grass, Critical Tactics Lab, 350.org, Movement Net Lab, or Training for Change¹⁷.

All the while my process of defining absurd performance is set against the backdrop acknowledgement that, in concrete terms, absurd performance does not exist. That is, if we recognize that there is no fundamental basis for evaluations of what should be, such evaluations varying greatly cross-culturally, then no given performance may be solidly, universally defined as absurd. This research deals with something utterly ethereal and eminently debateable, absurd performance being impossible to definitively pin down, the same act considered ‘absurd’ if it markedly transgresses normative expectations within

could also variously fall under such labels, querying, like Barthelme’s consideration of the ‘post-postmodern new newness’, the need “to slap a saddle on this rough beast” (1985: 512).

¹⁷ That the research that informs the tactical performance literature and subsequent proliferation of training models has been based principally in the USA, and specifically NYC, will be addressed in discussion of fieldwork design in chapter three.

the context of its occurrence, whilst potentially ‘normal’ in another cultural realm. Indeed, as chapter seven shall empirically illustrate, and the US-centric tactical performance literature often overlooks, what constitutes normative expectations and subsequent notions of absurd comportment depends greatly upon context, both cross- and intra-culturally. Here we might reflect on the consistent inspiration found in the traditional arts and rituals of ‘other’ cultures by the Western avant-garde (Innes, 1981; Goldwater, 1986; Flam and Deutch, 2003)¹⁸, further reflected in my own fieldwork, where the ‘normal’ of one place, transposed to another, becomes ‘transgressive’ and potentially ‘absurd’. Absurd performance, in my definition, is thus centrally contextually contingent, unlike the universalizing tactical frame that predominates current reigning academic definition.

As later data analysis chapters shall illustrate, my research partly reaffirms the insights of the tactical performance literature, yet also evokes greater nuance. I argue that in presenting tacticality as a universal frame for understanding politically motivated absurd performance, this literature offers a partial explanation as if it were totalizing. This precludes consideration of other forms of absurd performance, observed during my fieldwork, which may seek to surpass tacticality and transgress without calculated aims, thus undermining hegemonic assumptions of obligatory means-end rationality and the systems of power/knowledge that this upholds. This is a gap in the literature that I seek to fill within this thesis by explicating below the broader conceptual framework of a spectrum of (supra)tactical absurd performance and later substantiating this notion within analysis of the ethnographic evidence which informs it.

¹⁸ Such cross-cultural borrowing may be seen as a radically democratizing act, exposing cultural relativity and countering euro-centric notions of artistic ‘value’. The equal claim to appreciation of art from other cultures is here asserted as part of a larger attack upon socio-politically absurd hierarchical constructions. However, in practice this has often appeared to constitute a problematic hijacking of subaltern cultural modes often already colonially besieged and fetishized, privileged occidental avant-garde artists entering the ultimately undamaged Western canon, whilst their purportedly ‘primitive’ inspirations remain anonymous, tokenistically acknowledged influences upon supposed Western genius. The central call of this research to consider the contextual contingency of absurd performance aims to contribute to the undoing of such ethnocentric privileging of one cultural mode over another, whether in constructions of ‘artistic’ or ‘tactical’ value, opening consideration of the relativity of transgression and its potential aesthetic/political motivations.

Building on Rancière's characterization of utopia as "the extreme point of a polemical reconfiguration of the sensible" (2004: 40), I define two conceptual extremes of absurd performance: tactical absurd performance seeking such a *reconfiguration of the sensible*, and supra-tactical absurd performance seeking rather a *destruction of the sensible*, as shall be explained more fully shortly. In the same breath I underline that these sub-classifications are not rigid cages but rather flexible, inter-bleeding trends that I have observed to be expressed differently in different contexts. Wishing to avoid simply replicating the flaw that I identify within the tactical performance literature on a slightly broader scale by reifying two counterpoised notions of absurd performance instead of one, I express the actual cloudy reality of absurd performances oscillating between points on a spectrum between tacticality and supra-tacticality that I observed during fieldwork within a third, semi-parenthesized intermediary term: (supra)tactical absurd performance. Following a rundown now of the differences and commonalities between my conception of absurd performance and the Theatre of the Absurd and what I mean when I write of the '(un)professional' categories of 'activists' and 'socially committed artists', I will define each ideal type of absurd performance and the spectrum running between them in-depth. I outline these concepts and their interrelation with broader literature here, rather than awaiting the presentation of the ethnographic data from which they are primarily drawn, precisely in order to maximize the clarity of the major framework through which such data analysis shall be undertaken, whilst rendering my elaboration upon dominant tactical performance discourse optimally resonant.

Two major practical differences distinguish the Theatre of the Absurd tradition and the absurd performances of my research, mirroring common distinctions between literary theatre and performance art or activist intervention more broadly. In contrast to the Theatre of the Absurd canon, the performances that I assess in this thesis are typically characterized by the absence of defined scripts and occurrence outside defined theatre spaces. Some semi-improvised, often participatory dialogue may form part of the performances I assess, yet they are not literary in the sense of, say, Beckett or Pinter. Meanwhile, whilst Paul Chan's staging of *Waiting for Godot* in an

intersection in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans has been heralded as an innovation (Chan, 2010; Moody, 2013), the performances that I focus on regularly occur in public space, as standard. The tendency of the Theatre of the Absurd to operate upon the traditional stage, replacing book pages with theatre spaces in expressing absurdist philosophy, whilst occasionally mirrored within arts/community spaces, is often reneged in favour of more direct confrontation in less-bounded public space within the absurd performances I investigate. The audience here is less defined and differently engaged, not typically being those who have bought tickets, but rather those who one passes, attracts, or affronts, opening different channels of dialogue and/or confrontation.

The self-selected audience of a Theatre of the Absurd production will typically offer concentrated, non-participatory attention during an extended show, whereas I observed the somewhat chance audiences of many of the absurd performances documented in this research to interact with pieces in an often more fleeting yet sometimes more active manner. Indeed, the typically different sites of the Theatre of the Absurd and the absurd performances that I research mean that the normative frameworks from which any exaggerated transgression may deviate within either form of performance are distinct. The Theatre of the Absurd has archetypally transgressed the narrative expectations of the theatre, as emblemized by playwright Jean Anouilh's recasting of Gogo's lines in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as encapsulating the entire play: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (cited in Berlin, 2008: 60). In contrast, many of the absurd performances that inform this thesis are in transgression of normative expectations of public behaviour, engendering a distinct sense of disharmony within a different aesthetic/political sphere, as later data analysis chapters will make clear.

Still, some conceptual commonalities remain between the Theatre of the Absurd and my formulation of absurd performance. Neither engage in direct argument or discourse nor enter into standard dichotomous oppositionalities, but rather obliquely - yet explicitly and consciously - 'do' absurdity, to co-opt Butler's (2004) formulation regarding gender. This is the embodied reflection of

existential and/or socio-political absurdity within actions, albeit distinctly dramaturgically coordinated in interaction with contrasting sites and audiences. Here both the Theatre of the Absurd and my conceptualization of absurd performance may be seen to resonate with Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's (1990) notion of a "third position" which queer performance occupies - outside of, yet still critiquing sideways, normative binaries concerning both theatrical and social performance. This, in turn, evokes Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh's assertion, writing concerning the ecological implications of the Theatre of the Absurd, that

the sense of exile provoked by the Absurd ultimately problematizes the narcissism of the anthropocentric self and, as a consequence, holds out the possibility for a more ecologically viable form of subjectivity (2015: 22).

This closely mirrors the connection traced within my conceptual framework between the fundamental meaninglessness and essential equality of all beings. In both arguments, human beings are no more essentially significant than any other component of the eco-system. Thus my conception of absurd performance, like the reading of the Theatre of the Absurd that Lavery and Finburgh propose, similarly accounts for

the possibility for a more radical intervention, one in which the alterity of the world is both acknowledged and affirmed and where the supremacy of the human subject is undone (*ibid*: 27).

Throughout this thesis, I differentiate 'artist' and 'activist' absurd performance as (un)professional categorizations generally defined by the primary self-identifications of each performance maker/collective. I began using the semi-parenthesized term '(un)professional' whilst writing my fieldnotes to encompass the fluctuating ambience of the activist and artist spheres I work within in relation to expectations of supposed 'professionalism' such as goal-orientation, coherent self-explanation, or legitimation by reference to other recognized 'professional' bodies. This relates to ongoing scholarly discussion concerning resistance and/or embrace of professionalization and 'mainstreaming' across multiple global scenes of dissident art (Moulin and Vale, 1995; Marrero, 2002; Cooke, 2007; Sholette, 2011; 2017) and activism (Everett, 1992; Kleidman,

1994; Stoker, 2006; Alonso and Maciel, 2010; Roy, 2011; Walker, 2015). With the aforementioned swell in tactical performance trainings, the “institutionalization of protest” identified by David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (1998: 21) threatens to engulf and professionally delimit activist absurd performance. This trend is mirrored by the established institutionalization of arts/performance higher education (Singerman, 1999), discourses exhorting that artists position themselves as entrepreneurs (Harvie, 2013; Greer, 2018), and funding regulations that often render artist absurd performance beholden to professional norms. During data analysis I will show how I observed research co-performers to both assimilate to and resist these professionalizing drives dependent on context, reflecting malleable (un)professional realities variously impacting the (supra)tactical positionality of a given absurd performance. I recognize that the self-identifications of those defining primarily as artists or activists¹⁹ are fluid, and that different actions by the same people, or the same actions in different contexts, may be seen by their practitioners to fall to different sides of this (un)professional divide. Nonetheless, I loosely compare ‘activist’ and ‘artist’ absurd performance practices in recognition that such distinctions still persist, often self-policed as the anarchist artists/researchers Josh Macphee and Erik Reuland make clear:

[a]s anarchists, we have seen our politics denigrated by other artists; as artists, we have had our cultural production attacked as frivolous by activists (2007: 3).

I use the term ‘socially-committed-artist’ specifically to demarcate the influential presence of progressive political orientation upon self-defining ‘artistic’ performance practice. I borrow this label from discourse developed by Nicolas Bourriaud surrounding “relational aesthetics” which emphasizes “inter-subjectivity” and “being-together”, constituting “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context” (2002: 14). For individual artists such as Rikrit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller, or Suzanne Lacy and collectives like WochenKlauser, Superflex, Center for Political Beauty, or

¹⁹ Noting that ‘*those identifying primarily as artists/activists*’ is the most appropriate manner in which to refer to the composite, shifting self-identifications of my research co-performers, yet that this is also an unwieldy combination of words to continually repeat, I use the terms ‘artist’ and ‘activist’ throughout this thesis as if they implicitly contained such nuance.

Assemble, consideration of the merit of the work itself and its socio-political consequence are here intertwined. Such injection of political engagement into performance art practices is further evident in Grant Kester's analysis of the "situated dialogue" (2004: 24) of "conversation pieces" that replace historical avant-garde movements' perceived Kantian preoccupation with "an ideal-viewer-yet-to-be" (ibid: 39) with direct engagement with actual people "as co-participants in the transformation of both self and society" (ibid: 79). This 'dialogic avant-garde' has in turn spawned numerous anthologies (Thompson, 2012; Lacy, 1995; Felshin, 1995), paralleling the increasingly popular social movement portmanteau 'artivism' to label work that blurs distinctions between political and artistic action (Sandoval and Latorre, 2008; Rhoades, 2012; Milohnić, 2015; Poch and Poch, 2018)²⁰.

Claire Bishop (2004), however, rebukes broadly rosy depictions of relational artworks by asking exactly what kinds of people enter into their interactions, suggesting that purportedly all-inclusive microtopias are in fact products of inherent exclusivity produced by the requirement of a unified subject. This corresponds for Bishop to audiences of individuals that broadly agree with each other, often thanks to their shared and only tokenistically acknowledged privileges. Instead, Bishop advocates a model of "relational antagonism" that explicitly highlights rather than denying inequalities. She points to Thomas Hirschhorn (2002) constructing a monument to the stereotypically bourgeois topic of Bataillan philosophy amidst low-income, immigrant housing projects or Santiago Sierra (2000) paying indigent people to be collectively tattooed as exemplars. Here the possibility of spaces constructed by artists to be socio-politically remedial or transformative is shunned as out-of-touch optimism, such rationales cast as obviously reactionary²¹. As a replacement, Bishop states

²⁰ These discourses overlap with adjacent notions of mutual politicized blurring of visual and performance arts traditions, such as Hans-Thies Lehmann's (2006) 'postdramatic theatre' and Shannon Jackson's (2011) 'social works', that I do not have the scope to address in depth within this thesis yet I flag here as relevant parallel strands of literature.

²¹ Elsewhere such casting of artists experimenting with 'relational aesthetics' as naively optimistic has been critiqued as a straw-person characterization ignoring commonplace cautious pragmatism, see for example Murphy and Cullen (2016). Thus a seemingly irresolvable debate concerning the political potentialities of relational artworks continues.

relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony (2004: 79).

Such language concerning social (dis)harmony resonates with my research, relational antagonism appearing as a model based upon an awareness of inescapable socio-political absurdity. Here performances are dictated by and reflect upon an acknowledgement of ineluctable inequality and conflict, highlighting and interrogating the normalization of oppression. This more closely approximates my conception of an ideal type of supra-tactical absurd performance, whereas relational aesthetics veers closer to that of tactical absurd performance with pre-calculated aims. The amalgamated reality I identify of (supra)tactical absurd performance then attempts to capture both these contrasting orientations and the ever-present unresolved dialectical tension between them. I turn to more fully defining each of these interlinked concepts now.

2.1 Tactical absurd performance

I take the term ‘tactical performance’ specifically from Larry Bogad’s 2016 book of the same name, itself growing out of previous concepts such as ‘tactical media’ (Garcia and Lovink, 1997; Critical Art Ensemble, 2001; Boler; 2008; Raley, 2009). This, as Nayar (2010: 100) points out, stems from the even earlier notion of ‘tactical television’, whilst also informing parallel contemporary terms such as ‘tactical frivolity’ (Kingsmith, 2016), indicating how such focus upon tacticality in conceptualizing creative political acts is profoundly entrenched²². This unifying, broadly unquestioned foundation of

²² My concerns that this discourse mirrors the dominant rational, positivist logic of hegemonic power/knowledge structures within capitalism may be anecdotally illustrated by that *Tactical Media* (2019) also serves as the name for a “guerilla advertising” and “tactical marketing” agency. Meanwhile, *Tactical Performance Center* (2019)- eerily similar in title to the *Center for Tactical Performance* founded by Bogad at Berkeley - is a firearms training facility in St George, Utah.

assumed tacticality²³ shared across the tactical performance literature is referenced back by Bogad (2016a: 5; 87) to Michel de Certeau's (1984/2005) distinction between strategic powers and tactical players. Here, in contrast to strategic power held by normative institutions within intertwined established physical territories and hegemonic discourses, tactics are the "art of the weak" (de Certeau, 1984/2005: 219)²⁴ that innovatively respond to and make seditious use of surrounding dominant power/knowledge²⁵ infrastructure in order to outwit or potentially change it. Tactics here operate without authority to lay claim to physical or theoretical space, occupying "the space of the other...within enemy territory" (*ibid*: 219). Thus "a tactic is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (*ibid*: 220). In this view, underdog rebels aspiring to undo the strategically enforced authority of powerful institutions must then necessarily turn to a tactical orientation as their sole recourse.

Within this broader arc of tactical acts, tactical absurd performance describes exaggeratedly transgressive performance that aims to contribute to the opportunistically calculated attainment of a given political goal in negotiated conjunction with other methods within a broader repertoire. It is considered, focused, and holds hope of influencing direct political change, interacting with and subversively using dominant scripts of power/knowledge with an eye to reconstruct them. Prominent practitioners embodying a broadly tactical absurd performance practice worldwide include the aforementioned groups The Yes Men (Mouffe, 2008; Lambert, Bonanno, and Bichlbaum, 2009),

²³ Assumed inevitable tactical orientation links to rich philosophical debate concerning the necessity or lack thereof of 'practical reason' and 'instrumental rationality' to human action. For outlines of such argument about whether calculated pursuit of reasoned ends must essentially characterize human behaviour or not, and, if so, how, see Star (2018), Knauff and Spohn (forthcoming), and Sylvan and Chang (forthcoming). I lack the scope here to enter such debate in-depth, rather noting that, in my research terms, the dominant frame of tactical performance is undergirded by assumed universality of rational goal pursuit, whilst my observation of supra-tactical performance troubles this assumption.

²⁴ This phrase mirrors James Scott's (1985) presentation of "weapons of the weak" within Malaysian peasant resistance, observing humour as a tactic of "everyday resistance".

²⁵ de Certeau mirrors Foucault's conception of power/knowledge outlined above, stating of 'knowledge' emerging from strategically constituted bases that "a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge and not merely its effect or its attribute. It makes this knowledge possible and at the same time determines its characteristics. It produces itself in and through this knowledge" (1984/2005: 219).

The Church of Stop Shopping (Lane, 2002; Lechaux, 2010), and Billionaires for Bush (Farrar and Warner, 2008). Further examples include the Belgian faux-guerrilla force of woodland creatures *l'ensemble zoologique de libération de la nature* (The Zoological Ensemble of Liberation of Nature) (2016) known to invade the headquarters of fossil fuel corporations and empty out sacks of leaves and feathers; the Ugandan anti-corruption collective The Jobless Brotherhood responsible, for example, for releasing a hoard of painted pigs to disrupt the Ugandan parliament (Tumuhimbise, 2014); the Belarusian group *Zmena* (Change) (Aden, 2012) who have attempted to undercut the totalitarian government of Alexander Lukashenko through whimsically provocative acts such as orchestrating a protest of teddy-bears against police brutality; the self-proclaimed 'gaggles' of the Raging Grannies (Roy, 2007) across the USA exaggeratedly embodying stereotypes of grandmotherliness and singing politically reworked versions of traditional songs; the global networks of the Biotic Baking Brigade (Agent Apple, 2004) known for pelting maligned politicians with custard pies; and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) (Bogad, 2011; Routledge, 2012) to be described more fully below. I do not have the scope in this thesis to offer more comprehensive outlines of all such collectives to have informed the current dominant tactical performance perspective, but shall offer a brief illustrative rundown here of two of the examples most regularly discussed in this literature - CIRCA and The Church of Stop Shopping - to give a reader a sense of the empirical basis of the key literature upon which this research builds.

Bogad elected what he describes as “an irresistible image” - that is an image of an act so captivatingly transgressive that “even one’s ideological opponents are compelled to reproduce it even though it undermines their narrative” (2016a: 1) - of a CIRCA clown kissing a police riot shield for the cover of his book *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play*. This poster group of the tactical performance perspective, constituting multiple global cells of ramshackle clowns that appear at various protest situations, are known, as Bogad expands “to play with police absurdly” (*ibid*: 1) wherein

[a]s the clowns greet police as ‘friends’ and fail either to melt away in fear or raise tension with anger, a paradigm shift in the confrontation ensues (*ibid*: 124).

Here the central explanation given for CIRCA’s exaggeratedly transgressive mockery of authority is to steer the tone of conflict between demonstrators and police away from aggressive reinforcement of power towards an irreverent undermining of power that is potentially more conducive to the attainment of a given political aim. It is reported that CIRCA has typically been driven by tactical consideration of how to best achieve this end, any performative display of the “earnest absurdity of clown-logic” (*ibid*: 128) underpinned by an actual rigorous “action logic” dictating where and when clowning may be optimally impactful. This concurs with other studies of CIRCA such as Paul Routledge (2012) similarly framing radical clowning as an addition to the repertoire of contention, echoed in turn by articles by clowns-cum-scholars such as Kolonel Klepto (2004) and Hilary Ramsden/General Confusion (2015) asserting the tactical drive underlying their interventions.

A second prominently referenced example within the tactical performance literature is the NYC-based Church of Stop Shopping comprised of faux-evangelical preacher Reverend Billy and accompanying Stop Shopping Choir of activists who sing Baptist church style anti-capitalist hymns. This collective has inspired a lot of scholarly attention or, as one activist scholar in NYC put it to me during fieldwork, “gotten a lot of ink” (Lane, 2002; Sandlin and Milam, 2008; McClish, 2009; Hindley, 2010; Lechaux, 2010; Berther, Fischer, and DesAutels, 2011). The general consensus amongst these scholars, mimicked by members of the collective itself who I interacted with during fieldwork in NYC, is that the exaggerated transgression of an all-singing, all-dancing anti-capitalist sermon in, say, the headquarters of a bank or multinational corporation is an orchestrated tactical ‘culture jamming’ act. Such interventions are framed to shame capitalist targets and, quite directly, stop shopping. This means halting the flow of consumerism both immediately within the disruption of a site of commerce, such as the exorcism of a Starbucks cash register (Perucci, 2008), and more broadly within spectacular awareness-raising concerning the exploitative practices of such corporations by attracting media attention and

sharing documentation of interventions widely online. My data analysis shall reinforce the validity of past presentations of CIRCA, The Church of Stop Shopping, and related groups as examples of a tactical approach to political absurd performance that I observed to remain influential throughout my fieldwork. However, at the same time I shall present ethnographic evidence that undermines previous use of such accounts to construct a generalizing tactical performance framework that has neglected consideration of more supra-tactical absurd performances as identified within this research. I shall more fully define this new term shortly.

Bogad presents absurd performance, as a component of the broader subcategory of ‘creative activism’, as the “air-war” that may “soften the cultural terrain, draw attention to a problem, change some minds or at least weaken opposition, and galvanize discouraged supporters” acting as a crutch to “the more fundamental ‘ground war’ equivalent; the hardcore, everyday organizing” (2016a: 51). Duncombe et al reiterate a similar militaristic metaphor:

If the first rule of guerrilla warfare is to ‘know your terrain and use it to your advantage’, the savvy activist has learned that drawing from the arts is an effective way to wage successful battles on this cultural landscape (2018: 2).

As such it is seen that performers may “add new tactics to the repertoire of contention, and...revamp old tools so they don’t get rusty with disuse, or dull with overuse” (Bogad, 2016a: 5). This is further echoed by Shepard’s analogy that “[w]ithout a little seasoning, the stew of social protest becomes bland” (2011: 2), the “seasoning” of playful performance seen as making the broader inventory of potentially tedious political stratagems more palatable and their cumulative effective nourishment of society more likely. Absurd performance, often bracketed within broader discussions of humour, is thus framed by the tactical performance literature as both externally and internally tactical. The practice is here presented as offering an innovative complement to existing action repertoires and a relieving ‘coping strategy’ preventing ‘burnout’

regarding assumed more key political activities (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamembaum, 2014; Maon and Lindgreen, 2018).

A significant adjacent body of literature feeding into the tactical performance perspective comes from Social Movement Studies. This sociological sub-discipline has classically been characterized by attempts to structurally account for how and why social movements arise in certain situations and not others. Prominent theories here include those of ‘political opportunity structures’ or ‘political process’ that emphasize the tactical manipulation of transitory, context-specific structural opportunities by social movement actors to provoke social change (McAdam, 1982; Kriesi, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Notions of ‘resource mobilization’ have also been influential that explain social movement activity as a result of participants’ calculated consideration of their collective capability to acquire and sustainably mobilize a diversity of economic and political resources towards shared aims (McCarthy and Zald, 1973). Further the ‘frame alignment’ perspective has positioned the cultivation of perceived ideological congruence between potential participants and the apparent core values of a given activist network as key to elucidating flows of social movement activity (Snow et al., 1986). I shall not outline such theories in greater depth since they are not of central relevance to my research, which, in contrast to structural theories proffering general explanations for all political activity, focuses on absurd performance practice ethnographically observed at ground level²⁶. However, I flag this literature here as the root of the dominant academic lens currently used to interpret political absurd performance wherein its tactical deployment from within an arsenal of wider actions is seen as dependent upon critical calculation of maximal impact. As Bogad summarizes here “[t]actical performances should have a well-constructed action logic” wherein any absurd elements ought to be the result of “conscious choices with a calculated purpose and desired impact” (2016a: 26) formulated in focused consideration of surrounding structural conditions.

²⁶ Here I contribute to ongoing fulfillment of Ortner’s (1995) call to fill the “ethnographic black hole” (1995: 190) within research of resistance, adding another thread to the ever-thickening tapestry of ethnographies of diverse forms of political resistance worldwide, such as those of Juris (2008), Summers-Effler (2010), Lapegna (2016), Gorringer (2017), and Burnyeat (2018).

I note that significant critiques of the limitations of such structural thinking have emerged before within the field of Social Movement Studies itself, such as Alberto Melucci's assessment of 'New Social Movements' which he observed to "open up the way for other modalities of experience beyond instrumental rationality" (1996: 358). Meanwhile, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison have noted that "[t]hose who would reduce social movements to instrumental actors engaged in power struggles on a battlefield called 'political opportunity structure' have made an ontological choice" that artificially represents political action as dominated by cool-headed value judgements (2003: 368). Such critiques are further reflected within growing scholarship surrounding emotions and social movements (Flam and King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2009). As such I seek to avoid a straw-person misrepresentation of Social Movement Studies as solely a structural, rationalistic enterprise yet still note that this aspect of the field currently remains a disproportionate influence upon dominant frames of academic scrutiny regarding political absurd performance.

At the same time I must expel the possibility of a further straw-person depiction emerging with regards to the relationship between the tactical performance literature and Social Movement Studies. For example, Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe, three major figures of the tactical performance literature writing together, explicitly acknowledge that "[t]he limitations of the rationalist view of social movements are many" (2008: 5). However, their critique centres upon the tendency of more structural theories to ignore the "pleasures many find in the chase to create a better world" (*ibid*: 5), this being addressed by a dual emphasis upon structurally informed calculation and the pleasures of dissident playfulness, such gratifications in turn re-instrumentalized as coping mechanisms or recruitment tools. With some qualifications, these scholars thus remain rooted in a rationalistic paradigm that generally assumes an integral backbone of means-end calculation undergirding any activist performance, absurd or otherwise. My research problematizes this assumption via observation of more supra-tactical absurd performances that attempt to transcend expectations of rational calculation, thus potentially undermining

normative distributions of the sensible and associated power/knowledge structures. Here my ethnographic engagement with the lived realities of diverse absurd performance collectives allows us to question the predominance of assumed obligatory tacticality rooted in structural analysis by contributing on-the-ground observations of a diversity of more flexible (non)relations to tactical thinking in relation to absurd performance, as data analysis shall illustrate in depth.

2.2 Supra-tactical absurd performance

Noting such a tendency within my ethnography, as data analysis will illustrate in depth, I propose the new term supra-tactical absurd performance to describe an ideal type of exaggeratedly transgressive interventions that are not calculated around defined aims. Such performances rather attempt to reach beyond and undermine frames of tacticality that might be interpreted as intrinsic to dominant rational paradigms that undergird oppressive normative order. Such actions obliquely gesture towards broader cultural change, potentially provoking intertwined existential and socio-political (re)considerations whose anti-normative impacts are immeasurable and unforeseeable, yet nonetheless potentially indirectly influential. Dominant tactical performance perspectives would typically critique such performance as insufficiently calculated, such as Epstein criticizing 70s/80s feminist and anti-nuclear collectives' attempts at "cultural revolution" as "astrategic", reflecting "the movement's most crippling weaknesses, its avoidance of strategy and its disdain for lasting organizational structure" (1991: 19). In contrast, with the concept of supra-tactical absurd performance, I look to recast 'astrategic' action as a valid alternative mode of resistance, undermining - and potentially abetting the transformation of - rigid positivistic frames upon which oppressive normative constructions hang, and not simply constituting tactical absurd performance done badly as current prevailing discourse might suggest.

A crucial distinction that I draw between ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance is that the former contributes to calculated attempts to establish a new 'sense' whilst the latter poses 'nonsense' in defiance of all fabrications of 'sense'. This reflects a performance focused articulation of sociologist Christina Foust's distinction between 'hegemonic' and 'transgressive' resistance wherein "hegemonic movements are typically vested in becoming the new status quo" (2010: 4) whilst

[t]ransgression deconstructs the natural and the normal...it does so by...undermining (versus representing) the common sense which helps build social order (or a related, but different, common sense, which might replace it) (*ibid*: 5).

However, Foust still characterizes transgression as "open-ended tactics of resistance" (*ibid*: 5) and positions her work as contributing to "debates over its efficacy" (*ibid*: 9), remaining faithful to traditional benchmarks of positivistic impact assessment, which I query in my evaluation of supra-tactical performance.

Tactical absurd performance appears absurd in seeming contravention of dominant behavioural norms, yet in actuality sits in harmonic concordance with defined plans to provoke specific political changes and further a new, more just paradigm of sense. In contrast, supra-tactical absurd performance foregoes rationally calculated pursuit of political change, defying not only dominant behavioural norms, but also expectations of justification and explanation for such acts according to conventional scripts dictating the necessity of a clear, driving purpose or end-goal. This perceived necessity of a pre-established ultimate objective that makes 'sense' according to current dominant distribution of the sensible might in itself be seen as an integral and pervasive component upholding hegemonic normativity, policing transgression as 'pointless', 'worthless', or 'lost'. In asking why activists and socially-committed-artists engage in absurd performance, I am thus careful not to reify the problematic notion that a definable, articulable explanation is inevitable, recognizing the 'supersensible' as a co-existent mode. I employ this term following Immanuel Kant's description of "a realm that is unbounded, but that is

also inaccessible to our entire cognitive power: the realm of the supersensible” (1790/1987: 15). The word ‘supersensible’ is then used here and throughout this thesis to acknowledge that supra-tactical absurd performances that reject dominant standards of coherence are not by virtue of this necessarily incoherent, potentially having the capacity to express philosophies and emotions beyond and difficult to convey within the dominant distribution of the sensible.

As shown above, the tactical performance paradigm positions activists/artists as playing or fighting against opposed political figures or institutions within the same game or war, following ultimately the same rational rules towards different ends. Supra-tactical performance attempts to take place on different metaphorical terrain from those it obliquely opposes, rejecting the gameboard or battlefield and associated rubrics as infecting all players/fighters with germs of normative oppression²⁷. Supra-tactical performance then operates outwith established repertoires of contention, questioning such repertoires’ reflection of dominant cold emphasis upon rationally maximized efficacy. These are ‘off-the-wall’ rather than ‘off-the-shelf’ actions. Interactions with other, more direct modes of political action are thus more unstructured, and often, as my data analysis will show, tense and conflicting. Where tactical performance is a branch of ‘direct action’ (Carter, 2005; Tracy, 1996; Graeber, 2009; Wood, 2012) seeking immediate political change, supra-tactical performance constitutes ‘indirect action’ gesticulating towards gradual cultural change. Meanwhile, the actual liminal, mixed status of performances observed during fieldwork upon the (supra)tactical spectrum may be conveyed as (in)direct action.

I draw notably upon dada and punk (anti)traditions in my conceptualization of an ideal type of supra-tactical performance, following the two movements most regularly referenced by research co-performers creating more supra-tactical absurd interventions during fieldwork. These movements

²⁷ One might think here of Orwell’s (1945) ‘Animal Farm’, and the totalitarian communism it satirizes, wherein by following the logic of their initial human/Tsarist oppressors, the pigs/Bolsheviks ultimately become them.

interconnect with numerous other historical art/political groups whose performance practices are also relevant, including Futurism (Berghaus, 1998; 2012; Kirby and Kirby, 1986; Taylor, 1979), Surrealism (Rapti, 2013; Orenstein Feman, 1975; Zinder, 1976), Situationism (Plant, 1992; Wark, 2015), Fluxus and the happenings (Kirby, 1965; Kostelanetz, 1968; Sandford, 1995; Kellein, 1995; Higgins, 2002), Provo, (Kempton, 2007), the Yippies (Hoffman, 1971), and Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (Orange Alternative) (Fydrych, 2014; Romanienko, 2007). Artaud's theatre of cruelty (Artaud, 1988; Bermel, 2014), though not a movement, must also be mentioned. However, the scope of this thesis does not allow for a rich unpicking of the lineage of transgressive performance within the 20th/21st century avant-garde - for attempts at this task see Aronson (1998), Berghaus (2005; 2010), or Goldberg (2011). Rather I open the invitation for further research to explore the links between other historical avant-gardes and the contemporary forms of absurd performance I identify in this thesis. Meanwhile prominent further contemporary collectives worldwide that may be seen as generally falling closer to the supra-tactical side of the spectrum include Russian provocateurs *Voyna* (War) known for staging an orgy in the Moscow Museum of Biology, throwing live cats at McDonalds workers, and daubing a sixty five metre tall penis on a St Petersburg drawbridge facing the headquarters of the FSB successor organization of the KGB (Zaytseva, 2012; Gerasimenko, 2018); Janez Janša group of Slovenian artists all operating under the same name borrowed from a right wing politician (Wilmer, 2011; Georgelou, 2014); the Italian 'after-failure' arts collective IOCOSE creating oblique acts such as installing flat-pack guillotines in numerous IKEA stores (Ruffino et al, 2017; 2018); Japanese group *Chim↑Pom* known for theatrically hunting street rats and turning them into taxidermied Pikachus (Chim↑Pom, 2015); and Czech network *Ztohoven* who hoisted an enormous pair of underpants in place of the national flag above the presidential palace in Prague (Pospiszyl, 2016).

Dada is often depicted as being born in the Cabaret Voltaire of 1916 Zurich as a howl against the senselessness of war (Hopkins, 2004; Jones, 2006). That is, an exasperated reaction to extreme socio-political absurdity as itself a window unto consideration of interconnected existential absurdity. In reaction to the meaninglessness of death during the First World War, and, in reflection,

of life in general, dadaists began to make art and performance that exaggeratedly called into question the supposed rational basis of bloodstained modern society. Rather than concrete tactical aims, such as preventing a certain battle or more broadly stopping the war, dada honked and squawked in noisy oblique protest against the normative order that legitimated warfare in the first place: “the new artist protests, he [sic] no longer paints” (Tzara, 1992: 7). As oppressive normative order and associated conflict persists, so too do such honks and squawks return in squabbling waves, some contemporary vibrations of which I listen and contribute to with this (auto)ethnographic project and the proposed (wonky) frame of (supra)tactical absurd performance.

Dada performance has received considerable academic scrutiny (Gordon, 1974; 1987; Erikson, 1984; Melzer, 1980; 1994), yet much of this Art History scholarship has focused on the ‘artistic’ and ‘cultural’ merits and influence of dada performances, as if this were chiefly distinct from their political import. Whilst much of the absurd performance that I label supra-tactical could equally be labelled dada, or neo-dada (Rose, 1963; Dezeuze, 2006), or - appropriately farcically - “post-dada, post-neo-dada, neo-neo-dada” (Klein, 2003: 21), I use the term supra-tactical to emphasize the full potential political resonance of such interventions and clearly signpost the elaboration of my research upon the dominant tactical performance literature. I recognize that tactical performance scholars may critique my dual analysis of more supra-tactical acts alongside more tactical performances as a comparison of dissimilar acts best analysed in isolation like current dominant academic trends reflect. However, my elaboration on the tactical performance literature seeks to show that the bracketing off of acts less dictated by means-end rationality as not relevant to combined consideration with more classically tactical political performance often disallows consideration of the distinct potential political import of more obliquely counter-normative absurd performances, as data analysis shall illustrate in detail.

Previous over-emphasis on the artistic lineage of dada may be seen as a major contributor to the taming ‘museumification’ of dada and other avant-

garde movements, kept institutionally contained by bourgeois discourses that frame them primarily as ‘cultural’, formulated unthreateningly as largely distinct from, rather than intrinsically intermeshed with, ‘the political’. As Peter Bürger puts it -

once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite (1984: 52)²⁸.

My interdisciplinary investigation of contemporary transgressive performance, with one foot in ‘Arts’ and the other in ‘Social Sciences’, undermines the reification of disciplinary divides and resists associated cultural containerization of dada, and avant-garde and absurd performance more broadly. Here we might do more justice to the “revolution...that does not define itself by preemptive conclusions...revolution *without* a goal, but revolution *with* effect” (Jones, 2006: 12) within dada, seeing its absurdist iconoclasm not principally as a jarring mess upon a gallery wall or theatre stage, like dominant framing might suggest, but more broadly as an aptly slapdash undermining of power/knowledge structures throughout society.

Whilst noting the ideal type of dada performance as a close parallel with that of supra-tactical performance, it must be noted that in practice dada is a blurry movement with many internally-diverse chapters, most notably historically in Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Paris, and NYC²⁹. Some chapters veered in closer combination with tactical performance. For example, Berlin dada has been presented as drawing more upon social movement performance forms and crafting interventions with more unambiguous political resonance, such as

²⁸ I note the complex relationship between avant-garde performance that may not be considered particularly transgressive within the legitimated space of a gallery or theatre as inter-related with, sometimes even in direct preparation for, highly transgressive street acts or interventions in less progressive institutions. Further discourses surrounding the potentiality of arts-spaces to incubate and/or containerize subversive performance arise here (Poggioli, 1968; Foster, 1994). My definition of absurd performance centred around transgression forefronts disruption, addressing the potential suffocation of otherwise challenging and provocative acts if restricted within ‘specialist’, legitimated corners where ostensibly deviant performance becomes a nominally ‘underground’ appendage to the overarching hegemonic cultural infrastructure.

²⁹ For extensive details of these major historical centres of dada activity, as well as many smaller uprisings, see the ten volume monograph *Crisis and the Arts: A History of Dada* edited by Stephen Foster (1996-2005).

parading distribution of the magazine *Every Man His Own Football* (Grindon, 2011) demanding “150 circuses for the enlightenment of the proletariat” (Hülßenbeck, 1971: 48). This demonstrates the same point to be illustrated by below data analysis chapters that tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance, whilst highly distinct ideal-types, meld and inter-percolate in actual diversely blended and contextually contingent (supra)tactical absurd performance practices, taking on elements of both orientations to varying degrees, as I define further shortly.

Punk, in contrast to dada, has received more sociological attention - ranging from Dick Hebdige’s seminal 1979 study through to recent proposal of a “punk sociology” (Beer, 2014) - and less art historical consideration. Still, punk, like dada, remains “a notoriously evasive and multifaceted beast” (Smith, Dines, and Parkinson, 2017: 3), being understood simultaneously as a principally musical subculture (Laing 1985), stylistic “neo-tribe” (Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999; Sklar, 2013), multi-faceted and malleable mode of cultural/political resistance (The Subcultures Network, 2014; Ensminger, 2016), and ‘DIY’ embodiment of a uniquely ‘punk’ political philosophy overlapping with autonomous anarchism (O’Hara, 1999; Kristiansen et al, 2012; Sofianos et al, 2017). Meanwhile, despite overarching anarchism, just as avant-garde performance has flirted with fascism, most notably within Italian Futurism (Berghaus, 1996), so too exist notable fascist punk branches (Worley, 2012; Sabin, 1999), alongside entrenched heterosexist subcultural norms (Leblanc, 1999; Reddington, 2016). Opposing these oppressive tendencies alongside my research co-performers, in its influence upon the formulation of supra-tactical absurd performance I foreground the queer etymological root of ‘punk’ as a reclaimed homophobic/classist slur, with an original connotation somewhere between ‘thug’ and ‘fag’ (Dale, 2016: 132). Here I extract an ideal type of queer punk transgression that attacks, rather than subculturally buttresses, hegemonic matrices of domination, as better practically illustrated by queercore (Nault, 2018) and riot grrrl (Leonard, 1997; Marcus, 2010) punk sub-movements.

Stephen Duncombe (2016), a prominent voice within the tactical performance literature advocating precise metrics for measuring creative activist impact, speaks of his introduction to political radicalism through punk, but that this only brought him “halfway there” since “[p]unk had no strategic plan; it had no plan at all” (2002: 5). This represents a commonplace criticism from a tactical perspective of supra-tacticality within punk as inefficient (Anderson, 2004; Cornell, 2005), whilst others attempt to defend the movement by squeezing punk within a tactical frame after all (Moore and Roberts, 2009; Barrett, 2013). However, amorphous rejection of tactically maximized efficiency might alternatively be interpreted as a central fount of punk’s derisive, transformative potency (Marcus, 1989; Savage, 1991). Fitfully and impulsively shrieking in the ears and spitting in the face of hegemonic normativity, punk here might open interrogation and perhaps alteration of otherwise unquestioned regimented norms, akin to motivations voiced for many more supra-tactical absurd performances during my fieldwork.

Such interrogation of norms may result in conservative backlash, normative reinforcement, and the commercialization and domestication of dissent (Moore, 2005); or continual progressive shifting of discourse and expanded parameters of normatively ‘acceptable’ behaviours (Clark, 2003); or, perhaps most likely, a complex admixture wherein reactionary responses may sharpen or blunt rebellion dependent on (sub)cultural context (Mattson, 2001; Wallach, 2008; Xiao, 2018). In this way, from the vantage point of the more supra-tactical punk or absurd performer, exact outcomes are ultimately unforeseeable, strict planning being exasperatedly renounced and overwritten by a more instinctual disdain towards normative constraints. A quintessential phrase of a tactical approach to social change remains: “[i]f the real radical finds that having long hair sets up psychological barriers to communication and organization, he [*sic*] cuts his hair” (Alinsky, 1971: *xix*). Queer punk responds with asymmetrical tangles or spikes and grotesque tattoos on freshly shaved gender-nonconforming scalps. Such commitment to offence and refusal to compromise is also characteristic of my observations of more supra-tactical absurd performances where exaggeratedly transgressive actions question the

constructed ‘meaning’ of both normative boundaries and underpinning notions of rationality, as data analysis chapters shall make clear.

The adoption of punk music, posturing, and (anti)symbolic ‘bricolage’ (Hebdige, 1979) is evident in numerous contemporary activist collectives such as Pussy Riot (Alyokhina; 2017; Tolokonnikova, 2018) singing in multi-coloured balaclavas in contentious sites across Russia and worldwide or *Hijas de Violencia* (Daughters of Violence) (Ramirez, 2016) responding with punk songs and glitter guns to street harassment in Mexico. There is also a long history of overlap between punk and performance art scenes, as emblemized by the vaudeville burlesque shock-rock of Kembra Pfahler’s *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* (Grayson, 2009), Martha Wilson founding the a cappella punk experiment DISBAND as well as the NYC performance space Franklin Furnace (Wark, 2000), and the “terrorist drag” of Vaginal Crème Davis (Muñoz, 1997). Similarly, I found punk “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (Hebdige, 1979: 105; Eco, 1986) and DIY³⁰ praxis to be prominent influences upon many of my research co-performers in BsAs and NYC, both cities boasting influential historical and contemporary punk scenes with bands such as Dos Minutos and Boom Boom Kid, or The Stooges and Choking Victim, respectively. Still, once more illustrating the blurred boundaries between tactical and supra-tactical transgression in practice, many punk collectives have engaged in calculated, targeted actions alongside more oblique counter-cultural affronts. Prominent examples include the anti-Thatcher pranks of eighties anarcho-punk collective Crass (Berger, 2006; Glasper, 2007), Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys running a mock campaign for mayor of San Francisco (Bogad, 2016b; Dunn, 2008), and the Desperate Bicycles (1978) anthem *Advice On Arrest* whose lyrics are easily-memorizable instructions of best conduct if arrested.

Numerous analyses have suggested linking punk to Bakhtin’s (1968) notion of carnival (Hoy, 1992; Nehring, 1993; Jones, 2002). Similarly, this “embodiment of the liberated communality of the people in perennially renewed rebellion

³⁰ For an overview of DIY cultural production, intimately connected to below discussion of (pre)figurativity and the prominent concept of autogestión in BsAs to be outlaid in chapter four, see Bennett and Guerra (2018).

against the social and spiritual restriction of the official order” (Lindley, 1996: 17) remains a commonplace lens for interpreting the kinds of absurd performances that populate this study, which are often characterized by ‘carnavalesque’ tropes such as masks, transgression of behavioural norms, and ridiculing laughter. However, while carnivalesque political intervention has been readily linked to anarchism, connections with absurdism have gone unexplored, such acts generally framed as tactically giving playful meaning to political action, rather than supra-tactically expressing ludicrous meaninglessness. This is what Bogad, prior to refining his definition of tactical performance, called “tactical carnival” (2006: 46). This widespread notion of ‘carnival-against-capital’ (McKay, 1996; Notes from Nowhere, 2003; Grindon, 2004; Robinson, 2011), developed largely in relation to the international Reclaim the Streets movement and sharing its name with a global day of action against the 25th G8 summit in 1999, often foregrounds highly tactical facets, such as the use of puppets with large flowing dresses to hide pneumatic drills making holes for planting trees in the tarmac during an anti-road party/demonstration (Jordan, 1998).

Meanwhile, once more displaying the actual cloudy (supra)tactical reality, carnivalesque performances are elsewhere seen to potentially undo repressive normative orders on two levels: both immediately and temporarily within the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) (Bey, 1985) of the performance itself *and* gradually and more lastingly within broader cultural/political impacts (Gardiner, 1992). However, Terry Eagleton, recalling Olivia in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* proclaiming “there is no slander in an allow’d fool” (1981: 148), suggests that there is no hope for impacting broader societal change through the permitted play and “laughter laughing at itself” (Lachmann, 1988: 132) of carnival. Revelry here is rather seen as operating like a safety valve through which otherwise potentially revolutionary sentiment is released. This echoes Max Gluckman’s (1963) presentation of “ritual rebellion” as a permitted performative device preserving social stability and remains a potential critique of supra-tactically oriented performance from a more tactical perspective. Within data analysis I shall illustrate how acknowledgement of this potentiality occasionally influenced the (supra)tactical positionality taken within a given absurd performance.

2.3 (Supra)tactical absurd performance

As aforementioned, the ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance that I identify above are just that - ideal types that are unattainable in their pure form in reality, rather marking the imagined endpoints of a continuum of (supra)tactical absurd performance activity that lies between them. For this reason I refer to *more* tactical or *more* supra-tactical inclinations throughout this thesis, recognizing that a broadly tactical absurd performance typically contains some more supra-tactical elements and vice versa. The tactical performance literature that I build upon is not entirely devoid of such nuance, and in some ways my counterpoint of supra-tactical absurd performance picks up on threads left hanging, if underexplored, by these scholars. For example, Shepard is careful to point out:

Some argue that organizing is about labor movements and material ends - but this is a narrow view. For many, organizing is also about shifting the mechanisms of everyday life, challenging the regimes of the normal (2015: 2).

Nonetheless, Shepard goes on to primarily instrumentalize play and performance as a sustainability strategy in an auxiliary role supporting apparently more significant political work, privileging the tactical side of the spectrum as the 'real' explanation for transgression. Meanwhile, sociologist of anarchist movements Richard Day opines -

if anarchist-influenced groups look disorganized, this is perhaps because the ways in which they are organized cannot be understood from within the common sense maintained by the hegemony of hegemony. Perhaps a new, uncommon sense is needed (2004: 741).

Critiquing unwitting replication of hegemonic norms in dominant interpretation of anarchist organization, Day posits a new order, "uncommon sense", falling just short of the recognition of acts that attempt to oppose constructed 'sense' wholesale that this study proposes.

Paradoxically, pursuing the destabilization of normative frameworks of rationality lends more supra-tactical performance a kind of ethereal aim of undoing assumptions of essential definite goal-orientation and opening contemplation of ways of being that embrace ultimate equalizing purposelessness rather than fabricated hierarchicalizing purposefulness. Following this realization, my label of supra-tactical may seem problematic, as a contradictory hint of tactical orientation may be identified within aspiration to undo dominant default impositions of 'sense' and disrupt hegemonic production of power/knowledge. There is, as such, an oxymoronic driving purpose of recognizing and embodying purposelessness. Duncombe raises this issue:

[i]n opposition to...instrumentality, an activist artist might aspire to create artwork that, in the perplexing words of the poet W. H. Auden, "makes nothing happen"...It is hard to imagine a piece of work not working at all, for even not working is work of a sort...it is an aim. (2016: 123).

The purely supra-tactical performance appears impossible whilst ensconced within a context characterized by tactical thinking, where even to oppose tacticality may be readily framed as tactical.

In response, I would emphasize that, whilst attempted supra-tactical performance may be called out in practice as acting somehow tactically, this balance of tacticality is undeniably distinct from that established by aforementioned scholars of tactical performance, replacing calculation, focus, and reconstructive hope with chance, diffuseness, and disruptive disorder. I label this other, under-investigated orientation of more oblique political absurd performance 'supra-tactical' to place it in obvious juxtaposition with the dominant discourse of tactical performance. At the same time, I note the inability of this new term to fully capture the intricacies of the practice that it seeks to describe that both reaches beyond yet still remains marred within prevailing notions of tacticality. The term is thus an embellishment upon rather than a complete departure from the notion of tacticality, in recognition that more supra-tactical absurd performance, whilst distinct, remains often formulated and understood in relation to dominant frames of rationality that it

seeks to oppose. At the same time, I note how even supremely tactically orchestrated absurd interventions contain within them the germs of supra-tactical disruption, as exemplified by Bogard noting within an extensive list of largely direct tactical attributes of transgressive intervention the simultaneous possibility for

creative disruption of the articulation of power, or synaptic disruption in the minds of passersby as clichés are broken up through playful and surprising action (2016a: 280).

As such the analytic frame of a spectrum of (supra)tactical absurd performance that I devise from my data may be seen as containing an irresolvable dialectic characterized by constant tension between always intermingled yet never fully synthesized tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance orientations. Chapters five, six, and seven shall offer concrete ethnographic examples of how tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance are theoretical ideal types embedded within the contrasting, contextually contingent aspirations of artists and activists, helping us understand messier actual trends that fall upon the (supra)tactical spectrum between these points. Elements of coherent purpose and supersensible purposelessness within an absurd intervention are thus not necessarily mutually exclusive in practice.

In sum, then, a more tactical absurd performance orientation typically designates exaggerated transgression as direct action in calculated combination with other elements of an established repertoire of contention thus seeking a specific reconfiguration of the sensible and associated power/knowledge hierarchies. Meanwhile, a more supra-tactical absurd performance orientation contrastingly designates exaggerated transgression as indirect action uninterested in any calculated repertoire of contention, rather seeking an undefined destruction of the sensible and associated power/knowledge hierarchies. I argue that these ideal types provide a much-needed heuristic to break away from dominant tactical performance discourse and better understand and compare diverse modes of absurd performance. At the same time, I caution that they must be mobilized tentatively in recognition of cloudier,

inter-bleeding contextually contingent (supra)tactical realities of absurd performance, as data analysis shall illustrate.

2.4 (Pre)figurativity

A further notion of importance to the tactical performance literature, and in turn to my research, is the burgeoning Social Movement Studies concept of prefigurativity. This is the attempted contemporary embodiment of the Industrial Workers of the World's (1905) exhortation to "form the structure of the new society within the shell of the old". Here activists or artists endeavour to construct microcosmic foreshadowing exemplars of a desired utopian or post-revolutionary society within the current context, blending previous distinction between 'ends' and 'means'. The concept has roots in the 'New Left' of the 60s and 70s (Breines, 1989), and subsequently Hakim Bey's (1985) rhetorically flourishing, yet broadly critically questioned (Williams, 2010), exhortation of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) as a site of "poetic terrorist" transformation and fleeting realization of lived utopia. In this sense, prefigurativity - conflated with anti-instrumentality - was initially largely academically disparaged as a naïve release valve of otherwise potentially transformatory revolutionary sentiment and a chaotically uncalculated notion (Harrington, 1965; Altbach and Lipset, 1969; Unger, 1975; Weinstein, 1975; Bookchin, 1995). That is, a more supra-tactical notion, critiqued from a tactical standpoint.

In this light Wini Breines observed "conflict between strategic and prefigurative politics" (1989: 7) amongst the 70s 'New Left'. Contemporary ethnographer of prefigurative movements Marianne Maeckelbergh identifies this as an ongoing "strategy/prefiguration dichotomy" (2011: 7), mirroring discussion elsewhere of the division initially proposed by Russell Curtis and Louis Zurcher (1974) between "instrumental" and "expressive" social movement actions (Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Smucker, Russell, and Malitz, 2013). This is undeniably similar to the dichotomy I sketch between ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance. Indeed, the dualisms Jonathan Smucker

(2014: 78) observed between prefigurative, expressive and strategic, instrumental orientations during Occupy Wall Street mirror many aspects of the conceptual framework outlined in this chapter. However, Smucker makes this distinction in order to buttress his central argument that ‘expressive’ prefigurative actions ought to supplement more directly tactical ‘instrumental’ ones, rather than to herald the former as representing a fundamentally different yet no less valid way of understanding politics and the political implications of exaggeratedly transgressive action as I do with supra-tactical performance.

Meanwhile Maeckelbergh does not seek to subordinate prefigurative action to a tactical frame but rather reframes prefigurativity as in fact already part of a reimagined tactical mode: a malleable “strategic practice” that “allows for goals to be open and multiple” (2011: 2). This emblemizes recent general shift in framing of prefigurativity from a ‘lifestylist’, ‘bohemian’, essentially supra-tactical approach, to one relegitimated with reference to an apparent new mode of flexible tacticality, but tacticality nonetheless. This is broadly supported by other recent scholarship positing ‘tactics’ such as affinity group organization, horizontalist decision-making, independent media, neighbourhood assemblies, social centres, open kitchens, and - crucially to my research - art, music, and theatre performances, as examples of “prefigurative praxis” (Dixon, 2014: 84; Day, 2005; Sitrin, 2012; Calhoun, 2013; Cooper, 2014; Yates, 2015; Milan, 2017; Raekstad, 2018). It is in this repurposed tactical sense that much of the tactical performance literature refers to the interventions they focus on as prefigurative. Tactical absurd performance here may form part of calculated enactment of a vision of a desired world:

If we can define a win, whether poetic or policy-oriented, and think backwards from that vision, we can design a sociodrama with strong action logic and prefigurative power (Bogad, 2016a: 24).

In this vein, activist scholar L.A. Kauffman asserts that

protests gain in power if they reflect the world we want to create...a world that is full of color and life and creativity and art and music and dance (Kauffman, 2004: 380-81).

Prefigurativity here *gains* power; it *reconstructs* it as part of a tactical reconfiguration of the sensible. The complementary notion of figurativity that I propose, and to which I turn to defining now, rather contemplates a supra-tactical destabilization or even destruction of power/knowledge.

Prefigurativity having been tactically repurposed, I perceive a need for a new term to capture the distinct form of (no)future-orientation offered by more supra-tactical absurd performances. Here I propose that, in rejecting the notion of progress towards an idealized future inherent within 'pre', supra-tactical absurd performance may represent the imperfect exemplar of a pragmatic absurdo-anarchist *figuration*. This is being oriented towards a theoretically possible equal, utopic future, paradoxically recognized as practically impossible, yet remaining so-oriented nonetheless, thus gesturing constantly towards the shifting socio-political absurdity of (im)possible egalitarianism. Here a figurative, as in metaphorical, nod towards the (un)attainable replaces prefigurative, as in prior to concrete realization, apparent exemplification of an achievable fair(er) existence. Such actions are figurative - metaphorical - in that they are deeply symbolic, yet inescapably fictional, evoking the fundamental equality of absurd beings at the same time as underlining tragicomic persistence of power/knowledge disparity.

Figurative absurd performances attack 'symbolism' and 'knowledge' wholesale, playing with 'symbols' and 'truths' in chaotic disunity and disharmony, ironically pointing with fingers both loaded and devoid of meaning to an imagined-yet-impossible world free of constructed truths and associated matrices of power, perhaps partially destabilizing the knowledge foundation of hegemonic hierarchy, or perhaps not. Figurative absurd performances do not seek to know, plan, nor measure their political impacts in the same way that prefigurative acts do, but rather obliquely reflect upon our intertwined existential and socio-political absurdity via exaggerated transgression of social/behavioural, political/organizational, and cultural/symbolic norms. This is not to say that such acts do not have a political impact - they inevitably, if immeasurably, do - but that premeditation of this impact, the essence of

prefigurativity, is rejected in favour of indiscriminate assault upon symbolic regimes that sustain oppressive power dynamics. More tactical, prefigurative absurd performance thus attempts a utopic reconfiguration of the sensible, whilst more supra-tactical, figurative absurd performance gestures towards the (im)possible destruction of the sensible. Meanwhile, in reflection of the aforementioned cloudy realities of (supra)tactical absurd performance I observed during fieldwork, I note that in practice both prefigurative and figurative (no)aspirations often jostle alongside each other and meld in different (pre)figurative combinations within activist/artist performance collectives in different contexts, as data analysis will display in-depth.

2.5 Symbolic interactionism

The sociological schools of symbolic interactionism and cultural hermeneutics³¹, in particular the writing of Erving Goffman and Victor Turner, are also influential upon my conception of absurd performance. Here the Shakespearean epithet that all the world is a stage is taken on as a sociological dictum, interactions between ‘social actors’ being understood as performances wherein meanings are co-constructed, negotiated, reinforced, and challenged. These thinkers can be read as implying a recognition of existential absurdity underlying the ostensibly rigid interactional performance structures they analyse. Goffman asserts that all social life is performance directed and interpreted in relation to socially constructed ‘meanings’ associated with particular ‘props’ or internalized (sub)cultural ‘scripts’ wherein

any groups of persons...develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal, once you get close to it (1961: x).

Here it is apparent that for Goffman there is no fundamental meaning to any act, only subjective meanings interactionally co-constructed and negotiated within social performance. Consequent norms, as dramaturgical constraints, dictate

³¹ These interlinked theories were the inspiration for Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott’s largely overlooked proposal of a ‘Sociology of the Absurd’ wherein “the mystery of how social order somehow emerges from the chaos and conflict predicated by the inherently meaningless is the motive for the study of social phenomena” (1970: 9).

which ‘fronts’ are broadly considered contextually appropriate social actor behaviour, and which are inappropriate, discreditable, or stigmatizing. Beneath this lies the oft-unacknowledged fact that “the role of normal and stigmatic are cut from the same cloth” (1963: 130) - that is, these ‘roles’ are essentially equal, the latter ostracized as a result of deviating from ultimately foundationless norms. Goffman’s conception of stigma thus offers a rich example of socio-political absurdity in action. In these terms, what absurd performance does, as exaggerated deliberate norm transgression, is resolutely risk - or even welcome - stigmatization, thus querying the legitimacy of behavioural norms and their role in preserving power/knowledge inequalities. More tactical absurd performance may manipulate established interactional norms in order to undermine a specific expression of power/knowledge, whilst more supra-tactical performance may attempt to break from conventional interactional norms more completely in attempted critique of the entire constructed matrix of domination. Here some of the absurd performances of my research, and my autoethnographic performance practice to be detailed below, may be seen as exaggerated reflections of Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) innovation of ethnomethodology. This is the methodological practice of purposefully transgressing the norms of a given social situation, within ‘breaching experiments’ such as standing facing all the other passengers within an elevator or refusing to move when obstructing a public path, in order to study the reactions of social actors within such situations (Rafalovich, 2006).

Taking absurd performance as provocation of stigmatization, it may be seen as an exaggerated kind of “social drama” in Victor Turner’s terms. These are “units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process” characterized by an instigating “breach” of norms and ensuing “crisis”, “redressive action” and “reintegration” (1987: 74). Expanding on Goffman’s position, Turner suggests that

social drama is a kind of metatheatre, that is, a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status-maintenance (*ibid*: 75/6).

I argue that it is such a ‘metatheatrical’ capacity that we can observe within absurd performances’ undermining of normativity. I do not mean to suggest here

that social drama and absurd performance are the same thing. Evidently from Turner's examples, such as Zambian Ndembu refusing to follow hierarchical conventions within antelope meat sharing, much social drama is relatively banal in contrast to the exaggerated transgressions I focus on. Rather, I aim to highlight that more tactical absurd performance mirrors the reconstructive negotiation of social drama, whilst more supra-tactical absurd performance represents a truncated form thereof - one consisting of only the first two of Turner's stages, 'breach' and 'crisis', dismissing 'redressive action' and 'reintegration' in favour of attempted destruction of power/knowledge infrastructures more wholly. Turner states that within social dramas - that is, performative challenges of normative power distribution - *Weltanschauungen* - a term taken from Wilhelm Dilthey to signify dominant constructed schemas for interpreting (ultimately incomprehensible) existence - become visible. Translated into my theoretical terms: transgressive performance highlights interconnected socio-political and existential absurdity.

3. Howling Spoon and autoethnographic praxis

As noted above, perhaps the most eloquent, supersensible expressions of intertwined existential and socio-political absurdity have not come through philosophical/theoretical writing but rather through inexplicable yet piercing art and performance that is able to fleetingly capture and make-felt beyond language the profound meaninglessness of our being(s) and surrounding constructed power/knowledge infrastructures. As an artist/activist I seek to make such performance. Simultaneously, as a researcher I seek to better express and (re)understand my theories through such performance praxis. As such, as part of the development of the theoretical infrastructure outlaid above, alongside reviewing the associated scholarship in synergistic conjunction with continual appraisal of my ethnographic fieldnotes, I have also attempted to translate my burgeoning theory of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism within personal performance practice. This is the primary autoethnographic element of my research, acting principally as a kind of pre-fieldwork methodology that allowed me to test pragmatic absurdo-anarchist ideas through practice whilst refining my

own embodied sense of absurd performance prior to and in preparation for the ethnographic participant observation that informs the bulk of this thesis. The practicalities of this inter-relationship between autoethnographic and ethnographic work will be outlaid within the account of my methodology in chapter three. Here I concentrate on the theoretical import of my autoethnographic performances, recounted here as they sprang forth alongside the first steps of consideration of the conceptual framework outlined above, helping develop these ideas through their attempted performative incarnation.

My central autoethnographic embodied theorizing experiment has surrounded the uprising of artist-activist-cutlery collective Howling Spoon: a gang of spoons that have come to life and begun to howl³². They also occasionally communicate, strugglingly, in some human languages. Their principal demand is for 'total poetic liberation'. They remain internationally active³³ but held Glasgow as an epicentre of activity throughout 2016, which is the period I shall focus on here. One of the central spoons looks a lot like me, yet, crucially, is not me, but rather a spoon - a spoon that reflects me in its stainless steel curves as I, in turn, reflect the spoon in my pupils, and we reflect together upon intertwined existential and socio-political absurdity. During 2016, this spoon that resembles me, and eight other spoons that resemble other humans that this first spoon recruited and trained for the resistance, regularly wandered the streets of Glasgow howling, also holding four 'Performance Kitchens' - two at Kinning Park Complex community centre, one at the top of Queen's Park, and one at Glasgow Autonomous Space anti-capitalist social centre. These were events where the spoons cooked a large vegan³⁴ meal - sufficient for approximately 150 people each time - using ingredients they had collected from local greengrocers that were otherwise bound for landfill, then serving this food, free, alongside numerous performances by spoons, humans, and other creatures.

³² See www.howlingspoon.wordpress.com for some video documentation.

³³ Special mention is merited to Kitchen Spoon and their personal researcher Mr. A. Schneider, SpR (2017), who have been pursuing one another across the USA without ever being in the same place since the dissolution of the Glasgow headquarters of Howling Spoon at the end of 2016.

³⁴ Vegan because if all creatures are essentially equal within shared meaninglessness, then one creature cannot be justified in killing and eating the other.

A food-not-bombs style meal was converted by its delivery by a collective of living, wailing spoons into a counter-normative intervention, which was itself a platform for further transgressive performance. The tactical activist act of collecting food that would otherwise go to waste in order to feed people for free - which the spoons combined with outreach to local food banks - is joined with the intention to more broadly undermine normativity of more supra-tactical absurd performance. Something practical with an immediate goal is performed - feeding people and preventing waste - at the same time as something impractical and oblique such as, say, an elaborate ceremony to name a cardboard cow or the creation of an orchestra playing broken umbrellas, to pick two examples from the Performance Kitchen cabarets.

In this way, these interventions of Howling Spoon attempted to embody the notion of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism whilst such ideas were still in gestation, contributing to the development of concepts that were not necessarily fully formulated at the time of each performance. Rather this autoethnographic experimentation adds a further strand to the aforementioned intermesh of engagement with existing literature and reflection upon my ethnographic data as never mutually exclusive influences upon the conceptual framework detailed in this chapter. My autoethnographic practice thus cumulatively endeavoured to reconfigure the sensible in relation to societal norms of food waste and hunger whilst at the same time kicking at the oppressive framework of the sensible wholesale. It pragmatically accepted the impossibility of total liberation while figuratively trying anyway. Here my autoethnographic practice attempted to strike a pragmatic equilibrium between the ultimate absurdo-anarchist imperative to destroy all interconnected hierarchy and sense with practical lessening of acute actual instances of power/knowledge imbalance. Redirecting flows of food waste to feed hungry people for free regards the latter, doing so as shrieking spoons simultaneously conducting apparently senseless rituals regards the former.

The bringing to life - the creaturization³⁵ - of spoons, or any previously inanimate thing, attempts to resist the decreaturization of living things wherein after the initial question of ‘Why are they a spoon?’ potentially follows closely its echo ‘Why am I a human?’ and then simply ‘Why am I? Why are we?’ Of course, this sequence of questions is not in reality so smooth, and many have remained stuck repeating the first question throughout interactions with Howling Spoon, yet this may with time still sow potential seeds of compassion in the encouraged realization of the equal (il)legitimacy of all beings within shared ultimate meaninglessness. On an ideal plane, I have strived with Howling Spoon to expose the inherent existential absurdity of all beings and the essential equality that lies behind that, hoping to display to those that participated with the Performance Kitchens that, just as there is no fundamental reason for being a spoon, neither is there a fundamental reason for being anything, and in this we are equal, and ought to treat one another accordingly, eliminating hierarchy wherever possible. I consider this kind of effect to be essentially immeasurable, acknowledging that one cannot trace the manifold potential ways in which interaction with a performance may have influenced each who came into contact with it over time³⁶. Nonetheless, it is a hope that burns and which, as I will show, mirrors similar counter-normative, anti-hierarchical aspirations encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork, the methodology of which I turn to defining in the chapter that follows.

³⁵ I write creaturization and decreaturization in order to avoid the speciesist hierarchization inherent within notions of humanization or dehumanization.

³⁶ I recognize the endeavours of scholars within the nascent field of audience studies to attempt to map the impact of performances upon their audiences and vice versa (Freshwater, 2009; Reason and Sedgman, 2015; Walmsley, 2019). However, as an ethnographer I remain suspicious of much empirical work in this field that often forms conclusions based upon survey or interview methods that cannot allow for documentation of whether the stated, self-perceived impacts of audience members translate into longer-standing changes of view and/or behaviour.



Fig 2-1: Two spoons transport a pot full of reclaimed vegetable curry to be served alongside a selection of performances.

Chapter Three - Methodology: Absurd Hanging Out

Whenever necessitated to describe my research methodology succinctly, I use one word: ethnography. This noun primarily labels two things: a methodological practice centred around intensive, long-term participant observation, and the textual presentation of such work as “a distinctive semi-literary genre” (Abu-Lughod, 1990). This thesis as a whole exemplifies the latter; this chapter details my practice of the former.

Given my research questions focused upon identifying the contextually contingent motivations of artists and activists creating absurd performance, I elected comparative ethnography as the most appropriate methodology for capturing the fullest picture possible of the nuanced drives underlying absurd performance across two contrasting fieldsites. By building intimate ethnographic relationships with research co-performers in BsAs and NYC I was able to repeatedly observe and participate within the entire process of absurd performance creation, noting differing motivations and practices at each stage in each fieldsite. Observing, as co-participant, the interconnected web of actions that comprise the existences of my research populations, I document the ‘lived lives’ and multi-layered motivations of those creating absurd performance more intimately than has typically been attempted before. The tactical performance literature, for example, is based primarily upon interview research and more sporadic periods of participant observation in single locations. I thus elected to conduct a comparative ethnography to best overcome the ethnocentric conceptual limitations of this literature detailed in chapter two.

Applying my anthropological/sociological methodological training to the study of absurd performance practice, I hope to reinforce the growing mutual introduction of ethnographic methods to Theatre/Performance Studies (Denzin, 2003; Olomo, 2006; Landis and Macaulay, 2017) and “performance-sensitive research” (Conquergood, 2013: 92) to the Social Sciences (Shevtsova, 2009; Korom, 2013). Here I put into practice the oft-ignored exhortations of Richard

Schechner (1985) and Victor Turner (1987) that a focus on pre and post performance activity must accompany the assessment of performances themselves in order to develop fuller understandings of the populations and pieces under study. Where Schechner appeals that “around the world, performers after a show eat, drink, talk, and celebrate...truly these activities don’t come ‘after’ but are ‘part of’ the performance and should be studied as such” (1985: 19), I do precisely this, as this chapter shall outline in detail. Furthering the introduction of ethnographic methods into Performance Studies may be seen as a significant contribution to knowledge of this thesis, not only offering richly focused new insight into contextual variation between contemporary political absurd performance practices, yet also paving the way for more ethnographic studies within Performance Studies, potentially broadening the knowledge base of the discipline.

Ethnographic research then broadly means “participating...in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said...asking questions” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 3) and recording fieldnotes about the whole experience. However, this ostensibly simple label is in fact a fuzzy hat for a many-headed creature. If we premodify the term ‘ethnography’ differently, we come into contact with many distinct-yet-overlapping participant observation practices. For example, to list the sub-methodologies that my own research draws upon, we encounter multi-sited ethnography, comparative ethnography, urban ethnography, grounded theory ethnography, feminist ethnography, activist ethnography, and autoethnography.

In the first section of this chapter I will detail what each of these interblending subsets of ethnography signify and what I have borrowed from them and why in the overarching ‘deep hanging out’ of my ethnographic practice, alongside consideration of the challenges that each component brings. In the second section I shall outline the practical details of my research practice, detailing - in the following sequence - processes of fieldsite selection, sampling, participant observation and fieldnotes, research conversations, data coding and analysis, and experiments with writing this thesis as a public performance. In the

third section I shall consider the implications of my personal demographic characteristics and intersectional position upon research design and practice. In this way I shall sketch the skeleton of my methodological process, the meat being put on these bones in subsequent data analysis chapters.

As alluded to in chapter one, I follow Dwight Conquergood (2013: 82), in my use of the term ‘research co-performers’ to describe those with whom I conducted this ethnography. Here I aim to elude the depersonalization and removal of agency potentially implied by less-inclusive terms such as subject, informant, or participant, rather emphasizing our ethnographic ‘acting-together’. This term also accommodates the full diversity of relationships generated during fieldwork, ranging from loving friendship to occasional antagonism, yet without negating the social collaboration and research contribution that all these connections involve. Here I am also influenced by Lassiter’s (2005) proposal of ‘collaborative ethnography’ that acknowledges the inherent collaboration of participant observation and translates this into a drive to actively produce research cooperatively, with outputs that reach beyond solely academic publications. This thesis, being produced in English according to the time constraints of a PhD schedule, cannot invite full involvement of my research co-performers in the writing/editing process as some approaches suggest, yet my consultation with them surrounding key points is continual.

At all stages I have been attentive to design and maintain an ethical research practice that causes no harm to researcher or researched. I have ensured that the risks of participating in this study were minimal for both research co-performers and myself, akin simply to the risks associated with everyday activity. My presence as ethnographer carried no risk of physical, financial or legal stress for research co-performers. My sampling practice, to be fully detailed below, always foregrounded the establishment of informed consent for research participation via both verbal explanation and printed research information sheets and consent forms. All individuals included in this thesis granted full consent for their research participation whilst it was always made explicitly clear that such consent could be revoked at any time without

penalty. To prevent against psychological distress, research co-performers were fully informed and their recognition confirmed that if they wished to skip any conversation topics or for me to abstain from documenting any given incident altogether then this would be acceptable without question. In accordance with these precautions, all of the methodological practices that inform this thesis were granted ethical approval by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

Concurring with Albert Camus that ultimately “the sole datum is the absurd” (1942/2013: 29), I nonetheless conduct empirical research regarding contemporary absurd performance. Aware of the inescapable fundamental meaninglessness of my work, I research regardless, the meaning (un)making of this investigation forming part of my personal existential revolt.

1. Varieties of ethnographic methods and their influence on my research practice.

1.1 Multi-sited and comparative ethnography

Within traditional anthropological research concentrating on geographically contained populations, ethnography has generally been anchored to a specific, singular fieldsite. The “Malinowskian paradigm” (Marcus, 2011: 16) of ethnographers often cited as pioneers of the method, such as Bronislaw Malinowski himself in the Trobriand Islands (1922), Margaret Mead in Samoa (1928), or E.E. Evans-Pritchard in Sudan (1940), conducting research within single villages or tribes, remains the root of contemporary ethnographic practices. For researchers seeking to document and understand groups who live collectively in the same place, this model remains indispensable. However, as ethnography has become utilized to pursue ever-broader research questions concerning less closely collected populations, the method has had to adapt. Two developments are particularly relevant to my research. The first is multi-sited

ethnographic methods that seek to study more diffuse networks of people, such as networks with members living in multiple areas or transitive or diasporic populations like migrant workers or touring artists (Falzon, 2016; Coleman and von Hellerman, 2011). The second is the emergence of comparative ethnographies that seek to contrast in-depth observations of correspondent populations in two or more distinct regions. By virtue of contrasting two or more populations, comparative ethnography is necessarily multi-sited; however not all multi-sited ethnography is necessarily comparative in focus, such as where researchers follow a single, mobile population.

My ethnography is multi-sited on two levels, split comparatively between BsAs and NYC and also incorporating numerous sites within each city. My central research questions pivot upon comparison: between those identifying as ‘artists’ or ‘activists’, and between the socio-political contexts of BsAs and NYC, comparing absurd performance practice both within and between fieldsites. I move with and alongside dynamic research co-performers, undertaking participant observation in all spaces within which absurd performance is organized, enacted, and reflected upon. Research locations within each fieldsite range from cultural centres to living rooms to street-corners and numerous spaces - and modes of transport - in-between. Inevitably, studying fluidly located populations complicates processes of sampling and maintaining a manageable scope of investigation. The potential dilution of the intimacy of ethnographic insight is a common critique of both comparative and multi-sited research (Coleman and van Hellerman, 2011: 6). My approach to minimizing such problems, involving the selection of ‘hub’ populations and locations for sustained participant observation, will be addressed below.

1.2 Urban ethnography

A major motor of multi-sited ethnography has been the introduction of ethnographic methods into urban settings. It is possible to perform traditionally sited ethnography in an urban context, for example by studying a certain school

(Willis, 1975) or factory (Kornblum, 1974). However, especially in large cities, it is likely that a research population will be dispersed across a relatively large area and congregate in numerous locations. Consequently, the majority of urban ethnographies, including my own, are multi-sited. The term ‘urban ethnography’ is largely seen as stemming from Robert Park’s 1920s lectures at the University of Chicago³⁷ and associated ‘Chicago School’ of sociologists, the first generation of which included Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), Anderson (1923), and Cressey (1932), this work later built upon by figures such as Liebow (1967), Suttles (1968), and Becker (1963). Following a lull in the 70s and 80s, Duneier, Kasnitz, and Murphy note recent “extraordinary revival” (2014: 4) of urban ethnography with researchers such as Goffman (2009), Rios (2011), Stuart (2011) and Contreras (2012). However, whilst throughout this trajectory urban ethnography has been generally associated with research of street life and gangs in underprivileged neighbourhoods, I aim to widen the thematic scope of recent revival, translating such incisive explication of the everyday lives of the urban poor into a comparably nuanced exploration of the lived reality of contemporary artist/activist absurd performance networks.

Whilst ethnographies in urban and rural settings share more methodological similarities than differences, in an urban context, especially megacities such as BsAs and NYC, there are a number of factors that necessarily shape the practice of ethnography differently. These factors include the greater population of non-researched people existing within the fieldsite that need to be ‘researched around’, associated greater difficulties of locating and accessing relevant research populations, and the effect of the differently-paced urban environment upon potential research relationships. Here my research practice learns from previous urban ethnographies. I made use of certain sites as research hubs around which the ethnography could orbit, as exemplified by Bourgois’ (2003) base in a ‘front’ store whilst working with drug dealers or Wacquant’s enrollment in a boxing gym as a “strategic research site” (2004: 7). Navigating the difficulty of penetrating ‘underground’ urban networks, I

³⁷ The approach remains broadly associated with the sociology department at Chicago, where, not-so-incidentally, I received my methodological training.

purposively identified potential 'gatekeepers'³⁸ to help me gain access; a role emblemized by 'Doc' in Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) or 'Herman' in Anderson's *A Place on the Corner* (1976). My exact practice here shall be further detailed below.

1.3 Grounded theory ethnography

Grounded theory ethnography involves a researcher entering the field with a broad notion of the phenomena and/or population they seek to study, yet remaining open to the development of “analytic categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses” (Charmaz, 2001: 336-337). Another term used by empirically-focused anthropologists is ‘ethnographic determinism’, which “seeks to identify intellectual problems that emerge from the ethnography, not impose them on it” (Sillitoe, 2003: 336). Influenced by this inductive approach, I have attempted to ensure that the conceptual framework outlined in chapter two has grown from and remained malleable to the insights of my participant observation, in dialogue with rather than under the thumb of prevailing academic discourse or other preconceived ideas. As aforementioned, in this way I devised the analytic frame of a spectrum of (supra)tactical absurd performance by reflection upon the diversity of motivations for and practices of absurd performance observed during fieldwork - to be illustrated in chapters five, six, and seven - in contrast to the more restricted framing propounded within the dominant tactical performance literature.

I thus seek to document and comprehend absurd performance communities afresh, not to test whether they fit existing ideas, taking from grounded theory ethnography an emphasis upon detailed observation over pre-formulated notions. This ‘bottom-up’ research design operates against the privileging of the researcher’s perspective and their institutional academic framework, whilst reflexively acknowledging the impossibility of removing this

³⁸ ‘Gatekeepers’ is a term regularly used by ethnographers to designate initial fieldwork contacts who facilitate access to the wider social realm under study often introducing the researcher to other members of the community and lending them credibility.

power disparity entirely. Here my methodology and my theoretical framework intertwine further as the fundamental (yet practically unachievable) equality of all absurd beings is acknowledged within the practice of research, ‘professional’ aspirations of hierarchically constituted objective expertise eschewed in favour of (un)professional ones of anti-hierarchical subjective validity.

I link grounded theory to Conquergood’s assertion that “[e]thnography is an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing”. Here ethnography may uniquely undercut the dominant “Mind/Body hierarchy of knowledge” (2013: 82/83) wherein bookish references and calculated theories are generally valued over embodied awareness and experimental movement. By undertaking such “sensuous scholarship” and “apprenticeship” (Stoller, 1997) I open broader possibilities for consideration of (counter)knowledges that might be missed by an overconcentration on pre-established academic premises. This opens the door for my interrogation of previous universal application of a tactical frame regarding absurd performance, rooted in participant observation within absurd performances displaying distinct (anti)logic(s). General academic overemphasis upon (text-based) rationality - what Conquergood elsewhere labels “text-positivism” (2013: 95) - is also drawn into question here. By embracing grounded theory immersive participation/observation, I allow textual and embodied knowledges to intermingle in my readings/doings/writings/performances of each ethnographic situation, attempting to combine both “thinking-in-concepts” and “thinking-in-motion” (Barba, 1995: 88).

1.4 Feminist ethnography

Conquergood expands that the embodied knowing of ethnography may be mobilized to undermine assumptions that “the body and the flesh are linked with the irrational...to be controlled by the higher powers of reason and logic” and associated “patriarchal constructions that align women with the body, and men with mental faculties” (2013: 82). Here grounded theory overlaps with the

innovations of feminist methodologies conspiring to dismantle hierarchal, typically male-dominated frames of research and power/knowledge construction. Such attempts have grown from radical feminist assertions, encapsulated by Adrienne Rich, that -

[m]asculine ideologies are the creation of masculine subjectivity...Feminism implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy...of male-centered ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act out of that recognition (1979: 209).

This 'acting out' in research methods has meant numerous attempts to develop new (anti)tools following Audre Lorde's (1984) aphorism that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", including consultation of unofficial archives such as diaries, dialogic interviewing, co-writing experiments, and, influentially upon my research, attempts to foster a specifically feminist ethnography.

Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven (2016) in their recent textbook of feminist ethnography distinguish the practice from other sub-schools of participant observation with reference to its central attention upon and efforts to alleviate gendered and other power disparities within research situations. Practically this has often meant the attempted minimization of previously valorized 'objective' distance, replacing attempted detached documentation with compassionate 'co-witnessing' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Behar, 1996; Malkki, 1997). Here researchers try to allow researched populations greater agency in moulding ethnographic focus. However, such 'giving voice to the voiceless' (rather than speaking for them) aspirations have in turn been critiqued as naïve assertions of a feminist methodological metanarrative, potentially damaging oppressed groups further in denial of inescapable power imbalances between researcher and researched (Stacey, 1988; Angel-Ajani, 2006). Feminist ethnography, following this 'loss of innocence' (Visweswaran, 1994), must then paradoxically balance attempted corrosion of entrenched fieldwork hierarchies with participation within an investigatory framework still inherently laden with its patriarchal history - a tightrope walk that my ethnography shares. In practice this means I have attempted to maintain relationships as equal as possible with

all research co-performers³⁹ whilst acknowledging the impossibility of flattening such power dynamics entirely, for example by engaging in unstructured, collaborative research conversations rather than delimited, unidirectional interviews, to be detailed fully below.

Evoking notions of intersectionality described in chapter two, some see feminist ethnography as knocking open the door for the recognition of a wider variety of intertwined power/knowledge inequalities within traditional ethnography. Lila Abu-Lughod, uniting feminist ethnography with the work of indigenous and “halfie” (mixed heritage) researchers, affirms that such a perspective “like any subaltern view...never could pretend that it wasn't a view from somewhere” (1990: 15), nor that an inviolable construction of self in contrast to a reified ‘other’ were possible. This foregrounds the inevitable ‘situatedness’ of all multiply-constituted persons - both researchers and researched - within any given ethnographic context. As a white, male ethnographer, the demographic classically most responsible for ostensibly unsituated proclamations of objective expertise, I assume the responsibility within this project to explicitly acknowledge and continually reflect upon the effect of my intersectional position on my research. I broadcast my findings as readings inevitably filtered through my own eyes, not those of some mythic neutral authority. This critical reflection shall be outlaid further at the end of this chapter, considering the import of my positionality within both fieldsites.

³⁹ I considered adopting the further feminist methodological innovation of co-writing/coediting with my research co-performers as a way to trouble constructions of academic authority. However, this was not pursued, for several reasons: my research populations are relatively large, do not all speak English, and were, when consulted about the possibility, largely disinterested in writing/editing, especially without economic recompense. Meanwhile, ironically, within the framework of assessment for the ‘professional’ qualification of a PhD that I find myself pragmatically pursuing, such a direct attack upon the sanctity of the expert author - the doctor-in-formation - would have been difficult to negotiate.

1.4 Activist ethnography

Activist ethnography⁴⁰ has two overlapping connotations: ethnography that is about activists or ethnography that is by activists and is in itself an activist project. The latter connotation also carries the alternative label ‘critical ethnography’ which “seeks not just to describe but to transcend existing inequalities” wherein “critical ethnography and activism can be thought of as parallel, related and potentially supportive endeavours” (Chari and Donner, 2010: 76/7). Contrary to Max Weber’s classical suggestion that a sociologist must abandon bias to rationally pursue their research questions, activist ethnographies, my research included, are both about and in solidarity with their research subjects. This draws on Howard Becker’s assertion that “there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one or another way” (1967: 245) and consequent suggestion that researchers must openly acknowledge their inevitable ‘sides’. I recognize then that I work with leftist absurd performance groups not only due to the practicality of this topic given the “subcultural capital” (Thornton, 1996) accrued via previous experience within anarchist movements as activist, artist, and researcher (Sillitoe, 2012; 2014), yet, most importantly, because I support them as an active member. My participation with such performance communities did not start nor will it end in concordance with the parameters of fieldwork. This is not objective, purely academic professional labour, but rather compassionate, subjective (un)professional investment⁴¹.

Some critics might suggest a contradiction in terms concerning an activist grounded theory ethnography, in that ‘activist’ suggests strong preconceived

⁴⁰ See writings on ‘feminist activist ethnography’ (Davis and Craven, 2013) for an exemplar of how the submethodological trends detailed here do not exist as distinct ingredients informing my research recipe, but rather as parts of a broth from which I take a considered, yet leaking, scoop.

⁴¹ I intend to publish my research not solely in academic avenues, but also convert my findings into bilingual English/Spanish zines to be donated to public collections in activist/artist spaces in my fieldsites and further afield. This is intended to facilitate self-reflection within activist/artist communities around the significance of absurd performance to provoking social change. This direct dissemination of research amongst activist/artist research populations takes inspiration from the zines of other researchers such as Grindon and Jordan’s (2010) *A User’s Guide to Demanding the Impossible* and DIY journals such as *Do or Die*.

convictions, whilst grounded theory suggests openness to all ideas discovered during research. However, this critique conflates activism with dogmatism, which, whilst often intertwined, are not necessarily synonyms. To conduct an apparent ethnography aiming to ‘confirm’ one’s own ideological or activist stance would be closer to propaganda than academic research and should be rejected as such. In contrast, activist ethnography, as I mobilize the term, rejects partisan manipulations of observations, precisely because of a commitment to document and understand activist/artist practice in order to potentially better inform its practitioners. As such my research is both in solidarity with and a challenge to activist/artist communities. The intention is not simply to myopically applaud political absurd performance practice, but rather dissect it in order to potentially offer a greater level of self-awareness and nuance in future practice. My research offers such insight within the ethnographically driven innovation of a spectrum of (supra)tacticality to more keenly understand diverse, contextually-contingent political absurd performance practices, as data analysis shall illustrate in detail.

1.5 (Auto)ethnography

In chapter two I set out the attempted embodied development of my pragmatic absurdo-anarchist theoretical framework within the autoethnographic performances of Howling Spoon. Here I deal with how this sub-methodology relates to my broader ethnographic project. Autoethnography claims the actions, thoughts, experiences, and emotions of the researcher themselves as data. It is not so much an alternative iteration of ethnography than a distinct methodology in its own right. Carolyn Ellis advocates ‘autoethnography’ over ‘auto-ethnography’, foregoing the hyphen “because autoethnography is a thing all its own, not just ‘auto’ linked to ‘ethnography’” (2013: 9). Recognizing this, but also wishing to evoke that the two distinct methods as combined in this study are mutually informing, I prefer, following the grammatical (anti)logic outlined in chapter two, ‘(auto)ethnography’ when referring holistically to my methodology. Self-reflection is prominent within ethnography, whilst observation of others colours autoethnography - loose distinction lies in the

centrality lent to either focus. The major practical expression of this distinction in my research is my primary role as orchestrator of actions within autoethnographic experiments, yet as a more supportive participant/observer in the plans of others during fieldwork in BsAs and NYC.

Frameworks for how autoethnographic data is best collected and analysed remain widely debated. Autoethnography is a relatively new methodology, emerging in the 1990s, beginning to be distilled within a recent wave of ‘handbooks’ (Chang, 2008; Boylorn and Orbe, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2015). Within these texts there is a general reluctance to definitively outline what is often presented as an incomparably enigmatic method, vague consensus clustering around broad claims such as what “binds all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013: 22). However, what such immense categories as ‘personal experience’ and ‘cultural experience’ are to be taken to mean and how they might be documented and contrasted in practice remains unclear. This has served little to dispense commonplace suspicions that autoethnography is a substanceless, egotistical, “intellectually lazy” methodology (Delamont, 2007: 2). Indeed, some work vaguely dubbed ‘autoethnography’ can appear as if navel-gazing narcissism without critical rigour, exemplified by much ‘autoethnographic poetry’ (Wyatt, 2010; Weems, 2013) whose distinction from other forms of autobiographical poetry is left unexplained. Attempting greater clarity in my practice, I specify the role of autoethnographic performance in this study as a ‘pre-methodology’ to experiment with the development of my budding pragmatic absurdo-anarchist theoretical framework within personal artistic/activist praxis prior to commencing ethnographic fieldwork. Here, as outlined in chapter two, I began developing my conceptual framework not only from the literature but in conjunction with embodied autoethnographic performance experimentation, to then be reconsidered and fully elaborated in reflection upon my comparative ethnographic fieldnotes.

Autoethnography involving performance is similar in many respects to the practice as research (PAR) paradigm within Theatre/Performance Studies. Loose distinction between these models may be drawn in terms of different processes of repetition and rehearsal and institutional frameworks of appraisal. Performances within a practice-led PhD are often directly presented for examination following an extended period of development, testing, redevelopment, re-testing, and so on. In contrast I use unexamined autoethnographic performance to inform my broader analytical framework without the scope to engage in the more extended process of refinement allowed by a PAR project. Conducting performance as an (auto)ethnographer and (auto)ethnography as an artist/activist, I hope to contribute to the undoing of what Conquergood identified as the “academic apartheid” (2013: 42) between performance scholars and performance practitioners, connected to aforementioned classical devaluation of embodied knowledges.

1.6 Deep hanging out

Deep hanging out is not so much a variety of ethnography as an increasingly popular shorthand for capturing the day-to-day reality of participant observation. The term appears to have been coined by Renato Rosaldo (1989) before being critically popularized by James Clifford (1996), then Clifford Geertz (1998), and now widely used (Wogan, 2004; Browne and McBride, 2015; Walmsley, 2018). Deep hanging out is precisely this: hanging out, but deeper; passing time collectively, consistently and intensively with others whilst recording the social/political/cultural/interpersonal details that constitute this shared embodied experience with profound attention. I celebrate and adopt this flexible model as a more grounded and accessible encapsulation of the daily reality of ethnographic fieldwork than typically more verbose renderings such as “the deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events” (Willis and Trondman, 2000: 5) or

the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods that capture their social meanings and ordinary activities,

involving the researcher participating directly in the setting (Brewer, 2000: 10).

To a non-specialist audience, including my research co-performers, I am able to speak of deep hanging out and immediately attain a level of comprehension of my principal research activity that denser, classically ‘academic’ descriptors do not facilitate.

However, some accounts are concerned that deep hanging out is too flippant a term, insufficiently austere to capture the rigorous demands of systematic ethnographic practice. Joost Fontein calls it “facetious” capable only of “reflecting superficially what we may appear to be doing in the field”, undermining oftentimes “arduous, exhausting, and anxiety-provoking” (2013: 59) research realities. There is an apparent risk of “excessive subjectivity” (Woodward, 2008) connected to old, problematically entitled, preoccupations with ‘going native’⁴². Deep hanging out, then, may be perceived as conflating work with leisure - a threat to the professional sanctity of ethnography. This may lead to outright rejection or obtuse attempts to standardize a ‘best-practice’ of hanging out such as Henk Driessen and Willy Jansen’s proposal “that efficient and effective use of small talk can be learned and applied in a structured and systematic way” (2013: 260).

I am dubious of such critiques of unstructured deep hanging out as insufficiently sober and formalized. I ask rather whether such supposedly

⁴² Bernard Perley (2013) offers an intriguing dissection of the continued awkward resonance of this archaic colonial term through a consideration of its inverse - a native person ‘going anthropologist’. Where Evans-Pritchard reported having to “check this lapse into unreason” surrounding his application of Azande witchcraft logics to his own life following immersion in this culture, Perley asks whether a native anthropologist would obversely risk ‘lapsing into reason’ (2013: 103). Here we might consider traditional hierarchization of different cultural scripts and associated distributions of the sensible between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ as if the former offered an inherently superior frame of supposed ‘reason’. A model of deep hanging out cannot escape interaction with such entrenched assumptions, but may begin to trouble them. My research, which assesses absurd performances seeking to reconfigure or disrupt the sensible in each fieldsite, rejects reified notions such as ‘native’ or ‘anthropologist’ into which one could discretely ‘go’, refusing associated hierarchies of ‘sense’. This is in concordance with Geertz’s “anti-anti-relativism” asserting the intrinsic enlightenment of studying other ways of being without condemning them as ‘backward’ or ‘primitive’ in relation to hegemonic poles: “Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about...We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers.” (1984: 275).

necessary solemnity and preorganization is a symptom of pervasive, ethnocentrically defined means-end rationality that may inhibit the empathetic documentation of cross-cultural or subcultural realities. As such I practice deep hanging out with a minimized level of premeditation or imposition of frames of inquiry developed outwith ethnographic interaction. Rather in BsAs and NYC I located research relevant spaces to hang out in, then hung out, slotting as smoothly as possible into associated stream of actions, from cleaning toilets and cooking dinner to sewing masks and building puppets. Thus I was generally able to amenably follow the emotional flow of the communities I worked with, chatting, joking, or despairing with them in concordance with the mood of the moment, rather than imposing pre-scheduled topics to explore.

Of course, as is an ethnographic truism, my presence in the field impacted the field itself in immeasurable ways. However, through my mobilization of deep hanging out, I attempted to make my presence as informal and unobtrusive as possible, passing extensive unstructured periods of time with my research co-performers whilst quietly maintaining my research questions at the front of my mind and tip of my tongue, noting, relatively inconspicuously, how each research community compared with each other and my continually developing conceptual framework. Rather than attempting to systematically reduce the intrinsic oxymoronic nature of participant observation - watching and doing simultaneously; being in the middle of the action whilst observing it holistically - I embrace it. Here I attempt to balance 'stepping-in' and 'stepping-back' but acknowledge that, ultimately, that's a dance, and one best improvised in reaction to the partners and dancefloors in question.

The 'deepness' of this notion is connected to the 'thickness' of another: thick description, which is how Geertz, borrowing the term from Gilbert Ryle, describes the "inscription" of participant observation into "the consultable record of what man [*sic*] has said" (1973: 30). Here an ethnographer must recognize that "anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third ones to boot" (*ibid*: 15). Such texts offer ethnographers' readings of their research collaborators' readings of surrounding cultural

“ensembles of texts” (ibid: 452), all the while attempting to convey such nuanced ways of being as vividly as possible. Practically this means allowing space within ethnographic texts for in-depth illustrative vignettes, much like deep hanging out allows space for such recounted events to be observed in the first place. In this way a ‘thicker’ sense of the (sub)culture under study may be projected, rather than dry, ‘thin’, reductive reporting of numbers or superficially simplified this-then-that process details. I inscribe some of my deep hanging out as such, balanced against the word count restrictions of a doctoral thesis, to attempt to optimize the breadth and depth of ethnographic detail recounted, as shall be illustrated during data analysis.

I offer these thick descriptions as an inseparable companion to the absurd performances described/inscribed therein, neither positioning this text as an (anti)explanation for performances unable to convey (non)meaning alone, nor exhorting performance as inherently superior to text - rather seeing both elements as mutually complementary poles of (mis)communication. Here the relation I maintain between my (auto)ethnographic performance and writing concurs with Conquergood:

If the Performance Paradigm simply is pitted against the Textual Paradigm, then its radical fore will be co-opted by yet another either/or binary construction that ultimately reproduces modernist thinking. The Performance Paradigm will be most useful if it decenters rather than discarding texts (2013: 98).

2. Practical outline of research practice

2.1 Fieldsite selection

My selection of BsAs and NYC as fieldsites resulted from the consideration of multiple possible locations according to the following criteria:

- a) Level of active collectives creating absurd performance in the area

- b) Level of access to such groups - for example through established contacts or the presence of public gathering spaces which might act as foci for ethnographic observation

- c) Maximizing the relevance of fieldsites to the aim of comparing use of absurd performance across markedly different socio-political contexts, whilst also taking into account practical considerations such as:
 - c.1) Personal safety and safety of research co-performers
 - c.2) Language
 - c.3) Visa restrictions

- d) Correspondence between fieldsites, existing scholarship, and potential contribution to academic discourse surrounding absurd performance

- e) Opportunities for forging collaborations with other researchers and practitioners of absurd performance and maximizing possibilities for dialogue between our respective bodies of work

In chapter four I will give a detailed rundown of the socio-political histories and actualities of BsAs and NYC. Here I offer a summary of how I came to consider these cities to be the most suitable fieldsites following the above criteria. Regarding criteria *d* and *e*, as outlined in chapter two, much of the tactical performance literature has been based on research conducted within and about NYC. The principal current imaginary within the English-speaking world of what constitutes ‘artistic activism’, with absurd performance as a subcategory, is thus notably dominated by a disproportionate influence of NYC.

In order to enter into dialogue with and augment this dominant literature on its own turf, NYC became an obvious fieldsite choice. I selected NYC to maximize the resonance and impact of my critical elaboration, allowing me to engage in direct dialogue and build networks with several proponents of the tactical performance perspective that I seek to embellish. Meanwhile, to reach outwith NYC-centric analysis and introduce a new lens, addressing my research question of how absurd performance practices are impacted by surrounding socio-political context, comparison between NYC and a contrasting fieldsite was necessitated. As Pierre Bourdieu argues -

[i]t is, no doubt, only by using the comparative method, which treats its object as a ‘particular case of the possible’, that one can hope to avoid unjustifiably universalizing the particular case (2010: xiii).

This decision was further motivated by consideration of how over-focus upon NYC within the current dominant literature on this topic may inadvertently speak over or for activists and artists operating in other, less privileged global contexts. Notably, there have been nods towards confronting this possibility amongst the NYC-centred community of tactical performance scholars. For instance, the *Beautiful Rising* (Boyd et al., 2017) collection of “creative resistance form the global south” follows the previous *Beautiful Trouble* (Boyd and Mitchell, 2013) “toolbox for revolution” informed mostly by US and European examples. However, the methodologies of such projects, such as the six “jam sessions” used by the editors of *Beautiful Rising* in vastly different contexts scattered across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, from my perspective as an ethnographer, seem worryingly transient and unlikely to allow for the profound reflection necessary to begin undoing the overarching influence of exported Western cultural frames. There is, I fear, a grave danger of tokenism, which my intensive ethnographic comparison of BsAs with NYC hopes to resist.

Criteria c was highly influential in my eventual selection of BsAs, and rejection of alternatives. Many more politically repressive potential fieldsites that I reviewed, such as Kampala, Harare, Shanghai, Minsk, and St. Petersburg

were rejected following an appraisal of the potential risks to my own and my prospective research co-performers' safety. For example, whilst investigating absurd performance in Kampala, I discovered that Norman Tumuhimbise of the Jobless Brotherhood collective, aforementioned in chapter two, had recently been abducted and tortured alongside questioning of his political activity (Wilmot, 2015). In this case, my presence as a foreign researcher could have attracted yet greater state scrutiny and repression, which is the opposite of the above stated political intentions of my activist ethnography. The need to prioritize not putting dissident research populations at risk, even in apparently 'free' fieldsites, is shown by multiple police seizures of field data, including the Boston College Belfast Project oral histories of IRA members (George, 2013), PhD fieldnotes concerning urban explorers in London (Garrett, 2014), and ethnographic data concerning US animal rights activists (Scarce, 1994). The seizure of such data in a more repressive political climate could have yet more severe consequences. To ensure my research was not responsible for attracting unwanted attention and placing vulnerable individuals in greater danger, consideration of fieldsites within current totalitarian regimes was abandoned. This decision was reinforced by the simultaneous need to protect my own safety, as underlined by the torture and murder of Giulio Regeni in Cairo in 2016, most likely by state forces in connection with his PhD research into Egyptian trade unions (Fisk, 2016), or the jailing of Matthew Hedges as a suspected spy whilst conducting PhD research in Dubai surrounding the security strategy of UAE (Weaver, 2018)⁴³.

In comparison to above rejected fieldsites, contemporary Argentina is less severely politically repressive. Ethnography of subversive performance networks there appeared as an option without prohibitive risk to myself or research co-performers. However, what does distinguish Argentina is recent history and living memory of both brutal dictatorship and economic collapse, to be detailed in chapter four. BsAs thus allows investigation of the impact of a very different socio-political context, characterized by recent and still continually debated

⁴³ Of course, these considerations do not preclude the possibility of state or police intelligence agencies anywhere accessing and using to their own ends the published materials of research, this thesis included (Ghodsee, 2011). As such, I have been careful throughout not to report details of my research co-performers' activities that could inform their oppression, rather emphasizing those that may inspire continued, expanding revolt.

periods of fascism and financial breakdown, upon absurd performance practices, in comparison to NYC as a context with a generally less repressive recent history. I note that other Latin American fieldsites with comparable totalitarian histories such as Rio de Janeiro or Santiago de Chile may have also served the investigation well, yet selected BsAs due to its specific legacy and active actuality of dissident performance tied uniquely directly to aforementioned cruel history, also to be detailed in chapter four.

In addition, having rejected potential English-speaking fieldsites within African ‘big man’ regimes on grounds of research safety, feasibility of language training became a significant factor in my considerations. The average time required to obtain research fluency in Spanish with English as a first language within an intensive training programme, estimated at twenty-four weeks by Language Testing International (2017), was achievable within the time constraints of my PhD and limits of available funding⁴⁴. The forty-four weeks required to attain competency in, say, Russian or ninety-two weeks in Mandarin would have been unfeasible. Further, it would have been highly difficult to obtain a visa as a British citizen to conduct politicized research in Russia or China, whereas I was able to enter and conduct my ethnography in Argentina with little restriction.

In terms of size, BsAs and NYC are well suited for comparison, both megacities with huge populations, approximately 12,801,364 across the full conurbation of BsAs (Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2010) and 8,537,673 across all five boroughs of NYC (New York City Department of City Planning, 2016). Meanwhile both Argentina and the USA entered new epochs of

⁴⁴ At the end of 24 weeks of intensive language training that preceded my fieldwork at the Cervantes Institute accredited language school *Academia Buenos Aires*, I passed my final verbal and written exam with a mark of 96 out of 100. This certified secure attainment of a C1 ‘advanced proficient user’ level of competency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. As fieldwork continued, speaking Spanish constantly in BsAs and regularly with Latino research co-performers in NYC, I refined this linguistic competence further. However, I do note that, especially during initial weeks of participant observation in BsAs that overlapped with my final weeks of language training, my capacity to take optimally detailed fieldnotes was lower than it may have been in English. I acknowledge this in my reflection upon fieldnotes from that time, whilst remaining confident that throughout fieldwork I maintained sufficient Spanish linguistic competency to make solid, reliable observations.

populist right-wing government shortly before my fieldwork, rendering comparison especially timely. Argentina elected the right-wing (and corporate dominated) government of Mauricio Macri's *Cambiamos* party at the end of 2015, signalling a significant political shift, resoundingly echoed by Donald Trump's ascension to power in the USA in 2016. These parallel political shifts will be detailed alongside the contrasting political histories and socio-cultural norms of each fieldsite in chapter four, their different influence upon the absurd performance practices I observed in each location then analysed in depth in chapter seven.

2.2 Sampling

Steinhoff (2003) refers to her research following effervescent activist networks in Japan as “fieldwork without a site” due to the absence of a consistent locale of participant observation. I contend that this moniker is misleading, in that inevitably all research must take place somewhere, and thus be somehow sited. Rather I wager, regarding the style of investigation that Steinhoff and I share working with highly mobile activist/artist collectives, that a flexibly defined process of sampling of sites and populations within overarching research regions is necessary to ensure the collection of fieldnotes relevant to one's research questions. This was especially pertinent within my research to ensure that my observations within BsAs and NYC remained viably comparable. Across both fieldsites I used a primarily purposive sampling method⁴⁵, adapted flexibly to the fluid practices of absurd performance scenes in each location.

The “foundation work” (Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker, 2002: 291) of my sampling was to identify spaces such as social centres, clubs, galleries, or squats/occupations where research-relevant activity seemed likely to occur, then directly approaching collectives and individuals who create absurd

⁴⁵ ‘Purposive sampling’ is a sociological term for when a researcher actively selects the participants of a given study, generally in accordance with given criteria.

performance within these spaces, explaining my research, and verifying if they would consent to participate or not. Given the highly specific focus of my study, this was by far my most used sampling method, entailing widespread attendance at shows and demonstrations in a diversity of locations across BsAs and NYC in the beginning period of fieldwork in each site. This was a kind of concentrated ‘deepish hanging out’ through which I established the best geographical hubs for the ‘deeper hanging out’ of the months to follow. In this way, alongside reaching out and arranging some initial meetings with seemingly relevant artists and activists through their websites and social media pages, I purposively made contact with many of my primary research co-performers.

As far as possible, heeding the guidance of feminist ethnography detailed above, this sampling process also included the attempted selection of research co-performers spanning a diversity of gender identities, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. However, given that only a small population takes part in the niche activity of absurd performance that I focus upon, the pools of potential research co-performers in each fieldsite were limited. Further, as shall be illustrated during data analysis, a more privileged intersectional position may typically be more conducive to involvement in absurd performance. As such, my attempts to establish an optimally diverse cohort of research co-performers do not equate to the proportionate representation of different groups amongst my fieldnotes, although in my sampling I did attempt to redress this imbalance wherever possible, for example prioritizing the inclusion of consenting female and ethnic minority performers.

This primarily purposive sampling process contains shades of a snowball approach⁴⁶. My concentration on semi-defined collectives meant that once some members of a collective had expressed enthusiasm to participate, I would generally be introduced to the rest of the group, explaining my research and establishing consent to participate with them in turn. Once I had purposively established rapport with gatekeepers, the rest of the scenes opened gradually

⁴⁶ ‘Snowball sampling’ is a sociological term for when a researcher allows their sample to grow based upon the recommendations of further contacts from initial research participants selected using another sampling technique. Thus the sample size grows like a snowball rolling downhill.

like tickled buds. Some gatekeepers, though, pushed the doors open wider than others, as I will address during data analysis.

2.3 Participant observation and fieldnotes

Participant observation - the core of ethnographic fieldwork - is the bread and butter of my research. Through this process I have gleaned over four hundred thousand words of fieldnotes that inform this thesis. As outlined in above discussion of deep hanging out, the basic idea of participant observation is simple: spend an extended time with a group, acting with and alongside them, keeping detailed notes, thereby developing an increasingly acute awareness of the fine details of the existence(s) of the researched population. This was my everyday for sixteen months. Following three initial months dedicated solely to intensive language training, I spent eight further months (three overlapping with continued language training) conducting participant observation with artists and activists in BsAs during 2017. After a brief return to the UK, I then spent a further eight months doing the comparative equivalent in NYC during 2018. Unlike traditional models of ethnography, it was not possible to cohabit with my research population, some of whom did live together but many of whom were dispersed across each city. My residential relationship to research co-performers rather approximated “less a practice of intensive dwelling (the 'tent in the village') and more a matter of repeated visiting, collaborative work” (Clifford, 1996: 5).

Principal activities engaged in during such “repeated visiting” varied between each collective, including brainstorming performance ideas, making masks, props, puppets, and costumes, taking and giving workshops, going to see the performances of collaborators, and, of course, staging absurd interventions themselves. This was accompanied by many more activities not directly linked to absurd performance but often incorporating fruitful conversation on the topic, such as cooking and eating together, going for walks and bicycle rides, gardening, playing music, and cleaning shared performance spaces. In short, I participated

in the lives of my research co-performers at all levels which they granted me consent to access, as shall be demonstrated during data analysis below. I chose this intensive participant observation practice with the intention that time spent participating in performances themselves and time invested in both directly and indirectly accompanying activities would richly complement each other in cultivating fuller comprehension of the motivations of diverse absurd performance practitioners. This speaks once more to the potential broadening of the types of knowledge dealt with within Performance Studies promised by the incorporation of ethnographic methods that my research practice illustrates, offering a deeper understanding of the tapestries of inspirations behind moments of performance themselves.

A central conviction of ethnography is that everything is data: every observation is analysable and may contribute to refined understanding of researched phenomena. It is for this reason that, having adopted an adaptable practice of deep hanging out, in tandem I strictly maintained thorough fieldnotes. This was essential to ensure that the most potentially enlightening observations could be recalled and reflected upon during data analysis and inscription. My fieldnote practice is in broad concordance with the guidelines of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, agreeing that “finished texts incorporate and are built up out of...smaller, less coherent bits and pieces of writing - out of fieldnotes” (1995:vii). I formed these scribbled ‘building blocks’ generally by first fully engaging in a given activity, sometimes making short, hand-jotted notes or audio recordings during a lull in action if it felt necessary and possible, then typing up full reflective accounts at the soonest opportunity. It is from these records of raw data that I draw the vignettes of thick description and shorter anecdotes that illustrate forthcoming data analysis chapters.

2.4 Research conversations

For some, interviews and ethnography are mutually exclusive methodologies, arguments occasionally emerging that one is superior to the

other, such as Khan and Jerolmack's (2014) notion of the "attitudinal fallacy" of interviews that document respondents' opinions rather than social actualities. However, in any ethnography, conversation is inevitably a huge component. It is the level of pre-planning of conversations that varies - from heavily structured kinship surveys to unstructured chat. My approach falls closer to the latter, taking inspiration from models such as Wilkerson's "guided conversations" (2007: 31), Mishler's "speech events" (cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 17) and Rubin and Rubin's "conversational partnerships" (cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 28), all emphasizing the discreet harnessing of natural conversational currents within collaborative discussion of research themes. Here I broadly let fieldwork conversations flow according to the cadence I encountered them within, remaining vigilant to subtly probe further when a comment of particular relevance to my research questions was raised, thus interacting with existing currents of conversation to tactfully coax them towards my research foci. Given that by the end of each research period I was spending the vast majority of my waking hours with my research co-performers, I had ample opportunities to engage in such conversations ranging from one-on-one discussions to larger group debates. Steering conversation within collective interactions was admittedly more difficult, however these interactions allowed me to observe the types of questions asked by different research co-performers of each other and of me, offering complementary insight to one-on-one probing, both forms of 'conversational partnership' weaving supplementarily through my fieldnotes.

My original research plans involved semi-structured interviews with key members of each collective using a flexible pre-planned question list. I even began organizing this process during my first fieldwork period in BsAs, refining a set of questions and running some preliminary recorded interviews, yet eventually decided against the use of more formal interview data, finding above detailed guided ethnographic conversations to be more revelatory. Since many research co-performers were suspicious of formal procedures, long-term steered conversation appeared to generally offer more candid insights than the concentrated interviews I had trialled, and for this reason I abandoned the latter. For example, sitting down for a semi-structured recorded interview with Gianna of ETP she asked me "*¿Qué querés que te diga?*" (What do you want me to tell

you?). This emblemized the air of expectation and pressurization that I observed such semi-formal interactions to generate, research co-performers often worrying about saying the 'right' thing during an interview in contrast to freer, more relaxed everyday conversation.

Henry Glassie offers a succinct take on how foregrounding informal, intimate conversation within participant observation links back to grounded theory:

Ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not hypotheses, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately (1982: 14).

Meanwhile, connected to above discussion of feminist ethnography, numerous feminist researchers have attempted horizontal research conversations to deconstruct 'patriarchal' power dynamics within traditionally regulated interviews featuring a dominant, masculinized researcher and a passive, feminized respondent (Reinharz, 1992; Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Oakley, 2005). My unstructured guided research conversations similarly aim to reduce the hierarchical divide between researcher and researched, simultaneously navigating aforementioned essential "recognition of the noninnocence of any practice of knowledge production" (Lather, 2001: 204).

Such loose, sprawling research conversations - enduring throughout fieldwork and even ongoing now as I maintain regular contact with my research co-performers - are not possible to audio record. However, I tried in my fieldnotes to log quotations as close to verbatim as possible. In my presentation of this data, where I am positive that I recorded a phrase exactly as it was spoken - through making a note in the moment or soon afterwards - I present it within "double quotations marks", yet where I am paraphrasing due to not being able to make notes about the conversation until later, I use 'single quotation marks'.

2.5. Data coding and analysis

My process of data analysis is relatively straightforward and typical, involving the reading, and re-reading, of fieldnotes with my three principal research questions foregrounded in my mind, thus developing a series of colour and letter codes corresponding to the themes displayed in the headings and subheadings of forthcoming data analysis chapters. In this way, I was able to catalogue all sixteen months of fieldnotes in relation to major strands of my argument regarding my central research questions, rendering otherwise impenetrable tomes of notes into digestible (sub)topic headings that I could make easier reference to in constructing following data analysis.

How I refer to individual research co-performers throughout data analysis is dictated by the responses I received when asking individuals how they would prefer to be referred to whilst establishing consent for research participation. The most common response across all groups was ambivalence, the majority of research co-performers informing me that I could refer to them however I wished, whilst others, largely self-defining activists, requested anonymization, and others still, largely self-defining artists, emphasized their desire to be named. One research co-performer with the Cart Department took the opportunity to mock the question altogether, responding, with sardonic reference to my nationality in a mock-British accent: “I don’t know, I don’t care, what are those English cakes called, Mrs Kipling? It is very important to me that you call me Mrs Kipling.” In respect of all these wishes, I do not follow a standardized method for labelling my research co-performers, rather using pseudonyms for those who requested anonymization, using real names for those who did not, and calling ‘Mrs Kipling’ Mrs Kipling.

2.6 Performance writing

In terms of the writing of this project, it has been a consistent challenge to attempt to express the irreverent, iconoclastic attempted reconfiguration and/or destruction of power/knowledge of the absurd performances observed and participated within whilst fitting the narrow confines and restrictive expectations of a PhD thesis. There is a disjuncture between the form and the content that I fear I have often been unable to surpass. For example, I introduce the notion of supra-tactical absurd performance and herald resistance to professionalism yet within a text produced in tactical pursuit of a professional qualification where each editorial decision must be cautiously and logically justified. This is a quandary I have reflected on throughout the composition of this text, eventually taking the pragmatic decision to produce this relatively conventional PhD thesis whilst acknowledging its limitations both directly within this note and more obliquely within my elaboration upon performance writing practice. Performance writing as a loose, purposefully undefined concept was pioneered by John Hall (2013), Ric Allsopp (1999), and others at Dartington College of Art as a broad label for the exploration of intersections between writing and other art forms, especially performance. My experiments with writing large parts of this thesis as itself an absurd intervention - detailed below - may be seen as a further innovation within this realm, though I recognize that this text itself, produced in accordance with aforementioned expectations of PhD examination, remains distinct from the often more experimental styles of Hall, Allsopp, and other performance writing pioneers.

Offered an 'office hours residency' at Grace Exhibition Space, I was able to return to NYC during three months of my writing-up period and attempt to perform the composition of this thesis. Here I set up a desk in the street-facing window of the old pizza shop turned gallery, surrounded by my central research questions written on cardboard in English and Spanish, and worked at my computer in rotating costumes and masks. Passersby at different moments encountered a spoon, a frog, a clown, or a fully suited man with underpants on his head, amongst numerous other unidentified creatures, working studiously.

Thus many sections of this text, composed to meet the meticulous professional standards of a PhD thesis, were written with a pair of underpants on my head in a shop window. The text of a sign attached to my computer read “Why? Why not? Por qué? Por qué no?” descending into illegible nonsense script. One pedestrian, putting a note in the cookie jar I provided for comments and questions wrote: “This seems like some kind of protest”. I thus attempted to transform the condensation of exaggeratedly transgressive performance into a relatively normative academic text into a further opportunity for counter-normative intervention in public space. Here I hope to blur the boundary between creating and writing about absurd performance whilst querying through action the political motivations and import of both.



Fig 3-1: Performance writing at Grace Exhibition Space.

3. Evaluation of the impact of my personal demographic characteristics upon research

During the design and practice of my ethnography, I had to continually ask myself - what does it mean to be a white, male, middle-class, British (auto)ethnographer in these fieldsites? My personal and demographic characteristics, as with any ethnography, inevitably impacted the possibilities of my research. In both fieldsites, I was a foreigner, an outsider, yet one carrying different cultural connotations that necessitated different mouldings of research practice.

In BsAs, I was a representative of *el primer mundo* (the first world), *un gringo*⁴⁷, someone with pejorative roots in a part of the world responsible for grand swathes of colonial oppression. This otherness was exacerbated by being *rubiecito*: white, with blond hair and blue eyes - the stereotypical characteristics of a colonial European which made me stand out and became the fuel of many jokes. For example, my nickname amongst the ETP was *el vikingo* (the Viking). Being British specifically, I represented a nation seen by many as in active occupation of what is popularly perceived as Argentine soil: the Islas Malvinas/Falkland Islands. I had to maintain an awareness of such negative popular perceptions of a researcher with my privileges in order to work against them. Following the economic crisis and mass-demonstrations of 2001, to be detailed in-depth in chapter four, Argentina received an influx of foreign researchers and journalists keen to investigate emerging “experiments against neo-liberalism” (Ballvé and Prashad, 2006). This flood of international interest, now somewhat subsided, was so noticeable for a volunteer in a cultural centre of the neighbourhood of *Villa Crespo* to comment with a wry laugh upon learning of my fieldwork: ‘*Ay, pero llegaste tarde, teníamos muchísima gente como vos hace quince años*’ (Oh, but you arrived late, we had a lot of people like you fifteen years ago). Reflexivity around my position as a foreign ethnographer was

⁴⁷ ‘*Gringo*’ was classically used across Latin America to label people from the US, but has since widened its meaning in Argentina to include any person from the global north. Today ‘*yanqui*’ fulfills the function of a pejorative term solely for those from North America.

thus paramount in relation to cynicism towards overseas interest that had been seen to surge and wane in accordance with academic fashions.

In response to initial suspicion about my character and motives, I worked hard and with persistence to convince research co-performers in BsAs of my good will. For example, I took extra care to pitch in with menial communal tasks such as cleaning the toilets of collective spaces in attempt to shatter expectations of superciliousness. Such gestures, alongside sustained effort to demonstrate earnest interest in the opinions, processes, and actions of research co-performers - rather than take advantage or impose my own views as often assumed at first - was necessary to undo initial distrust and begin to forge friendships. My difference did not disappear - I was and always will be a *gringo* - yet, still, perhaps having shown myself through committed participation to be a different kind of gringo from the widely maligned flow of backpackers from more privileged corners of the globe that have problematically descended upon BsAs in recent years. On one occasion Dariel of ETP showed me the lyrics to the song ‘*Somos Sur*’ (We are the South) by Ana Tijoux that include the lines “*fuera yanquis de América Latina, y franceses, ingleses, y holandeses*” (get out Yankees from Latin America, and the French, the English, the Dutch). Upon reaching this verse, he laughed, hugged me, and said “*pero no vos, Hugo, quedáte tranquilo*” (but not you, Hugh, don’t worry).

In a city as phenomenally diverse as NYC, foreignness is more difficult to define and less emphasized. Accordingly, alongside the popular perception of Britain - the other half of the ‘special relationship’ - as a political ally rather than oppressor, my Britishness or Europeanness was generally treated more as a novelty than a barrier⁴⁸. Echoing reports by Wacquant (2004) and Gowan (2010) as French and British ethnographers working in the USA, I found this unthreatening otherness to mildly facilitate my integration in research communities. For example, some research co-performers in NYC wished to

⁴⁸ This novelty was solidified when, delving into a bag of fabrics, Kalan of The Cart Department produced a strip of fabric with the words “MADE IN ENGLAND” stitched into it and laughingly gifted it to me, the undisruptive yet undeniable distinctness of my cultural origin for research co-performers in NYC here condensed into a slip of cloth.

employ my 'quaint' accent in certain interventions whilst requests for clarification were often perceived as reflecting a charming rusticity, in direct contrast to commonplace assumptions of ignorant superiority in BsAs. Others in NYC took delight in ironically accosting me as a 'Limey', using the archaic pejorative nickname for British sailors, drawing attention irreverently to the datedness of such divisions, highlighting actual similarity through mockingly evoked conflict. Even Latino artists and activists in NYC, who one might expect to exhibit some of the apprehensiveness towards gringos that I experienced in BsAs, welcomed me with little tension, my acceptance expedited by my ability to speak Spanish in contrast with the majority of non-Latino people in NYC.

In connection with entrenched racial tensions in the USA, to be detailed in depth in chapter four, my whiteness inevitably moulded how different research co-performers interpreted my presence. Despite aforementioned purposive sampling efforts, the majority of my research co-performers in NYC were white and/or Latino, partly in reflection of the disproportionate whiteness of the scenes under study and partly of the restrictions upon me as a white researcher to conduct participant observation within collectives or spaces dedicated to performers of colour. On a number of occasions performers of colour made comments such as African-American artist Sol'Sax telling me regarding the role of everyday racist micro-aggressions upon his work - "You're never gonna understand that because you're white". The widespread belief was that a white person's empathetic and academic purview was delimited by their whiteness. Taking this on board, I endeavoured to pay extra careful attention to non-white performers' opinions on the impact of race upon their performance practices. Here I attempt to contribute to the undoing of the 'white gaze' whilst also not pretending that my research is representative of all intersectional vantage points upon absurd performance, based as it is upon a white ethnographer's observations within disproportionately white research populations.

Thus, throughout each stage of research, I have consciously attempted to minimize any potential inadvertent contribution as a privileged researcher to

the inequalities and socio-political absurdities, such as racism in the USA and neo-colonialism in Argentina, which my performances and research are intended to oppose. Meanwhile, I feed back a tragicomic recognition of the steam train of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal⁴⁹ 'progress' whose tracks may at times be rendered unintentionally more secure by my revolting dance steps - though I hope, at others, may still be dislodged.

⁴⁹ Here I borrow bell hooks' (2013) definition of the US socio-political system: "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy".

Chapter Four - Fieldwork Contexts: Key Cultural and Political Trends Influencing Absurd Performance in Buenos Aires and New York City

The characteristics of any field of social action firmly influence what may occur within each context and therefore what may be observed as ‘ethnographic data’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Fieldwork that does not pay close attention to the fields in which it operates, then, risks myopia, ignoring the interrelationship between what happens and where it takes place. As outlined in chapter two, this is a critique I propose of the oft-universalizing discourse of dominant tactical performance literature disproportionately informed by US case studies without attention to their contextual particularities. Exemplifying a more context-sensitive model for the future study of absurd performance, in this chapter I aim to equip the reader with a focused understanding of the socio-political and (sub)cultural worlds of my research co-performers in BsAs and NYC, which may then be mapped onto the forthcoming exposition of ethnographic data, enabling better comprehension of aspects of these distinct social worlds as differential influences upon absurd performance practice. Here my research contributes to growing currents of work critiquing and attempting to undo what Jon McKenzie has identified as the broader “imperialism of performance studies” (2006: 6) characterized by previous over-concentration upon Western, anglophone case studies.

Recent studies countering ethnocentrism within Performance Studies include Jesse Weaver Shipley’s (2015) investigation of Ghanaian ‘trickster theatre’, Chrsitine Douxami’s (2019) work with experimental black and anti-racist performance in Brazil, Adair Rounthwaite’s (2019) dissection of the shared history of the Balkan nations that formerly comprised Yugoslavia upon performances that interrogate the notion of national identity, and Burcu Yasemin Seyben’s (2019) assessment of the influence of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian regime upon performing arts in Turkey, amongst many others. McKenzie, Roms, and Wee (2010) have documented this drive to ‘decentre’ performance research by compiling accounts of varied Performance Studies approaches developed in relation to different research contexts worldwide. I

argue that academic assessment of political absurd performance, dominated by the disproportionately US-focused tactical performance literature detailed in chapter two, has often lagged behind this shift. I seek to open the way for more culturally sensitive consideration of this topic through my research. Via engagement with the contrasting histories of BsAs and NYC as unique influences upon the distinct absurd performance practices I observed within each fieldsite, I thus heed and reinforce calls to consider the impact of different ‘glocal’ (Čale-Feldman and Blažević, 2010) contexts on diverse culturally-situated performance practices.

Both of my fieldsites boast pronounced identities and the potential to inflame gushing pride, biting disdain, or a love/hate mixture in their residents. The ‘Big Apple’ is famously referred to with aggrandizing subtitles like ‘the greatest city in the world’ or ‘the city that never sleeps’ whilst the ‘Buenos Aires querido’ (Darling Buenos Aires) of tango singer Carlos Gardel dances around the label ‘Paris of Latin America’. These brandings are, as hackneyed tourist lures, often superficial, yet nonetheless indicate the tip of more profound meshes of (sub)cultural identities formulated in relation to the cities they co-inhabit. I aim to explicate this more complex composition in this chapter, pointing to the position(s) of absurd performance for both artists and activists within the cultural lattices of BsAs and NYC. Still, I cannot hope to convey fully the difference between walking the streets of BsAs or NYC at the start of each fieldwork period, having read several academic texts about each city but lost in their noisy actualities, and walking the same routes at the end of fieldwork, having absorbed some of the spirit of each place and tied them to my own. This in turn serves as a reminder that my ‘understanding’ of my fieldsites and the absurd performances they provoke, based on extensive but still limited fieldwork, pales in comparison with the lived knowledge of my research co-performers, from whom I have tried to learn as much as I was able.

Throughout fieldwork, I noticed multiple versions of apparently the same histories in circulation. This applied equally to broader histories, such as how a neighbourhood had been prior to gentrification, as well as personal accounts of

previous performances. Subsequently, it is important to make the distinction between actual histories and perceptions of these histories (Nora, 1989), recognizing that the latter, which may not map directly onto the former, is that which directly influences the practice of social actors. At the same time, the plausibility of an ‘actual history’ must be questioned, recognizing that what is projected as an official history is necessarily the dominant presentation amongst a plurality of possible readings of what occurred (White, 1973; Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994). As such, while I attempt to present historical facts as accurately as possible throughout this chapter, within data analysis I shall give precedence to how these facts were understood and processed by my research co-performers as a more direct influence upon their absurd performance practice.

Meanwhile, it is noted that none of the contextual motivations for creating absurd performance highlighted here may be considered mutually exclusive. For instance, although I will explore the most recent military dictatorship in Argentina as a prominent *historical* influence upon absurd performance possibilities, many groups that emerged in response to the routinized abduction, torture, and ‘disappearances’ of those considered dissidents remain important *contemporary* political forces in BsAs. Perhaps the most notable of these is *Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) comprised of mothers of the disappeared who to this day maintain weekly vigils and regularly lead campaigns and marches in their characteristic white *pañuelos* (headscarves) with the names of their lost children embroidered in Argentine celeste upon them (Navarro, 2001; Taylor, 1997; Bosco, 2006; Borland, 2006). History and actuality, culture and ideology, art and activism are all impossible to cleanly separate and are only presented beneath separate subheadings as an attempt to render my expression of such intricately complex realities a little easier to write and, I hope also, to read and understand.

1. Key socio-cultural characteristics

1.1 Buenos Aires: Latinidad, europeidad, argentinidad

Latinidad serves as an academic label for the sense of collective continental identity often shared amongst people with Latin American heritage, discussed by Felix Padilla (1985) in his research with Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago and subsequently widely adopted across Latin American cultural studies (Gracia, 2000; Delgado and Stefancic, 2011). *Europeidad* is the equivalent Spanish term to refer to apparent ‘European-ness’. I observed tensions between perceived *europeidad* and *latinidad*, informing an unsteady notion of a specifically Argentine cultural identity, or *argentinidad*, to be a prominent influence upon absurd performance practice in BsAs. Such continental quintessences are ultimately indefinable, yet these imagined subjectivities still feed into blurry ideas of what it means to be a *porteño*⁵⁰ and create absurd performance beneath this cultural mantle, as shall be illustrated in chapter seven.

I often encountered the argument during fieldwork that it is the constant juxtaposition of more classically ‘European’ and ‘Latino’ elements that characterizes the distinct culture of Argentina and BsAs. Here the architecture, cuisine, and political ideologies brought over by European, especially Spanish and Italian, migrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are seen to have meshed with *criollo* (European descended yet born on colonized land) and *mestizo* (mixed European and indigenous ancestry) innovations such as *gaucho*⁵¹ culture, alongside some adapted indigenous practices such as the communal

⁵⁰ Residents of BsAs are collectively known as *porteños*⁵⁰ (literally people of the port), or occasionally *bonaerenses* (literally people of BsAs). The feminine form would be *porteña*, whilst the grammatically non-standard gender neutral forms, often favoured amongst my research co-performers yet not widely societally used, would be *porteñx* or *porteñe*.

⁵¹ *Gaucho* refers to a cowboy-like cattle-work culture developed in colonized Argentina and surrounding areas. The epic poem *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández (1872), widely considered the national poem of Argentina, explores the gaucho as a symbol of Argentine nationalism.

drinking of *mate*⁵². I encountered the patrimony of tango as a uniquely Argentine music and dance stemming from this ‘melting pot’ of influences often presented as emblematic of a distinct *argentinidad*. The tango then exemplifies how rhetorical separation of actually hybridized ‘European’ and ‘Latino’ founts of cultural influence may be considered a fallacy. However, such essentializations still hold considerable political clout, often symbolizing class divides. In broad lines the supposedly ‘European’ is seen as more middle class and the supposedly ‘Latino’ as more working class. A prominent political rift exists between right-wing commenters wishing to frame Argentina and BsAs as more ‘European’ and left-wing commentators typically emphasizing a more ‘Latino’ identity. I observed absurd performance in BsAs to be consistently moulded in relation to these clashing class-based cultural framings, as will be illustrated during data analysis.

This consistent tension is exemplified by the scandal of ‘*la cheta de Nordelta*’ (the posh woman of the north Tigre delta) that erupted during my fieldwork (Rivas Molina, 2017). Here an audio was leaked of a voicemail of a middle-class woman from the gentrified BsAs neighbourhood of Palermo complaining to a friend that the neighbours of her second home in the Tigre delta north of BsAs were “*bestias*” (beasts) who went against her “*codigos de estética y ética*” (aesthetic and ethical codes) by drinking *mate* by the waterfront. Such rejection of cultural practices deemed unrefined, as well as forceful resistance to such prejudice - including the organization of a mass *mate* drinking in the north Tigre delta in response to ‘*la cheta*’ - was tied inextricably to notions of the ‘European’ and the ‘Latino’.

Meanwhile, during the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, then neo-liberal Argentine president Mauricio Macri denied the entire existence of the indigenous peoples of Latin America with the claim that a Mercosur-European Union trade agreement would be “a natural association because in South America, we are all descendants from Europe” (Telesur, 2018). Tellingly, whilst

⁵² *Mate* is an infusion made from the leaves of the yerba mate plant, steeped in lukewarm water in a gourd and drunk through a specialized straw, typically shared amongst a group.

this comment caused controversy in left-wing circles, Macri was not forced to revoke or apologize for his comments. The ongoing repression of indigenous people runs to the core of Argentine history. One of the prime reasons why the loaded claim that BsAs is a European city located in South America has been able to gain such credence is a result of the scale and brutality of the genocide of the indigenous peoples of Argentina, rendering their profound histories often almost invisible. It is in this way that conservatives often project the cultural influences of European colonizers as inherent, even 'native' to Argentina, whilst influences of indigenous peoples of America, largely represented in BsAs today by poor immigrants from across the colonially invented borders of Paraguay, Bolivia, or Peru, are presented as 'foreign'. Further, state repression and killing of indigenous people continues to this day, as will be discussed further below. This stark socio-political absurdity of unending colonialism tied to notions of the 'European' as superior to the 'Latino' or '*Indio*' (Indian - xenophobic term for indigenous people) weighs upon absurd performance possibilities in BsAs. Which side of the *latinidad:eupeidad* spectrum a given performance is imagined to represent alters its potential political motivations and resonance significantly.

I cannot address the cultural construction and political mobilization of notions of *argentinidad* without making reference to the controversial icon, Juan Domingo Perón, president of Argentina from 1946 until his overthrow and exile following the military coup of 1955, and briefly again upon the temporary return of democracy in 1973 until his death in 1974. Throughout his career, Perón mixed elements of left and right wing politics: endorsing unionization, increasing free access to education, and expanding social welfare, whilst persecuting intellectuals, seeking to remove all figures that disagreed with him from public institutions, and sympathizing with Nazism. Historian Jill Hedges points to the "total lack of orthodox ideological conviction" within Peronism, adding:

Perón was a sort of ideological string-saver who pieced together the patchwork of Peronist 'ideology' by incorporating bits of any type of thinking, left, right or centre, which came to hand and which could serve a useful purpose (2011: 88/89).

Consequently, political factions that refer to themselves as ‘Peronist’ have ranged from leftist revolutionaries such as the *Montoneros* (Gillespie, 1982; Duzdevich, Raffoul, and Beltramini, 2015) to fascist groups such as *Alianza Libertadora Nacionalista* (Nationalist Liberating Alliance) (Brodsky, 2013; Furman, 2014), whilst the neo-liberal presidency of Carlos Menem and the leftist ‘pink tide’ tenures of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner both proudly bore this same title. As such, Peronism is often seen both within and outside of Argentina as incomprehensible. Chili of ETP reflected a common sentiment when responding to the question of what Peronism means: “*nada, puede significar lo que quieras*” (nothing, it can mean whatever you want it to). This maps on to Marina Sitrin’s reading:

Peronism is an ideology, a person, a politic, a relationship, and an identity. It can be negative, implying centralized rule or even dictatorship, or it can mean democracy and workers power. This plurality creates a situation which for some has very little meaning, while for others it can be heavily weighted. (Sitrin, 2012: 28/29).

The continued ascendancy of the messy, open-to-interpretation political ideology of Peronism in Argentina may be seen as a reflection of the ongoing cultural uncertainty described above. An aspect of *argentinidad*, too, is its patchwork construction of multiple seemingly incongruent ‘Latino’ and ‘European’ elements. During data analysis the influence upon absurd performance practices of such volatility as an integral characteristic of Argentine cultural and political life, combined with normalized corruption, shall be contrasted with commonplace perceptions in NYC of a flawed but ultimately honest political system.

1.2 New York City: NYC exceptionalism

Dipping into a deli in Bushwick, seeking food whilst The Cart Department took a break from performing, I joined the line to order sandwiches, still in full mask and costume. Waiting, I heard the words, “*Only in Brooklyn, only in Brooklyn*” being repeated over and over. I looked across to their origin and saw a man taking a video on his cellphone, adding - “*You only see this mad shit in*

Brooklyn". This anecdote demonstrates a widely held perception that I encountered during my fieldwork that NYC, and even individual boroughs or neighbourhoods therein, are exceptional, unique places where much is possible that would not be elsewhere. On one hand, this is interpretable as media spin and tourist hype regurgitated as truism. However, on the other hand, given the unusual density and diversity of NYC, it is genuinely possible to do and see a combination of things that it would be difficult to imagine in many other locations.

I encountered the phrase '*This is New York*' (or similar iterations such as '*Welcome to New York*') used as if an immediately transparent explanation within situations as diverse as the clashing of multiple events on one night, the sudden end of a romantic relationship, and the discovery of a silver bodysuit in the trash. A thread linking such remarks was a sense of NYC as a hectic cornucopia of opportunities where one's time is precariously spilt between a surfeit of activities, people, and things. As such, I observed performers often project NYC as a stimulating symbol of wild opportunity and creative flair, acting as a uniquely inspiring backdrop for their actions. JME of The Cart Department told me that after a few years in NYC, one accumulates memories connected to different corners of the city - the houses of ex-lovers or the sites where a certain performance was premiered, for example. When I commented that this could be the case in any city, JME disagreed, saying - "Yeah, but New York's New York, you know?" The exceptionalism emblemized by this remark or the '*Only in Brooklyn*' anecdote above often appeared as a self-fulfilling prophecy within my observations wherein the entrenched belief that NYC is remarkable facilitated the creation of remarkable things, as data analysis shall show to have been influential upon the absurd performance practices I observed there.

Being a New Yorker throughout my observations meant first and foremost being somewhere special, and being special oneself by association. My research co-performers in particular put emphasis upon NYC as a progressive social/cultural/political/artistic haven in contrast to the more conservative

wider USA. Steven Jaffe's declaration within his history of activism in NYC from colonization to the present day that "New York has played an especially important role in the history of leftist and liberal activism" (2018: 13) was widely shared by the activists I worked with who often emphasized the heritage of groups such as the Yippies (Hoffman, 1971) and ACT UP (Gould, 2009), as well as some ongoing NYC innovators of activist absurd intervention such as The Church of Stop Shopping overviewed in chapter two or The Yes Men (Mouffe, 2008; Lambert, Bonanno, and Bichlbaum, 2009). Consequently, I found NYC activists to often conceive of their practice as a national or even international role model. Meanwhile, NYC has an undeniable global prominence as a laboratory of avant-garde performance that was often referenced by The Cart Department. Bleeding into each other throughout the 20th and 21st centuries NYC has been home to multifarious experimental movements: NYC Dada (Naumann, 1994); Fluxus and Happenings (Smith, 1998; Higgins, 2002); Neo-dada (Hapgood, 1994); Pop-Art centring around Warhol's Silver Factory (Watson, 2014); the 'art utopia' of 60s SoHo/Chelsea (Kostelanetz, 2003); Experimentalism (Piekut, 2011); Franklin Furnace (Sant, 2011); The Living Theatre (Tytell, 1997; Malina, 2015); and Guerrilla Girls (Guerrilla Girls, 1995; Withers, 1988; Kahlo and Kollwitz, 2010). Absurd performance amongst both activists and artists in NYC, then, is created atop particularly illustrious lineages of transgressive experimentation, something I observed to sometimes drive forward further innovation yet at others times breed a jaded desensitization to absurd intervention, as shall be illustrated during data analysis.

2. Key political histories

Given the vast size and even vaster histories of both BsAs and NYC, historical accounts here cannot be comprehensive⁵³. Rather, I report key aspects influencing the production of absurd performance as emphasized by research co-performers and which open analysis of the contextually contingent expression of different (supra)tactical absurd performance practices as conceptually outlined

⁵³ No historical account can ever be comprehensive, but for a broader survey of the political history of BsAs one might look to Rapoport and Seoane (2007) and Romero and Romero (2000), and in the case of NYC, Burrows and Wallace (1999) and Jackson and Dunbar (2005).

in chapter two and to be ethnographically illustrated within data analysis. For example, although the military dictatorships of 1930-32, 1943-46, 1955-58 and 1966-73 in Argentina doubtless significantly influenced the BsAs encountered today, it is the more recent, more bloody 1976-83 period of totalitarian rule and its “*imborrable rastro de sangre y mugre*” (inerasable footprint of blood and grime) (Galeano, 1989: 174) which was far more regularly referenced by research co-performers as an historical influence upon their practice. Indeed, when someone made reference to *la dictadura* (the dictatorship) there was never ambiguity concerning which epoch they spoke of. As such, I detail the 1976-83 dictatorship as a prominent influence upon absurd performance practice in BsAs, giving less attention to preceding periods of unrest.

I aim to combat ethnocentric tendencies in the West that assume, often inadvertently, that events of historical and political significance to the global north are universally recognized as History with a capital aitch, whereas events in the global south are parochial. It is often unconsciously assumed by Western commentators that their dominant understandings of history represent a form of truth, rather than one version and interpretation of events amongst a global plurality. Indeed, as shall be substantiated in chapter seven, one of the major contributions of this thesis to current academic discourse on the practice of political absurd performance is the undoing of falsely universalizing over-emphasis upon Western case studies and histories in order to account for broader contextually contingent (supra)tactical absurd performances practices worldwide.

The divide between what is typically considered historically and politically most significant in BsAs and NYC may be exemplified by the date of 11 September. In NYC specifically and the West more broadly, this date commonly signifies 9/11, the attack of Al Qaeda upon the World Trade Center. However, for many in BsAs and across South America, the same date evokes primarily not 2001, but rather 1973, when the Chilean army, headed by Augusto Pinochet, staged a coup d'état that began *Operation Condor* - the instigation and financing of military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, and

Uruguay by the CIA as part of anti-communist cold war operations. The same date in different contexts signifies opposite things: the USA as victim and perpetrator of terrorist violence. Thus, when one hears the currently popular North American⁵⁴ rhetorical device to talk of ‘making history’ in relation to apparently significant political acts, the question might be begged: whose history?

This question is inspired by numerous critiques of a homogenizing, heteronormative, ‘whitewashed’ notion of history as exclusionary to marginalized populations such as the working class, ‘people of colour’ (POC), or queer communities (Fuglestad, 2005; Rösen, 2004; Halperin, 2004; Wylie, 2012; Painter, 2006; hooks, 2014). However, even many of these valuable critiques largely restrict themselves to internal comment upon Western regional foci. Reading Jasbir Puar’s (2007) concept of homonationalism intersectionally, we might identify a warning of the potential subsumption of, say, queer or POC or working class histories to the norms of traditional hegemonic historical models and associated presentation of the queer/POC/working class ideals of a given (Western) context as if they were representative of such ideals in all contexts. Within this research I seek to articulate a similar warning in response to the dominant tactical performance literature outlaid in chapter two that suggests an obligatory tacticality of absurd performance based upon predominately Western activist case studies, ignoring the kinds of cross-cultural variations that my ethnography illustrates, as shall be illustrated throughout data analysis.

⁵⁴ Despite the English language convention to refer to the United States of America simply as ‘America’ and to its residents as ‘Americans’, I refuse to do this within my writing on the region. This is in recognition of the commonly held indignation that I discovered in Argentina for the reduction of the continental name of ‘America’ to label only the most powerful nation within the region, which was often seen as symbolic of the neo-imperialism of the USA in Latin America. As Grace Livingstone puts it in her critique of the popular U.S. political assessment of Latin America as ‘America’s backyard’: “the usurping of the title ‘America’ by the United States is symptomatic of an enduring imperial arrogance” (Livingstone, 2009: 6).

2.1 Buenos Aires: ‘*Nunca más*’ and ‘*Que se vayan todos*’

Two historical events stood out most prominently in shaping the conversations, attitudes, and actions of my research co-performers in BsAs. These are the military dictatorship of 1976-83 and the economic and political crises of 2001 and their aftermath. The two phrases included in the above subtitle correspond to these two moments. ‘*Nunca más*’ (never again) remains a ubiquitous refrain in relation to the dictatorship having served as the title of the report of the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) (CONADEP) commissioned by the first post-dictatorship government of Raúl Alfonsín in 1984⁵⁵. Meanwhile, ‘*Que se vayan todos*’ (may they all leave) was the insistent chant directed towards the *Casa Rosada* (the Argentine national governmental palace) from the mass-demonstrations of December 2001 at the peak of anger, hunger, and desperation caused by the economic crisis, leading to the collapse of the government. In what follows, I will give, in chronological order, an overview of these two periods. I will nod towards the potential impacts of these prominent elements of historical context upon absurd performance practices in BsAs, to be substantiated with ethnographic evidence in chapter seven.

2.1.1 *Nunca Más*

On 24 March 1976, the Argentine military, clandestinely supported with resources and training by the CIA, staged a coup that would lead to the so-called

⁵⁵ On 10 May 2017 Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo called a march against the proposed extension of *dos por uno* (two for one) laws allowing the possible release of prisoners after half their sentences in return for ‘good behaviour’ to include those imprisoned for *crímenes de lesa humanidad* (crimes against humanity) such as perpetrators of the military dictatorship. During this march, I sang the following chant in tremendous chorus alongside the over 500,000 people in attendance: “*Por el nunca más, vamos a luchar, contra el olvido, y la impunidad*” (For the never again, we will fight, against forgetfulness, and impunity). What I wish to highlight here is the commonplace nominalization of “*el nunca más*” (the never again), the unproblematic transformation of the phrase into a noun embraced by such an enormous collection of people acting as a clear symbol of the enduring centrality of this concept to Argentine public life and political consciousness. This has informed ample investigations in Argentine memory studies, as well condensed in Emilio Crenzel’s (2008) meticulous account of the CONADEP report and its eponymous phrase.

Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process of National Reorganization), widely considered one of the most bloody dictatorships in the history of Latin America. Between that date and the end of military rule in 1983, at least 498⁵⁶ clandestine centres of detention, torture, and extermination operated within Argentina, where an estimated 30,000 suspected ‘subversives’ were ‘disappeared’⁵⁷, and approximately 500 babies born to mothers executed soon afterwards were appropriated to be brought up in military families or sold. Censorship of any cultural material considered potentially seditious was violently enforced. Repeated waves of shock have washed over Argentina as fresh atrocities have been uncovered, including perhaps most infamously the routine *vuelos de la muerte* (flights of death) where chemically paralyzed yet fully-conscious detainees were dropped from planes into the *Río de la Plata* (the river that separates BsAs and Uruguay) to drown. To this day there are effectively no green vehicles in Argentina, courtesy to the painful memory of green Ford Falcon cars used by military abduction squads.

The fortieth anniversary of the coup passed the year before my fieldwork, marked, as every year on 24 March since 1983 in BsAs and across Argentina, by an enormous march defending human rights. That year the march was rendered even greater by the ill-timed state visit of then president of the USA, Barack Obama. Indeed, as activist media collective Lavaca (2016) noted, the title of ‘march’ for this event was a misnomer: “[l]a *marcha fue tan masiva que nadie podía marchar*” (the march was so massive that nobody could march). The streets became so full that there remained no space to move. This overwhelming physical presence was reflected in my experience during fieldwork the following year. The passing of more than four decades since the onset of dictatorship does not appear to have eroded the prominence of this period for Argentine street politics nor, as I will show during data analysis, its influence on absurd performance. Despite such force of popular opinion, during my fieldwork Mauricio Macri’s government attempted to renege on several initiatives of

⁵⁶ This number is the quantity of verifiably identified clandestine detention centres cited in the updated 2015 edition of the 1984 CONADEP report. The actual quantity may be yet higher.

⁵⁷ ‘*Los desaparecidos*’ (the disappeared) is the most commonly used term to describe those killed during the dictatorship due to the routine practice of the military to abduct their targets without warning or admission, effectively making them ‘vanish’. The fates of thousands remain officially unknown.

accountability and prosecution regarding members of the military junta, introduced under the previous, more left-wing governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner⁵⁸. Following this, it may be suggested that the memory of the dictatorship, and the need to face up to this as individuals and as a society, was even more present during my fieldwork than at other moments in recent history when this process was not perceived to be at such great risk.

The official state title for 24 March, created in 2002 and converted into a national holiday in 2005, is *Día Nacional de la Memoria por la Verdad y la Justicia* (National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice). During my fieldwork Macri's government attempted to make the date of this holiday movable, yet they were forced to retract this proposal following broad reproach from human rights organizations that saw this as an offensive disregard for the symbolic value of 24 March (Página 12, 2017). This reverence for certain dates relating to the dictatorship is notable year-round, such as *La Noche de los Lápices* (The night of the pencils) every 16 September with events commemorating the 1976 'disappearance' of numerous secondary school students who had previously campaigned to preserve subsidized public transport for schoolgoers⁵⁹. In relation to such dates and themes of dictatorship in general, the possibility and appropriateness of absurd performance is hotly contested, as will be explored during data analysis.

⁵⁸ Recent wavering of policy regarding the prosecution of those responsible for the dictatorship is reflective of persistent yo-yoing on the issue in Argentine politics since 1983. Raúl Alfonsín, as the first democratically elected president following the dictatorship, began his tenure by commissioning the CONADEP report and pledging to bring those responsible for crimes against humanity to justice. However, under pressure from the military, Alfonsín introduced the *Ley de Punto Final* (Full Stop Law) in 1986 declaring that no further trials against those involved in the dictatorship would be permissible, and the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience) in 1987 that exempted subordinates for being prosecuted for carrying out orders. Later, following the election of Carlos Menem in 1989, the new president swiftly moved to pardon even those who had been prosecuted during the initial phase of Alfonsín's government, including the de facto president during the majority of the dictatorship, Jorge Rafael Videla. It was not until 2003, under the government of Néstor Kirchner, that the *Ley de Punto Final* and *Ley de Obediencia Debida* were repealed, and not until 2005 that they were officially removed from the Argentine statute books and prosecution proceedings could fully restart. For a robust account of this tumultuous history and the continued fight against impunity, included within a run-through of Argentine history from 1853 onwards, see Jill Hedges (2011).

⁵⁹ Such events are often further inscribed in the Argentine collective consciousness by virtue of a wave of cinema immediately following the dictatorship that dealt with recently suffered atrocities, such as Héctor Olivera's *La Noche de los Lápices* (1986) or Luis Puenzo's *La Historia Oficial* (1985).

Tied to the dictatorship, *memoria* (memory) is an omnipresent concept in political discourse at all levels in BsAs, from the squatted theatres and independent galleries of my research to the national congress. Entering as an outsider, it was strikingly ubiquitous, referenced almost exclusively in relation to the dictatorship, alongside some less frequently discussed events such as the war with the British in *Las Islas Malvinas* (The Falkland Islands). In reflection of this, exploration of '*memoria*' serves as a central pillar of much research focused on recent Argentine and broader Latin America history since the dictatorships of the 70s and 80s (Rajca, 2018; Tandeciarz, 2017; Delgadillo, 2015; Blejmar, 2016; Lessa and Druliolle, 2011; Jelin and Kaufman, 2002). Several former detention centres in BsAs and across Argentina have been transformed into '*espacios de la memoria*' (spaces of memory). Perhaps the most notable example is the former *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA) in the BsAs neighbourhood of Nuñez, now widely referred to as the 'ex-ESMA' and the site of some performances observed during fieldwork to be analysed later. Here the *Museo de la Memoria* (Museum of Memory) is based, where rooms used for torture, execution, and the delivery of babies to be stolen remain preserved as they were left in 1983.

Such spaces across Latin America, interconnected with the preservation and exhibition of sites of genocide elsewhere such as European Nazi concentration camps, inform their own area of study, debating the 'marketing of memory' (Bilbija and Payne, 2011). This field of investigation underlines my observations in BsAs of the enduring weight of a history of fascist slaughter upon political consciousness and action, in turn influencing potential absurd performance practices. Documenting the translation of this constant societal preoccupation into the arts, the centrality of notions of memory and forgetfulness to post-dictatorship Argentine theatre and performance has been roundly noted in recent scholarship (Montez, 2018; Werth, 2010). My research then adds an assessment of the impact of expectations regarding the appropriate memorialization of the dictatorship upon contemporary absurd performance practice in BsAs, in contrast to the context of NYC not characterized by such discourses. As shall be illustrated during data analysis, the

notion of respectful memorialization of the disappeared as mobilized within the radical activist and artist collectives of my fieldwork often included an emphasis upon respecting the traditional anti-capitalist struggle and associated organizing tactics that many of the fallen were seen to represent, sometimes placing checks upon absurd performance innovations.

Connected to above reflection concerning the volatile process of reporting history, conflict continues over the contemporary framing of the 1976-83 dictatorship, with particular ire generated within the communities of my research in relation to notions of the *teoría de los dos demonios* (theory of two demons) and the *guerra sucia* (dirty war). The *teoría de los dos demonios* is based on the assertion that there were two violent parties to blame for the occurrence of the ultimate dictatorship. The first demon here is the military who performed the coup, and the other is the revolutionary groups such as the *Montoneros* and the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) who are seen from this perspective to have provoked the coup through the unrest caused by their armed pursuit of various leftist Peronist or socialist agendas in the 60s and 70s. I found this perspective often criticized as a shrouded attempt to legitimize the abuses of the dictatorship as an inevitable result of revolutionary agitation, with the victims of the *genocidio*⁶⁰ (genocide) supposedly ‘bringing it upon themselves’ through affiliation with radical groups.

Even setting arguments against torture and execution aside as if the assumption were defensible that such treatment of the ‘guilty’ could be legitimate, this theory still ignores the great diversity of people disappeared, some of whom did belong to aforementioned revolutionary cells yet many more of whom did not (CONADEP, 2015). Similarly it may be seen as perverse to suggest through the label of oppositional ‘demons’ that the forces of the military and the revolutionaries were somehow equitable, when in reality the

⁶⁰ *Genocidio* is the term most often used to label the mass-killing performed by the military state between 1976-83. However, as Jérémy of Etcétera pointed out to me, such ubiquitous association holds the potential to eclipse the genocide of the indigenous peoples of Argentina during colonization, reminding me that our performances ought to be informed by a broader grasp of history. This was in general agreed upon by research co-performers in BsAs yet in practice I observed the influence of more recent events to be consistently much stronger.

CIA-funded state wielded significantly greater resources, precisely with which they were able to subjugate the entire population of Argentina on a scale that dwarfed the sporadic actions of guerrillas. The *teoría de los dos demonios* may then be seen as a smokescreen, purporting to offer a backdrop of historical context to the military coup, whilst ignoring disproportions between the actions ostensibly being counterpoised. Connectedly the title of *guerra sucia* was broadly disdained by research co-performers as misleadingly suggesting that what occurred between 1976-1983 was a civil war rather than dictatorship, the heinous fascism of the junta once again cast as righteous defence against the menace of supposed terrorism. The ludicrousness of the perseverance of such apologism for fascism fired incredulous recognition of socio-political absurdity amongst numerous research co-performers in BsAs, partially inspiring absurd intervention, as shall be illustrated during data analysis.

As Heather Love puts it in relation to queerness, “[f]or groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (2007: 1). In BsAs, I occasionally encountered a swell of pride amongst research co-performers in considering the manner in which they continued to confront the darkest elements of their collective history. On multiple occasions I encountered the sentiment that, whilst still leaving much to be desired, Argentina had at least prosecuted more of those responsible for *terrorismo del estado* (state terrorism) than other Latin American nations with similar histories such as Chile or Brazil, and that this was the result of sustained political action. Two movements inspired particular admiration. Above all I observed a profound reverence for the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. Alongside this ubiquitous reference, many research co-performers also emphasized the innovation of the human rights activist collective *H.I.J.O.S.* of the denunciatory theatrical spectacle - sometimes including absurd components - of the *escrache* (Kaiser, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Druliolle, 2013).

Escrache is a noun derived from the verb *escrachar* of the *lunfardo* slang of BsAs that roughly translates as ‘to break’. As a noun it labels a specific form of demonstration developed against the impunity of *genocidas* (those responsible

for genocide). Such protests typically involve the highlighting of the residence of a *genocida* through a theatrical spectacle outside their door, demands for justice and imprisonment being made, and the building being given a '*mancha*' (stain) such as splatters of red paint or a specially made road sign such as those designed by *Grupo de Arte Callejero* (GAC, 2009). Argentine Performance Studies scholar Cecilia Sosa has summarized these interventions as "massive, festive and mobile spectacles of public shaming" (2014: 31). The graffiti slogan - '*Si no hay justicia, hay escrache*' (if there is no justice, then there is an *escrache*) - remains prevalent around BsAs, testifying to the broad cultural rootedness of this vigilante theatrical practice, recently adapted by other movements such as feminist groups demonstrating outside the houses of unprosecuted sexual abusers. It works "breaking walls of fear...breaking silence", to quote Diego Benegas Loyo (2014: 391) concerning H.I.J.O.S.. As I shall analyse further in chapter seven, Etcétera began their long history of street intervention working alongside H.I.J.O.S., often inserting absurd elements into *escraches*, this history remaining embedded in their, and others', use of absurd performance in BsAs today.

2.1.2 *Que Se Vayan Todos*

"*Diciembre es un mes caliente*" (December is a hot month), Alvaro of ETP joked about the continued resonance of the popular uprisings in Argentina, with their epicentre in BsAs, at the end of 2001. December, indeed, is a suffocatingly hot month in the humid streets of BsAs. With banks refusing to dispense money, super-inflated food prices and utility bills, and palpable hunger, on 19 and 20 December 2001, these streets exploded in demonstrations across diverse social classes. As Marina Sitrin, notes:

[t]he social movements that arose in Argentina are socially, economically, and geographically diverse. They comprise working class people taking over factories...middle class urban dwellers...the unemployed...and autonomous indigenous communities struggling to liberate stolen land (2012: 5).

The middle classes from more well-to-do areas of central BsAs such as Recoleta and Palermo, concerned for the potential loss of their life savings, engaged en masse in a form of demonstration known as a *cacerolazo* wherein pots and pans were banged together in unison, by thousands, creating tremendous noise. The suffix *-azo* is used to create a word that denotes a grand spectacle involving the thing signified by the root word, very often but not necessarily in relation to protest activity. *Cacerola* means saucepan and, as such, *cacerolazo* translates as ‘grand spectacle of saucepans’⁶¹. Concordantly, the events of December 2001 are themselves commonly referred to as the *Argentinazo*. Meanwhile, in poorer areas of the greater conurbation, and especially around the *villas* (Argentine term for shanty towns), many supermarkets were looted. By the end of the two days, thirty-nine people had been killed across Argentina, mainly shot by police or shopkeepers. Converging under the common call of ‘*vamos todos a la plaza*’ (let’s all go to the plaza), which still holds strong resonance in relation to current issues, groups from across the entire conurbation descended on the Plaza de Mayo⁶² surrounding the seat of the Argentine government, the Casa Rosada.

It was at the height of this rebellion that then president Fernando de la Rúa fled the Casa Rosada by helicopter, producing a tragicomic image still often reflected upon today. The helicopter endures as a potent symbol of the powerful fleeing from the mess they have created, as is of central significance to a prominent performance of Etcétera with a cardboard helicopter that I shall analyse in chapter seven. Of course, the enormous uprising of December 2001

⁶¹ This suffix allows for significant absurd creativity. For example, a formative intervention of Etcétera in 2002 was called the *mierdazo* (grand spectacle of shit). This involved setting up a toilet at the steps of the national congress and inviting people to shit on the system that had already shat on them and throw bags full of shit at the congress.

⁶² A rounded assessment of the profound political symbolism of the *Plaza de Mayo* is offered by Silvia Sigal (2006). Throughout the history of BsAs, this site has been the focal point of enormous political gatherings. It witnessed the iconic revolt of ‘*los descamisados*’ (the shirtless) in defence of Perón against oppression from other military figures in 1945 and associated speeches by Perón and his wife Evita, cementing them as national heroes. It is the location of the weekly ‘*ronda de las madres*’ (patrol of the mothers) every Thursday where the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* walk silently around the central *Pirámide de Mayo* sculpture displaying the names of their disappeared children as a consistent reminder of the many state murders that remain unresolved. It remains today where almost every large march terminates and every large rally occurs.

was not an isolated event, rather the most spectacular of a diversity of interconnected reactions to the crisis, both preceding and following what is often referred to as *el estadillo* (the explosion). Of this web of interlinked activities, I highlight as influential upon contemporary absurd performance practice the *piqueteros* workers movements, neighbourhood assemblies, occupation and cooperativization of workplaces, and the growth of cooperative cultural centres following the model of *autogestión* to be explained below.

“¡Los mejores, los únicos, los métodos piqueteros!” (the best, the only, the *piquetero* methods) - with this chant starts the popular song ‘Los Métodos Piqueteros’ by Argentine ska-rock band *Las Manos de Filippi*. *Piqueteros* literally translates as picketers, yet functions in Argentina as a label for a more profound identity and practice of mass-organization than this term would suggest in English, and as such I leave it untranslated. *Piquetero* methods developed in the time surrounding the *Argentinazo* centre around extended ‘*cortes de ruta*’ (roadblocks), often using the bodies of participants, vehicles, and large fires, causing significant disruption to the usual functioning of urban areas. The spaces created upon occupied roads may then provide a location for holding popular assemblies, making demands of government, socializing and radical network building, and - most significantly to my research - radical music, theatre, and performance.

Intimately connected to the *piquetero* movements is the direct democracy practice of assembly, which became widespread following the *Argentinazo*. In BsAs this took the form of *asambleas barriales* (neighbourhood assemblies), with neighbours discussing local issues and movement possibilities on a regular basis and attempting to self-organize to address them. Representatives of these assemblies occasionally gathered in huge citywide assemblies in large public spaces such as *Parque Centenario*. It is here that the concept of *horizontalidad* (horizontalism), which designates organizational operation with minimized hierarchy and optimized respect and dignity⁶³,

⁶³ These concepts of ‘*respeto*’ (respect) and especially ‘*dignidad*’ (dignity) are of central importance to the Argentine political imaginary, potentially traceable to the legacy of Perón’s

originated. Marina Sitrin has argued that this practice constitutes an innovative form of social relation that purportedly can “create new people” (2012: 70). During my fieldwork the values of assembly and the ostensible equal right of all to contribute to decision-making remained prominent influences upon my research co-performers, especially within the activist sphere. Popular assembly, so key to consensus decision-making processes (Polletta, 2002) and “autonomous geographies” (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) of activist groups around the world, thus holds a particularly potent influence in BsAs due to its widespread explosion following the *Argentinazo*. As shall be addressed during data analysis, absurd performances amongst activists in BsAs were often required to pass through the appraisal of an assembly before enactment, in turn often planned to ‘*sacar la voz*’ (amplify; literally: ‘get out the voice’) of the perceived collective will of the assembly or, more broadly, a common, diffuse notion of ‘*el pueblo*’ (the people). Further, the squatted base of ETP at *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa* was initially occupied to house the neighbourhood assembly of *Palermo Viejo* before later transitioning into the theatre, soup kitchen, and workshop that it is today, a physical space of much of my fieldwork existing directly thanks to the wave of neighbourhood assemblies.

Numerous workplace occupations took place across Argentina surrounding the crisis of 2001, and continue, at a slower rate, to this day. In BsAs alone, workers cooperatives established by seizing the means of production notably include the aluminium products factory *Industria Metalúrgica y Plástica Argentina* (known as ‘*el IMPA*’), the Brukman garment factory, *Cooperativa Chilavert Artes Gráficas* printing workshop, and the Bauen hotel. This particular element of Argentine popular uprising has captured the attention of multiple researchers (Ranis, 2010; Bryer, 2010; Vuotto, 2012; Atzeni and Vieta, 2014). For a thorough overview produced within Argentina, see the account produced by Lavaca activist media collective (2007). A common component of such occupied workplaces is the addition of a cultural centre⁶⁴, accompanying the worker-run

emphasis on the dignity of working people. The idea even forms part of the name of the overarching movement with which the ETP is based - *Movimiento Popular La Dignidad*.

⁶⁴ This term ‘cultural centre’ is undeniably ambiguous, yet I use it as a direct translation of the term ‘*centro cultural*’ ubiquitously employed across BsAs to name any venue for mixed cultural events. Spaces falling under this catch-all label are so diverse that they could be more

workplace with a worker-run cultural hub. Taking *el IMPA* as one example, it hosts such a space, including a theatre, which, at different points has been used by Etcétera to rehearse for street interventions (using aluminium props made in the factory itself) and by members of ETP to perform with other collectives.

This is reflective of the consistent overlapping between elements of what is broadly referred to as ‘*el under*’ in BsAs, borrowing the English concept of ‘underground’ to label the vast network of independent arts and activist spaces/collectives across the city. Cultural centres within reclaimed workplaces themselves operate in reflection of and conjunction with the broader cultural landscape of BsAs, which is nourished by the existence of many standalone cultural centres, some functioning more as social hubs, others as centres of certain forms of theatre, circus, music, or academic discussion. A comprehensive history explaining the rise of this distinct (sub)cultural infrastructure in BsAs is not forthcoming, yet País Andrade (2011) points to the significance of the *Programa Cultural en Barrios* (Neighbourhood Cultural Programme) of 1984 as a government policy initiated to enable the growth of neighbourhood cultural spaces in the hands of local residents following the severe censorship of the dictatorship, as built upon by broad societal realization of the possibilities of autonomous organizing post-2001. In their current constellation, what I observed to unite diverse independent cultural centre projects across BsAs, and to often open the doors for the nurturing of absurd performance within them, was commitment to the notion of *autogestión*, to which we turn now.

This pervasive concept, as Sitrin has noted before me, “has no exact English translation” (2012: 10). Tellingly struggling to condense the idea, Marcelo Vieta proffers:

one can conceptualize *autogestión* as ‘self-gestation’—self-creation, self-control, self-provisioning, and, ultimately, self-production...*autogestión*

independent spaces, such as those that my fieldwork engaged with, cultural recruitment centres of political groups such as the *Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores* (MST) or *La Cámpora*, or enormous government funded initiatives such as the *Centro Cultural Kirchner* or *Centro Cultural Recoleta*.

alludes to an organic and processual movement of self-conception having sociopolitical relevance in its implicit notion of becoming and potentiality (2009: 317).

For my own attempt to translate the untranslatable - an ongoing challenge of cross-cultural research (Liamputtong, 2010; Miller-Cleary, 2013) - I shall try to illustrate the concept of *autogestión* by means of a brief fieldwork anecdote:

Hanging out after a cabaret night, multiple members of ETP and myself were jamming around some improvised songs in Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa. In the absence of drums, we had had to jumble together an improvised percussion set-up from boxes and pans that we could find in the space. In place of a bass, we had a tuned down guitar. Other members of the collective improvised movements rapidly between us. Fernando entered and asked us with exaggeratedly raised eyebrows - '¿Qué es esto?' (What is this?) - to which Chili replied, laughing - '¡Esto es la autogestión carajo!' (This is fucking autogestión!).

Autogestión, then, is autonomous, collective self-management making innovative use of the limited resources and collaborative spirit available. Its closest comparison in NYC would be the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture of independent punk, this 'there is no authority but yourself' ideology paralleling the drive to create without seeking permission of '*autogestión*'. However, I did not observe discourses of DIY culture to be such a strong influence upon absurd performance in NYC whereas the high importance lent to *autogestión* amongst activists and artists in BsAs appeared to open opportunities for experimentation with absurd performance under the guise of expanding the possibilities of *autogestión* itself, as shall be demonstrated during data analysis.

2.2 New York City: Culture wars and the scars of slavery

Identifying defining moments of political history influencing my research co-performers in NYC is not so straightforward as with BsAs. No two moments stand out from my fieldnotes as strikingly more prominent in the way the dictatorship and *Argentinazo* did in Argentina. Rather a soup of less distinct,

often ongoing histories without specific dates appeared to impact contemporary absurd performance practice in NYC. From this milieu I identify the notion of the USA as an intrinsically politically and culturally divided nation within the discourse of the ‘culture wars’ and the history and actuality of race relations and white supremacy as two major influences, which I turn to detailing now.

2.2.1 Culture wars

James Davison Hunter coined the term ‘culture wars’ in his 1991 book of the same name. This expression has since become popular shorthand for referring to conflicts between the conservative right and progressive left concerning what may appropriately constitute ‘American’ culture from the end of the Second World War to the present, now meriting its own encyclopaedia (Chapman and Ciment, 2015). Following this pattern, I encountered the radical leftist actions and opinions of my research co-performers consistently counterpoised against the general opposition of ‘Redneck Amerikkka’, ongoing histories of cultural tension acting as a major influence upon the motivations for and possibilities of contemporary absurd performance in NYC. This has a generally nationalist flavour with conservative ‘patriots’ often lamenting ‘un-American’ acts of counter-normative transgression, such as the burning of the US flag within some absurd interventions that shall be analysed in chapter seven, whilst the ‘woke’⁶⁵ progressive left often bemoans the ‘bigotry’ of the right.

Chapman and Ciment are correct to point out regarding the dichotomizing notion of ‘culture war’ that “[w]hile such framing serves as convenient shorthand...it tends to oversimplify issues and individuals” (2015: xxvii). At the same time, it is undeniable that the us-and-them imaginary of ‘culture war’ in the USA is based upon genuine, stark oppositions of opinion and practice, that,

⁶⁵ ‘Woke’ is a term with roots in African-American activist communities in the 1960s and exploding in popularity in recent years in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. It initially specifically connoted an active awareness and repudiation of white supremacy yet has since expanded in meaning to signify being generally progressively politically aware (Whiteout, 2018; Grant, 2018). As data analysis shall show, discourses of defined ‘wokeness’ were often in tension with the potential ambiguity of absurd performance in NYC, moulding the practice accordingly.

for all their internal nuance, I found to often structure absurd performance practice as if the conservative:progressive binary were unwavering. Consequently the notion of ‘culture war’ offers a potentially fruitful lens through which to holistically approach absurd performance in NYC, with exaggerated norm transgression operating as a vanguard undermining conservatism.

US culture wars have passed through multiple overlapping chapters since the 60s counter-culture rose out of the McCarthyist era. Perhaps of greatest significance to my research topic is the 80s/90s controversies surrounding National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding. The roots of contemporary debate over public arts funding in the USA may be seen in the uproar surrounding indirect federal sponsorship of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* - an image from 1987 of a crucifix submerged in the artists’ urine - and Robert Mapplethorpe’s gay sadomasochist photography. Following this furore, four performance artists were awarded and then denied NEA funding on grounds of the ‘indecent’ of their work: Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck, and Tim Miller, who became known as the ‘NEA four’ (Saddik, 2007). In turn this connects with sensationalized reporting of Ron Athey’s indirectly NEA supported performance of *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1994) at The Walker Center in Minneapolis where bloodprints made from incisions in the back of co-performer Divinity P. Fudge were sent out above the audience on clotheslines. The subsequent media explosion falsely claimed that a terrified audience had been deliberately exposed to HIV-positive blood (DeLand, 2018). Ensuing discourses decrying experimental body art and performance as contrary to ‘American values’ maintain traction today. This case thus provides a rich example of potential sensationalist demonization of anti-normative performance as ‘un-American’ that I still observed to mould contemporary performance-making in NYC.

These controversies surrounding the ‘NEA four’ and Athey centrally concerned debate over the acceptability of the ‘realness’ of their nonmimetic bodily acts where, to quote Richard Schechner “[r]eal blood is really flowing”

(2015: 154). Such concern over the blurring of ‘reality’ and conventional notions of ‘art’ or ‘performance’ conflated with expectations of representation rather than embodiment relates to many of the absurd interventions that I study that often occur within the flow of everyday life - that is, as part of ‘reality’. Here such transgressive acts in public space, often in the absence of institutional validation or legitimizing explanatory labels, cannot be as easily tidied away into a separate category of ‘art’ or ‘performance’, echoing how an actually bleeding body may blur such distinction. For those eager to police the normative borders of society and cultural values and maintain rigid parameters of acceptable public comportment and/or artistic practice, this indistinctness is a potential point of consternation, and one that I observed to influence absurd performance practice in both provocation and appeasement across NYC and BsAs, as data analysis shall illustrate. However, conservative alarmism appeared as a typically more pervasive consideration amongst artists and activists in NYC where, in the shadow of ongoing culture wars discourses, the notion of an inviolable cultural ‘reality’ remains often imbued with constructions of proper ‘American’ conduct such as those mobilized against the ‘NEA four’.

Today comparable moments of condemnation and censorship of performance in the USA remain tangible threats, as associated debate over the legitimacy of federal arts funding continues. Both federal budgets proposed thus far during the Trump administration have called for the abolishment of the NEA, to be rebuffed each time by Congress (Deb, 2018). The argument is that public arts funding is spurious in a depressed economy, yet this pays little heed to the reality that NEA, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) funding combined accounts for 0.0004% of the overall national budget (Harsell, 2013). Whilst none of the performers of my research were in receipt of such funds, their operation within a society where polarizing debate continues concerning the economic/moral legitimacy of performance impacts the potential resonance of their practice regardless. Indeed, the very notion of the existence of “general standards of decency” which the Supreme Court ruled in 1998 must dictate NEA funding decisions, is problematized by absurd performance that challenges normative distributions of the sensible.

Campaigns for sexual freedom in opposition to Christian puritanism overlap considerably with the culture wars. NYC radicals dance upon the shoulders of many struggles for sexual autonomy including the Stonewall riots of 1969 and subsequent rise of the Gay Liberation Front, the Pink Panthers Patrol, Lesbian Avengers and the Dyke March, SexPanic!, WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) NYC stripper strikes, and the largest (albeit today horrifically corporate) Pride parade in the world (Shepard, 2010). One group particularly inspiring for many research co-performers was ACT UP and their artistic wing Gran Fury. As Shepard and Hayduk write -

Through innovative use of civil-rights-era nonviolent civil disobedience, guerrilla theatre, sophisticated media work, and direct action, ACT UP helped transform the world of activism (2002: 1).

In the case of their origin city, this is hard to dispute, NYC activists regularly mentioning to me the uncompromising innovation of ACT UP as paving the way for their actions. However, despite placing themselves in this lineage, I found contemporary NYC activists to often be reluctant to replicate the transgressive precedent of ACT UP for fear of damaging their broader tactical campaigns. Meanwhile, the more supra-tactical precedent of posing queer flamboyancy in contrast to straight conservatism remained a consistent influence upon artist absurd performance in NYC, as data analysis shall illustrate below.

In contrast with BsAs, absurd performance makers in NYC more often spoke of their actions being motivated by a perceived apocalyptic future. I found the notion of an impending climate change or nuclear holocaust to be a more widespread fear and fascination for both activists and artists across NYC. This may be connected to the seeping influence of fire-and-brimstone evangelical Christianity and ubiquitous Hollywood apocalyptic narratives across the USA, an obsession with endtimes that Betsy Hartmann dubs "America Syndrome" (2017). Here the conservative, typically climate-change denying side of the culture wars was seen as propagating apocalypse whilst the progressive side attempted, perhaps futilely, to resist. On numerous occasions, members of the Cart Department reported the senselessness of impending climate catastrophe as a

motivator for their absurd acts, as my data analysis shall explore. Meanwhile, Andrew Boyd (forthcoming), co-founder of Billionaires for Bush and Beautiful Trouble, is now working on a book dealing with how to reconcile creative activism with hopelessness regarding unstoppable climate change, with the ironic working title *I Want a Better Catastrophe*. In BsAs such future-oriented ecological concerns and their influence upon absurd performance practice, whilst not absent, were significantly overshadowed by reflection upon aforementioned political histories and fears of their repetition.

Multiple variations of this ‘American’ apocalyptic imaginary operate simultaneously, correlating with opposing sides of the ‘culture wars’, different strands exerting distinct influences over absurd performance practice in NYC. The US conservative Christian right boasts an extended history of propagating apocalyptic narratives, often casting those who do not fit their moral straitjacket and associated societal script as depraved subhumans bringing about the ‘death of the family’, chaos, and disorder. In relation to this conservative narrative, many of my research co-performers would be firmly pro-apocalypse, embracing the supposedly derogatory image of ‘moral decay’ and actively seeking to bring about this particular ‘end of the world’, wherein we might read ‘the world’ as ‘hegemonic normativity’. As rioters at Stonewall in 1969 exulted that “homosexuals are revolting” (Siodmak, 2018), playing with the homonym to transform a slur into an affirmation of defiance, thus absurd, anti-normative performance in NYC today similarly engages with the entrenched apocalyptic imaginary of the US Christian right by (being) revolting and mockingly embodying conservative nightmares. Later, during data analysis, I will illustrate how attitudes toward such defiance differed between activist and artist collectives in NYC, with more extreme transgressive actions often being seen as ‘too much’ from a more tactical activist position, potentially inhibiting real hopes of provoking change by alienating and disgusting the public in place of more gentle persuasion. In contrast, from a more supra-tactical artist position, watered-down transgressions were often viewed as meek, tame, and tedious pandering to conservatism, ultimately abetting the status quo through their compromise.

I found US culture wars to also be echoed by multiple internal subcultural conflicts in NYC. A prominent division regarding absurd performance practices surrounded the new-age gathering *Burning Man* (Bowditch, 2008; Gilmore, 2010; Chen, 2012) that takes place annually in the Nevada desert and styles itself as a “network of dreamers and doers”. Many NYC artists and activists were associated with or sympathetic to Burning Man, whilst others opposed it as a subsumption of apparently subversive aesthetics within a neatly contained hedonistic, consumerist splurge. The division recalls that between buoyant hippies and derisive punks, The Cart Department falling largely into the second category. Where ‘Burners’⁶⁶ often purport to attempt to engender hopeful, utopic togetherness, some of my research co-performers saw this as false and naïve, seeking rather to make audiences uncomfortable, destabilizing rather than making meaning. The notion that Burning Man represents a TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) is popular amongst its advocates, whilst its critics see such assertions as denials of ultimate dependency upon and reinforcement of surrounding hegemonic capitalism, offering a space of legitimated weirdness with a \$390 ticket cost which acts as another barrier to the actual establishment of greater autonomy that unpermitted absurd interventions might explore.

2.2.2 Scars of slavery

Anyone who has spent an extended period of time in the USA will note the omnipresent spectre of race hanging over interaction. The profound wounds of slavery and segregation have far from healed (Berlin, 1998; Horton and Horton, 2005; Massey and Denton, 1993; Carr and Kutty, 2008). Those in poverty continue to be disproportionately black, whilst, as of 2016, 41.3% of the male and 23.9% of the female prison population were black nationwide (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018), in contrast with 13.4% of the general population being black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Many argue that the US prison industrial complex functions as a contemporary mechanism of racialized control within a white supremacist “carceral society” (Wacquant, 2001; Parenti, 1999; Davis, 2003; Davis and Mendieta, 2005). Connecting walls and cages, as Loyd, BurrIDGE

⁶⁶ Common collective title for participants at Burning Man.

and Mitchelson (2010) put it, this racial situation becomes yet more complex when one considers rising xenophobia towards Latino communities, Trump's 'build-that-wall' rhetoric demonizing Spanish-speaking people with a generally darker skin tone. To attempt to interconnect the oppressions faced by multiple non-white demographics, the broadly encompassing term 'people of colour', often abbreviated to POC, has become widely adopted in academic, artistic, and activist circles in the USA. However, such generalized agglomeration of communities with distinct histories, each independently internally diverse in turn, may be critiqued as oversimplifying far more complex matrices of domination, to use Hill-Collins' (2000) term referenced in discussion of intersectionality in chapter two. Regardless of such flaws, the struggle to forge such a term testifies that race remains an all-pervading concern in US consciousness.

Consequently, much activity conducted in the USA is inevitably read through a racial lens, and yet more prominently amongst hypersensitive radical collectives such as those of my research. A performance done by a white male, or a black female, or collaboration between an Asian and a Latino, or whichever combination of messy racial identities imaginable, will of course be interpreted, wherever it occurs, in relation to the intersectional demographic characteristics of those performers and the semiotic weight of such characteristics for each particular audience. However, what is notable about NYC is the precedence given to conscious racialized reflection. Occupying an atypically progressive city within a nation characterized by histories of xenophobia, I witnessed radical communities in NYC often balancing an eagerness to act proactively against white supremacy with an uncertainty concerning how to do it⁶⁷. For white(r) artists/activists, fear of not being seen to be resisting racial injustice properly can feed into the apologetic insecurity of 'white guilt' (Steele, 2009) and/or the defensiveness of 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2018). Meanwhile, POC performers regularly feared tokenization. Potential racial implications were as such a foregrounded concern in both the design and interpretation of absurd performance throughout my observations in NYC, generating significant

⁶⁷ Kalan of The Cart Department summed up this combination of fixation and apprehension when he told me -"In America we're always talking about race, but we're never talking about race".

insecurities for performers across ethnic backgrounds, as below data analysis chapters shall explicate.

Where in BsAs fieldwork conversations would often orbit around notions of class, such as *el pueblo* (the people) and *los trabajadores* (the workers) against the bourgeois state, similar conversations were engulfed by race in NYC, with blackness often spoken of as if synonymous with proletarian identity. This can be seen in popular accusations towards POC that carry certain privileges not typical of their demographic to label them as effectively ‘white’. In slang here a middle class black person might be an ‘oreo’, an Asian-American a ‘twinkie’, a Latino a ‘coconut’ - all objects dark on the outside and white inside. Here a supposed proletarian essence of non-whiteness is reified and class struggle conflates with ethnic conflict. As such, when Barack Obama (2004) extolled that “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America”, he cast the USA as a fundamentally classless, colour-blind union. The reality of such “politics of illusion” (St Clair and Frank, 2012), undercut by the very mention of such supposedly non-existent divisions, is that racial tensions still run high, as I observed moulding the potential of absurd performance throughout my fieldwork in NYC.

Deeply connected to histories and actualities of race relations in NYC is the history of policing. In the wake of the viral video of the police murder of Eric Garner in Staten Island in 2014, and subsequent Black Lives Matter uprisings, global consciousness of the institutional racism of the NYPD and police forces across the USA has grown. Historian Elizabeth Hinton (2016) argues that the USA has functioned increasingly as a police state since Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 declaration of a ‘War on Crime’, an indictment shared with numerous contemporary NYC activist collectives such as NYC Shut It Down and Close Rikers. Indeed, NYC carries its own specific history of repressive policing. In the 90s, following Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s rhetoric of ‘getting tough’ and ‘cleaning up’, Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) (in)famous ‘broken windows’ policing strategy was broadly implemented by the NYPD. Here minor misdemeanours such as vandalism or recreational drug use were harshly punished with zero tolerance to

attempt to create a sanitized urban space supposedly less conducive to violent crime. This notion of nipping crime in the bud still moulds pedantic, overbearing police practice in NYC today, all too often accompanied by racial profiling and corruption (McArdle and Erzen, 2001; Gelman, Fagan, and Kiss, 2007; Curtis, 2012). For example, NYPD stop and frisk data collated by New York Civil Liberties Union (2018) shows that each year between 2003-2018 approximately 90% of those stopped were black or Latino⁶⁸. Such ‘policing New York Style’ (Harcourt, 1998) thus variously focuses its panoptic gaze based upon an individual’s intersectional position, impacting differently their actions in all spheres of life, including potential transgressive performance. Ubiquity of a heavy-handed, mistrusted, prejudiced police force moulds the atmosphere of NYC’s public spaces, influencing both how absurd performance might take place within them, and who is more able to do it.

Histories of racially-inflected gentrification are also highly relevant to my research population since young creative arrivals to a neighbourhood are often seen as the harbingers of future displacement. Jeremiah Moss (2017) labels the 21st century in NYC as a period of “hyper-gentrification”. Artists here may act as the unwitting vanguard of gentrification, seeking out lower rents affordable in relation to precarious creative work, making the marginal neighbourhoods they arrive to seem safer and more accessible to members of adjacent socio-economic groups such as younger office workers, before eventually being displaced themselves alongside more longstanding, typically disproportionately POC residents as prices rise to meet newly generated demand (Lloyd, 2010; Casellas, Dot-Jutgla, and Pallares-Barbera, 2012)⁶⁹. NYC provides us with perhaps the most widely referenced case study of this pattern - SoHo, Manhattan

⁶⁸ Following the 2013 ruling of federal judge Shira Schindlin that the NYPD had violated the constitution in its racial profiling of stop-and-frisk targets, the use of this policing tactic has plummeted dramatically from 685,724 total stops in 2011 to 10,861 in 2017, although the racial distribution of suspects remains consistent. The NYPD might then be seen to be beginning to depart from its legacy of broken windows style law enforcement. However, for now, the shadow of this approach lingers over their practice and reputation, still influencing the lives of New Yorkers, and especially those who might be more likely profiled as trouble-makers, whether for the colour of their skin, their subversive performance costume, or both.

⁶⁹ Even squatting artists have been implicated as inadvertently influencing gentrification (van der Steen, Katzeff, and van Hoogenhuijze, 2014: 18). The 80s occupation of multiple dilapidated city properties in the contemporarily swish Lower East Side (LES) of Manhattan provides a prominent NYC example (Starecheski, 2016).

- where the establishment of artists' studios in former warehouses acted as a bridge between the industrial past and elite residential actuality of the neighbourhood (Zukin, 1982).

This story has birthed its own NYC-centric synonym of gentrification - 'SoHoization' (Shkuda, 2016) - which, in turn, has recently been usurped by 'Williamsburgization', in reference to the formerly industrial, briefly artsy, and now exorbitantly expensive Brooklyn neighbourhood. Many research co-performers feared that a similar story may be playing out in Bushwick, a neighbourhood central to my fieldwork as the base of many artists/activists and underground performance spaces, where rents are already rising rapidly. This is what Jens Gurr calls "the 'anti-gentrifier's dilemma', the insight that even (and especially) resistant cultural production can be commodified" (2017: 127). In response, some NYC groups such as Chinatown Art Brigade (2017) and Decolonize This Place (2018) have begun theorizing guidelines for artists to reject and resist the 'artwashing' of gentrification such as raising awareness of the instrumentalization of artists by developers to aestheticize previously undesirable neighbourhoods and encouraging boycotts of art spaces that collaborate with real estate speculators. During data analysis, I shall dissect how I observed consciousness of such potential subsumption of absurd intervention as a quirky selling point of gentrifying areas (Heath and Potter, 2004) to influence absurd performance possibilities in NYC⁷⁰.

Decolonize This Place (2018) make an explicit link between colonization and gentrification, seeing the annexation of new "frontiers" by property developers as a contemporary reflection of imperialist land-grabs. However, it must be noted that, in contrast to the frequency of discussion surrounding race

⁷⁰ I observed gentrification to be an issue in BsAs too, notable in the real estate labelling of more and more areas as if part of the wealthier, trendier neighbourhood of Palermo and subsequent rent hikes, such as the re-branding of neighbouring Chacarita and Villa Crespo as 'Palermo Queens'. However, the scale and history of (hyper)gentrification and racialized urban displacement in NYC remains much more profound. The borrowing of the title of a NYC borough to suggest hipness by estate agents in BsAs underlines the global pioneer status of NYC as a model of supposed coolness cloaking homogenizing gentrification, partly accounting for the greater influence of this process upon absurd performance practice that I observed in NYC, to be analysed in chapter seven.

in NYC and conceptions of *europiedad* and *latinidad* in BsAs, the shared history of the USA and Argentina as stolen lands where indigenous peoples remain severely oppressed was referenced sparingly in both contexts as an influence upon the absurd performance practices of my largely non-indigenous research co-performers. This is not to say that these issues were invisible, as made clear by actions surrounding Mapuche land rights in BsAs, and apparent increased consideration of indigenous rights in NYC in the wake of the 2016 Standing Rock Dakota Access Pipeline protests. However, the relative absence of such consideration that I observed in relation to absurd performance practice does speak to the ongoing brutal erasure of indigenous peoples in both my fieldsites. Here I simply wish to acknowledge and pay respect to the people, elders, and ancestors of the Lenape who inhabited the land where NYC now stands before colonization, and the people, elders, and ancestors of the Querandíes who inhabited the land where BsAs now stands before colonization, and offer my deep gratitude to this Lenape land and Querandíes land where my fieldwork took place⁷¹.

3. Contemporary socio-political landscapes

3.1 Buenos Aires: Macrismo, Kirchnerismo, and *la grieta*

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the so-called ‘pink tide’ of more progressive, left-wing governments swept Latin America with the rise to power, for example, of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Lula da Silva and later Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Néstor Kirchner, and later his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in Argentina. This seemingly decisive continental move away from global trends of neo-liberalism excited scholarly attention as an apparent rejection of unfettered capitalism spurred on by widespread grassroots protests such as the Zapatistas reclaiming areas of Chiapas, Mexico under autonomous, indigenous control, the ‘Cochabamba water wars’ of 1999 and 2000

⁷¹ I thank Emily Johnson, a Native Alaskan dance artist of Yupik descent based in NYC, for her guidance in this indigenous land acknowledgement.

and ‘*cocaleros*’ coca growers union actions in Bolivia, the land occupations of *Movimiento Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement) (MST) in Brazil, and, of course, the *Argentinazo* of 2001 (Bull, 2013; Zibechi, 2012).

In Argentina, the rise, and parliamentary fall with the election of Macri, of Kirchnerism has been met with heated debate concerning its positive and/or negative impacts upon Argentine society. Major moves taken by the consecutive Kirchner governments between 2003 and 2015 included cutting ties with the IMF, nurturing continental bonds with other Latin American nations, repealing of amnesty laws surrounding the prosecution of members of the military dictatorship, the introduction of a universal child-benefit plan, and the first national legalization of gay marriage in Latin America. During the Kirchner governments the enormous national debt that precipitated the crisis of 2001 was significantly reduced, alongside a surge of ‘growth’ in terms of production, consumption and investment.

Nonetheless, the Kirchnerist years, in particular the tenure of Cristina, included notable controversy. Multiple accusations of corruption and embezzlement have arisen within the successive Kirchnerist governments, including questions surrounding the administration of public works funds for which Cristina Fernández de Kirchner herself has recently faced investigation. Whether she is proven to be innocent or guilty in this ongoing trial, her condemnation on this front by Macri may seem a little Janus-faced if the involvement of Macri and his family in offshore tax evasion reported in the Panama Papers is accepted. Indeed, the general sense amongst my research co-performers was that corruption is endemic to Argentine politics on the left and right. The commonplace resignation to this ‘fact-of-life’ was noted by Jérémy of Etcétera who compared the ousting of former Icelandic president, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, following the revelation of his tax evasion in the Panama Papers, with the lack of reaction against Macri on the same issue in Argentina, despite the generally stronger culture of street protest in Argentina than Iceland. He told me: “*Nadie hizo nada. No fue una sorpresa acá.*” (Nobody did anything. It was not a surprise here.).

Another major scandal concerning Cristina Fernández de Kirchner revolves around ongoing accusations of her participation in the cover-up of the involvement of Iran in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish centre in BsAs that killed 85 people. The federal prosecutor, Alberto Nisman, who aimed to indict Fernández de Kirchner over these charges, was found executed in his home the day before he was due to present evidence to the Argentine congress. His murder remains unsolved, yet suspicion is rife that the then-president ordered his death. Suspicions of state killings, then, are not restricted to right wing governments, such as the administration of Mauricio Macri that was in power throughout my fieldwork, but rather have remained a consistent feature of Argentine political life since the return of democracy, as concisely illustrated by the independent documentary *Nunca Digas Nunca* (never say never) (2014), anonymously produced to protect the safety of its creators. I thus observed the contemporary political context of BsAs to be characterized by widely recognized rampant corruption and capricious state violence, exerting a tremendous impact upon absurd performance possibilities as will be explicated during data analysis.

In recent times right-wing governments have returned across much of South America, as most notable in the two largest nations of the continent: a parliamentary coup in Brazil replaced former leftist guerrilla Dilma Rousseff with neoliberal Michel Temer in August 2016 before the election of fascist Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, whilst the elite businessman Mauricio Macri claimed victory with just over fifty per cent of the vote in the Argentine presidential elections of November 2015. It is of note that during the final stages of the preparation of this thesis, the presidential elections in Argentina on 27 October 2019 saw Macri deposed by the centre-left candidate of the *Frente de Todos* party, Alberto Fernández, who is due to take office, with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as vice-president, on 10 December 2019. In this thesis I detail the implications of Macri's presidency as those that impacted upon the absurd performance practices of my research co-performers during my fieldwork period, yet note that this current parliamentary return to the left portends an altered political landscape that may differently influence activist and artist absurd performance practices in BsAs in the coming years. Regardless, many political scientists

focusing on Latin America have investigated recently why a ‘turning of the pink tide’ and return to right-wing governments has appeared to be occurring (Gonzalez, 2018; Webber, 2017; Malamud, 2016; Pipitone, 2015). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to interrogate the credibility of such explanations, yet the perception that this political reversal were occurring, and with Argentina and BsAs as a significant epicentre during Macri’s tenure, was often expressed as an influence upon absurd performance practice during my observations.

Many performances to be analysed within forthcoming chapters engaged with this perceived shift to the right and the pronounced divide in Argentine political life, popularly referred to as ‘*la grieta*’ (the chasm), between those in favour of and those against Macri’s government. Following this metaphor of a chasm, the typically wealthier, whiter, supposedly more European *Macristas* stand to one side, whilst the typically poorer, browner, supposedly more Latino *Kirchneristas* stand to the other, hurling insults and heavier objects at each other. In reality, of course, this linear divide is somewhat of an oversimplification, accompanied by a diversity of outlooks that mix elements from both political perspectives or that neither support *Macrismo* nor *Kirchnerismo*, such as the generally more socialist or anarchist perspectives of my research co-performers. Nonetheless, the stark image of a literally divided population was pervasive throughout my fieldwork, driven forward by political changes introduced under Macri’s rule. These include rapid inflation and ‘*tarifazos*’ (price hikes) of gas, electricity, and public transport, heightened unemployment, an increasing gap between rich and poor, and an increased level of police repression of street demonstrations. Recent reports of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la República Argentina* (INDEC) (2019) indicate that between April 2018 and April 2019 average consumer prices across all items increased by 55.8% whilst prices of food and non-alcoholic drinks rose 66.2%, mirroring the runaway inflation that precipitated the unrest of 2001.

One event caused more sustained uproar than any other during my fieldwork period in BsAs: the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado. Santiago Maldonado was an anarchist activist from BsAs who had moved to the province of

Chubut in order to support the resistance of the Pu Lof Cushamen Mapuche community in their ongoing reclamation of ancestral lands from which they had been evicted following their sale in the nineties to the Italian businessman Luciano Benetton. During a police operation attempting to evict the Mapuche community from this land on August 1 2017, Santiago Maldonado went missing. The response across BsAs was enormous, inflamed by indignation at the apparent state disappearance of a political activist in a nation that had repeatedly declared this would never happen again. Images of Santiago's face and the question '*¿Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?*' (Where is Santiago Maldonado?) were inescapable, being painted and pasted on walls across the city. Marches attended by hundreds of thousands occurred the week following the disappearance, and then on the first day of each month until the 'discovery'⁷² of Santiago's body on 17 October 2017. Every performance I witnessed and took part in during the period of his disappearance made reference to Santiago, the appropriateness of absurd intervention in connection to this event debated repeatedly, as shall be dissected during data analysis.

When, on 25 November 2017, a Mapuche activist, Rafael Nahuel, was shot dead by police during a similar eviction operation, the popular reaction to this death was considerably smaller, prompting less marches, posters, or performances. This may be because Rafael's death was reported immediately and as such did not touch the same collective nerve as a disappearance, or, as voiced by numerous research co-performers, could be a reflection of internalized racism in Argentina wherein the death of an indigenous man is not valued the same as the death of a white one. This sentiment would correlate with the comparative societal lethargy around the issue of *gatillo fácil* (easy trigger) police killings in BsAs, which affect disproportionately more '*moreno*' (dark-skinned) victims in poorer, peripheral neighbourhoods, and especially the villas/shantytowns. These killings tie in with the use of vulnerable young people from the villas within drugs, prostitution, and robbery operations often coordinated by an incredibly corrupt police force. As Ruth Stanley puts it in her

⁷² I place 'discovery' in inverted commas to highlight the widespread suspicion that the body, supposedly found 78 days later, 400 metres upstream in the River Chubut from where Santiago had last been seen alive, had been placed there by state forces following his death at their hands elsewhere.

research informed by interviews with family members of people killed by BsAs police: “individuals from poor areas are not citizens but become resources employed by the police in pursuit of diverse goals” (2010: 137). Amongst such groups, many of whom are often too vulnerable even to pursue justice for the police murder of a relative, the possibility of creating any form of politicized performance, let alone attention-calling absurd intervention, is somewhat dampened, if not impossible. The scope of my research does not allow a profound consideration of the possibilities of absurd performance amongst shantytown residents, my only interaction with such communities being through limited participation in the community theatre group of the ETP. I hope that a deeper investigation of this issue might inform future research, aiming for now to highlight how an awareness of the extreme inequality within BsAs emblemized by the issue of *gatillo fácil* may still be seen to influence the manner in which absurd performance is created in other parts of the city, as I shall explore during data analysis.

Meanwhile, the force of feminism within Latin America has been rising in recent years. Uruguayan social movement scholar Raúl Zibechi, in a talk I attended at the cultural centre *MU Trinchera Boutique* during my fieldwork, pinpointed the feminist movement in Argentina, and specifically in BsAs, as the spark of this mounting continental uprising. In response to high rates of femicide (one woman killed every thirty hours in Argentina according to the favoured, yet unreferenced, statistic of activists) and deaths during clandestine abortions carried out in the absence of legal ones, alongside widespread reports of normalized street harassment, the movement *Ni Una Menos* (not one woman less) emerged with a huge march on 3 June 2015 in BsAs and continues growing today. Indeed, reportedly, in accompaniment of the strike called of all female workers on International Women’s Day, 8 March 2018, a march for women’s rights in BsAs was attended by between five and eight hundred thousand women, media estimates varying depending on the political persuasion of the source. Regardless, even the most conservative estimates indicate an enormous feminist movement, the likes of which was unknown even a decade ago in Latin America, contemporary absurd performance in BsAs necessarily interacting with this rising force.

As aforementioned, the contemporary political landscape cannot be separated from the historical one, and many echoes of past eras were identified by research co-performers as evident in the present situation in BsAs. Current practices of holding political prisoners without trial, such as Milagro Sala and Facundo Jones Huala, and of disappearances of dissidents, such as the aforementioned case of Santiago Maldonado, under the government of Macri, were spoken of by many as murmurs of the re-emergence and attempted re-legitimization of the repressive practices of the dictatorship. Commonplace slogans such as ‘Macri = Videla⁷³’, ‘Macri = 1976’, and ‘Somos 30,001’, forebodingly adding the death of Santiago Maldonado to the infamous estimated total state assassinations between 1976-83, testify to this attitude. However, it is also of note here that, whilst some were keen to draw such associations, others, especially older research co-performers who had lived through the dictatorship years, were irritated by what they viewed as a lazy and flippant comparison. As Loreto of Etcétera told me:

‘la situación ahora es una mierda pero no es una dictadura, si fuera una dictadura, no podríamos hacer lo que hacemos’ (the situation is shit but it is not a dictatorship, if it were a dictatorship, we would not be able to do what we do).

In relation to the crisis of 2001, many critiqued Macri’s policies as a reiteration of those of Carlos Menem, the hyper-corrupt neo-liberal president of the 1990s whose government’s responsibility for the economic depression has led to his consideration as a ‘*mufa*’ (omen of bad luck) by much of the Argentine public. Here, in a well-known half-serious, half-tragicomic ritual amongst the Argentine left, in order to dispel further bad fortune at the mentioning of Menem’s name, a man ought to touch his left testicle and a woman her left breast. Such widespread participation in a crude and darkly comic performative acknowledgment of the farce of repressive politics speaks volumes to the

⁷³ Jorge Rafael Videla was the leader of the military junta during the majority of the 1976-83 dictatorship.

receptiveness of many Argentines to absurd manners of demonstrating dissent⁷⁴. A succinct visual summary of the fears of links between political past and present in Argentina was offered by a viral graffiti stencil present in the shape of the international recycling symbol with the faces of Videla, Menem, and Macri interspersed between the three revolving arrows. In this dystopic image, the faces most symbolic of political repression in Argentina since the 1970s continually feed into one another, representing an idea of an inescapable reality of socio-political absurdity that I observed to bear down on the manner in which activists and artists created absurd performance throughout fieldwork in BsAs, as data analysis shall illustrate.



Fig 4-1: Graffiti representing cyclical political repression in Argentina.

⁷⁴ A significant referent here is the popular Argentine comic Diego Capusotto, whose sketches often touch on sensitive political issues with exaggerated irreverence, such as *Juan Domingo Perdón*, a loved political figure who continues acting corruptly but always says sorry, or *Micky Vainilla* an elite commentator with a Hitler moustache campaigning for a world without poor people. Fede and Augusto of Etcétera even referred to Capusotto as a significant inspiration, indicating that the line between this form of absurd performance as televised ‘entertainment’ and the performances of artists/activists is not always clear.

3.2 New York City: Trump fever and its symptoms

Many of the artists/activists with whom I worked in NYC remained in shock concerning the presidential election of Donald Trump. The rise of the populist far-right television personality to the White House, his baldly xenophobic rhetoric and policies, and accompanying emboldening of fascist networks nationwide including the Ku-Klux-Klan, Proud Boys and numerous supposed ‘alt-right’ groupings, was an omnipresent source of exasperation, incredulity, and despair during fieldwork. Many, specifically within activist groups, asked me how I hoped to reconcile what they perceived as the ‘absurd performance’ of a clownish president with my studies, some attributing a dip in enthusiasm for activist absurd intervention to a sense of being unable to outdo the ridiculousness of those currently in power.

Trump’s administration, rapturous rally chants of ‘Build that wall!’ still ringing in their ears, has been responsible for rendering already intensive immigration enforcement yet more unforgiving (Capps et al., 2018). Five days after taking office, Trump signed an executive order calling on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to stop prioritizing criminals for deportation but rather pursue all undocumented migrants alike. ICE police have since become a nationwide symbol of an increasingly draconian state, broadly seen with pride by the right and disbelief by the left. ICE facilities have become targets for demonstrations across the USA, most notably in NYC with The Church of Stop-Shopping’s ‘Bikes against Deportations’ monthly rides, the month-long July 2018 occupation of Foley Square by Occupy ICE, and New Sanctuary’s suitcase march and ongoing campaigns. Meanwhile, actions not directly aimed at ICE still take place within a political climate characterized by viral images of children being stripped from their parents at the US/Mexico border⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ Here I make reference specifically to John Moore’s image of a Honduran toddler sobbing as her mother is searched against a border-patrol truck (Beaumont, 2018).

Bleeding out from such racist immigration policy, I encountered a general fear in NYC that xenophobia, wrapped as patriotism, is at risk of becoming more normalized. Indeed, FBI hate crime statistics have shown rises during the past three successive years with a 17% spike in 2017 (The Guardian, 2018; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). White America appears currently hyper-defensive of its unstable self-image of the USA as a white, Christian, English-speaking nation - a straitjacketed norm against which I found experimental absurd performance to be inevitably counterpoised in NYC. The polarizing divides of the 'culture wars' here return to the fore as a dichotomy between pro-Trump and anti-Trump. The majority of NYC, as a progressive city within a solidly Democrat state, would swing to the anti-Trump side of the spectrum, yet constantly aware of broad pro-Trump sentiment elsewhere in the USA. Political histories of division recounted above flow into and exacerbate the contemporary landscape, many of my research co-performers viewing the current zenith of conflict as one of the most divided moments in US history, provoking much discussion surrounding the (lack of) hope of greater future union and the (lack of) role of absurd performance within this.

With the appointment of a president who brags about non-consensually grabbing women 'by the pussy', his nomination of another man, Brett Kavanaugh, facing multiple accusations of sexual assault to the Supreme Court, and the outing of numerous high-profile US celebrities as sexual abusers including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Woody Allen⁷⁶, gender violence has been elevated as a topic of US national conversation. With reference to the responsive wave of new feminist movements across the USA such as Time's Up⁷⁷, One Billion Rising, #YesAllWomen, #MeToo, and the enormous Women's March the day following Trump's inauguration, many referred to the current political actuality during my fieldwork as the '#MeToo Moment'. My research then may be seen as taking place during the unsettled formation of a new paradigm to contest the stubborn old one of normalized sexual exploitation, as combined with other intersectional

⁷⁶ Samantha Cooney (2018) in Time magazine composed a list of 142 public figures accused of sexual assault in the wake of what has been dubbed the 'Weinstein effect'.

⁷⁷ Not to be confused with the NYC environmentalist bicycling rights of the same name, referenced elsewhere in this thesis.

oppressions. Absurd performance here may feed into the destabilization of previous hegemonic norms, while also potentially coming into conflict with new subcultural frameworks attempting to prevent abusive behaviour such as ‘safer spaces’⁷⁸ policies.

Indeed, a major impact of Trump’s election upon the radical left in NYC was the tightening of subcultural norms within leftist spaces and collectives. As US society was seen to be becoming a less safe space, especially for the marginalized, so the emphasis upon creating ‘safer spaces’ within resistant communities had become stronger, with notable impacts upon the possibilities of absurd performance. Every activist space that I encountered in NYC held a collectively composed ‘safer spaces policy’ dictating the forms of behaviour, broadly defined under categories such as sexist, racist, homophobic, or transphobic, that would not be tolerated, and procedures for reporting behaviour perceived as such. The most common stated penalty was ejection from the space and ostracization from the group, though others suggested potential, undefined procedures of ‘radical accountability’. Even temporary occupations in public space such as Occupy ICE established such protocols in what was broadly expressed to be an integral foundational step. These guidelines often included instructions concerning expectations to ask someone what pronouns they preferred before addressing them as such and to ‘establish consent’ before any form of physical contact. These blanket rules were not always strictly adhered to with people continuing, for example, to shake hands or pat each other on the shoulder without seeking explicit permission and assume pronoun preferences based on an individual’s presentation. However, they remained firmly written and generally prominently displayed in the background as a kind of consistent disclaimer, defining performance possibilities in their shadow.

⁷⁸ Due to debates concerning whether safety is an attainable ideal or may vary in definition between cultures, the terms safe spaces, safer spaces, safe/r spaces, and safe(r) spaces were all in common parlance during my fieldwork in NYC, with what appeared to be a growing general preference towards the latter, parenthesized expression. To quote from *The We Have Voice Collective Code of Conduct To Promote Safe(r) Workplaces in the Performing Arts* (2018) - “The term safe(r) espouses an intersectional approach to the term ‘safe’, acknowledging that what is ‘safe’ shifts depending on one’s various identities and positionalities”. Meanwhile, nascent discussion of ‘brave spaces’ noted in some recent scholarship (Arao and Clemens, 2013) was not evident during my fieldwork.

Research conversations in NYC often considered the relation of performances to political correctness and whether adherence to or transgression from such expectations was preferable. Some commentators have remarked that Trump's appeal to many is his supposed anti-intellectual rejection of political correctness in contrast to a more po-faced left-wing (Mounk, 2018). This led some research co-performers, especially artists, to propose the significance of irreverent, absurd performance in defence of left-wing ideals that often appear stale within more conventional forms such as rallies or marches. However, others, especially activists, remained concerned that the ambiguity of absurd performance may be insufficiently resonant with clear, 'woke' scripts, concerned about 'triggering' the sensitivities of audiences. In contrast, I found insecurities over notions of political correctness to be far less prominent in BsAs, some tellingly rejecting the concept as a '*yanqui*' preoccupation. I encountered a particularly ripe example of this difference in relation to a t-shirt gifted to me by Dariel of ETP reading '*Resistencia Mapuche Territorio Libre*' (Mapuche Resistance Free Land) across the front and with a text on the back including the lines '*Por la dignidad de mi Familia de mi Comunidad y de mi Pueblo*' (For the dignity of my family, my community, and my people). I received copious compliments in BsAs for wearing this shirt, seen as an uncomplicated gesture of solidarity with ongoing Mapuche land struggles, pleasing in contrast with general expectations of *gringos* to be ignorant neo-colonizers. However, upon wearing this t-shirt to a potluck held at Woodbine anarchist space in Ridgewood, Queens, a white activist approached me and asked why I felt entitled to wear a shirt that aligned me with the struggle of a group to which I did not belong. She accused me of 'cultural appropriation' - a buzzword in contemporary NYC radical discourses. In NYC, then, one must navigate eggshells that do not exist in BsAs and I observed this to have significant effect on the potentialities of absurd performance in each fieldsite, as data analysis shall illustrate.

I observed growing emphasis upon calculated and ensured 'safety' and attempted precise specification of appropriate political behaviour to form part of professionalizing drives within arts and activist performance scenes in NYC. The more grassroots political movements that inform my research in NYC

operate alongside what numerous research co-performers referred to as an enormous ‘NGO industrial complex’. This is the swathes of professionalized social justice organizations whose employees campaign surrounding issues dictated by their founders and funders such as Color of Change, 350.org, Amnesty International USA, or MADRE. These are office-based workforces focused on influencing social/political change through mostly official channels. Some NYC organizations relating specifically to ‘artist’ training would also fall into this category, including Blade of Grass, Creative Time, and Center for Artistic Activism, exemplifying what Bogad has advocated as the “recent pedagogical turn” (2016a: 4) within artistic activism, as discussed in chapter two.

Where activist performance has traditionally been a ‘DIY’ affair, institutionally verified certification is being increasingly marketed, with NYC as an epicentre of the trend. For example, The Hemispheric Institute at New York University has offered an annual two-month programme entitled *EmergeNYC* since 2008 that purports to be “an incubator for emerging artists working at the intersection of performance and politics” that offers “varied entry points into art and activism” (Hemispheric Institute, 2019) with a price tag of \$1000. Such recent professionalization of creative activism, and activist absurd performance within this, mirrors more longstanding professionalization of performance art, students of arts schools being a disproportionate presence within NYC performance art scenes. In BsAs, professional accreditation of artistic training was also rife⁷⁹, yet I did not observe this to have bled into the activist sphere as prominently as in NYC, more grassroots projects of popular education such as ETP experimenting in mutual aid in the absence of marketized purportedly ‘activist’ courses within mainstream institutions. The impact of these different (un)professional contexts upon absurd performance practices in BsAs and NYC, in

⁷⁹ Such training is often Eurocentric. Within the degree of ‘Artes’ at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (2018), six modules concern the history of plastic arts, which covers an almost exclusively European history of art, two modules concern art in the colonized Americas, two modules concern Argentine art, and one module concerns the indigenous art of the entire American continent pre-colonization. Meanwhile, within the masters in ‘Teatro y Artes Perfromáticas’ at the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (2018) reading lists centre around prominent figures to have moulded European/North American notions of what constitutes performance art such as RoseLee Goldberg and Richard Schechner. I fear the US and Europe-centric activist trainings proposed within the tactical performance literature risk rendering activist scenes similarly eurocentrically standardized. Data analysis shall consider how absurd performance may resist or be assimilated by such professionalizing norms.

complex union with all of the contrasting contextual aspects detailed in this chapter, will be assessed during data analysis, to which I now turn.

Chapter Five - Data Analysis Prologue: Thick Description Immersion

Below I present two extended fieldwork vignettes, separated exactly a year apart and drawn from the culminating periods of my research in BsAs and NYC respectively. The first documents a clown performance by the ETP whilst the second presents a variety show of The Cart Department so as to juxtapose activist and artist absurd performance practices across my fieldsites in initial crude thick description. I begin data analysis in this way in order to display from the outset the throbbing, messy multiplicity of motivations for and practices of absurd performance across my comparative ethnographic work. At the same time I hope to give an impression of the profound emotional resonance of this work, displaying how the methodology described in chapter three translated into the almost entire dedication of my being and emotional energy to participant observation within the two intensive eight month periods coming to a close in these vignettes.

Here I aim to plunge readers in at the deep end, attempting to reproduce as far as possible the rich if sometimes chaotic detail observed during fieldwork, before progressing to unpick the indications of these examples alongside numerous others within the following data analysis chapters. For readers then, just as for me, data - dense, laden, and sometimes overwhelming - precedes analysis. This short chapter is as such intended both to immerse the reader, to give them a richer sense of the reality of this research, yet also to unsteady them and remind them that whilst I scrutinize my ethnographic data to suggest certain trends within following data analysis, messier instances of absurd performance continue relentlessly. Thus I begin as I intend to continue: foregrounding ethnographic thick description in necessarily untidy, troubling (non)explication of my central research questions. These questions, I remind the reader as we come to consider them head-on, are:

1) Why do activists and socially-committed artists engage in absurd performance?

2) *What differentiates artist and activist absurd performance practice?*

3) *How are both modes of absurd performance impacted by socio-political context?*

1. Buenos Aires, 30 November 2017

As we descend the stairs of my apartment in the neighbourhood of Caballito, I position a red bottle cap on a string over my nose, Dariel adjusts a similar mechanism featuring a snout of moulded rubberized crack sealant painted red, whilst Rodri squeezes on a large red foam proboscis. The three clowns exit to the street in character. Loping, rolling, and scuttling towards Parque Centenario, we speak with passersby in voices developed during previous months of clown classes at the ETP. I use a farcically exaggerated English accent in Spanish, Dariel honks like a goose, Rodri utilizes a flawed falsetto. Passing a municipal sign covering roadwork fencing that reads ‘Próximamente vamos a disfrutar más de la ciudad’ (Soon we will enjoy the city even more), Dariel and I become hyper-excited, jumping up and down, exclaiming how much we are going to enjoy the city and thanking the government for the impending utopic future. Dariel shouts how much fun it will be when food costs even more money. Meanwhile, Rodri announces repeatedly that “El 2001 será un gran año para todos” (2001 will be a great year for everyone) in direct quotation of former president Fernando de la Rúa speaking in 2000, later fleeing the Casa Rosada by helicopter following Argentina’s economic collapse and enormous popular uprising during the following ‘gran año’.

In this manner we make our way to ‘Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa’, hailing the bus to Palermo with impassioned hand-waving, informing passengers of the ‘obra maestra’ (masterpiece) we will be staging that evening. Arriving we remove our noses for a while, cleaning the theatre-space, Dariel reminding us

that during the previous assembly the decision had been taken to move the storage space of some items. We prepare props and costumes as the other clowns arrive - Alvaro, the 'profe' (teacher) of the political clown classes we have taken together over the previous six months, and the other students, Fiorella, Mariam, David, Fernando, and Jesús.

Once all together, beneath the flapping presence of a flag of 'Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra' (MST - Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil) and another with the visage of Che Guevara above the costume rails, we form an 'abrazo comunitario' (collective hug) and share our feelings on the impending end-of-year show. Some express nerves and excitement, others gratitude to 'compas' (comrades) for the 'aprendizaje compartido' (shared learning). Mariam reminds us that first and foremost our clowning should reflect the 'alegría rebelde' (rebellious joy) of 'la lucha' (the fight) that we form a part of. Alvaro adds that these moments help build the movement and nourish future action in the street, both theatrical and not. Cheering this, Jesús suggests we clown on the street outside the theatre to attract a larger audience, prompting a hurried exit.

Outside, Fiorella, stumbling on roller blades, starts greeting invisible people and showing them inside, whilst Fernando approaches those dining at nearby cafes declaring "perdonénme por romper sus éticas estéticas un momento"⁸⁰ (pardon me for breaking your aesthetic ethics for a moment) and gesturing to the alleyway where they may enter the donation-based theatre. Jesús, in a priest's outfit with large black nose, emphasizes that we are "payasos choripaños" (sausage-sandwich-seller clowns)⁸¹ and that cultural and actual nourishment for the revolution await inside. Still, after twenty minutes of diminishing exuberance parading nearby streets, we have attracted no audience members and regress to present the show for an audience of around

⁸⁰ A reference to the aforementioned 'cheta del nordelta' scandal.

⁸¹ A reference to the proud working-class symbol of *choripán* (Argentine sausage sandwich) being offered in the theatre that night.

forty people largely otherwise connected to the theatre or the broader social movement of which it is part, 'Movimiento Popular La Dignidad' (MPLD).

The show is a variety beginning with our collective delivery of a coffin to the theatre. Suddenly all of the other clowns apart from David and myself realize the gravity of the situation, scream, and leave. David retreats to the back of the room and withdraws a violin which he will play at inopportune moments throughout the show, in between stealing items from the other clowns as 'el payaso-chorro' (robber-clown)⁸². I am left downstage holding a prop of a birthday cake. This gringo-clown, an exaggeratedly ignorant foreigner, believes the funeral is a birthday party. I exclaim about the coffin - '¡Que mesa más exótica!' (What an exotic table!) - and set the 'table' with a 'tablecloth' of a municipal tarpaulin sign that reads 'Seguimos Avanzando Juntos' (We Continue Advancing Together) with the graffitied words added 'al abismo' (into the abyss). I place the cake on top and comment on the beautiful yellow⁸³ of the tablecloth and the wonderful government of Argentina before becoming distraught over my inability to set the table as well as I'd like to and exiting.

I am replaced by Fiorella who skates around misdelivering choripán before placing a sandwich upon the table/coffin and declaring 'Que el pan descanse' (May the bread rest)⁸⁴. Next enter Rodri as factotum and Dariel as painter. Rodri takes sexual pleasure in re-varnishing the coffin, looking inside and becoming highly distressed, explaining that there is no varnish inside, comforting himself with the phrase that "Él que despoitó dolares recibirá dolares" (He who deposited dollars will receive dollars)⁸⁵. Meanwhile, upstage, Dariel juggles with paintbrushes, covered in plastic bags as an 'artista plástica'

⁸² This plays with the commonplace compound titles for different forms of thief in BsAs such as *bici-chorro* or *moto-chorro* for ubiquitous bicycle and moped based bag-snatchers respectively.

⁸³ The colour of such road signs and of Macri's Cambiemos party.

⁸⁴ A pun upon 'que en paz descanse' (rest in peace).

⁸⁵ A direct quotation of an infamous undeliverable promise made by Eduardo Duhalde, provisional president of Argentina in January 2002, evoking the preceding 2001 crisis many see as headed for contemporary repeat.

(visual artist), commenting on the beauty of his artistic expression in a French accent.

Fernando replaces Rodri and Dariel, carrying a huge bag and seeking an ironing board. He stands by the coffin and pulls an iron from the bag whose cable is composed of old rags, bicycle tyres, toy sausages, and an anarchist flag, amongst other components, plugging it in and beginning to sing about lost love. He mistakes the iron for a microphone and burns his face before being escorted off by Jesús the priest-clown who begins a sermon interspersed by breaks to snort cocaine. A 'bible' descends on a string from the ceiling, Jesús takes it, exclaims that it is a limited edition, then begins to read from it a recipe for chicken empanadas. The pages fall to the floor and he storms out, whilst breakdancing⁸⁶, renouncing his faith.

Mariam, in a cleaner's outfit with hands overflowing with mops, buckets, sponges, and other cleaning materials arrives to clear the scene. She is obsessed with removing 'manchas'⁸⁷ (stains), spraying the audience with a bottle of 'Trenet' stain remover and forcing them to repeat the brand slogan 'Trenet...Y chau mancha!' (Trenet...And goodbye stain!). She maniacally declares 'Tiene un gatillo y es fácil!' (It has a trigger and it's easy!)⁸⁸. As she cleans the 'bulto' (literally: package, making reference to the coffin)⁸⁹, the rest of the clowns re-enter and we take a clumsy bow. Later, following several further 'abrazos comunitarios', I am alone in the multi-purpose costume-cupboard/changing-room/community-kitchen-larder/prop-and-banner-storage-space. I am to leave Buenos Aires in a few days. I place the cake prop back in the same position I had

⁸⁶ Jesús, referencing other ETP classes concerning Brechtian theatre, called this 'Brecht-dancing' - engendering the Brechtian alienation effect via breakdance.

⁸⁷ Recalling rhetoric of the fascist state during the 1976-83 dictatorship that surrounded the removal of supposed 'manchas' from Argentine society.

⁸⁸ A reference to *gatillo fácil*, the aforementioned title given to the high rate of police killings with impunity in shanty towns in Argentina.

⁸⁹ 'Bulto' was a euphemism commonly used by the military dictatorship to refer to those they abducted and killed.

found it many months earlier, blowing at the candles, making a wish, shedding a tear.



Fig 5-1: The clowns of ETP weep over the coffin.

2. New York City, 30 November 2018

Cycling down Broadway in Brooklyn, ahead of me Cranberry is wearing a rainbow coloured teddybear with the stuffing removed as a mask, meanwhile Jamie has on the dense green coat and gawky mask of one of his many performance personas, ‘Kiki Riki Live Poultry’. I am wearing a translucent silver bodysuit and a hot pink mask made from reclaimed materials our friend and collaborator Kalan had given me. Jamie’s boom-box fights against the noise of the elevated J-line train, attracting the attention of pedestrians, alternating between hardcore punk and hip-hop. At a traffic light, CupcakKe’s song ‘Duck Duck Goose’ comes on. Following the lyrics “I can make your dick stand up, like Statue of Liberty once we fuck”, Jamie turns to me and says - “An all-American family song”. Such roaming performance has become typical for me during my fieldwork in NYC, having crossed the city many times with members of The Cart Department, by bike, on foot with our trash sculpture carts, or performing on the subway. This journey has a different emotional tone for me, weighted by

the knowledge that the next day I shall return to the UK, to begin writing the thesis I've spent the past two years doing fieldwork to inform. Replacing the bike saddle with an office chair fails to thrill me.

We arrive to the Bushwick performance space and bar 'Flowers for All Occasions' and unite with some other core members of our loose collective - JME, Kevin, Mrs. Kipling - as well as numerous others from the broader performance art sphere, for a cabaret that is doubling as a farewell party for me. Jill, the curator of 'Grace Exhibition Space' not-for-profit gallery where we had performed previously approaches me and comments - "It must feel great to be getting out of this shithole country"⁹⁰. I laugh and respond that I'm surprisingly feeling quite sad about it, to which she replies - "I know, there's nowhere like New York".

Jamie and Cranberry set up a pyramid of foam bricks on the floor and begin a version of a performance I have participated in with them on numerous occasions before. Cranberry, nude in an ant-like mask, waves large cardboard cut-outs of cockroaches behind Jamie who foams at the mouth and grunts half-decipherable words about vegetables whilst crouched over the foam brick wall. "You know, they're raising awareness about poor sanitation in the city with those cockroaches," JME comments to me with a wry smile⁹¹. Cranberry begins to launch the bricks, along with empty beer cans, at the audience across the bar. Jamie recounts a story of a man who worshipped "asparagus divine", building a seven-hundred-seventy-seven foot monument to asparagus, whilst Cranberry distributes freshly oiled sprigs of asparagus around the room. As people attempt to applaud, Jamie holds up a cardboard sign reading 'BOO!', he and Cranberry giving everyone the finger as they exit.

⁹⁰ A reference to Trump's infamous smear of El Salvador, Haiti, and numerous unspecified African nations.

⁹¹ A reference to the community garden where we were to host another event earlier in the year billing us as 'raising awareness about recycling', roundly mocked as reductive by the collective and becoming a repeated joke.

The next performance is an electronic sound set by Kevin in a mask made of packaging tape, during which Mrs. Kipling, uninvited, shouts “Boring!” and projects a porn video entitled ‘Fat ass white girl gets fucked’ behind him. She screams “Me too! Me too!”⁹² This is followed by numerous performances by artists within the wider circle of the Cart Department including some improvised dance, some punk music, and two young women eating make up and waxing each other with an audio track of objectifying phrases read by a male narrator.

Some friends from the other half of my research in NYC, members of various activist groups, have come to say farewell but decline the invitation to perform, some stating that it is not their environment. JME, dressed as a ramshackle astronaut in baseball helmet, ski-goggles, and army jumpsuit, wheels in a toy cart full of gifts for the audience including an oversized ‘patriot’ pickle, a bag of 1900 ‘genuine New York’ pennies, and an academically-qualified aubergine named ‘Professor Thompson’. All of these performances are documented by numerous people taking videos and photos on their cameras and smartphones. Jamie attempts to collect the contact details of anyone with documentation to obtain it later.

The night is stretching into the early hours as I put on my costume of a red thong with a music box of two dancing clowns tied to the crotch, applying a thick coating of make-up to be covered by the pink mask I had worn on the way there, covered in turn by a looser cotton mask, then a motorcycle helmet splashed with multi-coloured paint - all used in previous interventions with the collective. I wind up the music box before walking throughout the bar until the music stops. There I turn to the closest person, attempting to communicate through sound poetry that they remove my helmet. Instead they wind the box again. I repeat the process. This time the helmet is removed. I rewind the box. The music stops. Still unable to see, I invite a kiss through the masks and, within the tumult of embrace with unseen volunteers, the second mask is removed. I rewind the box once more. The music stops by the door. I remove

⁹² A reference to the aforementioned #MeToo movement.

the next mask to reveal my made-up face. I have my eyes closed but I have eyes drawn onto my eyelids with which I look around the room before turning and exiting to the street. There I have left a bowl of soapy water and a flannel.

Those within the bar exit to form a crowd around me, joined by some curious passersby, one of whom shouts - “Bushwick, Baby!” I begin to wash my face, giving a speech in English and Spanish, distorted by repeated flannel strokes across my mouth. I speak about how I remain uncertain whether the self exists but that if it did exist then I would be closer to it now than ever before, thanks especially to many of the people there, thinking too of my friends in Buenos Aires. Finishing speaking I walk to the corner of the street and attempt to hail cabs, hoping to take one around the block, but none will stop for me in my wet, near-naked state. Returning after a few minutes, an African-American artist involved in the broader NYC performance art scene tells me: “If I tried to do that they’d see a mad nigger and take me straight to Rikers”⁹³. Later Cranberry comments, hugging me - “You got a bit sentimental there, huh? You forget that nothing means anything?”



Fig 5-2: Cranberry’s teddy bear mask in action during a street intervention.

⁹³ Rikers Island is the largest and most notorious prison in NYC.

Chapter Six - Data Analysis Part One: Ideological and (Un)Professional Motivations of (Supra)Tactical Absurd Performance

As outlined in chapter two, one of the central contributions of this thesis is the expansion upon current dominant 'tactical performance' discourses to include the consideration of more supra-tactical political inclinations of absurd performance observed during my fieldwork. On the spectrum between the ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance, I observed activists in NYC to be closest to the tactical pole, with activists in BsAs a little closer to the centre, artists in BsAs crossing over to the supra-tactical side of the bar, and artists in NYC to be closest to the supra-tactical extreme. NYC, then, offered a more polarized landscape of absurd performance in comparison with more blended, less broadly divergent scenes in BsAs. In this chapter I aim to illustrate these (supra)tactical positionalities, presented in order of their position along the spectrum from more tactical to more supra-tactical, as I observed them in action, linking them to the ideological motivations I witnessed at their root. Thus I respond to my first and second research questions of why activists and artists engage in absurd performance and what differentiates their respective praxis, as connected to the conceptual framework sketched out in chapter two. My third research question concerning potential contextual explanations for differences observed between NYC and BsAs will be turned to in-depth in chapter seven.

1. Activist absurd performance - tactical inclinations

1.1 New York City: Patchwork of activist collectives

As aforementioned, activist absurd performance in NYC has already attracted substantial academic attention within the tactical performance literature (Shepard, 2011; Bogad, 2016a; Duncombe, 2016). I discovered the uniting finding of this corpus of work - that absurd performance is

conceptualized and mobilized by activists as a tactically deployable tool - to still be the dominant perspective amongst current NYC activist collectives. However, rather than spurring absurd intervention as activist-scholars documented in the Bush and Obama eras, I found this same rhetoric to be inhibiting the contemporary production of absurd performance by NYC activist groups. Here a common refrain was that during the ‘heyday’ documented by the tactical performance literature⁹⁴, absurd intervention had significant potential tactical clout, yet now this type of action was tactically untenable. A former member of Billionaires for Bush told me, for example:

“Bush was ridiculous, sure, but he still had political legitimacy, you know, through his father and other things, that we could usefully undermine. But Trump undermines himself as part of his daily routine - what are we supposed to do with that?”

Here a shifted political landscape was seen as stripping absurd performance of its previous tactical advantage. The joke quickly became cliché of NYC activists inquiring why I was asking them about absurd performance when I could simply take a look at the White House. Trump, for many, was a clown who could not be outdone and whose insidious irrationality must be resisted by rational, sincere opposition. L.A. Kauffman, talking to me after the launch of their book *How to Read a Protest*, put it forthrightly: “It’s too fucked up right now for the absurd”. Indeed, on a few occasions NYC activists even became irritated with me for asking about absurd performance, calling out such a question as a product of my (white, male, middle class) privilege and/or telling me I was detached from the severity of the current political moment. My previous experiences with activists creating absurd performance amidst dire

⁹⁴ It is worthy of note that there was not consensus amongst the current NYC activist community that this ‘heyday’ had even actually happened. Many who had arrived to activism in the wake of Trump were unaware of groups such as Absurd Response to an Absurd War or Missile Dick Chicks, whilst those with long-standing histories of involvement disagreed on their prominence. One member of The Stop Shopping Choir told me for example that, in their view, the significance of these collectives and of absurd performance tactics in general had been exaggerated by academics who spied an opportunity to carve an attention-grabbing niche in which to cultivate their careers. Without being able to time-travel, it is difficult to ascertain the credibility of this accusation, yet I hold it in mind as I build upon this body of scholarship. Nonetheless, despite questioning its previously reported prominence, this same commentator remarked that there was certainly even less absurd performance amongst activists in NYC today, stating - ‘heck, right now there’d be basically nothing to exaggerate from’.

political trauma in BsAs, to be turned to shortly, allowed me to take what I came to recognize as a quintessentially NYC activist critique with a comparative-ethnographic pinch of salt.

Another cutting critique following tactical performance logic that I encountered numerous times in NYC was that absurd performance initially innovated an unsettling, surprise impact upon targets and a novel, sustaining one upon activists but both effects had lost their edge through repetition. As one former rebel clown put it to me - “One day I just got tired...I looked at my clown suit and I thought, ‘Fuck, do I have to put that on again’”. Absurd performance here was considered, once upon a time, ‘useful’ and ‘worthwhile’, but not now, and perhaps not ever again. Where Bogad describes ‘die-ins’⁹⁵ as “once a shocking tactic...now...a worn, undynamic cliché” (2016a: 119), I witnessed the same critique to have come to bear upon much absurd performance amongst contemporary NYC activists. Perceived impact had diminished and enthusiasm waned with it. There is here an immense gap between activist absurd performance that is often inspired or curtailed in relation to perceived tactical utility and more supra-tactical artist absurd performance typically driven by personal compulsion and notions of indirect political import, as shall be further illustrated below.

The general devaluation of absurd performance on tactical grounds within NYC activist communities meant that, as alluded to in chapter one, the bulk of my research within such groups entailed conversations such as those referenced above. Here we talked at length about why not much absurd performance was happening currently within NYC activism, rather than participating in regular actions and surrounding reflection as occurred with my other three sets of research co-performers. As a result of this lack of opportunities for participation/observation within research relevant actions, my data concerning these more inactive groups - or rather active but with different ‘tactics’ - is inevitably thinner. Still, the occasional revival of partially absurd performance

⁹⁵ A ‘die-in’ is a widespread form of demonstration/occupation constituting a mass-staged collapse of numerous activists in a symbolic location, their strewn bodies representing the deaths caused by a given corporate practice or government policy.

by NYC activists took place, which broadly confirmed its continued tactical conceptualization, as the below account demonstrates.

New York City, 2 August 2018

Part of a wave of 'Abolish ICE' actions co-ordinated by numerous activist networks across the city, including New Sanctuary, Occupy ICE, and The Stop Shopping Choir, the collective Rise and Resist had called a performance demonstration entitled 'Profiteer's Day'. According to their online promotion it was to be a "Wall Street Fleece Market...a mock hawking of For-Profit Prison industry apparatus...a joyous, righteous but raucous noise to put those profiting from I.C.E. on notice."

Arriving to the congregation spot at 23 Wall Street, I discover a gaggle of approximately forty protestors holding placards linking Bank of America, Wells Fargo, JP Morgan, and other surrounding financial organizations to ICE. Above them, on the steps stand three suited individuals grabbing at toy dollar bills that I begin to participate in dangling in front of them. They shout about the great investment opportunities offered by Trump's proposed border wall and immigration enforcement. Trump himself, with an oversized papier-mâché head, raises a golden sceptre in hearty agreement. They point towards a nearby \$675 a day hotel and call it cheap, referencing the average \$782 a day price of an ICE prison cell to the US taxpayer.

Attempts are made by members of the larger activist mass to rally surrounding tourists and workers into booing yet with little success. The group pulls down Trump and the business people from their pedestals, pushing them into a mass that marches the short distance to the Charging Bull statue, chanting 'Immigrants are welcome here, get ICE outta here'. At the bull, chants continue and the business-people return to cawing over the money to be made in children's prisons. This all occurs to the backdrop of a steady stream of

mostly unabashed tourists lining up to take photos touching the bull's remarkably polished testicles, shining from the daily caress of so many hands. As the crowd disbands a woman recognizes me from previous attendance at Rise and Resist planning meetings where I had introduced my research, saying -

'You're the performance guy, aren't you? It's great that you're here, we need more artists. You know my husband and I were just saying yesterday - what on earth happened to all the politically radical artists in New York?'



Fig 6-1: Rise and Resist's ironic corporate sharks gloat over the money to be made from imprisoning immigrants by the Charging Bull.

Here, following the Billionaires for Bush model, and including some former members of that collective, the over-zealous business characters represent an extraction of socio-political absurdity through inflated, pompous presentation ultimately rooted in facts. They flounder ludicrously at play money whilst dropping references to numbered data such as the comparison between the 'cheap' hotel and an ICE prison cell. The characters are obviously a joke, yet their punchlines are hard data. Here a seemingly disharmonic break from the

normal flow of activity on Wall Street unveils itself as a distilled presentation of the logics followed behind the closed doors of surrounding banking headquarters. This was done purposefully. The tactical goal of calling out specific financial supporters of ICE activities, hoping to contribute to pressure upon them to withdraw investments bankrolling the separation of migrant families⁹⁶, dictated the action, directing and delimiting it according to the perceived best route towards achievement of this aim.

The absurd elements in such a performance, as I typically observed amongst activists, especially in NYC, were restricted in the interest of maximized, direct, short-term impact. As much as the fanatical business-people might stir some initial confusion in unfamiliar passersby, this confusion and discomfort is sought in so much as it is considered tactically advantageous in shaming and undermining the legitimacy of targeted institutions, and is ultimately dispelled as soon as it is seen to achieve or lose this tactical promise. Such activist disruption is typically explained as it is done, the larger crowd of classically placard-wielding activists in this instance signalling, and sometimes literally explaining to more dumbfounded onlookers, the ironic intentions of the business-people characters. The fact that this constitutes one of the best accounts of an absurd performance by activists in NYC from eight months of fieldwork transiting numerous activist networks, yet barely satisfies the loose conditions of ‘exaggerated transgression’ that my working definition of absurd performance requires, speaks volumes to the drought of such actions that I encountered amongst NYC activists in comparison to the era of practice reflected in previous literature. This is further spoken to by the closing rhetorical question of the above account, an activist remarking, as I observed on numerous other occasions, on a perceived decline of artistic inclinations and aptitudes within NYC activism, let alone the more specific practice of absurd intervention.

⁹⁶ Another tactical aspect of this action was its coordination in response to the surrounding release of photos of crying infants being taken from their families at the US/Mexico border, attempting to capitalize upon associated waves of popular outrage.

Rise and Resist, as I observed to be typical of many NYC activist collectives, did not state a specific ideological position but rather a shared commitment to defending ‘civil liberties’. They acted rooted in a milieu of broadly ‘progressive’ leftist political ideologies, encompassing participants self-identifying as liberals, socialists, and anarchists, yet united by a commitment to targeted action addressing shared concerns such as racist immigration policy. In the absence of greater ideological cohesion, tactical orientation towards achieving shared goals bound them together. I did note some collectives to be exceptions to this commonplace ideological cloudiness and inclusivity, such as the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Committee (MACC) or the Revolutionary Communist Party (RevCom). These more ideologically dogmatic groups were even less prone to mobilize absurd performance and did not organize a single research-relevant intervention during my fieldwork. One former collaborator of the anarchist experimental theatre company The Living Theatre, now affiliated with MACC, told me in response to hearing about my research -

“the climate is not great for that kind of thing right now...I make [performance] proposals every once in a while with groups like this, but no one bites, it’s not obviously anarchist enough for them”.

This illustrates my consistent observation that the inherent ambiguity of absurd performance often grows more unpalatable the more dogmatic one’s ideological stance and associated ‘appropriate’ action style. This links back to discussion in chapter two of much classical anarchist thought presenting anarchy as the only natural apex of human political organization (Proudhon, 1840/1994; Bakunin, 1866/1972). In my observations, social actors ascribing to similarly inflexible political doctrines were typically unopen to absurd performance, seeing its obscurity as obstructive to their clear vision and therefore, say, “not obviously anarchist enough”. The above Rise and Resist intervention then demonstrates the restricted use of elements of absurd performance allowed under an ideologically loose commitment to tactical action, which may be disallowed under a stricter ideological praxis, or expanded if means-end tacticality is drawn into question, as shall be illustrated below.

Despite the tactical planning and execution detailed above, the juxtaposition of grinning tourists groping polished bronze testicles, flatly ignoring the business-people characters gloating over their profits from ripping apart migrant families, was unintentionally perhaps the most powerful scene of the afternoon. I observed this as a condensation of the oft-unsurpassable indifference of broader society in contrast to the opinion-changing intentions of activists. Sustaining the framework generally favoured by activists themselves, this would be a tactical failure, further informing the dismissal of absurd performance as a fruitless practice, as indeed I later witnessed in the critical appraisals of some participants in this action. From a more supra-tactical viewpoint, however, fruitlessness may be, paradoxically, fruit, and the sightseers smiles with a sheened scrotum behind ironic celebration of exploitative wealth could be taken as a potent encapsulation of inescapable, interconnected existential and socio-political absurdity. Here I think of Camus' reflection that

a man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but you see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive (1942/2013: 13).

We might see the chatter of tourists reflected in bronze testis as similarly exposing the fundamental meaningless of being, their obliviousness to surrounding protests about the mistreatment of migrants evoking simultaneously the interconnected omnipresence of unjustifiable inequality. This, it must be underlined, was not an apparent intention of any activists creating this performance, rather I highlight here the supra-tactical cadence that even supremely tactically intentioned absurd performance may unwittingly transmit.

1.2 Buenos Aires: *La Escuela de Teatro Político*

As detailed in chapter one, in contrast to lack of opportunities for participant-observation amongst activists in NYC, in BsAs I encountered a thriving scene of performance interventions by a multiplicity of activist

collectives. Nevertheless, within this more flourishing scene, I still observed in my participant observation with ETP that a dominant tactical perspective, whilst not inhibiting absurd performance to the extent I found in NYC, did mean it was only considered appropriate in limited contexts, as the below account illustrates.

Buenos Aires, 28 August 2017

In Plaza del Congreso, as a march against ‘gatillo fácil’ police killings congregates, I stand beside the encampment of workers recently made redundant by the closure of a PepsiCo factory. I am surrounded by the usual hubbub of such demonstrations - bread and drinks sellers balancing baskets and buckets on their heads, choripán under preparation, books, badges, and t-shirts laid out on blankets... I spot the banner of MPLD and head over, helping unload a van full of drums, as I wait for other members of ETP to arrive. I ask the driver - ‘Están armando una murga?’ (Are you putting together a murga⁹⁷?) - to which she replies with a smile, “No, un quilombo” (No, a mess). Mati arrives holding a plastic bag full of uninflated yellow sausage balloons and toy police hats, followed shortly by Dariel. More ETP members are expected, but do not show.

Regardless, Mati re-explains the plan that those dressed as police shall take the yellow balloons⁹⁸ and hold them as if they were guns, patrolling the scene with ludicrous, exaggerated vigilance, eventually using the ‘guns’ to aim and fire at ‘los pibes’ (the kids) who will appear to die but then come back to life to perform ‘un baile improvisado de resistencia’ (an improvised dance of resistance) as we burst our balloons. Mati, as an ‘egresado’ (graduate) of ETP, asserts an unspoken position of superiority, telling us he will coordinate the

⁹⁷ Murga is a mix of drumming, dancing, and singing practiced according to different styles in Argentina and Uruguay, often strongly associated in BsAs with working class neighbourhoods and, in turn, often forming part of leftist demonstrations.

⁹⁸ Yellow is the colour of Macri’s Cambiemos party and yellow balloons were used ubiquitously throughout his presidential campaign. Alvaro of ETP belittled the current government on another occasion as “una dictadura de globos amarillos” (a dictatorship of yellow balloons).

best moment for the action with other members of the broader MPLD movement, before departing to do so alone. As we wait, Dariel and I join in with the forming drum group, contributing to the ‘quilombo’ of beats, over which I observe Mati chatting with numerous surrounding figures, nodding sombrely. He returns to tell us that the decision has been taken that now is not the right moment for the performance, that it could be taken as making light of a grave situation and reflect poorly on the demonstration, and it would be better to re-plan for another time. The plastic bag full of yellow balloons and police caps still dangles from his wrist; over his shoulder the holster of an observing cop catches the sunlight⁹⁹.

I share here an account of a stifled performance to illustrate the tension consistently at play in my observations of ETP surrounding the perceived appropriateness of absurd intervention, often inhibited by fears of appearing disrespectful to victims of a given injustice. As with the Rise and Resist action detailed above, this planned performance is relatively tame in comparison to the more blatantly absurd acts of artist collectives in both BsAs and NYC to be detailed shortly. The proposed lampooning of police violence via buffoonish street patrolling with balloon weapons just about allows it to be considered within my lenient rubric of ‘exaggerated transgression’. The relative dourness of this performance idea, nonetheless perceived within the echelons of connected social movement hierarchies to be too blithe, precisely demonstrates activist monitoring and management of acceptable levels of irreverence that I witnessed again and again throughout fieldwork. Here intertwined concerns of tactical effectiveness and appropriate political sensitivity police absurd performance possibilities. Issues especially provoking such caution varied between BsAs and

⁹⁹ Similarly to the image of indifferent tourists with bovine testis above, the plastic bag of props hanging limp and unused around Mati’s wrist as the actual police loom over the demonstration with real, loaded guns, provoked in me a sense of the tragicomic bathos of much activism, of heartfelt compassion so often making little dent upon oppressive structures of power/knowledge. The figures intended to be lampooned, their ultimately baseless authority undermined through exaggerated impersonation, continue in their roles as if the constructed meanings that support them were inviolable, whilst our minute mockery was cancelled due to the tactical considerations of an act that held no guarantee of contributing to reduction of police assassinations in any case. Indeed, alienation with activist tacticality in the light of such bathos, and subsequent incredulity towards continued militant rationality, was a major inspiration for more supra-tactical action amongst socially-committed-artists observed in both fieldsites, as will be shown below.

NYC, as shall be detailed in chapter seven, yet the concern itself was a shared moulding trait of activist absurd performance in both fieldsites.

That the perceived risk above of appearing disrespectful towards victims of police violence was seen as potentially staining the image and thus influence of the demonstration unveils the connection between such caution and tactical hopes of maximized impact. A similar calculation was made in the cancellation of a cabaret scheduled in *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa* on the night that Santiago Maldonado's body was discovered, as the collective did not wish to appear disrespectful nor detract from the potential impacts of street reclamations. Absurd performance was welcome, and relatively regularly practiced, in the BsAs activist sphere, yet only when also considered, as members of ETP regularly put it, '*contundente*' (forcefully convincing) by those with decision-making power, otherwise taking a backseat to more established modes of protest. This echoes notions of the 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007) propounded in the tactical performance literature, resounding through the sentiment shared with me on numerous occasions within ETP that the "*piedras poéticas*" (poetic rocks) they threw at society within performance necessarily needed to be combined with "*piedras de verdad*" (actual rocks) thrown at the police in order to collectively produce socio-political change. In my observations in both BsAs and NYC, the particular poetic rock of absurd performance was typically launched with careful consideration by activists, amid concerns of its liability to backfire and potentially delay rather than expedite accomplishment of tactical aims.

However, the fact that this performance was suggested in relation to the issue of *gatillo fácil*, and almost enacted, signals a difference from NYC, where I did not observe even a consideration of absurd performance within activism surrounding police killings, such as austere 'People's Monday' weekly wake-like events for victims of police violence held by the anti-capitalist collective 'NYC Shut It Down'. This reflects how I observed the option of absurd performance, whilst still treated with caution, to be more prominently placed within the activist 'repertoire' in BsAs. This may be connected to an assertion shared by

numerous members of ETP that I did not encounter so prominently amongst NYC activists, most cogently expressed by Chili when he told me - '*No podemos mantener nada sagrada, si no nos convertimos en una iglesia*' (We cannot hold anything sacred, otherwise we turn into a church). In other words, the undermining of all normative structures, including nascent subcultural ones, is essential to the maintenance of autonomy and not becoming beholden to the word of an alternative, newly oppressive and inflexible 'Lord'. That is, there must not be only one 'correct' way of doing activism. Thus, in contrast to Bogad's suggestion that absurd performance is a "crowbar" that must be used correctly because "in the case of mistakes or miscalculations, that crowbar can break or rebound, causing painful self-inflicted injuries" (2016a: 2), my research co-performers with ETP remained more open to novel or experimental crowbar manipulation. I observed that such innovation, rather than necessarily causing "self-inflicted injuries" and damaging movement prospects, may wrench open the window for more supra-tactical absurd interventions that may provoke socio-political change in different ways.

This openness to some more supra-tactical absurd performance may be illustrated with reference back to the clown show detailed in chapter five. Here the dark humour surrounding a coffin, mistaken for a table and ironing-board and varnished and cleaned without concern for the body inside, places ambivalence towards death - and therefore life - in the centre of a torrent of tragi-comic references to socio-political, economic, and moral insecurity such as the robber-clown, Rodri's (dis)comforting quotations of ex-presidents, or the cocaine addicted priest. Here it is ambiguous whether the 'abyss' referenced in the edited municipal sign that my clown persona used as a tablecloth alludes to an existential or political void - to our impending mortal ends or the metaphorical death of Argentine society, or perhaps both. The clowns as such did not make a clear, definably political-impact-generating point, nor were they orientated towards a specific goal. Rather they evoked a soup of socio-political absurdities in irreverent reflection of their unjustifiability wherein the bible, the Truth, the word of (dead) God may as well be a recipe for chicken empanadas. This illustrates the generally greater potential to break free from the prototype of tactical absurd performance that I observed amongst activists in BsAs in

comparison with the more rigidly tactically circumscribed practices of activist performance in NYC detailed above.

Alvaro once thanked me for the debates provoked within ETP by prompting enhanced consideration of absurd performance, saying -

“es esencial que tengamos compañeros que nos hacen interrogar lo normal, tanto de la sociedad como dentro de nuestros movimientos” (it is essential that we have comrades who make us question the ‘normal’, both within society and our social movements).

This is not to say that such emphasis upon interrogating normativity both within and without the movement was the dominant perspective within ETP, with many exhorting what they perceived to be the correct process of doing things such as militant adherence to the popular assembly system of collective decision-making¹⁰⁰. Indeed, the above vignette during the *gatillo fácil* march illustrates well the strength of semi-formal activist hierarchies to outrule absurd intervention. Nonetheless, against this largely controlled backdrop, I observed a greater presence of internally dissenting, questioning voices within activism in BsAs than NYC. The larger, more robust activist framework I encountered in BsAs, as detailed in chapter four, possessed a stability and scale that appeared to slightly more readily afford possible experimental diversions from more established practices. This included some more supra-tactical absurd performance, if still often siphoned through and semi-institutionalized within potentially restrictive group decision-making processes, as illustrated above. This compares to a smaller, more fragile activist scene in NYC often seeming more concerned with threats to its less established political legitimacy, as seen in aforementioned defensive critiques of my research topic as trivializing and out of touch, which were not encountered in Argentina.

ETP forms part of the rhetorically socialist movement MPLD, yet in actuality contains individuals variously politically identifying as socialist,

¹⁰⁰ Connected to Chili’s declaration above, this diligence was critiqued by some participants as creating an intransigent ‘*sagrada asamblea*’ (sacred assembly).

anarchist, Peronist, or preferring to evade any specific categorization. This ideological looseness, similarly to that illustrated amongst numerous collectives in NYC, was again compensated in my observations with ETP by a general shared emphasis upon tacticality. However, in BsAs some opportunities were also left open for more supra-tactical elements within activist absurd performance via the key notion of *alegría rebelde*. Here activists in BsAs were able to frame absurd performance as pitting the delight of transgressive resistance against the drudgery of normative conformism, more supra-tactical elements often legitimated as helping sustain the broader fight for a fairer and more enjoyable future. *Alegría rebelde* thus appears as an Argentine parallel of ideas expressed elsewhere, such as Hardt and Negri's proposed "posing against the misery of power the joy of being" (2000:413), or George McKay's observation that "pleasure and direct action can be intertwined political strategies" (1996:131). However, diverging from McKay's assessment based upon work with British protest movements, I did not observe the notion of *alegría rebelde* to operate solely within the realm of strategy, but also sometimes as a window for more supra-tactical action existing alongside normative tactical frameworks.

Clown performances within ETP were repeatedly legitimized, as demonstrated by Mariam in the opening anecdote of chapter five, with reference to *alegría rebelde*. Such perceived need to justify the revolutionary function of clown may be seen to reflect overarching tactical persuasion, with *alegría rebelde* simultaneously supporting and undermining absurd performance as an auxiliary activity within this broadly tactical frame. Clown was sometimes half-jokingly referred to as an 'optional' course in comparison to the 'mandatory', larger group size sessions of Theatre of the Oppressed and Brechtian theatre, occasionally displaced by the decision of general assembly if one of the other streams desired space to rehearse. The supposed '*alegría*' offered by clown and other absurd performance practices was thus supported by the larger social movement group when it did not get in the way of their other, apparently more 'serious', pursuits. I observed the amorphous yet hugely popular idea of *alegría rebelde* then to subtly assimilate most absurd performance under an ostensibly tactical rubric, allowing more supra-tactical elements to emerge without seeming to threaten too strongly an overall logic of

purposefulness. Still, this limited flexibility allowed via *alegría rebelde* facilitated wider absurd performance possibilities than amongst NYC activists. I did not observe a parallel concept in contemporary, often adamantly disconsolate NYC activist communities, one long-term anti-capitalist activist and volunteer at the radical library ‘Interference Archive’ asking me with a grin a few months into my research -“How you finding that straw shirt you gotta wear round here?”

It was with emphasis upon their potential contribution to *alegría rebelde* that, following encouragement to participate in the popular education model of ETP not only as student but also teacher, my proposal of workshops of absurd intervention were accepted through general assembly. Subsequently I facilitated eight weeks of sessions that came to be known as *talleres del absurdo* (workshops of the absurd), culminating in a collective street intervention with a group of five other members of ETP: Majo, Gianna, Lucía, Ceci, and Jesús. This process opened up many insights into perceptions of and motivations for absurd performance both within the small workshop group and the broader collective, as the following account begins to illustrate.

Buenos Aires, 5 December 2018

Lucía writes “Rebelamos adentro de la absurdidad de este mundo” (We rebel within the absurdity of this world) on a sliver of paper, rolls it into a tube, and slots it inside the small hole on the underside of a papier-mâché ‘egg’, adding the ovum to a pile of others with their ‘yemas poéticas’ (poetic yolks) already inserted. Next to her Majo scribbles ‘los ojos de tu abuelo’ (the eyes of your grandfather), whilst Ceci chooses lines from a poetry anthology to copy out, and Gianna flicks through newspapers selecting words at random to note down. The next day we are to stage the final intervention of our series of workshops of absurd performance, entitled by Lucía ‘El Huevonazo’¹⁰¹ (grand

¹⁰¹ This also carries strong connotations of testicles and a term of (sometimes playful, sometimes not) disrespect.

spectacle of giant eggs), the eggs as a central prop to be playfully distributed by a giant eye, a penguin, a cat in boxing gloves, a princess, and a spoon. We are in the sun occupying the outside stage at Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa, while another group of compañeros - Mati, Javi, and Mercedes - are painting signs for an upcoming march against the WTO within the theatre building.

In reality, participation in the two activities is not mutually exclusive, Lucía entering to paint a banner for a while, Javi occasionally exiting and helping fill some eggs. Finishing the eggs we begin to play with them, rehearsing for the next day, throwing the eggs between us, juggling them, trying to steal them from one another. Javi emerges in the doorway of the theatre holding a '¡Fuera OMC!' (WTO out!) sign and says with a grin 'Estamos aquí adentro preparando para una manifestación importante y afuera hay algo que no tiene ningún sentido' (We're inside preparing for an important demonstration and outside there's something that doesn't make any sense). Gianna, tossing an egg high in the air, responds, 'Hay un mundo más allá del sentido y estamos yendo para allá con alegría rebelde' (There is a world beyond sense and we're headed in that direction with rebellious joy), to which Javi laughs and Mercedes, having also exited to investigate the commotion, appears to cringe. After playing a little longer, we place all the smaller eggs inside the larger egg we had prepared as their receptacle, ready for the next day. Mati approaches us and reminds us that it is important that we carry ID with us during the street action, in case of attracting police attention. Majo pulls a face and I jest that perhaps we could put our passports inside the eggs to play with too but Mati is not amused, stating curtly 'Compas, es muy serio lo que digo' (Comrades, what I say is very serious).



Fig 6-2: A penguin reads a poetic yolk to a passerby during ‘El Huevonazo’.

The diversity of phrases inserted by different individuals within the approximately two hundred smaller ‘eggs’ used in this action speaks to the varied perceptions of its (anti)rationale within the participating group. For example, where Lucía foregrounded socio-political absurdity as the fuel for an ongoing social struggle within literal statements, adding snippets explicitly about the ‘absurdity of capitalism’, Majo opted for short, disconnected, emotive statements without an obvious message. In the action itself, where members of the public would receive these clippings of poetry, those of Lucía would offer a direct political explication whereas those of Majo would more likely extend any initial perplexity provoked by the counter-normative intervention. The former lends the action a purpose - rebellion against socio-politically absurd oppressions and the spectacular spreading of that sentiment, which, as Lucía put it, was hoped might become ‘*contagioso*’ (contagious) if expressed in this way. This coincides with the slogan of the ETP street intervention sub-group *Tumbarrati Frente Cultural*: “*El Arte no puede hacer por sí solo la revolución, pero puede despertar revolucionarios*” (Art cannot achieve the revolution alone, but it can wake up revolutionaries). Here the wake up call metaphor represents a broadly tactical understanding of transgressive performance. In contrast, Majo expressed

the desire to engender poignancy and sudden, intimate reflection through short, cutting images, not necessarily feeding directly into a broader ‘revolution’, suggesting a more supra-tactical intention to obliquely corrode the normative distribution of the sensible. Within the same action, these orientations existed side-by-side. In contrast, amongst activists in NYC such mixing of tactical focus with supra-tactical flair was less evident, the latter often dismissed as ‘besides the point’ from a more rigidly enforced tactical perspective. In short, ‘activism’ typically appeared as a more flexible enterprise - and more open to supra-tactical absurd performance experimentation - throughout my observations in BsAs. Meanwhile, more routinized expectations in NYC often mirrored those critiqued in the article ‘Give up Activism’ wherein the reified, professionalized activist role “fits into...society and doesn't challenge it - activism is an accepted form of dissent” (Anonymous, 2001).

Still, the co-occurrence alongside the classic activist action of banner painting grounds the above egg production and absurd performance it prepared for within the broader activist repertoire and associated overarching tactical frame in BsAs too. Javi’s playful suggestion that our act that ‘made no sense’ was inferior to their ‘important’ preparations did not come without teeth. Behind it lay the truism, discussed above regarding clown classes, that an action needed rational justification. Here an action needed to ‘make sense’ somehow following tactical scripts, in order not to become frivolous. Dariel’s visual-artist clown from the opening anecdote of chapter five speaks to this, his buffoonish French accent mocking the supposed superiority of ‘European’ ideas posited by many middle-class Argentinians and equating this with ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ as a detached, elitist enterprise with near zero political significance.

Javi’s accusation thus appears as a reminder that we not forget to ‘make sense’ somehow politically. As alluded to in comparing Lucía’s and Majo’s phrases, for some this was a legitimate note, for others such obligatory sensibleness was itself in need of critique. This emblemizes the divide between more tactical or more supra-tactical intentions of absurd performance that my research centrally highlights. Grimaces at suggestions of a movement

beyond sense or po-faced declarations of seriousness in response to more playful acts signal towards the apprehension of many activists in BsAs towards absurd performance whose clear tactical formulation was not apparent. At the same time I observed this unease with deliberately supra-tactical action to represent part of a more open constellation of activist perspectives in BsAs than in NYC, facilitated by greater internal movement criticality and the legitimizing narrative of *alegría rebelde*, as Gianna evoked once more in response to Javi's semi-jesting gripe.

2. Artist absurd performance - supra-tactical inclinations

2.1 Buenos Aires - *Etcétera*

Pithily summarizing his perception of the difference between *Etcétera* and activist performance groups such as ETP, Hernan told me “*somos más cool, boludo*” (We're cooler, *boludo*¹⁰²). This was expressed at the end of a conversation reflecting on the collective's greater irreverence towards established societal and subcultural norms, holding a more independent and thus more experimental position, coolness roughly equating to disrespect towards convention. Indeed, irreverent rule-breaking played a central role in the rhetoric and performance practice of *Etcétera* throughout my participation with them. A more supra-tactical valorization of transgression in and of itself appeared intrinsic to group identity. However, valuing transgression for its own sake did not translate to a negation of potential affiliation with other sakes. As detailed in chapter four, the origins of the collective include participation in the *escraches* of H.I.J.O.S., distracting police attention with outlandish street theatre whilst others pelted the residences of unprosecuted torturers and murderers with red paint, pushing for the repealing of impunity legislation, illustrating a supremely tactical use of absurd intervention.

¹⁰² The word *boludo*, ubiquitous in Argentina, is difficult to effectively translate. Signifying a cloudy status between 'ballsack' and 'jerk', the word is used fluidly in informal contexts as a generalized insult, to suggest stupidity, to display camaraderie, or to pinpoint emphasis.

What does mark out Etcétera from the ETP position outlined above is that occasional tactical mobilization of absurd performance takes place against a backdrop of commitment to more indirect troublemaking, rather than vice-versa. Etcétera often extolled contradiction as a virtue¹⁰³, messily combining tactical and supra-tactical motivations without perceiving a need to justify either. Their emphasis upon the accidental, aleatory concept of ‘error’ illustrates this, a tactically orchestrated error being oxymoronic yet embraced nonetheless. The title for the *Errasmus Mundus* series of (no)work(no)shops of “*Des-educación Errorista*” (Errorist dis-education) which constituted a major part of my participant observation with the collective was “*El arte no es un espejo, es un martillo*” (Art is not a mirror, it is a hammer), borrowing a quotation variously attributed to Mayakovsky and Brecht. However, this was not necessarily always a hammer swung towards a targeted focal point, but often rather danced with, or where striking one’s thumb was reframed as potentially provoking soulful, perspective-shifting song. Each error here is a flaw in rationality providing a peephole to the potentially greater freedom beyond it.

In a self-penned description of errorist performance the collective writes - “*Aquí no hay ensayos: la acción dramática nace del error*” (Here there are no rehearsals, the dramatic action is born of error) (2017: 268). This contrasts with the practice of ETP that was heavily influenced by Augusto Boal’s proposition that the Theatre of the Oppressed “in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without a doubt *a rehearsal of revolution*” (2000: 141). Here potential solutions for pinpointed socio-political problems may be identified and kick-started via theatrical repetition and rehearsal¹⁰⁴. In contrast,

¹⁰³ Here Etcétera’s placement within avant-garde (anti)tradition is apparent, echoing Hans Richter’s assertion - “[t]he realization that reason and anti-reason, sense and nonsense, design and chance, consciousness and unconsciousness, belong together as necessary parts of a whole - this was the central message of Dada” (1964: 64). This contrasts sharply with activists who typically viewed contradiction as signaling a flaw in their reasoned arguments for political change, hence their generally more tactically justified mobilization of absurd performance.

¹⁰⁴ Dariel underlined the paramount significance of this theorization upon the performances, absurd or otherwise, of the ETP when he told me - “*Todo lo que hacemos aquí, que sea absurdo o que sea realista o cualquier otra propuesta que sea, todo es un ensayo para la revolución*” (Everything that we do here, whether it is absurd or realist or whatever other proposal it may be, everything is a rehearsal for the revolution).

amongst Etcétera practice and preparation for pursuit of a predetermined goal was abandoned in favour of the possibilities opened by improvisation and ‘error’ as a reclaimed term no longer synonymous with failure but rather mobilized in critique of dominant scripts of ‘sense’. Here “*el error es una afirmación negativa, una especulación sobre otro resultado posible*” (Error is a negative affirmation, a speculation about another possible result) (Etcétera, 2017: 270). Rather than a direct goal, performances inspired by ‘error’ pursue the opening of other possibilities, maintaining open what more tactical performances tend to close off, as I illustrate with the below account.

Buenos Aires, 9 September 2017

Sitting in a circle with nine others on the floor of Experiencia Hiedra, we wait for Augusto, the ‘maestro errante’ (wayward teacher) of this particular (no)work(no)shop to finish setting up his projector. Four of us - myself, Sophie, Mishtho, and Jacinta, plus Augusto - have been regular participants in recent errorist actions, the others more sporadically involved. Sophie shows me images on her smartphone of posters she had put up in connection with her ‘#LaBocaTour’ fake tourism project, contrasting news headlines about fires, evictions, and murders in the La Boca neighbourhood next to tweets from the local gallery Fundación PROA about world-changing art without reference to dire local context. “Se viene el cambio¹⁰⁵, viste?” (Change is coming, you see?), she jokes.

Augusto calls our attention and begins a presentation introducing the concept of errorism for those less familiar, naming Fede and Loreto as founders and the curators of this series of (no)work(no)shops. He cites the direct influence of Situationism on his plan for the day of a derive, adding matter-of-factly that ‘a través de una coreografía errorista, de mover el cuerpo de una manera extraña o inesperada, tal vez podamos desestabilizar el poder’ (through

¹⁰⁵ A sardonic reference to the ‘change’ promised during Macri’s presidential campaign.

an errorist choreography, moving our bodies in a strange or unexpected way, perhaps we can destabilize power). He then projects a sequence of videos of birds, ants, and fish moving in packs, telling us that we are going to do the same, handing out a selection of open-ended cardboard headsets that restrict our vision to a single plane with the appearance of virtual reality goggles. He announces - “Esto es la realidad aumentada tercermundista” (This is virtual reality of the third world) to much laughter.

Placing our goggles on, Augusto instructs us all to hold hands, leading us out into the street as director of the derive/intervention, as photographed by Jacinta. He leads us along at a slow pace, largely in silence, pressed up against walls, so that visible through the visors is only a tiny portion of wall at a time, rendering discernible minute detail otherwise often ignored. I note the varied textures of the walls, splutters of spray paint, mosquitos caught in spiders’ webs, an eyelash stuck in a blob of paint, countless chips and cracks, and many scribbled messages: ‘chupa verga grande puta’ (suck huge dick slut), ‘yo voto Scioli’ (I vote Scioli), Cristina volverá (Cristina will return)...

Turning the corner onto more commercial Corrientes Avenue, Augusto instructs us to turn around and leads us along as we face pedestrians and motor traffic, provoking the attention of many. An extended shout of “Pelotudoooooos!” (Dickheeeeeeads!) is aimed at us from a passing construction workers’ van. An older man approaches me specifically to ask “Qué hacen? Es algún tipo de arte?” (What are you doing? Is it some kind of art?), then, whilst I pause to consider how to respond, exclaims incredulously, “No vas a contestarme?” (You’re not going to answer me?), before hurrying off. A woman asks Augusto, “Esto es algo político?” (Is this something political?), to which he responds, “Puede ser” (It could be). One passing man asks if he can join and adds himself to the sequence temporarily, albeit without goggles, commenting on how he wishes he saw things like this more often.

Augusto leads us inside a supermarket, then a clothing store, encircling a taxi for a few moments and eyeing intently its driver, then into the Federico Lacroze train station. Here, as we form a circle around a hot dog stand, two police officers approach Jacinta and request her ID, stating that it is illegal to take photos inside the station. Admitting later that he feared potential escalation of the situation, Augusto leads us promptly out of the station, recollects goggles, and instructs us to choose a nearby slot to reflect on the experience, moving both ‘normally’ and ‘abnormally’ in this chosen space, to reconvene in the gallery thirty minutes later.

Chatting as we disband, I note a sticker reading ‘¿Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?’ (Where is Santiago Maldonado?) on a nearby lamppost and ask Augusto how he thinks the performance might have been different if we’d carried a banner featuring that ubiquitous question of the moment, suggesting we were searching with goggles for the disappeared activist. Augusto laughs and states that it would have transformed the action entirely, that we couldn’t have done it and maintained an undefined troubling of norms of movement and seeing. Mishtho adds that the police may have intervened a little sooner, too, and I speculate that maybe the workers would not have called us ‘pelotudos’. Augusto feigns agreement - “Tenés razón, nos habrían llamado hijos de puta” (You’re right, they’d have called us sons of bitches).



Fig 6-3: *La realidad aumentada tercermundista.*

The explicit signing of performance, or lack thereof, is highlighted here as a major distinction between more tactical, typically activist forms of absurd performance and more supra-tactical, typically artist interventions. Following Augusto's reasoning above, to transgress under a label that states 'this is why we are transgressing' - as seen within previous anecdotes with the Rise and Resist statistical placards or Lucía's explicitly anti-capitalist 'poetic yolks' and as the inclusion of a '*Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?*' banner would have been above - is to centre a defined political purpose that denies more general problematization of normativity. Here absurd transgression is ultimately legible according to dominant rational logic. In contrast, to transgress without a clarifying label is to draw into question the basis upon which the perceived need for such explanation and justification stands, potentially opening the way for more indefinable, perhaps unforeseen anti-normative impacts. Linking back to the conceptual framework outlined in chapter two this would be the destabilization of what Foucault (1978; 1984) might identify as conventional power/knowledge hierarchies and associated constructed 'regimes of truth'. Here acts contravening hegemonic scripts of obligatory rational justification may obliquely question and perhaps destabilize the dominant 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2004), opening possibilities for surpassing normative order that more tactical absurd intervention, pre-justified according to hegemonic rational logic, may not be able to reach.

The questions from passersby about presumed vague 'political' or 'artistic' intentions detailed above, illustrating a typical public reaction to unsigned absurd intervention observed throughout fieldwork, indicate the confusion often prompted by such unmarked, difficult to categorize actions. Meanwhile, Augusto's response of 'could be' typifies the cultivation of bewilderment as valuably disruptive by artists, which I generally observed to be dispelled as damagingly obfuscatory by activists, across both fieldsites. Such more supra-tactical generalized problematization of normativity formed a driving motivation of the above performance, as seen in Augusto's academic speculation on the potential of a situationist-inspired 'errorist choreography' to potentially destabilize power. Here an ethereal rather than direct goal was pursued through

an oblique rather than on-the-nose absurd performance. Meanwhile, Augusto's joke that, if less unsettled by ambiguity of the action, the workers would have simply slung a different slur at us, nods toward a lack of hope of altering social norms or creating political change in any case that I often observed underlying artist absurd performances. Here such absurd performance takes on a more explicitly Sisyphean flavour as it is perceived that, having created a transgressive intervention, one will simply have to start all over again within a largely undented, self-healing normative framework. However, this dampened hope, differently from The Cart Department in NYC to be detailed shortly, did not drive Etcétera to abandon direct political action as such, rather incorporating it scrappily within their performances.

When a specific political issue was explicitly raised within an Etcétera performance, I typically observed it to stir reflection upon interconnection with broader oppression, rather than tactically pursue the immediate resolution of said issue. For example, continuing with the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado as a case study, in an event at the aforementioned *ex-ESMA* former clandestine centre of detention, Fede and Loreto, performing alone, distributed placards featuring Santiago's face in amongst others bearing the logos of multinational corporations such as Ford, Dow, and Benetton before presenting a tongue-in-cheek outline of their planned *Museo de Neo-Extractivismo* (Museum of Neo-Extractivism). Here they mocked, in matching tuxedos, the genuine 'greenwashing' exercises of environmentally destructive companies, whilst implicitly connecting the fatal consequences of swallowing such a mendacious pill to the historic mass-murder emblemized by that performance site and the recent assassination of Santiago. The ludicrousness of such lies and their ever-perpetuating consequences were rendered into farce, critiquing once more the normative framework that allows such damaging deceit to be framed as 'sensible'.

Meanwhile, in a street action organized loosely as a reproach of gentrification, my character, who was a giant walking beard, was to hold a placard of an image that we had previously found in the trash of a heavily-

bearded cartoon character who was themselves holding a placard of an indecipherable diagram. Loreto suggested on the day of the action that we clip flyers asking ‘¿Dónde está Santiago Maldonado?’ over the top of the diagram, not making this the central question of the action but adding a kick of concentrated contemporary political relevance to an otherwise indirect action. This once again connected a specific, current political concern to a broader, atemporal socio-politically absurd matrix of domination, positioning the former as a symptom of the latter, evoking the disharmony of both through exaggerated transgression. The meta-depiction of a protester within the intervention thus nodded towards base solidarity with their cause without centring it in typically activist fashion, rather sharpening the multi-faceted commentary of a broadly supra-tactical absurd intervention.



Fig 6-4: The errorist walking beard.

Thus Etcétera contributed to widespread calls for justice for Santiago Maldonado, but rather than directly stating this demand as was typical in ETP performances and other activist actions surrounding the issue, inserted it obliquely alongside broader troubling of oppressive normativity and obligatory rationality. Here the closer proximity of more tactical absurd performance to Bourriaud's (2002) model of 'relational aesthetics' and more supra-tactical absurd performance to Bishop's (2004) counter-model of 'relational antagonism' highlighted in chapter two is made apparent. ETP's more tactical absurd performances were typically oriented towards the establishment of greater socio-political harmony, calling out and attempting to undermine and undo current injustices, echoing rhetoric of creating emancipatory 'microtopias' of harmonic inter-relation within relational aesthetics discourse. Meanwhile, Etcétera's more supra-tactical absurd performances often focused on exposing inevitable socio-political disharmony, more obliquely provoking reconsideration of the normative frameworks undergirding such inequality. This may be seen as mirroring the generation of "friction...awkwardness and discomfort" that provides "polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other" (Bishop, 2004: 79) that purportedly characterizes relational antagonism.

In light of his support of other more directly political actions, Augusto's baulking at the suggestion of a banner in the above vignette can be read as reflecting group reluctance to forego unsettling anti-normative capacities in favour of direct political resonance, not a wholesale rejection of the possibility of integrating direct political commentary within broader disorientation. As such I observed with Etcétera that general supra-tactical motivations limited more tactical elements within absurd intervention without disallowing them. This connects to a general distinction I perceived between the political self-conceptions of artists creating absurd performance in BsAs and NYC. Members of Etcétera asserted on numerous occasions that their practice was activist as well as artist, expressing concerns about maintaining some direct political clout and fostering camaraderie with more activist networks. In contrast, Cart Department members generally conceived themselves as separate from the activist sphere.

Kalan of The Cart Department commented when I first outlined my research to him - “Woah, that’s weird to hear you talking about activism and what I do in the same breath”. Further, where Fede commented on one occasion that to create irreverent performance without any defined political aim whatsoever was “*masturbatorio*” (masturbatory), when I asked the core Cart Department group what they thought of this, Jamie responded immediately by saying, “I like masturbating”, to the laughing affirmation of the wider group. This relates to different conceptions of what it means to be or not be politically active in BsAs and NYC, with the abandonment or refusal of activist affiliation appearing almost shameful in BsAs whereas this carried less stigma in NYC, to be explored in-depth in chapter seven.

Meanwhile, Sophie’s directly critical poster campaign, proudly shared at the outset of volunteering her body in a broadly supra-tactical choreography, indicates the internal diversity of Etcétera as a loose collective of individual artists, creating interventions both together and alone, sometimes more tactical than others. An all-encompassing definition of their performance style would be an oversimplification, anathema to the buoyant contradictoriness of the internally diverse group, though I pinpoint tendencies within this research. Different members of the collective took the lead within different performances during my fieldwork, such as Augusto as the teacher and director above, yet only because a group of other autonomous performers allowed them to do so, under the implicit agreement that these roles may switch in other performance situations. Augusto, for example, participated in other sessions of ‘*Erasmus Mundus*’ but in a more backseat, supportive role. Such mutual give-and-take allowed the collective to generate a mixture of more tactical and supra-tactical performances directed by varied individual philosophies, messily united within shared interest in surrealism, autonomy, and ‘error’.

However, undergirding and co-ordinating such co-supportive elasticity, I observed emphasis in these loose guiding principles to be maintained foremost by the ultimate hierarchical control of the group by its two most dominant founding members, Fede and Loreto. Their approval was implicitly necessary for

an action to be considered ‘*errorista*’, their ideological limits constituting also the limits of possible collective actions. The couple were, throughout my observations, the charismatic leaders of Etcétera. They do not feature directly in the above anecdote because they were out of the country, representing Etcétera, in a residency in the Netherlands, but their chief organizational role, as underlined by Augusto, was undeniable at each step. The above intervention, as with the whole *Erasmus Mundus* series, occurred because they scheduled it and paid a friend/collaborator to design and direct it. This dynamic also highlights an additional professional motivation for absurd performance occasionally done mercenarily, to be considered in more depth below. Here I seek to clarify what otherwise might seem as an over-focus on the ideological drives of two members of the collective in my exposition of the primary ideological motivations for absurd performance within Etcétera. To a large extent I observed the ideology of Fede and Loreto to define the contemporary ideology of the collective with others following their lead for varied reasons, for example, respect for their artistic legacy, lesser investment in the collective, or (un)professional ingratiating. As another, currently less involved, founding member told me, having just spoken of previously more egalitarian group organization: “*Hoy en día Fede y Loro son Etcétera, es decir que Etcétera ya se murió y ellos se dieron cuenta que podían sacar plata del cadáver*” (Today Fede and Loreto are Etcétera, or that’s to say that Etcétera died and they realized they could make money from the corpse)¹⁰⁶. Indeed, it is noteworthy that when Etcétera won art awards those who had travelled to accept them, and who had received the economic compensation¹⁰⁷, were Fede and Loreto. Their dominance, in this light, was undeniable.

¹⁰⁶ Conducting ethnography within the current formulation of the group, necessarily the majority of my participant observation involved interaction with currently active members. My access to former collective members, some reportedly on bad terms with Fede and Loreto, was limited, especially with Fede and Loreto as my principal gatekeepers to the community. However, occasional interactions such as this one corroborated my observations of the couple’s dominance, which some, as above, attributed to cynical greed, and others to greater sustained commitment where the dedication of others had waned. I, as their researcher, collaborating artist, and friend, do not wish to cast a personal judgment within this thesis, but rather document the diverse interpretations of other implicated parties.

¹⁰⁷ This sometimes included significant sums of money. For example, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development Award, which Etcétera received in 2015, amounts to €25,000.

Loreto, speaking about her motivations to start making more absurd performance, told me “*siempre quería involucrarme en activismo, pero quería hacer cosas locas también*” (I always wanted to be involved in activism, but I wanted to do mad things too). Fede and Loreto, both having direct familial connections to people disappeared during the military dictatorships of Argentina and Chile respectively, passionately expressed the continued essentialness of social justice activism, yet in balance with simultaneous, irrepressible, and assumed traditionally incompatible drive to create ‘*cosas locas*’. Unlike with ETP, I did not observe this ‘*locura*’ (madness) to be legitimated via the discourse of *alegría rebelde*, but rather exist beyond such requirement of legitimation, stimulated more by the directly acknowledged art-historical inspirations of surrealism and dadaism rather than classically calculated socialist or anarchist aims¹⁰⁸.

The autobiographical text of Etcétera published during my fieldwork, whose production was mainly undertaken by Fede and Loreto, features as an opening quotation the words of Juan Andralis, the Argentine surrealist artist and publisher whose former BsAs residence Etcétera had occupied during their formation:

Ser surrealista...es fundamentalmente tener un pie asentado en el sueño y un pie en el asfalto...Es decir, un pie en la realidad dura, como es la cotidiana, dura quiere decir que tiene implicancias políticas, y un pie en...el mundo de los sueños...El esfuerzo de unir esas dos cosas, esos dos mundos, sueño y suelo, eso es lo que muy sucintamente puede identificar el surrealismo (To be surrealist...is fundamentally to have one foot in dreams and the other on the asphalt...that’s to say one foot in hard, everyday reality, hard meaning having political implications, and one foot...in the world of dreams...The force of uniting these two things, these two worlds, dream and ground, this is what succinctly identifies surrealism) (2017: 18).

¹⁰⁸ I recognize that dada and surrealism and socialism and anarchism are far from mutually exclusive ideologies, rather implicated in multiple intersecting dialogues (Lewis, 1990; Löwy, 2009; Papanikolas, 2016). I seek here simply to highlight the differing emphasis upon more strategized and ‘political’ or more unruly and ‘artistic’ avant-garde inspirations amongst my different networks of research co-performers.

Taking this quotation to heart, proudly declared to have been discovered by ‘azar objetivo’ (objective chance)¹⁰⁹ when stumbling upon Andralis’ former abode whilst searching for an empty building to transform into a ‘laboratorio de arte experimental’ (experimental art laboratory), Etcétera began to attempt to combine the unsettling of popular consciousness with contributions to social justice activism. Throughout my fieldwork I observed continued attempts to balance a general conception that to be too didactically political was tedious and delimited the personal autonomy symbolized by dreams, whilst to be apolitical was distasteful and ignorant of on-the-ground social responsibilities. During one party at Fede and Loreto’s apartment, Fede told me:

‘me encantaría vivir en un mundo donde no hubiese la necesidad hacer activismo, pero ni en pedo quiero vivir en un mundo sin arte, eso es la diferencia. Ahora nos toca hacer ambas cosas. Probablemente siempre sea así. Somos la minoría, Hermano’ (I’d love to live in a world where activism was not necessary, but I never want to live in a world without art, that’s the difference. Now we have to do both things. It will probably always be this way. We’re the minority, Brother).

The ideological drive here, out of a perceived civic duty largely absent amongst NYC artists, was towards an explicitly politicized reading of the surrealist imperative to blur art and everyday life. In continually unstable Argentina this equated to the blurring of art and political struggle and a continuously shifting mixture of more tactical and supra-tactical mobilizations of absurd performance, as chapter seven shall elucidate further.

¹⁰⁹ A prominent surrealist concept, widely credited to André Breton and defined within the Etcétera autobiographic text as “*la confluencia inesperada entre lo que el individuo desea y lo que el mundo le ofrece. Uno está pensando en determinada cosa o persona y repentinamente, al cruzar una esquina, se topa con ella...una reconciliación momentánea...entre deseo y realidad*” (the unexpected confluence between that which an individual desires and that which the world offers them. One is thinking about a certain thing or person and suddenly, turning the corner, bumps into them...a momentary reconciliation...between desire and reality) (2017: 8). If, as I have defined it above, existential absurdity constitutes disharmony between desired fundamental meaning and actual absence thereof, then objective chance, mentioned numerous times during fieldwork as an inspiration for Etcétera’s actions, demonstrates the possible temporary illusion of harmony, achieved in an entirely unplanned, supra-tactical manner.

2.2 New York City: The Cart Department

In contrast to the general tendency observed for Etcétera to create absurd performance with some political compromise, in NYC I discovered much artist absurd performance to be less focused upon direct political relevance. The everyday transgression of members of the Cart Department, regularly transiting the city in masks and costumes and with props and puppets made largely from materials recuperated from the trash, may be seen in the account of my bike ride with Cranberry and Jamie in chapter five. I did not observe such consistent intervention to be driven by a defined political goal but rather motivated by boredom with hegemonic normativity and associated thirst for creating controversy and discomfort, unsure of the socio-political effects. This scattergun disdain rings through Jamie's sardonic description within the same vignette of sexually explicit music broadcast at high volume in the street as a "family song". Here he reiterated a derision that we had previously discussed towards conservative 'family values' as the breeding ground of broader political conservatism, all without a tactical plan of how such transgressive intervention may undo reactionary norms. Rather, the perceived intrinsic anti-normative value of such obnoxiousness was expressed to me on numerous occasions by members of the Cart Department, such as Cranberry declaring -

"I feel fucking uncomfortable almost all the time in this society, just sitting there on the subway I feel uncomfortable, so it feels good to make other people squirm, you know?"

Amongst The Cart Department, the most frequent political identification offered when the question was not mocked or avoided was nihilist, although this label did not necessarily mean the same thing for all who used it, as shall be explicated below. Cart Department interventions were often motivated by a clear central notion of fundamental meaninglessness and designed to combat constructed notions of 'sense' and associated power structures by deliberately evading understanding. Still, I observed much internal debate concerning the very same question often hoped to be provoked of audiences: why do this? I offer a flavour of these ongoing discussions of political (anti)intentionality in the

below anecdote surrounding the bacchanal of the Coney Island mermaid parade - an annual pageant of people dressed as mermaids and other sea creatures used by The Cart Department as a springboard for tangential performances.

New York City, 16 June 2018

Arriving to the Coney Island boardwalk amidst a steady flow of mermaids in various states of drunkenness, myself in a pink and turquoise corset and heavy spirals of glittery make-up, I find Cranberry and Jamie where I had arranged to meet them opposite a White Castle fast-food outlet. Jamie is rooting through trashcans to see if anyone has thrown away any scraps of meat-free 'impossible burgers' but only finds funnel cake and chicken strips. He breaks the cake and distributes it amongst us, but, being vegan, leaves the chicken, to which I comment in jest, connected to ongoing group discussions about nihilist performance - "a true nihilist wouldn't leave that". Cranberry laughs and says that they had been talking on the whole bike ride from north Brooklyn that morning about what a true nihilist could be and how the prominence of proclaimed nihilist philosophy within The Cart Department is potentially problematic because

'you know we got a heavy dose of white, cis, dudes who all wanna resist their privilege and say none of it matters yet still use that same privilege to go be the centre of attention as a bunch of egocentric artists...you know I wonder if we're only able to think about this stuff and call ourselves nihilists or whatever because we're a kind of weird elite that live with almost no money but still a whole lot of privilege'.

As we stroll the boardwalk searching other trashcans, she expands that she can't fully sink into nihilism because if she accepted fully that there was no reason to do anything in particular then she would do nothing, or rather she would do "what I really want to do, which is take a load of drugs and not give a fuck about anything". This is in reference to her and Jamie's previous addiction problems and Jamie adds that now as sober 'straight edge' nihilists "maybe

we're making an even bigger stand because we know it's all fucking meaninglessness but we don't escape it chemically". Almost in unison we exclaim, "When the drugs hit!", in ironic reference to the caption of a viral video of Jamie performing on the subway, emblematic of commonplace comments assuming the influence of drugs upon the almost exclusively sober performances of the collective. Cranberry elaborates that -

'for me, I grew up in fucking redneck, god-fearing Nebraska, it's still hard for me to get away from that impulse to look for the God-given purpose for something, even if I'm a nihilist or Satanist or whatever...I think it's only possible to carry on and be nihilist or absurdist or whatever if you take it to the extreme but that's hard, you know?'

I ask how she thinks that relates to her performances and she speculates 'I guess we're trying to create the conditions where it would be possible to be nihilist, for everyone to live without meaning, but also, you know how it is' - she laughs - 'we'll never get there'. Arriving to where JME is busking one of his cart-based puppet shows, Jamie begins to add colour to a painting of a gigantic anus in his notebook, commenting that -

'I don't think there is any other option than to accept that there is no meaning for anything, I can't think any other way, but that doesn't mean that I don't want to get up in the morning or that I don't wish the world was less racist or sexist or whatever...This anus doesn't mean anything, but I'm still drawing it. What does that say politically? I don't know. I don't know if I'm interested in the question.'

JME finishes his show of a levitating sumo wrestler and a romance between a rat and scarecrow, receives the tips of a few onlookers, then asks us what's going on. Cranberry informs him that we're talking about what a true nihilist is, to which he responds "Not again", going on to reiterate previously shared opposition to the term - "I put a lot of thought into my shows, I want to leave people in awe of what is possible, not thinking that nothing is worthwhile". He proceeds to return to busk, anxious about making rent that

month, while Jamie and Cranberry head for their bikes. I head back along the thronging boardwalk to find Kalan performing a rendition of a regular street performance in a ripped neon-pink fishnet bodysuit, pulling numerous dolls made from trash out of a spiral-decorated suitcase whilst playing the harmonica beneath a beekeeper-esque furry mesh mask. On numerous earlier occasions, Kalan had described this spectacle as a “non-narrative, nihilist, anarchist puppet show”.

Following a scene where a kind of pterodactyl made from torn cloth and a bird’s skull abducts a paint splattered Barbie with a knee-length penis, Kalan places the head of a baby doll on his middle finger and the hands and feet on his other digits, creating a kind of spider-like baby that he crawls along the ground and across the bodies and faces of many onlookers. In between pointing to his tip jar and sign reading “Support Street Artists”, he makes a gargoyle-like fabric creature eat and vomit the Star-Spangled Banner several times. Packing up the show he puts a song on his boombox that is the line ‘Fuck Donald Trump’ on repeat and together we begin to re-walk boardwalk.

Our path crosses with a Westboro Baptist Church style demonstration of four men holding ‘God Hates Fags’ placards and preaching about the ‘sin’ of homosexuality, surrounded by indignant mermaids and drag queens. One mermaid pulls me into an embrace in front of the homophobic protestors as a police car rolls by and Kalan switches ‘Fuck Donald Trump’ to the KRS1 song ‘Sound of the Police’ on his boombox. Spotting a discarded full pizza on the ground, Kalan picks it up, bites two eyeholes and a mouth-hole in it and holds it to his face as a mask, picking up a cigarette butt, lighting it, and smoking it awkwardly through the pizza as he dances within the growing crowd of counter-protestors who drown out the sermon of the Christian group with a chant of “Go Pizza! Go Pizza! Go Pizza!” After a few minutes, as counter-protestors attempt to draw us into their direct verbal argument with the homophobes, Kalan throws the pizza back to the ground, saying to me - “This is pointless, let’s get out of here”. As we depart a slightly drunk woman approaches us and says “Wow, wait, you two have such great legs, but what is going to come after

capitalism?” Kalan, without pause and deathly serious, responds - “Nothing, non-existence, human beings have at most two hundred years left.”



Fig 6-5: ‘A non-narrative, nihilist, anarchist puppet show’.

Evidently, then, multiple motivations for creating absurd performance existed within The Cart Department, surrounding amorphous counter-normative ideological frames captured by Cranberry’s ambivalent descriptions: “nihilist or Satanist or whatever...nihilist or absurdist or whatever”. In contrast to expectations to establish a coherent conceptual framework within a PhD thesis, my research co-performers with The Cart Department often resisted formally theorizing their actions. A streamlined articulation of collective ideology here would be an academic imposition. I may point to parallels, for example, between Jamie stating that “I don’t think there is any other option than to accept that there is no meaning for anything” and Camus positing that for a person who has accepted ‘the Absurd’, “[b]elief in the absurdity of existence must then dictate his conduct” (1942/2013: 5). However, at the same time I must acknowledge that such resonance of, say, classical absurdist philosophy with contemporary motivations for absurd performance amongst my research co-performers is a link that I loosely draw to attempt to construct a sense of

coherence for a reader between the different sections of this research project and associated chapters of this thesis, whilst the topic at hand - exaggeratedly transgressive absurd performance - remains often purposefully incoherent or supersensible.

I very rarely observed The Cart Department plan a performance in pursuit of a pre-meditated political impact, as was contrastingly typical of more activist groups in both fieldsites and partially present within Etcétera's actions. For Cranberry above, the interventions of The Cart Department were tragicomically engaged in an inevitably losing battle to enable universal nihilist recognition of fundamental meaninglessness without this transforming into a denial of unjustifiable privileges currently legitimated by dominant frames of constructed 'meaning'. In an added complexity, Cranberry presented such performance sometimes clinging, despite itself, to some vestige of possible meaning, as nodded to in her inability to fully abandon ingrained notions of 'God-given' significance. Echoing this sentiment, Kevin would later compare searching for meaning to looking around the house for a lover who has left you - "you know they're not there, but sometimes you still search for them".

For Cranberry above, hanging on, however loosely, to this whisper of meaning was essential to carry on performing and prevent her from 'not giving a fuck about anything', whereas for Jamie and Kalan recognition of absolute meaninglessness appeared more as a motor for their actions, not disabling compassion but rather firing indirect, absurd political acts in the absence of faith in traditional discourse. Jamie saw no ultimate reason for publically drawing a grotesquely oversized anus, yet did so anyway, thrilled in part by the liberty represented by acting without need for 'sensible' justification, uninterested in killing that buzz and its potential contagiousness within concentrated reflection upon precise political consequences. Replying on another occasion to the reproachful question of a passerby - "That's horrible! Why are you doing this?" - following a street performance featuring his puppet 'Skinny' who, feeling hot and hungry, torturously removes their own skin and

eats their own intestines before, equally painfully, putting their skin back on again, Jamie faux-courteously said “Thank you, that’s a great question”.



Fig 6-6: ‘Skinny’ and Jamie during a street show.

On many occasions when confronted with inquiries like this I observed members of the Cart Department similarly express exaggerated uncertainty and flip the question back. For example, pushing a pram/cart full of toilet plungers¹¹⁰ and Christmas trees down the street in a mask of metallic green

¹¹⁰ A member of MACC who I knew from the other half of my fieldwork in NYC, and who we bumped into briefly during that same performance-walk, later asked me about the significance of the toilet plungers. She explained that following the 1997 case of Abner Louima, a Haitian man sodomized with plunger and broom handles by NYPD officers, toilet plungers had become for a while a symbol of racist police brutality in NYC. She wanted to know if we were reviving that symbol, yet when I asked Mrs. Kipling about this she was not aware of the case and offered no rationale for the use of toilet plungers as props beyond that they were “obviously ridiculous”. Whilst likely a reflection of generational gaps in knowledge - the activist in their late 40s, Mrs. Kipling in her mid 20s - this also serves as a succinct example of the division I observed between the logical scrutiny typically applied to absurd performance within activist networks and the frolicsome ambiguity generally sought by artist collectives.

fabric stitched to a fluffy red wig, an elderly woman asked Mrs. Kipling, “And who are you supposed to be, young lady?”, to which she responded - “Oh, I’m trying to find out, do you know?” Meanwhile, above, Kalan’s exasperated reaction of ‘this is pointless’ to attempts to drag him from dancing with a pizza-mask into direct discussion with homophobic demonstrators represented his desire to undermine prejudice obliquely through absurd performance rather than engage with it as if it made sense. Absurd performance here is born from an impulse to nonsensically antagonize heteronormative arguments rather than engage them in direct discussion that potentially lends legitimacy both to them and to dominant notions of normatively-prescribed rational conversation as the most ‘valid’ mode of interaction. On numerous occasions during fieldwork Kalan critiqued the normative rational frameworks dictating expectations of direct engagement and ‘sensible discussion’ themselves as intrinsically implicated in the maintenance of hopes of conclusive resolution incompatible with his ‘anarcho-nihilist’ perspective. Echoing other members of the collective, Kalan regularly associated tedium and exasperation with straight-faced political discussion, preferring absurd performance as a means to supersensibly communicate. Emblematically he once remarked, wielding a dead octopus as a puppet - “I’m so bored of talking with most people, I’d rather wave an octopus in their face”, whilst on another occasion he speculated -

“I wonder if I should go into politics, I’d hate it, but I’d be really good at filibustering, just put on a diaper and speak in nonsense languages for hours”.

Here supra-tactical absurd performance is motivated by a discursive break with conventional constructions of reasonable political ambition and what constitutes judicious political action. The foundation of the tactical performance literature - that politics consists of rational actors pursuing given ends by the most appropriate means available - is here rejected. Rather, apparently senseless and irrational performance disrupts normal flows of interactional co-construction of meaning and notions of legitimate power, exemplifying the truncated form of what Victor Turner (1987) identified as “social drama” outlined in chapter two. Here the initial “breach” of absurd performance cultivates “crisis” within challenged hegemonic normativity yet then attempts to

extend and exacerbate destabilizing chaos, rather than move on to the establishment of a new normative order through ‘redressive action’ and ‘reintegration’ as Turner speculated and as exemplified by above signposted tactical activist absurd interventions. The rational drive for absolute, concrete solutions is thus questioned via such more supra-tactical absurd intervention, ongoing problematization of socio-politically absurd regimes of power/knowledge favoured over their attempted correction and potential inadvertent reproduction.

Nonetheless, alienation from mainstream modes of ‘sensible’ political engagement, and subsequently primarily supra-tactical orientation of absurd performance, did not entirely obviate considerations of direct political impact of performances within my observations with The Cart Department. Here I think for example of Kalan ‘Riot DJing’ during mayday demonstrations, riding his bike in outlandish costume of ripped, dirty lingerie, Minnie-mouse-ears, and padded sports gloves along the lines of police fencing the march, shaking his barely covered buttocks at them, partly with the intention, he later reported, to distract them from their “bullshit job” and potentially minimize arrests of others. Of course, the juxtaposition of Kalan riding in his ‘uniform’ next to bike-cops in theirs also carried supra-tactical possibilities of obliquely undermining the meaning and authority lent to the latter, yet in this instance such indirect action was combined with a direct aim.

Further, until the announcement of its postponement, numerous ideas had begun to accumulate surrounding a collective trip to Washington DC to create performances coinciding with Trump’s proposed Veterans’ Day military parade. These plans held the express political intention of opposing and ridiculing the pompous macho display of military strength. One late night considering options for this intervention with Kalan and JME, both expressed a stunted desire to occasionally use their performance to contribute to direct political change, JME lamenting on a perceived lack of creative activists with whom to talk about how to use weird performance to create social change. In response I mentioned that multiple activists from the other half of my research

put a lot of time into exactly those kinds of questions. Kalan checked that this included The Church of Stop Shopping, who we had both seen perform the week before, then, upon my confirmation, exclaimed incredulously - “And that’s all they’ve come up with?” - underlining a general interpretation of more activist attempts at absurd intervention as tame and insufficient.

Expanding on this line of thought, with reference to recent anti-fascist demonstrations in Portland, Oregon, Kalan remarked “how shitty that there isn’t anyone there doing anything weird in amongst it all”, throwing his arms in the air and scuttling around the room grunting with a contorted face, suggesting an opinion that absurd performance was intrinsically lacking in protest situations where it could potentially contribute to the, say, antifascist cause. Nonetheless, these considerations largely remained exactly that - considerations unfulfilled in practice, often to be taken with a pinch of salt. This was highlighted on another occasion by Kalan’s exuberant proclamation of intent to take his cart to Rojava, mocking simultaneously the earnest, militarily-strategized revolutionary hopes of multiple Western anarchists who had taken up arms with the YPG ‘People’s Protection Units’ and his own bathetic absurd performance art. The farce of imagining NYC-based anarcho-nihilist puppetry transposed into war-torn North-eastern Syria - how profoundly out of place Kalan wearing fishnet stockings and a mask of trash would be amongst the military fatigued revolutionary ranks - may be seen to highlight both the potential greater facilitation of absurd performance within a relatively peaceful, privileged context, to be explored further in chapter seven, and the oft-unbridgeable chasm between generally tactical or supra-tactical approaches to social change and, in turn, absurd performance. Kalan elaborated that when he had proposed the idea to an anarchist acquaintance who was canvassing support for Rojavan leftist fighters, they had responded that some puppet shows might be a welcome morale boost - ‘No,’ Kalan asserted, mimicking the manipulation of a puppet, ‘this *is* the revolution.’ Here Bogad’s (2016a) suggestion outlined in chapter two that tactical absurd performance constitutes one element of a cultural “air-war” that facilitates the success of the “ground war” of more conventional activism was rejected. Rather, as I commonly observed amongst NYC artists, absurd intervention was seen as supra-tactically embodying revolutionary change in

itself, if typically with tragicomic laughter surrounding lack of hope of the broader societal realization of such radical change.

Indeed, the edge was often taken off potentially more directly political mobilizations of absurd performance within The Cart Department by this generally blunted hope, as seen above in Cranberry's defeatist truism "we'll never get there", or Kalan's assertion of the certain, soon forthcoming extinction of humanity. On another occasion, Mrs. Kipling remarked that she had considered getting involved in traditional activism surrounding sexual violence but then, citing the grand majority of rape accusations that do not result in any prosecution, she said - "There's no justice, there'll never be justice, so what's the point?" Tactical orientation of performance, then, was not entirely shunned by The Cart Department, but rather critiqued as oftentimes naïve, based upon over-inflated hope that bred an earnestness repellent to those more cynical. In turn, NYC activists often critiqued this artist position as self-indulgent, hedonistic, privileged, or - unironically - purposeless. This division, I observed across fieldsites to differing degrees, was often self-perpetuating, driving each party away from the practice of the other.

For example, jumping back to BsAs for a moment, one of the organizers of the shanty town community theatre sessions of ETP asked me why my participation was intermittent and when I explained that the Saturday afternoon time-slot often clashed with the errorist (no)work(no)shops that formed an important part of the other half of my fieldwork there, they responded -

"Dale, si tenés que hacer tales cosas burguesas, todo bien, pero nos gustaría tenerte más acá, donde realmente estamos contruyendo la revolución" (Okay, if you have to do such bourgeois things, that's fine, but we'd like to have you here more, where we're really constructing the revolution).

Meanwhile, back in NYC, when I described my work with The Cart Department to one attendee at one of the monthly 'creative activism happy hour' social events organized by Beautiful Trouble's Andrew Boyd that I attended regularly during

fieldwork, they responded - “sounds like some rich kids acting dumb”. Such assumptions reflected common perceptions amongst the broader public. For example, Cranberry and Jamie were once interrupted during a puppet show on the subway by a woman shouting - ‘Why don’t you do a show about how nice it is to have your parents pay for everything?’¹¹¹ Supra-tactical mobilization of absurd performance then often appeared considered synonymous with entitlement for activists in both fieldsites - a product of privilege wherein indirect action was only possible for those comfortable enough for direct action not to be essential. Artists on the other hand often saw principally tactical absurd performance as too on-the-nose, lacking nuance, and fired by unreasonably inflated hopes. This mutual disdain was notably stronger in NYC, for reasons to be explored in chapter seven, becoming an additional oppositional motivation for these respective styles of absurd performance, rendering them more distinct and allowing less crossover between more tactical activist and more supra-tactical artist spheres of absurd performance than in BsAs.

At a ‘Festival of Resistance’ organized by the social justice activist collective Mayday in Maria Hernandez Park, Bushwick featuring screen-printing stalls of classic activist slogans and musicians purportedly “spreading messages of hope”, the arrival of Cranberry in a full-face balaclava tugging a toy pony, Kalan wearing a helmet with a three foot expanding foam phallus atop, and Jamie in a cardboard dinosaur mask, all pushing trash-sculpture-carts, was not warmly received by activist event organizers. Almost immediately two of the organizers in matching yellow t-shirts emblazoned ‘Resistance/Resistencia’ - the aesthetics of the two groups clashing drastically - approached Kalan to ask what was their intention. Kalan later reported that they told him that they were concerned the carts and masks might distract from the invited artists and their

¹¹¹ It is of note that both Jamie and Cranberry in fact come from working class backgrounds and, whilst a ‘trust fund baby’ situation undeniably defined the circumstances of some members of the broader NYC performance art scene, especially those able to sustain not-for-profit performance venues in exorbitantly expensive NYC, none of the core Cart Department group existed off of family wealth. Rather these core research co-performers earned money through a mixture of precarious artistic and non-artistic labour variously as janitors, construction workers, teaching assistants, portrait-sitters, mural-painters, theatre prop-makers, and other roles. The blanket repudiation of performance art communities as havens of carefree privilege by many activists, then, whilst not entirely unfounded, appears unjustifiable on closer inspection. My point here is that, regardless, the damning assumption often prevails and mutually alienates, perpetuating divides in absurd performance practices.

important political messages for the community and thus requested that the performance be halted. The desire of the activists for clear communication produced distrust of the non-instrumental presence of The Cart Department. Taking the request on board, Cranberry, Jamie, and Kalan danced with the carts for a few minutes longer at the back, rather than entering the crowd as initially attempted, before leaving the event to continue a wandering cart performance in the surrounding streets. It is also of note that the invited performers had been curated to be largely women of colour, and of the three Cart Department artists, two were male and all were white. The influence of sensitivity to intersecting racial and gender inequalities upon the decision to take this intervention elsewhere, and upon absurd performance in general in NYC, will be explored in-depth in chapter seven.

Still here the general incompatibility of primarily tactical and primarily supra-tactical outlooks on social change and absurd performance is laid bare, unsigned counter-normative intervention not welcome amidst clearly designated 'resistance' activity. Later on during my fieldwork, Kalan would perform a puppet show like that detailed in the mermaid parade vignette at the Mayday collective's space during a fundraising event for the NYC Anarchist Art Fair. A similar absurd performance with the explicit label of 'anarchist' and the explicit aim of 'fundraising' was thus accepted by a more activist crowd where unlabelled and without obvious purpose it had been shutdown. Of note, also, is that Kalan, Cranberry, and Jamie respected the concerns of the activists, taking their intervention elsewhere, showing how even largely supra-tactical absurd performance is contextually negotiated, as chapter seven will focus upon. Despite their different views about hopes for social change and how to pursue them, The Cart Department did not push their provocation of the Mayday group in the same way as I observed within confrontations with more hegemonically-aligned critics such as the numerous business owners who removed the collective from their premises by force. This signals how a sense of political, if not methodological, solidarity moulded their orchestration of supra-tactical absurd performance.

Regardless of the general centrality lent to creating disruption over planning political impacts, on a few rare occasions I observed members of the Cart Department place irreverent performance to one side in order to engage directly with a given political process, suggesting contextual negotiation with hegemonic power structures rather than their absolute refusal. For example, when the agenda of an official meeting of the Washington Square Park Conservancy featured forthcoming stricter enforcement of restrictive laws on performance within the park, I attended alongside Cranberry, Jamie, JME, Kalan, and numerous other street performers and occasional Cart Department collaborators. The split of the meeting, held in an administrative building of the NYU campus, was remarkable: the front half of the room comprised exclusively of besuited Conservancy and NYC Parks Department employees and local committee members; the back half occupied by puppeteers, saxophonists, jugglers and other performers with their props beside them. I took a seat at the back between Jamie and an Abraham Lincoln lookalike in full costume. The artists sat through an hour of discussion about a planned mile-long-opera terminating in the park and proposed methods of rat extermination, before the topic turned to performance regulation. At this point numerous dissenting questions were posed, each responded to by Conservancy representatives with deflecting lines such as “I’ll look into that and get back to you”. This response was used with such frequency that it became a popular sardonic reply to any question within the collective for a few weeks following.

Such incredulous mockery was further expressed by JME drawing a grotesque caricature of the chair of the discussion, Jamie leaving a sketch labelled ‘kill all the skateboarders’ on his seat in satirical reference to numerous complaints raised against skateboarders, and one occasional collaborator of the collective asking, in reference to the aforementioned prior meeting topics: “I was wondering, as an alternative way to kill the rats, if you’d maybe considered using a mile-long-opera?” Nonetheless, despite poking fun, my point here is that Cart Department performers did occasionally attempt to engage with formal political procedures, if often only to find a demoralizing confirmation of the cynicism that fired their general indifference towards such worlds and preference for obliquely critical absurd performance. Kalan losing a court case

brought against the city for his wrongful arrest whilst performing in the subway, for which he had donned a suit and put together a reasoned case with a lawyer, stands as another example. I would argue that this reflects acknowledgement of the “omnipresence of power” noted by Foucault (1978: 93) and discussed in chapter two wherein inequality and oppression, as much as they are ideologically wholly rejected and resisted through absurd intervention that seeks to expose our fundamental shared existential absurdity, are noted to persist regardless. I observed this frame repeatedly used to legitimate some engagement with opposed power structures whilst elsewhere continuing with absurd interventions that sought to symbolically undermine them.

For example, there was some controversy within The Cart Department when Kalan applied for and accepted a handsomely paid gig at the headquarters of fashion magazine *Office* that shares the building of the fancy department store *Century 21* in the financial district of Manhattan. Kalan acquired free entry for the rest of the collective and we were greeted with free ‘Enormous Face’ cocktails named after Kalan’s performance persona, surrounded by a hip audience carefully dressed in expensive clothing, distinct from the crowd typical of the more underground Brooklyn performance venues that The Cart Department more usually appeared in. As Kalan writhed around grunting in a spiral-painted blanket full of balloons, a cabinet displayed bespoke jewellery for sale with price tags of over one thousand dollars. Kalan later spoke with me at length about his decision as an anarchist artist to still pursue that show ‘in the belly of the beast’, saying -

“we only worry about the compromise of accepting funds from some capitalist source because we are so fucking uncompromising in general, but most people are compromising all the time, doing things with their lives that they don’t want to do. They work all day doing something that is not important to them and then maybe they go see a movie they like every now and again...I’m not saying ‘oh look at those dicks’ like I’m superior, but it’s important to remember that accusations of ‘selling out’ are only possible towards people who have already resisted selling out in significant ways...I know that the relentless fucking monster of American

consumerism won't be killed or even hurt by me refusing a handful of cash for a performance.”

Kalan then legitimized his occasional artistic collaboration with a corporate sphere that remained anathema to the anarcho-nihilist ideology that motivated much of his absurd performance via defeatist acknowledgement of the seemingly inevitable continuation of this opposed system. Evoking the merits of his generally uncompromising creative and political life, he defended occasional pragmatic cooperation with opposed norms and systems in order to sustain the central practice of unaffiliated and critical performances. This depicts an (un)professional reality shared by The Cart Department and Etcétera of aspirations towards the destruction of oppressive hegemonic ‘professional’ norms mixed with some pragmatic engagement with such norms, and accompanying restriction of associated performances, in order to survive as performers. Jamie, reflecting on Kalan’s above collaboration as we walked away from the venue, sympathized -

“Why is it okay to take the cash of other poor artists in door money at The Glove but not to take a cheque from some rich-ass fucking business? You know, what I think we should be doing is throwing bricks through windows and robbing banks but if I fucked up once I’d be in prison, forced to work, and be a part of the machine all over again, so I don’t do that...We have to find ways around that.”

However, Cranberry countered this by suggesting that a permitted, contracted performance in a corporate location intrinsically legitimates the practices of that organization and removes any critical, acidic edge from the act, saying -

“the whole ‘putting the money towards the revolution’ line is a real crock of shit...the only way he [Kalan] could have saved a performance in that fucking hellhole would have been with diarrhoea all over everyone, diarrhoea Armageddon...Look at this” - she points to a sign of a rainbow-coloured bottle in a store window as we pass - “gay kombucha at Starbucks, that’s the same thing as what we just saw, the queer and the weird made into something that smells nice that you can buy.”

Cranberry here mirrored the aforementioned suggestions of Gluckman (1963) and Eagleton (1981) that permitted transgression, such as that of an officially ordained carnival or in this case a corporately contracted performance, signifies the normative assimilation of potentially transgressive action. The (un)professional orientation of The Cart Department and appropriate restriction of the transgressiveness of performance in relation to the expectations of poorly ideologically aligned economic collaborators was, in this way, in constant debate. No consensus was reached, but whenever such cooperation did occur I repeatedly witnessed it justified by recourse to the essentially Foucauldian notion of alterable but ultimately inescapable power. Ensuing performances were then inevitably moulded by consideration of how far to comply with associated professional normative frameworks.

The Cart Department, then, wavered in numerous ways in relation to the oft-purported nihilist motivations of their absurd performances. JME's aversion to nihilism depicted above mirrors some of Cranberry's concerns presented in the same vignette, equating it to demoralization, seeing this as opposed to the wonderment and freeing inspiration he hoped his performances might provide to audiences. JME sometimes blamed a perceived lack of organization of other collective members on their nihilist ideologies. In one conversation surrounding the failed event that was to be titled *The Greatest Cart in the World Pageant*¹¹², JME bemoaned that "we missed a chance to make something that would have actually had an impact". When I asked him what he imagined that 'impact' would have been he stated -

"something unforgettable that everyone who saw it would have carried with them from then on...but, hey, if you're a nihilist then who gives a fuck if anyone sees it or not".

JME's interest in absurd performance then appeared to stem more from a desire to use transgressive acts to startle and potentially amaze audiences, seeking to astonish and inspire rather than disturb them. Indeed, on several occasions JME

¹¹² This event was initially intended to be a grand spectacle featuring a parade with all our carts leading to the occupation of a space where a contest would take place inviting others to create elaborate 'pageant-wagons' to be judged by a fake celebrity panel according to mock criteria such as 'Most Useless', yet which, over time, became gradually less ambitious and in the end never took place.

referred to himself as an entertainer, framing absurd performance, too, as entertainment. This links to the economic motivation of using absurd performance to busk for tips, which all members of The Cart Department occasionally engaged in, yet that I generally witnessed to be an opportunistic and often unucrative capitalization upon performance that they would create anyway, rather than a driving motivation in itself. Meanwhile, when I asked JME how he envisaged the political impact of his performances he said “if one kid sees the world as a little more incredible then that seems like a big political impact to me”. Interestingly this parallels a similar perspective on the political impact of absurd intervention from Jamie, yet purportedly inspired by his nihilist ideology. He told me that observers of a performance that explores meaninglessness might then too be more empowered to shake off their own baseless normative shackles and loosen those of others: “the more often someone sees some freak like us doing a puppet show in the subway, the more likely they’ll let themselves be weirder too”.

The closest thing to a uniting principle for absurd performance that I observed within The Cart Department was a generalized desire to make the world a stranger place, in so doing perhaps gradually increasing public acceptance, or even better embrace, of bizarre, queer diversity. Debate raged as to what the broader political consequences of this may or may not be, yet the shared root inspiration remained. With regards to eponymous interventions with trash sculpture carts, a common catchphrase was to state an intention to “promote cart culture”. Exactly what constituted ‘cart culture’ was left undefined, rather ambiguously illustrated in action by costumed parades with carts full of broken clocks, fire extinguishers, twisted foam, and other debris. The clattering of such incongruous items, cumbersomely stacked and hauled with difficulty through the streets, was the aleatory song of ‘cart culture’, calling out to onlookers and indirectly asking them to reconsider the ‘normal’. This links to Kalan’s absurdist reworking of the Gandhian imperative to embody desired societal change in one’s actions: longing for “a world where there are freaks wheeling carts full of weird shit everywhere” and so doing precisely that. Expanding on this sentiment on another occasion, Kalan spoke of a diffuse hope that his performances ‘do some good in the world’, hypothesizing that extreme,

outlier performance might breed greater future acceptance of diversity wherein “in one hundred years maybe everyone will be able to be a freak like this and not just a white, male artist with my cocktail of privileges”. This links to Cranberry’s above concern surrounding nihilism as a potential veil for privilege and call to recognize the privileges that potentially enable absurd performance in order to use them to widen gateways to the practice. Both viewpoints point to how consistent concerns surrounding gender and especially race inequalities moulded absurd performance in my observations in NYC, to be explored in-depth in chapter seven.



Fig 6-7: Kalan promoting cart culture.

Despite insouciance regarding direct rationalistic political engagement, throughout my observations members of The Cart Department were typically sensitive to attempt to avoid perpetuating existing oppressions, their performances in part moulded by a drive to minimize potential damage to those already most subjugated within socio-politically absurd matrices of domination. For example, the adoption of carts by the marginal artists of my research was not undertaken without consideration of other marginal NYC characters making use of trolleys such as those collecting cans and bottles to exchange for cash at recycling centres or some homeless people using carts to transport their few belongings. I observed numerous conversations amongst the collective concerning how to make clear that Cart Department interventions were in solidarity with and not mockery of these other urban cart characters. Rejecting as, in Kalan's words, "a patronizing assumption" the popular notion that absurd artistic enterprise is inherently frivolous to those in dire economic straits who have 'more important things to worry about', the informal policy of The Cart Department upon encountering another cart-user during an intervention was to invite them to take part. This provoked varied reactions, some of disinterest, others pausing to spectate, or taking the opportunity to ask for spare change, yet centrally the message was broadcast amicably that performances were for and not against them.

Thus I observed The Cart Department, whilst often obstinately politically oblique, to be far from politically ignorant, attempting to scandalize normalcy but never at the expense of those most oppressed by such queried normative frameworks. Another illustration of this came during the consideration of a performance by Kevin and JME for a collective cabaret, which was initially planned to involve Kevin giving a puppet-making lesson with no arms. When this was proposed to the rest of the group, Kalan raised a concern, supported by Cranberry and Jamie, that this could appear ableist, and although JME and Kevin did not agree, they recognized the concern and removed this part of the performance. This level of sensitivity, even amongst a group that often positioned itself as critical of overwrought political correctness, was in part a product of the context of hyper 'woke' NYC, not mirrored by more brash rejection of less present political correctness discourse in BsAs. An armless

clown existed without critique within some ETP performances, for example. This shall be explored further in chapter seven, whilst here I underline the caution often underlying supra-tactical performances regularly rejected as ‘thoughtless’ by more positivist activist discourses.

Kevin, following a street performance where I pushed him dressed as a gargoyle around in a cart, told me that for him our interventions were “a kind of social experiment to see where society’s mind is at”, resonating with parallels between some absurd performances and Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological ‘breaching experiments’ noted in chapter two. When I asked what the aims or findings of this experiment might be, Kevin was loathe to precisely define this, rather loosely stating that one is able to see a side of people otherwise hidden when they are confronted by unexpected, non-normative performance: “kind of like pretending to be dumb when you meet someone and you see if they take advantage of you, it’s a face you wouldn’t otherwise see”. In this way Kevin saw us as testing and pushing the boundaries of the conventionally acceptable, making people show their usually concealed norm-policing faces and perhaps question this side of themselves and/or each other.

Connected to this notion of a ‘test’, vaguely diagnosing a societal condition of internalized normative constraint, is the notion of a ‘healing’ via absurd performance, illustrated in the below anecdote surrounding ‘La Rhaata’ cult of ‘demonic transdimensional art-tourists’. I note here that, whilst I heard many rumours about La Rhaata within The Cart Department, all research participants maintained that their insight was pure speculation and must never be reported otherwise. The origins and identities of these sponge-faced beings thus remains a mystery. How I even came to make the below observations is currently unclear, despite the vividness of associated fieldnotes.

New York City, 25th May 2018

Nine figures with large, differently textured yellow sponge faces with a single hole through the centre, all cloaked in white rags, some holding 'glyphs' - signs of indecipherable symbols - enter a twenty-four hour laundromat in Bushwick at two AM. They show great interest in the machines, opening and closing the doors with excited caws, some riding around in laundry carts, others investigating the garments of late-night customers. As will be the case throughout the roaming of La Rhaata through the streets and subways of NYC that night, many people respond by filming and taking photos on their smartphones, whilst others ask unanswered questions:

'What is this?'

'What the fuck?'

'What is the meaning behind this?'

'Why do you have sponge on your face?'

'Why do you have a vagina on your face?'

Leaving the laundromat, La Rhaata begin to scurry through the streets, investigating trash cans, extracting items and viewing them closely through their single facial orifices, carrying those of most interest with them. Encountering a flame being used to heat a mixture to fill potholes, all nine La Rhaata halt and perform a kind of undefined ritual beside the roadworks, humming and screeching, beating trash bags with sticks and poles collected earlier in their journey. One of the creatures searches trash bags for bottles,

pouring the dregs inside each one through the single hole in their face. Some onlookers voice disgust; others appreciation:

“That’s revolting!”

“I love it!”

“You need to stop this shit!”

“This is wild!”

“Get the fuck away from me!”

A group of three men in their twenties shout at the group - “What the fuck is this? What the fuck are you doing?” They receive no response, La Rhaata consistently wordless. The three men become increasingly agitated, one commenting to the encouragement of their companions - “Shall I just kick the shit out of one of them?” They then turn to ogling an apparently female-bodied creature, one commenting, “She’s got a great ass, I’d still fuck her.” La Rhaata move onwards, yet the three men pursue them as they descend into a nearby subway station.

On the platform, awaiting the train, La Rhaata surround the three men in a semi-circle, grunting and snorting, one comments ‘Fuck this!’ and turns to leave yet one of his companions catches his arm, holding him in place and begins to sing the Diana Ross song ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough’. After the first few lines, his two friends join him singing; after a few more another group nearby on the platform begin to join in - all the while La Rhaata continue screeching, pounding the floor with their palms, investigating the shoes of

passersby with eager fascination. A train arrives and La Rhaata board en masse, leaving the three men on the platform, who wave as they depart. The creatures parade through the subway cars, swinging on the poles, rubbing themselves all over the seats, reading their glyph scrolls in inexplicable languages. More people take videos, ask unanswered questions, voice concern or delight; others sleep through it, keep swiping concertedly at their smartphone screens, or move away.

Hopping on and off trains, in and out of the subway, this journey of La Rhaata lasts almost all night. In the early hours of the morning, news somehow reaching The Cart Department of this uprising, conversation buzzes. Speaking about the three men with initially violent intentions who later co-performed as singers with La Rhaata, as well as other incidents such as a woman who began by shouting abuse at the group yet later made some sounds with them - Kalan and Efrain (a member of the Puerto-Rican puppet group Poncili Creación and regular collaborator of The Cart Department) comment that some “healings” had taken place. Some initially oppositional people had, they say, been ‘cured’ by La Rhaata. Kalan expands - “As far as I understand it, the ultimate goal of La Rhaata with a healing would then be to convert the healed themselves into Rhaata, that’s the next step, that would be the ultimate healing.”



Fig 6-8: La Rhaata on the L train.

Comments regarding the healings of La Rhaata cult were partly tongue-in-cheek, partly sincere, building from the mythos of these militantly anonymous beings, lending them a sense of supernatural counter-hegemonic power. The definite achievements ascribed to La Rhaata notably contrasts with the common downplaying of potential political impacts of many Cart Department interventions. Here one might think again of Cranberry's comments of aiming to engender the conditions for existence beyond meaning and power but never being able to get there. In contrast, La Rhaata were widely presented as getting there, heralded by The Cart Department as examples from another dimension for their ideal practice. Of course, it is dubious that, for example, the three macho, sexist men from the above anecdote were in fact 'healed' of their normative prejudices through their interaction with La Rhaata, as much as their shift from violent trepidation to choral participation was notable. Regardless, this hyperbolic description of a 'healing', that is bringing people over to embrace bizarre anti-normative beings such as La Rhaata, rather than attack or question them, distils an ultimate intention of many Cart Department actions I observed.

The difference is that La Rhaata are presented as if having definite success in this venture, whereas other actions were appraised as inevitably uncertain in their achievements. La Rhaata in this way provide an imaginary of what it might be like to successfully undo hegemonic normativity, whilst also undercutting and mocking the naïve notion of such clear attainment within a far more complex reality marked by the diverse public reactions noted above encompassing careful indifference, aggressive dismissal, and gleeful encouragement. The healing, then, embodies the generalized, unattainable-yet-pursued-anyway aspiration of many more supra-tactical performances observed throughout my fieldwork: to create a world 'cured' of oppressive normative frameworks.

3. Chapter conclusion

I observed a drought of activist absurd performance in NYC, informed by an ongoing ideological commitment to tacticality. This mirrors the ideological motivations for absurd performance identified within the dominant tactical performance literature yet currently functioning to discredit rather than facilitate absurd intervention, often cast as inopportune within the shifted context of the Trump era. Encapsulating this view, one participant in a creative activism happy hour event told me:

“It hurts me not to be able to do what I’m best at. I’m good at making weird political street theatre. But that’s not what we need right now and I’m not married to any particular tactic.”

During another date of the same event, leading up to the midterm elections, ripples of laughter spread through the bar when one activist commented “In the 90s we had reclaim the streets, now all the anarchists are doing get out the vote work”. The ironic dominance of pragmatic tacticality over other ostensible ideological commitments, signifying a turn away from, say, street carnival to electoral canvassing, was well recognized, often the result of considered calculation. Here I show how the tactical explanation for the preponderance of activist absurd performance in one political moment and context, such as 90s/00s NYC, may in another situation, like contemporary NYC, elucidate its absence.

A dominant tactical orientation also united activists with ideological differences in BsAs, but not to the exclusion of absurd performance, as facilitated by a greater level of internal criticality of activist norms, alongside the ambiguous popular concept of *alegría rebelde*. Jesús, speaking with me about his upbringing in the ‘Villa 30’ shantytown and the need he perceived to create playful activism no matter how dire the social circumstances, told me that “*ya que estamos muy mojados, hay que jugar con la manguera, y de muchas maneras*” (given that we’re already drenched, we’ve got to play with the hose, and in many ways). Wet to the bone, permeated by oppressions, still

we must play and innovate and not give in to the dousing logics of hegemonic normativity - here lay the door to activist absurd performance in BsAs that had been mostly shut by more mournful NYC collectives. This metaphor of being 'drenched' may be seen to signify the greater undeniability of socio-political absurdity in the context of BsAs characterized by recent dictatorship and ongoing severe corruption, leading to a generally more ready embrace of challenging absurd performance, as shall be explored further in chapter seven.

With those self-defining more as artists in BsAs tactical mobilization of absurd performance typically remained a central pillar of activity, yet standing alongside a broader (anti)structure of more indirect, supra-tactical troublemaking. Where I observed the common stance within ETP to be a balance of any supra-tactical elements with a dominant emphasis upon - or notion of reinforcing - tactical clout, with Etcétera I observed the contrary. Here civic obligation and anarchist dedication to sustain direct political relevance was counterpoised against an overwhelming desire to more wholly undermine normativity. This is embodied in Etcétera's central ideological reframing of the concept of 'error'. What constitutes success or failure, correctness or incorrectness, normality or absurdity is here unsettled as a core enterprise, the exact political consequences to be discovered along this improvised pathway. Loreto expressed this political orientation to me as follows:

'Error¹¹³ como práctica de liberación es muy distinto a errar sin ninguna intención, pero a la vez es distinto perseguir la liberación sin errar. Para nosotros esto sería imposible' (To err as a practice of liberation is different from erring without any intention, but at the same time it is different to pursue liberation without erring. For us this would be impossible).

General political aims for an errorist absurd intervention were as such considered essential, as was irreverence in the roundabout pursuit of such aims as a locus for the further, unforeseeable liberation of 'error'.

¹¹³ 'Error' translating directly as 'to err' or, following a different strand of meaning, 'to wander', was the verb of choice for referring to errorist practice. On another occasion, speaking with me explicitly about my research interests, Loreto said "*El absurdo como verbo no existe, pero si tal verbo existiera, sería errar*" (The absurd as a verb does not exist, but if such a verb existed, it would be *errar*).

The artists I worked with in NYC, like those in BsAs, typically emphasized autonomy over the pre-eminence generally lent to collectivity within activist groups across fieldsites. However, where Etcétera often stressed anarchist ideological sympathies, nihilism was a more common reference point amongst The Cart Department. This translated to an expression of autonomy through absurd performance more centrally focused on fundamental meaninglessness, if checked against concerns not to negate privileges that hang upon ultimately meaningless power structures or to antagonize those already most oppressed by such socio-politically absurd matrices of domination. In contrast to the foregrounding of direct political relevance concerning specific issues that was common, with varied concentrations, amongst the other three spheres of my fieldwork, The Cart Department was rather united by a broad desire to ‘make the world weirder’ and thus more accepting of difference, typically only hypothetically considering specific political influence. This more markedly supra-tactical (anti)rationality for absurd performance rendered the self-perpetuating separation between activist and artist absurd performance practice, also observed in BsAs, to be particularly stark in NYC. When I asked Cranberry for her thoughts on the typical activist rejection of Cart Department actions as frivolous, hedonistic, and insufficiently critical, she responded from beneath a grotesque cloth mask of a disfigured, child-like face - “So what I’ve got to punch a cop every time I’m pissed or I’m a fake? Give me a break!”

My observations with the Cart Department thus illustrate most fully the counterpoint of supra-tactical absurd performance that this research contributes to academic discourse. Here my investigation problematizes normative paradigms of what constitutes political action and may allow us to begin to think, research, and perform beyond the confines of currently dominant ‘distributions of the sensible’ straitjacketed by assumptions of a necessarily rational, tactical central drive for any given act. Some absurd performance, for sure, foregrounds direct, calculated aims, as documented above to be the dominant tendency amongst activist networks in both my fieldsites. These more tactical absurd actions were typically undergirded by variants of classical rational political ideologies such as the traditional quasi-scientific strains of anarchism rooted in

notions of 'natural law' outlined in chapter two. A purpose was to be met via such absurd performance - a further step along an ultimately linear, clearly paved revolutionary pathway. However, other instances of exaggeratedly transgressive intervention such as many of the Etcétera and Cart Department examples detailed above appeared driven more by a desire to disrupt and disturb the very dominance of such positivist thinking. Such attempted destruction of the sensible, as a contemporary flourish of the "destruction of all artistic forms" (Richter, 1964: 35) of dada and the anti-definitional "isn't" (Rimbaud cited in Steinholt, 2012) of punk outlined in chapter two, mitigated by some recognition of the irrepressible omnipresence of normative frameworks dictated by only partially malleable power/knowledge inequalities, informs the framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism proposed earlier.

Here the (in)direct action of more supra-tactical absurd performance emblemized by above accounts of The Cart Department recognizes the limitations of its own destructive drive. These acts transmogrify through such acknowledgement and mitigation of hope from potential prefigurative idealism into antagonistic, figurative signals towards the utopic liberation of an embrace of shared existential absurdity that theoretically could be but practically will never be. That is, such more supra-tactical absurd performance attempts to illuminate the fundamental equality of all beings within existential absurdity yet that shall never translate into a correspondent socio-political harmony within an inescapably socio-politically absurd order characterized by the omnipresence of unjustifiable power/knowledge hierarchies.

As outlined in chapter two, prefigurative politics is often defined as "removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present" (Maeckelbergh, 2001: 4). This perspective is widely integrated within dominant tactical performance explanations of absurd intervention that "offers more than a 'no'" and "helps advocates demonstrate what they want the world to look like" (Shepard, 2011: 273). Some of my observations in this chapter confirm this hopeful motivation for absurd

performance as an impactful exemplar of pursued freedoms, yet simultaneously I highlight how this is only a partial explanation for a limited range of transgressive interventions. Running parallel to such more prefigurative, tactical absurd performance, I also document and analyse more figurative, supra-tactical absurd performances. Here the very notion of a rationally pursued ‘goal’, supposedly synthesized with the present within prefigurative acts, is problematized as a product of the dominant positivist distribution of the sensible from whence stem ostensibly opposed hegemonic structures of power/knowledge.

As such, where Shepard notes in relation to prefigurative performance intentions that “while serious politics often mirrors the very power structures activists oppose, playful responses open up questions, stories, and spaces” (2011: 275), my critique goes further in suggesting how the tactical conceptualization of play and transgressive intervention may also often reflect the basis of opposed power structures. Here tactical performance discourse in its assertion of a necessarily calculated deployment of absurd intervention in pursuit of predefined goals may reinforce a predominant distribution of the sensible predicated on the necessity of a definable purpose for any given act. Tactical absurd performance thus perhaps achieves a more focused impact on its intended target yet whilst simultaneously deprived of broader counter-hegemonic potential. Bogad writes about this in terms of (il)legibility, saying of his tactical performance model:

We are playing on the cultural horizons of expectations of the public, on the edge of novelty and familiarity; if our work is too ‘out there’, it falls beyond that horizon and is illegible. We hope to push those horizons outward into stranger and more thoughtful interpretation by putting our work right on the edge of the horizon (2016a: 93).

What many of my observations with Etcétera and The Cart Department represent is an opposing embrace of the troubling potentialities of illegible performance. Abandoning obligatory rationality and actively breaking with dominant distributions of the sensible, rather than dancing on their margins,

these extra-transgressive performances exemplify an alternative, as-of-yet under-researched supra-tactical model for politically challenging absurd performance. These acts seek to evade the inadvertent re-legitimization of hegemonic normativity potentially resulting from remaining within the fringes of its mandates, rather attempting to controvert such boundaries altogether. This reframes apparent illegibility as a mode by which to expose the fundamental senselessness of all interactionally co-constructed meaning and the base equality of all beings within this shared existential absurdity. Power/knowledge hierarchies are thus potentially corroded at their rational ideological roots, in contrast to the attacks upon specific branches one at a time of more tactical absurd performance that necessitates “a well-constructed action logic... with a calculated purpose and desired impact” (Bogad, 2016a: 26).

The positions taken by my different sets of research co-performers detailed above on the spectrum between the ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance thus may be seen as the result of consideration of how to balance direct, focused resonance with specific issues alongside indirect, generalized attack upon dominant “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1984: 74) and power/knowledge. A position nearer either end of the (supra)tactical continuum tended throughout my observations to blunt one set of teeth while it sharpened the other, whilst no two absurd interventions may bite the same, especially between different geo-historical and socio-political contexts, as the following chapter will illustrate.

Chapter Seven - Data Analysis Part Two: Impacts of Socio-Political Context upon (Supra)Tactical Absurd Performance Praxis

This chapter turns directly to addressing my third central research question through comparison of the impacts of key aspects of the socio-political contexts of BsAs and NYC outlined in chapter four upon the absurd performance practices of artists and activists. In what follows I shall analyse and compare, in the following sequence, the 1976-83 Argentine dictatorship, US culture wars, 2001 Argentine economic crisis and social uprising, discourses of NYC exceptionalism, cultural divides between the 'European' and the 'Latino' in Argentina, US racial tensions, and recent rise of right-wing populism in both BsAs and NYC, all as prominent aspects of the cumulative contextual tapestries that I observed to influence absurd performance practice differently across my comparative fieldsites. In order to cover such a broad range of topics within the limited scope of this chapter, I shall employ a shift in ethnographic reporting style. Having offered a maximally vivid depiction of my ethnography within the thick description of the vignettes of chapters five and six, I shall report fieldwork anecdotes relating to each of the contextual issues addressed here as briefer illustrative accounts.

A key contribution of my research here is to highlight that motivations for and restrictions upon absurd performance vary greatly between different socio-political and (un)professional contexts. The single universally applicable schema often proposed within the tactical performance literature, based disproportionately on western activist case studies, is thus problematized by comparison with non-western and artist case studies. Where Bogard purports "to offer some tentative, non-dogmatic, and ever-evolving principles of best practice for tactical performance" (2016a: 4), my research points to a potential next 'evolutionary' step within this sub-discipline of abandoning notions of "best practice" altogether. Here previous exclusionary emphasis solely upon tacticality is shed in favour of recognition of broader (supra)tactical performance possibilities whose contextual variations defy distillation into even the most tentative of universal regimens. Reinforcing Bogard's assertion that "[a]s tactical

players, it is crucial that we know our cultural terrain” (2016a: 26), I add that we must acknowledge that our constitution as ‘tactical players’, or not, is also a product of our varied cultural terrains.

Chili of ETP told me once - “*Cuando todo es un quilombo, vamos improvisando*” (When everything is a mess, we continue improvising). This chapter pays attention to the particular *quilombos*, the messes, of BsAs and NYC and the associated responsive improvisations of activist and artist absurd performance practice in each locale. Thus I hope to illustrate how future research on this topic, in any area of the world, must also pay close attention to the unique histories and actualities of its site(s) in order to move beyond ethnocentric assertions of a given deeply contextually and historically contingent form of absurd performance, such as 90s/00s NYC activist performance within much of the tactical performance literature, as if emblemizing an illusory universal practice. Richard Schechner reminds us that upon studying diverse modes of performance-making worldwide, we cannot deny that “there is more than one way to skin a cat” (1985: 17). The comparative ethnographic data analysed below shall demonstrate that, if to skin a cat is an absurd act, there are certainly many (contextually contingent) ways to do it.

1. ‘¡Macri, Basura, Vos Sos La Dictadura!’: The Argentine dictatorship 1976-83

The above subtitle, translating to ‘Macri, rubbish, you are the dictatorship’, was a common protest chant during my fieldwork in BsAs, reflecting omnipresent reference to the 1976-83 military dictatorship within contemporary political action in BsAs, as described in chapter four. A major influence of this spectre of state violence in relation to contemporary absurd performance practices was concern about appearing disrespectful towards the memory of the disappeared. Many of my research co-performers had direct familial links to those murdered, rendering this sensitivity not solely a courteous bow to a heavy political history, but a personal wound still deeply felt. As much

as, in my research terms, the dictatorship could be seen as an acute example of the unjustifiable oppression that characterizes socio-political absurdity, exploring this absurdity within performance appeared painful, only done with utmost caution, and generally avoided in concordance with solemn discourses concerning '*la memoria*' as detailed in chapter four. The most prominent symbol of resistance against the dictatorship, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, are famously stoic, dignified, and brave with their white handkerchiefs representing collective grief and gracious resistance. Most performance I observed surrounding the dictatorship attempted to toe a similar sombre, earnest line. *Nunca más*, never again - the reproach is clear and simple, the antithesis of absurdist ambiguity. Consideration of absurd performance in relation to this topic was thus uncommon, any such suggestions typically being shut down in my observations¹¹⁴.

Leading up to the *La Noche de los Lápices*, an annual commemoration of the 1976 disappearance of numerous secondary school children aforementioned in chapter four, a proposal was passed through the ETP general assembly to mark the date with a night of performance in *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa*. The planning of this project was undertaken with monitored seriousness. For example, during rehearsals for a section of community singing - a group rendition of the candid León Gieco song *La Memoria* - Jesús, who elsewhere often championed the necessity of play, commented that perhaps swaying from side to side should be avoided because "*no estamos por paseo*" (we're not here to take a stroll). Even minor displays of anything asides sorrow and repudiation within performances regarding the dictatorship were, then, potentially questionable. The major performance of this night was an attempted realist reproduction of the events of the children's disappearance, as reported by the few survivors, featuring short scenes of their protest, abduction, and torture. However, despite intentions to create an arresting re-enactment of evil,

¹¹⁴ On some rare occasions I did observe cautious exceptions to this tendency, such as Mariam's obsession with eliminating stains within the clown routine recounted in chapter five subtly alluding to the fascist 'cleansing' of state killings. Here, the ignorant clown sprucing up a coffin symbolized the danger of repetition that lies within forgetfulness, extracting the socio-political absurdity of the resurgent fixation with 'cleaning up' society under Macri's government that sits upon a bloody history fuelled by similar sentiment.

numerous flaws in the performance lead to what Dariel would later lament as “*una farsa*” (a farce).

A projection intended to display propaganda videos of the dictatorship malfunctioned and instead a plain computer screen was projected onto the back wall throughout the performance, including during intended blackouts, rendering visible the hurried rising and exit of supposedly incapacitated or dead characters. Meanwhile, military figures came off as bumbling and comic as they missed their cues, despite intentions to portray them as genuinely harrowing and cruel. The audience, mostly of other activists affiliated with the space, let out some laughter, stifled by the weight of the date. Following the performance, the mood of the group was tangibly low, some figures not involved in the show attempting to lift the spirits of others. Paula, *profe* of Brechtian theatre classes, commented “*lo importante es que el mensaje salió, y salió muy bien*” (what matters is that the message was communicated, and it was communicated very well). Meanwhile, Yarela, *profe* of the history of Latin American political theatre, proffered that the piece had been “*digno*” (dignified), suggesting evident venerable intention yet with additional comments concerning other merits conspicuous in their absence.

The accidental introduction of absurd elements into a performance surrounding the dictatorship in this militant group then created discomfort, seeming to joke about this omnipresent tragedy and the hallowed concept of ‘memory’ being broadly unpalatable, leaving the group unsure how to react. Following a few days reflection, Martina commented that they needed to laugh about their “*fracaso espectacular*” (spectacular failure) despite the heaviness of the topic, whilst Fiorella and Dariel both separately spoke with me about wishing they had taken a less stereotypical realist stance, even suggesting the possibility of a more absurdist slant. In Fiorella’s words -

“*me da bocha de pena que ni pensamos en hacer algo más absurdo, Huguito. Nos oprimimos a nosotros mismos con tanta seriedad*” (I’m

ashamed that we didn't even think of making something more absurd, Hugh. We oppressed ourselves with so much seriousness)¹¹⁵.

Still, despite such professed regrets, I did not witness during the rest of my fieldwork period the approach of the dictatorship by more activist performers with anything less than dutiful respect to existing mournful norms. Further, such expected doleful reverence regarding this omnipresent collective memory leaked over into activist performance regarding other issues, illustrated by the stifled performance at the *gatillo fácil* march documented in chapter six.

Etcétera, in comparison, were freer in their integration of themes of dictatorship within absurd performance. Many of their foundational performances featured grotesque, clownish military characters, often incorporated directly into seminal *escrache* protests against former members of the junta as described in chapter four. These exaggerated, revolting figures reflected the ludicrous, unjustified power of the former authoritarian state, bringing fascist leaders bathetically back to Earth, mocking them and any claims they once entertained to legitimate power. Here I observed on numerous occasions the notion of '*una farsa*' (a farce), used reproachfully within the ETP episode above, rather extolled as a forceful, acerbic undercutting of the regimes of truth that legitimate tyranny. For example, in the documentation of earlier collective actions as '*Etcétera TV*', now partially available on the group's YouTube channel, a character in military uniform with an oversized prosthetic nose and moustache acts as the incredulous presenter, lamenting in a buffoonish voice the leftist interventions of Etcétera. In some instances this character presents footage of Etcétera as if 'evidence' in a trial against them, wryly evoking the injustice of their performances being policed whilst torturers and murderers of the dictatorial regime walk free. At the end of one such presentation of footage from *escraches*, the military character declares "*El análisis que hacemos es que no sabemos nada de lo que queremos saber*" (The analysis we have made is that we do not know anything of what we wanted to

¹¹⁵ I must note that such reflection may have in part been inspired by my presence as a researcher defined by my specific interest in absurd performance. However, Fiorella's words here came following me asking her how she felt about the performance in general, subsequent reference to absurd performance possibilities being raised on her part.

know), before splattering a balloon full of red, blood-like liquid¹¹⁶ upon the table and spreading it upon his cheeks. Here the pastiched military figure makes a tragicomic admission of the pointlessness of the cruelty and murder of the dictatorship, reflected by the more benign, self-aware pointlessness of Etcétera's actions¹¹⁷, suggesting the impossibility of absolute knowledge and therein the foundationlessness of tyranny. In key terms from my conceptual framework detailed in chapter two, the notion of a stable distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004) and hierarchy of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1984) upon which oppression could be justified is here troubled via exaggerated transgression. The socio-political absurdity of the dictatorship is thus extracted through absurd performance, Etcétera crossing a taboo line held near sacred by most activists during my fieldwork.

In relation to playing with highly sensitive political themes within their performances, Fede commented in an interview with *La Tribu* community radio observed during my fieldwork - "*consideramos que la sociedad argentina tiene humor...que tiene la capacidad reirse a sus propias cosas y no repetir la historia*" (we consider that Argentine society has a sense of humour...that it holds the capacity to laugh at its own problems and not repeat its history). Here laughter, often engendered through absurd, exaggerated performance, was, rather than disrespectful to discourses of memory, presented as a key step in moving beyond past atrocities and preventing their recurrence. In this way I observed the onus of the dictatorship, and the feared return of such tyranny to Argentina, to motivate Etcétera's interventions even when not directly related to the totalitarian past. One example would be an action from 2011 that was recounted to me numerous times during fieldwork under the title *El Pitazo* (grand spectacle of whistles). Here, following the introduction of whistle-blowing guards to control the park, *Parque Centenario*, Etcétera distributed hundreds of whistles to those hanging out there, under the instruction that they would blow them in response to the guards. As such, when an official attempted to exert control by

¹¹⁶ Such red paint filled balloons have been repeatedly used in *escraches* to throw against the residences of former junta members and leave blood-like stains upon them.

¹¹⁷ In another video focused on the action *Ganso al Poder* (The goose to power) about the electoral campaign of a goose, the same military presenter declares "*Arte y política? Las pelotas!*" (Art and politics? My balls!)

sounding their whistle, the entire park erupted into a cacophony of shrilling and tooting. A mechanism of constructed authority was thus transformed into one of rebellion, destabilizing the supposed meaning of the whistle and of the power it represented. Jérémy, laughingly twisting a classic anarchist slogan, described this action to me as conveying the message - “*ni dios, ni patrón, ni silbato*” (no gods, no masters, no whistles), soberly adding that ‘*sabemos muy bien en Argentina lo que puede pasar si dejamos las opresiones pequeñas crecer*’ (we know very well in Argentina what can happen if we let small oppressions grow).

Here absurd intervention, in and of itself, is framed as anti-authoritarian, resisting apparently rational distributions of the sensible that have, in recent Argentine history, legitimated genocide as a ‘process of national reorganization’ and, still today, as outlined in chapter four, attempt to cast such evil as one of numerous ‘demons’ whose hand was forced within a ‘dirty war’. I saw the absurd performances of Etcétera to be driven, in part, to cut through such apologism, depriving it of its credibility by undermining the purportedly rational basis of claims to be able to make such clear sense of the inexplicable violence of Argentine history. Severe past oppression, here, in contrast to the tactical orientation and restrictive reverence of ETP, opened the door for some more supra-tactical absurd performance. The inescapable injustice - that is, extreme socio-political absurdity - of the dictatorship exhorted, for Etcétera, the need to undermine all baseless claims to power/knowledge, as phantasmal stepping-stones that can, if allowed to feign solidity, legitimate atrocity.

At the same time as potentially facilitating such realization of interconnected existential and socio-political absurdity, the legacy of thousands of radicals martyred during the dictatorship still lends traditional political organizing a heavy cultural weight in Argentina, as detailed in chapter four. In leftist circles I found the refusal of such classical activism to be commonly derided as shameful, akin to spitting on the dead. I observed this to be a major influence on the maintenance of the partially tactical absurd performance practice of Etcétera documented in chapter six, in contrast to the more wholly supra-tactical bent of The Cart Department who felt little pressure to ally

themselves to direct political campaigns in NYC where such recent large-scale bloody persecution of activists had not taken place. Regarding concerns of taking sufficient directly political action, Fede distinguished with me on one occasion between not making sense ‘*de buena manera*’ (in a good way) or ‘*de mala manera*’ (in a bad way). To create absurd performance with a defined political referent and intention to resist oppression, whether directly or obliquely, was to not make sense in a good way. However, to create absurd performance in ignorance of surrounding political inequalities, without even a wink towards directly challenging repression, was to not make sense pejoratively. This, for Fede, was ‘*no tener respeto para la historia y la memoria que nos defina como argentinos, como latinos*’ (to not have respect for the history and memory that define us as Argentines, as Latinos). This consideration, then, appeared inescapable for any instance of absurd performance in BsAs, if often differently translated by activists and artists in relation to their positionality on the spectrum between tacticality and supra-tacticality.

2. ‘Burn it! Burn it! Burn that fucking flag!’: US culture wars

Performers in NYC did not operate beneath the shadow of living memory of genocide and totalitarian rule. Concerns about appropriately respecting victims of state torture and murder were absent, if paralleled by differently expressed anxieties regarding the everyday violence of institutionalized racism in the USA, to be explored later in this chapter. Instead of occurring in the aftermath of sanguinary fascist persecution, absurd performance in NYC took place within the ongoing throes of an entirely different species of peacetime conflict: the so-called ‘culture wars’ outlined in chapter four.

The emphasis within The Cart Department, illustrated in chapter six, upon antagonizing conservatives within absurd intervention and making the world concretely less like the one desired by such establishment figures, appeared fired by a sense of the USA as intrinsically culturally riven. “Keeping the world weirder” in Kevin’s words, or pursuing “poetic liberation” against the “jail cell

of normality” in Kalan’s, pushing at or beyond the boundaries of the sensible within their performances, The Cart Department often positioned themselves at the frontline of the contemporary culture wars. Here they obliquely pitted exaggeratedly transgressive acts against rejuvenated Trump era puritanism whose potential political consequences were roundly feared. Thus where Etcétera’s more supra-tactical absurd performances were motivated by trepidation of the *slide back* into the inflexible normative frameworks that permitted past fascism, those of The Cart Department appeared partly driven by concern over a potential *slide forward* into future tyranny in the USA. Hence I observed artists in BsAs and NYC, informed by very different histories of armed and cultural conflict respectively, to both conceptualize more supra-tactical absurd performance as undermining the hegemonic normative foundations of political oppression. Here absurd intervention was an embodiment of what had been or could be lost in a more oppressive political situation, pushing against conservative norms in order to prevent their constriction.

Where in BsAs such anti-normative commitment was viscerally tied to historical trauma, in NYC a central motor was the ever-present US apocalyptic imaginary described in chapter four. Perceived impending political, economic, and ecological doom as pushed forward by a reified conservative agenda thus inspired absurd intervention in exasperation and anti-rational resistance to dominant neo-liberal ‘logics’ understood to promise global catastrophe. On one occasion making props in Kalan’s yard, JME declared that “if we don’t have anything more to say than dada did one hundred years ago, then we might as well just go to bed”. I asked him what more he thought we might have to say and he responded that he saw The Cart Department in the wake of climate change as representing a kind of “apocalyptic dada” where

“here in the US we know that we’re causing the end of the world, that wealthy Americans are destroying the planet and being awarded for it...our trash carts are an awkward glitch in that system”.

Kalan reacted to this oration by taking a knife and attempting to carve the phrase ‘apocalyptic dada’ on the table where we were sitting. The two d’s came out misshapen and appeared more like p’s and Kalan commented, laughing - ‘the

apocalyptic papa is coming to oversee the death of the family'. Here the moral apocalypse imagined by the US conservative right of the 'death of the (white, patriarchal) family' was counterpoised against the ecological collapse seen by my research co-performers to be presided over by the maintenance of this very same oppressive monoculture on familial and societal levels. Artist absurd performances in NYC were then often framed as undermining this distribution of the sensible, 'awkward glitches' rubbing against a repressive status quo.

The (anti)patriotic tensions of the culture wars burn particularly clearly, and sometimes literally, in relation to the US national flag. This has a prominent artistic precedent, perhaps most notably within the controversy surrounding Dread Scott's 1988 piece *'What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?'* wherein exhibition-goers were invited to step upon the flag to write their answer to the eponymous question. This provoked the introduction of the 'Flag Protection Act of 1989', protested by Scott and others in a mass flag burning on the steps of the US Capitol Building, eventually resulting in a Supreme Court ruling that flag-burning comprises a constitutionally acceptable expression and cannot be illegalized¹¹⁸. The 'desecration' of the Star Spangled Banner was incorporated by The Cart Department within numerous performances during my fieldwork, underlining their alignment with artists previously demonized as 'un-American' within the culture wars disputes detailed in chapter four such as Ron Athey, Andres Serrano, or the 'NEA Four'. Here the real flames of burning flags mirror the real blood of demonized body art performances, counternormatively blurring sacrosanct divisions between notions of 'reality' and 'art' or 'performance' as discussed in chapter four.

For example, following a full day of street performance co-ordinated by some occasional collaborators of The Cart Department¹¹⁹, Kalan, in kneepads

¹¹⁸ Of note is Trump's vocal ignorance/rejection of this law, tweeting in 2016 - "Nobody should be allowed to burn the American flag—if they do, there must be consequences—perhaps loss of citizenship or year in jail!" (cited in Wagner, 2016) - representative of contemporary hardline conservative rhetoric contested by the absurd performances of my research.

¹¹⁹ This event, 'Troutman Art Fest', was a full day of performance art on one block in Bushwick. A primary organizer of the event told me that a key intention of theirs was to create a public spectacle building links between long-term local residents and more newly-arrived artists and

and a tattered loincloth with balloons stuffed inside fabric pockets, set a cart full of clocks, keyboards, and other mechanical trash items on fire with lighter fluid, spitting upon a miniature US flag and throwing it into the flames. This occurred the day after the inauguration of Brett Kavanaugh as Supreme Court Justice and, in a moment of atypically direct political commentary, Kalan announced that burning the flag was ‘to burn Kavanaugh, and all rapists, and all states’. Where the flag represented abuse and apologism, the flames spoke - ironically in relation to a judge protected with effective impunity - to justice and compassion. Meanwhile, at the ‘Super Bowl’ scatophilic performance event and “nihilist football game” spearheaded by Jamie and Cranberry and held annually on the day of the ‘Super Bowl’ American football game since 2016 in Union Square, Manhattan, the players, dressed as toilets, turds, and anuses, have burnt a US flag as part of the happening on numerous occasions. Here the hyperbole of the Super Bowl is brought down to earth through the embodiment of a grotesque pun. The idea of a ‘great’ nation or a ‘super’ sporting event as mutually supportive pillars of normative patriotic pride are obliquely questioned through the presentation of ‘great’ or ‘super’ shit. These faecal creatures burning a US flag then underline opposition to the sanitized political and cultural order that the stars and stripes represent, exemplifying how I observed absurd performance in NYC to often feed into and off of the ingrained oppositionality of the culture wars.

thus work against flows of gentrification that threaten to ultimately displace both populations. This was then a tactically planned event, if incorporating many more supra-tactical performances, speaking to the incessant blurriness between these ideal type absurd performance orientations that my research identifies.



Fig 7-1: The Super Bowl.

However, the influence I observed of the ‘culture wars’ discourse upon absurd performance in NYC was not uniform and did not always necessarily equate simply to an us:them dichotomous opposition. This can be illustrated through reference to the events of 4 July 2018, US Independence Day, when Jamie, Cranberry, Kevin, and I travelled between rooftop parties, performing unannounced interventions. At one “ironic hipster” party, to use Cranberry’s epithet, Jamie performed the ‘Skinny’ puppet show described before, yet when extracting the guts of the puppet, also pulled out a stained US flag, proceeding to burn it with a cigarette lighter. In the context of this ‘woke’ gathering, the reaction of partygoers to the flag-burning was not expression of discomfort or opposition, as prominent responses encountered in the above street interventions, but rather overstated support. The subtitle of this section - ‘Burn it! Burn it! Burn that fucking flag!’ - was the screech of one attendee, emblemizing the faux-frenzy that ensued.

Such obligatory blasphemy may be seen as pointing towards not simply its surface anti-nationalism but also a perverse underlying concretization of US

triumphalism. These hip, young North Americans were, after all, congregated to celebrate, albeit ostensibly ironically, a holiday based on national pride. Here the destruction of the flag, whilst also signalling the broad political intent behind otherwise unsigned absurd performance, risks converting into a cliché, subsumed into a standardized conception of what it means to be anti-establishment and cheered equally predictably by ‘woke’ audiences. The culture wars here become a tedious, trite oppositional script. In response, alongside the more straightforward disdain towards conservatives detailed above, I also observed the performances of The Cart Department to be moulded by some revulsion towards the emergence of subcultural scripted oppositionality and those who perpetuated it, often denigrated as ‘Burners’ in reference to perceived affiliation with the maligned new-age festival ‘Burning Man’ as outlined in chapter four.

For example, performing in art-spaces to audiences perceived as embodying such scripted ‘woke-ness’ and naïve aspirations of political impact, Jamie and Cranberry commonly ended their shows by painting crude shapes on a canvas and then running frenziedly out of the venue, declaring that they were leaving “to change the world with our art”. On other occasions the collective descended in full trash-costumes upon ‘edgy-chic’ independent galleries chanting “No more art! No more art!” Here the standardization and professionalization of supposedly dissenting art, seemingly counterpoised against the conservative right within prominent culture wars discourse, was drawn into question as the nefarious manipulation of initially insubordinate aesthetics to ultimately support the hegemonic order ostensibly under attack.

The notion of the culture wars having itself leaked into popular culture - think, for example, of Green Day’s ‘American Idiot’ (both the song and subsequent sell-out Broadway show) (Diehl, 2007) - taking an ostensibly anti-establishment stance appears not necessarily anti-establishment at all. This connects to discussion in chapter two of the ‘museumification’ of dada (Bürger, 1984) and commercialization of punk (Moore, 2005) as two influential (anti)models upon contemporary more supra-tactical absurd performance that

are now often institutionalized. Recognizing this threat, I witnessed The Cart Department attempt to innovate unexpected, absurd interventions as a more unsettling interruption in the status quo, occasionally incorporating more familiar forms of dissent, such as flag burning, in order to revive them and question their taming normalization, but not always succeeding in this. We can see this in Jamie's lacklustre appraisal of the 4 July flag-burning, bemoaning the hackneyed response of the party but surmising, deadpan - "well, I put a little more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, so that global warming will fuck them all up good".

Amongst NYC activists, in comparison, I observed the political and cultural polarization of the USA, commonly perceived to be at a contemporary peak under Trump, to be taken as a further factor within the tactical rejection of absurd performance. Numerous NYC activists advocated to me the need to restrict absurd actions as potentially too alienating to an already unstable and split population. Despite commonly identifying inspiration in the legacy of NYC queer activism, emblemized by the Gay Liberation Front and ACT UP as detailed in chapter four, I did not find the transgressive acts of these groups to be commonly replicated by activists in present day NYC. Thus where I saw The Cart Department maintain commitment to the culture wars legacy of queer flamboyancy posed against conservative, Christian constraint, NYC activists appeared currently prone to play it more safe and straight, reverting to Saul Alinsky's (1971) model referenced in chapter two that, to have a radical argument heard by a non-radical audience, the activist must 'cut his hair'. Here the tactical activist must minimize the transgression or absurdity of their performance and self-expression in order to supposedly maximize the persuasive reach of their political arguments, seeing within the culture wars the need to accommodate themselves to the largest sector possible of the fractured public. My observations with NYC activists then often mirrored the dictum of Peace Studies scholar Colman McCarthy, restricting absurd performance possibilities accordingly: "Dress like a Republican so you can talk like an anarchist" (cited in Boyd, 2012).

During one ‘mic check’¹²⁰ at an immigrant rights rally organized by New Sanctuary, I witnessed one activist orator proclaim, each clause repeated by a crowd of approximately one hundred others - ‘Now is not the time for games, this country is in pieces, this will not be fun, it is serious shit’. This emblemized the rejection of play, and with it absurd performance, by most NYC activists during my fieldwork. Such irreverence was generally seen as poorly befitting the ‘serious shit’ of Trump-era resistance and exacerbating the deepening divides of the current cultural/political ‘battleground’. As one member of Rise and Resist expanded on a separate occasion regarding her reluctance to engage in absurd performance -

‘If Trump wants people to believe that there are fine people on both sides, then we sure as heck want people to know that the ridiculous people are only on one side, on his side’.

The reference to ‘fine people on both sides’ is a nod to Trump’s infamous comments in 2017 placing “blame on both sides” surrounding the ‘Unite the Right’ neo-Nazi event in Charlottesville, Virginia where a fascist demonstrator drove a car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing one woman and injuring several others. This particular conflict stemmed directly from a cultural artifact, surrounding the proposed removal of a monument of pro-slavery Confederate Army general Robert E. Lee from a Charlottesville park. The conservative right wished for this statue, and the white supremacist, patriarchal culture it represents, to remain unquestioned. Both the activists and artists of my fieldwork in NYC unanimously believed the sculpture should be removed, but with tellingly different replacements in mind. The view of many activists I spoke with was that the sculpture ought to be replaced by another monument to a black, female national hero, such as Rosa Parks or Maya Angelou, in a gesture towards the undoing of centuries of male dominance and white supremacy. Meanwhile, when I raised the issue within The Cart Department, the artists were altogether less interested in the question of a substitute monument preferring to irreverently reimagine the spot of the demolished sculpture as a performance space. The distinction drawn in chapter two between the reconfiguration of the sensible sought within more tactical absurd performance and destruction of the

¹²⁰ A ‘human megaphone’ practice popularized during Occupy Wall Street that features one person shouting lines to be repeated en masse by a larger group.

sensible sought within more supra-tactical absurd performance is demonstrated here. Activists generally sought reconfiguration, of a monument or societal norms, using absurd performance as one tool in the effort, whereas artists generally sought destruction, envisioning absurd performance as the essence of this. In NYC, both were opposed to the conservative right, their performances inevitably drawn into and influenced by culture wars discourse, if consequently inspired to take radically different positions upon the spectrum between tactical and supra-tactical absurd performance as shown throughout this thesis.

3. *El Club de Helicóptero*: The Argentine economic crisis and popular uprising of 2001

El club de helicóptero (the helicopter club) is a title that became popular amongst the Argentine right-wing press during my fieldwork for those opposed to Macri's government, within which all my research co-performers with Etcétera and ETP would fall. The term has roots in the aforementioned escape of ex-president Fernando de la Rúa by helicopter from *La Casa Rosada* in the midst of the *Argentinazo*. The indication is that dissidents want to recreate similar chaotic circumstances, subtly blaming the ever-impending possibility of another economic meltdown in Argentina upon straw-person carnage-hungry demonstrators rather than neo-liberal government policies and IMF stipulations. A symptom is thus identified as if the cause. Exact origins of this journalistic term are unclear, though many members of Etcétera claim it was coined, or at least became more widely popularized, in response to their controversial intervention featuring a large cardboard helicopter on 24 March 2017 during the annual memorial march on the date of the military coup of 1976¹²¹.

¹²¹ The front cover of a hit text by populist right-wing commentator Fernando Iglesias (2017) published during my fieldwork, entitled *El Año Que Vivimos En Peligro: Cómo Sobrevivio el Gobierno de Cambiemos al Club del Helicóptero* (The Year That We Lived In Danger: How the Cambiemos Government Survived the Helicopter Club), features an image of the cardboard helicopter raised above a banner reading 'ERRORISTAS'.

This intervention featuring the ‘*errorc6ptero*’ (errorcopter) unexpectedly became headline news across Argentina, images and footage of the performance broadcast nationwide, sparking numerous debates across multiple sectors of society surrounding the acceptability of such performance¹²² and the resurgent political and economic fragility of Argentina. Regarding this unanticipated splash, Fede, in one of our many conversations surrounding this performance, lay his head on my shoulder and wailed in mock anguish - ‘*Hermano, no s6 si vamos a poder repetir algo tan fuerte como lo del errorc6ptero*’ (Brother, I don’t know if we can repeat something so strong as the errorcopter). Later he added, regarding reports that Macri had personally been unsettled by the action, “*preocupar al presidente, esa es la mejor obra de arte*” (to worry the president, that is the best work of art), shortly afterwards shouting “*Que se vayan todos; que no quede ni uno solo!*” (May they all go and none remain!) in repetition of the now classic chant that characterized the *Argentinazo*. To concern the president, unbalancing they who sit atop the normative socio-political order and therein perhaps eroding such order itself, was thus seen as uniting the summits of political and artistic action. In this way I observed the undermining of business-as-usual capitalism in the wake of the *Argentinazo* to directly inspire the counter-normative absurd interventions of Etc6tera.

The notorious errorcopter emerged during my time in BsAs yet whilst I was still undergoing language training, before I had been able to make contact with potential research co-performers. My reporting of this action then is not drawn from direct participant observation but rather from multiple later conversations surrounding the topic, as well as a performance lecture given by Fede and Loreto on the matter a few months later. The action, as it was told to me, then, went as follows. Subsequently to viewing a news item regarding the visit of Macri to a helicopter manufacturing facility as a symbolic gesture intended to highlight the purported strengthening of Argentine industry under his government, the group decided to pay mischievous homage to this act within their annual contribution to the March 24 demonstrations. They hurriedly

¹²² This debate surrounding an irreverent performance during the national day of memory testifies once more to the aforementioned hypersensitivity surrounding absurd performance in relation to the history of the dictatorship, as intertwined with parallel sensitivities concerning histories of economic insecurity.

collected cardboard and constructed a helicopter that Loreto described, chuckling, as “*muy feo, muy mal hecho*” (very ugly, very badly made). They painted an ‘unequal’ sign (the equals sign with a dash through it) on each door and either side of the tailfin in stylized signalization of increasing wealth polarization in Argentina.

In the march itself, dressed as haphazard guerrillas with lopsided military hats and dark glasses, they joined the procession behind a huge banner reading ‘ERRRORISTAS’, flying the errorcopter alongside it until arrival at the Plaza de Mayo. The reaction of other people participating in the march was reportedly primarily of laughter and warmth, many posing for photos with the prop, children playing with it throughout. When asked for an explanation, the typical response was that it was a display of the incredible industrial capability of Argentina. As Fede put it in a much-circulated TV interview whilst in character in the Plaza de Mayo:

“como vimos la noticia de que se estaban volviendo a fabricar helicópteros pensamos mostrar algo de lo que se está produciendo” (since we saw the news that they were going to manufacture helicopters again, we thought we’d show an example of what is being produced).

The ramshackle errorcopter presented as if it were a symbol of strength and durability thus obliquely evoked the socio-politically absurd farce of attempts to mask the continued economic instability of Argentina and re-emergence of issues of inflation and unemployment familiar from 2001, as outlined in chapter four.



Fig 7-2: The errorcopter in flight.

This intervention did not pursue a specific, predefined political impact as per the expectations of a tactical performance, yet was presented as such by the conservative press. Etcétera were caricatured as representative of insensitive political dissidents seeking a revolution at all costs, images of the errorcopter being used to bolster right-wing reframing of the 2001 uprising as a ‘golpe de estado’ (coup) that undemocratic rebels wish to repeat. A more supra-tactical absurd intervention was thus read through a dominant tactical lens regardless, hegemonic notions of necessary goal-orientation used to demonize oblique critique. As such, I observed pride in the scale of the uproar provoked to be tinted with regret concerning how their ironic and ambiguous intervention had been ‘explained’ within the media to vilify political struggle. This conflicted self-appraisal was evident when Loreto told me -

‘no esperabamos esta reacción, es terrible, pero, bueno, nunca fuimos políticamente correctos. Somos erroristas y fue un gran error...no lo hicimos con una intención tan específica pero sí con la intención provocar y reflexionar sobre lo corrupto que es este país, y eso hicimos muy bien’ (we didn’t expect this reaction, its’ terrible, but, oh well, we were never

politically correct. We are errorists and it was a grand error...we didn't do it with a very specific intention but yes with the intention to provoke and to reflect on the corruption of this country, and we did that very well).

The errorcopter thus represents the mixture of tactical and supra-tactical motivations I often witnessed undergirding Etcétera's absurd performances, as laid out in chapter six. Street performance spectacles of a giant cardboard helicopter being offered as an example of incomparable industry, or of a hoard of people in lopsided chainmail carrying oversized knives and forks shouting 'A comer!' (Lets eat!), or personified corns on the cob offering sneaky agricultural business propositions - to make reference to other actions from the group's past - are on one level interruptions in the flow of normality drawing into question our general modes of being and making 'sense' of the world. However, at the same time, on another level these actions target specific political issues of corruption and political smokescreens, food price inflation and hunger, or environmentally destructive farming practices respectively. Stemming from the context of BsAs, indelibly characterized by the events of 2001, I observed the artistic actions of Etcétera to be more forcefully pulled into the realm of direct, tactical politics, whereas in NYC, not influenced by the legacy of an all-pervasive crisis and associated political mobilization, artists appeared more likely to create more wholly supra-tactical acts.

For example, when I spoke about my conception of supra-tactical absurd performance with Etcétera, indicating that I interpreted many of their actions as leaning towards this ideal, the response of many collective members was initially defensive. Sensitive to critiques already familiar from more traditional political actors in BsAs of the perceived insubstantiality of their actions, many members of Etcétera took the notion of the supra-tactical as if synonymous with the supra-political, cautious in response to assert their tactical, and therefore indubitably politically relevant, credentials. For example, Fede on one occasion, speaking directly of his perception of my research, told me:

'acá en Argentina todo es absurdo, es una situación desesperada, no es lo mismo de ponerse en un sillón en Europa y reirse de lo ridículo de todo,

Papá, es mucho más real y más triste...hacer algo absurdo sin ninguna intención política no tiene sentido en Argentina, ese modelo no puede funcionar acá (here in Argentina everything is absurd, it is a desperate situation, it's not the same as sitting in an armchair in Europe and laughing at the ridiculousness of everything, Mate, it is much more real and more sad...making something absurd without any political intention doesn't make sense in Argentina, that model cannot work here).

When I explained that I did not see the model 'working' anywhere but rather as frame upon which to tentatively hang different examples of absurd performance, Fede added that, even so, Argentine examples could never hang too close to the supra-tactical end "*porque acá no podemos evitar tener un objetivo, no en las setentas, ni en 2001, y no ahora*" (because here we cannot avoid having an objective, not in the seventies, nor 2001, and not now). In this sense, I found activists and artists in BsAs to be broadly in agreement, both greatly influenced by the intertwined histories of the military dictatorship and economic crisis to foreground the political intentionality of their performances. This perhaps contributed to their more similar approaches to absurd performance in comparison with artists and activists in NYC who were not united by comparable all-encompassing political traumas.

For the ETP, functioning out of a squatted space initially occupied as a centre of neighbourhood assembly in the wake of the 2001 uprising, this history was key to the group's very existence. Coordinated through the model of general assembly, possibilities for absurd performance were typically filtered through a system of collective approval inherited from the wave of neighbourhood organizing post-2001. In a warm-up exercise used at the start of many classes of the school, wherein all participants in a circle had to respond as quickly as possible to a series of prompts that elicited certain actions, one such stimuli was to shout '*¡Corte de ruta!*' (Roadblock!), to which all others needed to respond '*¡Y asamblea!*' (And assembly!). This was a popular piquetero call-and-response in reference to their classic methods, its central everyday repetition within ETP cementing their intention to continue this lineage of protest through their performances.

Many members of ETP had been radicalized during their participation in piquetero actions. Given the subsequent great respect generally attributed to the uprising of 2001, it too, like the dictatorship, often placed limits on the possibility of absurd performance amongst activists, albeit with an emphasis upon recognizing the valiant resistance of '*el pueblo*' rather than appropriately mourning the disappeared. Nonetheless, perceived required graveness and restraint upon absurd performance was a little more flexible surrounding the events of 2001, as notable in Rodri's ironic use of notorious political phrases from this period as part of his clown routine in the opening anecdote of chapter five. Still, the majority of direct references to the *Argentinazo* that I observed within performances of the ETP were more straightforward reflections on the courage of the resistance. For example, the central piece produced during my fieldwork within the community theatre group in the Villa 1-11-14 shantytown, entitled *Un Pino y Un Árbol* (A Pine and An Evergreen), recounted the riots of 2001 literally, with sock balls thrown at those playing the police in place of bricks and smoking flares in place of tear gas. Connected social realities in the shantytown of police corruption, drug and human trafficking, illegal factory worker exploitation, and lack of health services were presented with similar candour. Some irreverence was inserted into the piece, the eponymous trees having been planted by the government being ironically heralded by a news reporter as "*un gran cambio*" (a great change) in stark comparison to ongoing poverty, but this ridicule was carefully directed towards political elites, the sanctity of the resistance of 2001 preserved in critical comparison.



Fig 7-3: The ETP community theatre group in villa 1-11-14 evoking scenes of the *Argentinazo*.

Still, parallel to my observations regarding *alegría rebelde* detailed in chapter six, I noted an opening for more supra-tactical absurd performance - despite broader activist frames favouring a generally tactical orientation - within the concept of *autogestión* championed by waves of workers occupations and cultural centres in the wake of the *Argentinazo*, as introduced in chapter four. Operating autonomously outwith official structures, *autogestión* presents an integrally politically challenging model of creation. Thus I observed if a performance were presented as a product of *autogestión* it often became perceived as inherently political irrespective of its content. A more supra-tactical absurd performance might then be framed as still pushing forward an anti-capitalist model of cultural production, therein legitimated, to a certain extent, within dominant tactical thinking. For example, at the opening of shows at *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa* it was standard practice to introduce the intertwined projects of the theatre, school, and people's kitchen within the space whilst putting emphasis upon their *autogestión*. Introducing one variety show in this way, Mati reassured the audience "*puede ser que las obras sean raras o realistas, pero son todas autogestionadas igual*" (it could be that the

pieces are strange or realist, but they are all still products of *autogestión*). NYC activists in comparison lacked such a prominent mechanism to legitimate and mobilize more supra-tactical absurd performances within their overarching tactical frames, perhaps partially explaining their more limited practice of almost exclusively tactical absurd performance.

The closest parallel to the *Argentinazo* in the recent history of NYC would be the Occupy Wall Street movement, albeit on a smaller scale and surrounding a less paralyzing financial crisis. Nonetheless, Occupy was referenced with far lesser frequency by research co-performers in NYC, in comparison with the ubiquity of the *Argentinazo* within research conversations in BsAs. Indeed, Occupy went almost entirely unmentioned by artists in NYC, whilst amongst activists I found it intermittently referred to as both inspiration and disappointment - symbolizing both the potential for mass creative resistance in NYC and its seeming ultimate failure to engender lasting change. One veteran of the NYC Reclaim the Streets movement summarized this conflicted position whilst responding to hearing about my research topic during one creative activism happy hour night:

“Occupy was one big performance, and often a pretty absurd one. It was spectacular but it was a mess. It filled my heart but it wasn’t enough...after that a lot of the creative stuff just lost steam...Post-Occupy most activists I know stopped making performance”.

There was a relative consensus amongst BsAs artists and activists that the uprising of 2001 was exemplary of popular struggle and ought to inspire continued revolt including through absurd performance. In contrast, in NYC opinions concerning Occupy were generally more uncertain and occasionally pessimistic, often dampening current enthusiasm amongst activists for creative dissent.

4. “Only in Brooklyn”: NYC exceptionalism

Research co-performers in BsAs typically considered their city to be unique as a result of the historical struggles detailed above, with much pride, for example, surrounding the successful prosecution of multiple members of the military junta or continued flourishing of numerous worker cooperatives established post-2001. Nonetheless, this satisfaction paled in comparison to the often unabashedly arrogant sense of research co-performers in NYC that they inhabited the most extraordinary city on earth. As outlined in chapter four, this exceptionalism was often presented as a general truism, widely shared by both activists and artists yet inspired by different lineages of action and divergently influencing their approaches to absurd performance throughout my observations.

I found activists often took this city pride to fire actions seeking to make NYC live up more fully to its mighty helm, emphasizing for example the values symbolized by Lady Liberty in their demands for an actually freer city. Much tactical performance literature based in NYC has observed a similar tendency, framing such city identity as a tactical leverage point, such as Lechaux (2010) noting the use of NYC’s “emblematic places” like Times Square or Wall Street by the Church of Stop Shopping and Billionaires for Bush to attempt to heighten the impact of their interventions. My research adds the complementary insight that NYC artists often focus more on the wild avant-garde reputation of their city, their actions given different wings by a perceived unusual precedent for transgressive creativity in NYC. The ever-present sense of superlativeness regarding NYC thus fired both more tactical and more supra-tactical orientations towards absurd performance in the city throughout my observations, depending on which element of this perceived pre-eminence was focused upon. Meanwhile, in BsAs the more muted city pride amongst *porteño* artists and activists as ‘*gente que lucha*’ (people that fight) - against, for example, dictatorship or economic oppression as shown above - influenced artist and activist absurd performance there in a more unifying manner.

On 26 June 2018, following the Supreme Court upholding of Trump's executive order, popularly known as the 'Muslim ban', prohibiting the entry of people from numerous predominately Islamic nations into the USA, a rally and march was collectively called by numerous activist organizations across NYC. It was the most well-attended activist event observed during my fieldwork in NYC, amassing thousands of participants. Amongst the diverse range of people taking the microphone at the rally in Foley Square, representing groups ranging from the Asian American Foundation to the Muslim-Jewish Solidarity Committee to The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center, a sentiment of NYC's extraordinariness and need to continue acting as a progressive national role model was a uniting factor. One representative of the Yemeni American Merchants Association lead a chant of 'USA! USA! USA!'¹²³ exhorting the need to reclaim such pride "for all Americans, not only white bigots", going on to intone that it was "our duty as New Yorkers to protest and to protect the rights of everyone in this city and this country". Shortly afterwards, a member of the New York Civil Liberties Union exclaimed to whooping applause - "In New York City we look out for our neighbours!" As the rally rhetoric was reaching a crescendo leading into the planned march, a shout emerged from the crowd, responding to relentless calls for New Yorkers to take immediate action against the Trump regime - "In New York we stand up to fascists! We don't fuck around!" This was cheered then reiterated from another corner of the crowd - "We get shit done in New York City!"

The exceptionality of New York in this activist context then was presented as a burden, duty, or responsibility that needed to be carried and lived up to. There was little space for 'fucking around', a categorization under which I found absurd performance was often placed. To fill NYC's big - but not clownishly big - shoes as an emblem of progressive politics, and to avoid soiling them with inanity, I observed a sombre, 'serious' tone most often prescribed by the city's activists. The dominant perception was then that absurd performance had to be

¹²³ NYC exceptionalism sat uncomfortably in relation to progressive rejection of US nationalism. Connectedly, the reception of this attempted reclamation of nationalist rhetoric was lukewarm in comparison to preceding chants that afternoon, with only a small selection of the crowd participating. Indeed, for both activists and artists throughout my fieldwork, NYC was most often considered exceptional not as part of the USA, but rather in contrast to or even in spite of the broader, more 'backward' nation. As Cranberry of The Cart Department once distilled this rhetorically - "If you're not in New York then what the fuck are you doing in America?"

treated with caution by NYC activists bearing the responsibilities of a role model, more often than not being rejected. This corresponds with Tarrow's description of the repertoire of contention as -

not only what people *do* when they make a claim; it is what they *know how to do* and what society has come to expect them to choose to do from within a culturally sanctioned and empirically limited set of options (1993: 283).

My observations in both NYC and BsAs exemplify such “culturally constrained contention” (Ring-Ramirez, Reynolds-Stenson, and Earl, 2014) in relation to the influence of contrasting socio-political and cultural contexts upon different absurd performance practices. Here my research undermines the often generalizing discourse of the tactical performance literature, that typically mobilizes the notion of the repertoire of contention - and the apparent position of absurd performance within it - as if globally homogenous, as outlined in chapter two. Amongst NYC activists specifically, I observed perceptions of what may appropriately correlate with the apparent agenda-setting position of NYC to be a particularly prominent cultural constraint upon absurd performance.

Speaking with Kevin of The Cart Department later in the same week as the Muslim ban demonstration, I asked him what he had been doing since we last saw each other and he replied - “You know, the usual, fucking around with puppets and noise”. In contrast to the largely pejorative connotations amongst activists, ‘fucking around’ was assumed by The Cart Department and their collaborators as essential to their practice, allowing new ideas to emerge, potentially contributing to rather than detracting from social change, reflecting what they generally perceived to be most special and progressive about NYC: its incubation of transgressive art and performance. Kalan, speaking about how he ended up basing himself in NYC, described the city as “totally atypical” within the USA, remarking that the cultural output of NYC is the bulk of the output of the entire nation and “by far the most experimental”, adding that if he didn't live there, “or maybe New Orleans”, then he'd leave the US. Making reference to relaxed laws regulating street performance compared with the rest of the US,

the possibility to live in a tiny basement room for \$250 a month¹²⁴, and the abundance of other “weirdo artists” with which to connect, Kalan concluded that “it’s just easier for me to be here and do what I do, easier than anywhere else”.

In 2017, Cranberry and Jamie decided to leave NYC ‘forever’ as they were, in Cranberry’s words, “sick of the city and the same old scene”. They gave away most of their belongings and moved to Hawai’i yet only remained there two months before returning to NYC. Cranberry explained their boomerang journey to me as partly resulting from missing the matchless support for bizarre performance in NYC -

“outside of NYC there is almost no avenue for the things that we want to make...we performed at some fucking terrible open mics in Hawai’i swallowing ink and foaming at the mouth and the sea of dudes playing Jack Johnson¹²⁵ covers didn’t know what to do...and almost no one wanted to do weird stuff in the street with us”.

Jamie expanded on another occasion -

‘what we missed in Hawai’i and what’s different about New York is spaces like the roof of The Glove where fucking clowns and street performers can come together and share stories and drive each other on.’

Rather than select another place to try, the pair returned to NYC, perceiving the avant-garde performance scene in NYC to be incomparable, if at times tiresome. NYC exceptionalism then was not all roses, sometimes more of a flat ‘this is the best we’ve got’ sentiment, yet this still appeared to motivate

¹²⁴ Flying in the face of conventional wisdom that it is impossible to live cheaply in NYC, all members of The Cart Department were economic innovators, largely living in small spaces with many others, but doing so relatively cheaply. A commonplace assertion of older artists was that NYC had gotten too expensive to be as artistically wild as it used to be - caricatured by Jamie as “old people from the Lower East Side complaining that there’s no weird art anymore”. Following this same gripe, JME contested “Why don’t they come to The Glove one night and then tell us that there’s no avant-garde in New York anymore?” Discourses of NYC exceptionalism, then, sometimes also took the form of generational dispute, such ‘My NYC was/is more special than your NYC’ debates serving ultimately to underline perceived specialness of NYC, breeding new absurd performance upon existing transgressive heritage, if having moved in epicenter from Manhattan to Brooklyn.

¹²⁵ Popular soft folk-pop musician from Hawai’i.

more absurd intervention amongst artists than the isolation often experienced in other places. JME, speaking of visiting family in Mississippi, told me -

“I arrive from New York and I’m like an alien to people there, Man. I wouldn’t even know where to start with the kind of stuff we make here.”

In NYC, the alien could find their kind, forge solidarity and reciprocal positive reinforcement, and create more performance where elsewhere they might be paralysed by seclusion and surrounding condemnatory conservatism. Indeed, none of the central members of The Cart Department had grown up in NYC, all reporting their arrivals as adults as to an extent motivated by the mythos of NYC as a wondrous place to make boundary-pushing art. This sense, partially disappointed and partially vindicated, remained a tempered influence upon absurd performance throughout my observations, the legend of ‘avant-garde New York’ constituting a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in the mutually supportive performance community it nurtured. Here the act of making absurd performance in and of itself was valued as an important cultural practice, offering a partial explanation for the greater exploration of more supra-tactical absurd performance that I observed amongst artists in NYC.

Feeding back upon itself, this sense of NYC as a more supportive place to create transgressive performance generated some internal debate between artists as to whether creating such performance in NYC was as such intrinsically less transgressive. The central question here: if the normative structure was already different in NYC in comparison to the rest of the USA or world, then would it not be more culturally impactful to create absurd interventions in places that remain more conservative? During one afternoon recording improvised music with Jamie, Kevin, Cranberry, and JME using ‘instruments’ found on the street including walking sticks, a semi-inflated basketball, and a one-stringed bass guitar, to later be used as a soundtrack for street performance, the topic of conversation in between jamming turned to the dispassionate reactions of the oft-desensitized NYC public. Jamie commented on the “deadening feeling” of making a puppet show on the train and numerous people remaining fixated on their smartphones - a commonplace non-reaction that in

numerous online videos of The Cart Department and collaborators during subway performances attracted comments such as “typical New Yorkers not even looking up”. JME expanded -

“in New York everyone is so saturated with things to see that sometimes when I’m out with the cart and I’m setting up a show, I’m almost chasing after people like ‘Hey, hey, no really, it’s gonna blow your mind’”.

I asked at this point why they then chose to make performance in NYC and Jamie reiterated the above point about a more extensive and supportive radical performance art community despite the more indifferent public. Meanwhile, Kevin ruminated, reflecting on a recent intervention on the Williamsburg Bridge,

“maybe it’d be a bigger deal to cover myself in shaving foam and scream in the middle of a bridge in some other city, but then maybe I wouldn’t be able to do it at all...anyway without us New York would get boring fast”.

The generally progressive context of NYC, then, was recognized as fragile and in need of preservation, whilst currently both facilitating absurd performance and dampening its potential transformative cultural ripples. As Cranberry added -

“I guess they say everyone is looking at New York but I don’t know sometimes when we do a talent show and almost no one is looking at us, or they take an Instagram photo and that’s it”.



Fig 7-4: Kevin during a durational performance shrieking covered in shaving foam in the middle of Williamsburg Bridge.

Artist research co-performers in NYC thus remained largely unsure if their performances bolstered their city as a vanguard exemplar or constituted rather a less impactful cop-out sequestered in a progressive city that already largely tolerated their bohemian enclave, perhaps even assimilating it as an ‘edgy’ veneer upon the touristic/corporate brand of the ‘Big Apple’. Of course, despite above concerns, all of my research co-performers in NYC had decided to remain there, creating the majority of their performances within, even thanks to, the perceived haven of NYC. Here they traded off considerations of maximally disruptive counter-normative influence that might be better achieved outwith NYC against what NYC was seen to uniquely provide: mutual support within an unparalleled performance subculture, promoting collaboration and innovation, better sustaining performance practice over time. This also related to greater formal and informal opportunities in NYC to earn money in related arts work. For absurd performance to happen, across my fieldsites, a supportive, like-minded community often appeared essential, in correlation with the findings of much Social Movement Studies literature concerning the role of ‘networks’ in maintaining activist participation (Kitts, 2000; Diani and McAdam, 2003). The ‘network’ I observed within the NYC experimental performance arts scene then appeared particularly tight, incubating collective confidence that facilitated experimentation with more supra-tactical absurd performance.

5. ‘*El absurdo popular*’: Argentine dichotomization of ‘*latinidad*’ and ‘*europiedad*’

Discourses surrounding power inequalities between typically more disadvantaged ‘people of colour’ as opposed to typically more privileged white people as an influence upon absurd performance, prominent within the heavily US-focused tactical performance literature and to be explored as a significant influence upon my fieldwork in NYC below, were not so present in my observations in BsAs¹²⁶. Such concerns were rather superseded in BsAs by the

¹²⁶ Perhaps the most striking example of the relative lack of racial sensitivity in BsAs in comparison with NYC came during one clown class with ETP wherein Fiorella reported to the

perceived dichotomy between *latinidad* (the ‘Latino’) and *europiedad* (the ‘European’) outlined in chapter four. These cultural notions do carry connotations of race, the ‘Latino’ typically more associated with darker skin and more indigenous or *mestizo* (mixed) characteristics and the ‘European’ with whiter skin and more *criollo* (descendent of colonizers) features, yet race was not often at the forefront of discussions regarding this constructed divide during my fieldwork. Rather, implications of socio-economic class - shaded by race rather than outweighed by it as in NYC - were more often emphasized.

How this cultural class divide affected activists’ approach towards absurd performance in BsAs may be illustrated with reference to ETP’s *escrache* in the annual government-sponsored event *La Noche de los Museos* (The Night of the Museums) wherein all the major museums in BsAs, and many smaller-scale collaborators, stay open all night, many hosting special events. This spectacle was broadly seen by members of ETP as a celebration of a snobbish, European-modelled cultural infrastructure, centred on the most affluent neighbourhoods of the city, reflecting the aspirations of the neo-liberal government to present Argentina as a culturally sanitized and ‘developed’ nation. Consequently, ETP organized a tour of interventions coinciding with this ostentatious event outside four of the largest galleries in the city, all located in the wealthy neighbourhood of Recoleta: *Centro Cultural Recoleta*, *Palais de Glace*, *Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires* (MALBA), and *Museo de Bellas Artes*.

At the main entrance of each gallery the same intervention was enacted, involving the arrival of a group of twenty people as ‘*la masa*’ (the masses) exaggeratedly gawking at the lines of visitors waiting to enter, screeching trite phrases such as “*Ay me encanta la cultura!*” (Oh I love culture!). The mass was

group that she wished to try a new costume idea, appearing moments later with her face and all visible skin painted black, declaring ‘*Soy la oscuridad*’ (I am the darkness). Amongst radical artists and activists in NYC this act would have been unthinkable, the notion of ‘blackface’ commonly maligned as the epitome of white supremacist disrespect. Nonetheless, Fiorella’s act caused no disturbance amongst the ETP clown group who responded to my suggestion that the same act could be taken as highly offensive elsewhere with disbelief. Race in BsAs, then, even amongst militant activists, was generally a far less sensitive issue, perhaps partly because the black population of BsAs is minute in comparison to NYC. None of my research co-performers were black in BsAs, histories of slavery and segregation being a far less prominent feature of collective memory there.

quickly surrounded by six ‘yuta’ (police) armed with yellow balloons and observed by a walking CCTV camera on stilts, followed by two other formally-dressed figures on stilts standing outside the circle with oversized yellow microphones. Raising television remote controls in various directions and clicking ‘on’, the masses erupted into a babbling, outraged frenzy. At this the two formal figures on stilts sprang into life, shushing the crowd, reporting in high spirits prominent news stories of that year in Argentina regarding oppression of teachers’ strikes, corrupt trade union complicity with government, misogynistic reactions to feminist demonstrations, and the disappearance of Santiago Maldonado. Each news item was accompanied by a straightforwardly symbolic action within the mass, such as the raising of a school lab-coat to be violently snatched by a police officer at reference to the teachers’ strikes. The whole action terminated with a group chant of “*Para una lucha que no cesa, cultura popular, arte en movimiento*¹²⁷” (For a fight that doesn’t give up, people’s culture, art in movement) and subsequent collective improvised dance, inviting observers into the melee, limited numbers accepting in each locale. In each location a different headline act followed this uniting intervention, including a shantytown rap duo, a neighbourhood murga troupe, and a socialist cumbia band. This action, on the whole then, was moulded to make sense - counterpoising a prided Latin American ‘people’s culture’ against a maligned, wannabe-European elite one, critiquing the latter as detached from the political reality presented exaggeratedly in the intervention.

Elements of the *Noche de los Museos* action that might have been exploited to create a more transgressive, absurd act - such as the anthropomorphized camera on stilts - were rather used in a highly literal way, drawing attention to the didactic political messaging of the piece rather than generating their own more oblique troubling of normativity. When I later raised this observation, Dariel told me -

“Lo que tenés que entender, Huguito, es que si vamos a hacer algo absurdo, hay que ser un absurdo popular, que sea conectado con la vida y

¹²⁷ This carries connotations both of art in movement in comparison to the static, reactionary art perceived to be represented by the mainstream galleries, and of art within social movements as an integral component of the preceding notion of a fight that does not give in.

la lucha del pueblo” (What you’ve got to understand, Hugh, is that if we are going to make something absurd, it has to be an absurdity of the people, that is connected with the life and the fight of the people).

This reflects a sentiment I observed on numerous occasions within ETP that any absurd intervention must be cautious to maintain connection with ‘*el pueblo*’ (the people) and ‘*la lucha*’ (the fight), popular concepts used to express a perceived united working-class and anti-capitalist struggle, always tied to the ‘Latino’ side of the Argentine cultural divide. In turn, as I inquired what an ‘*absurdo popular*’ might be, Mati expanded -

‘Obvio hay un montón de cosas que no tiene sentido dentro de esas galerías, ¿y qué hacen para los pibes y las pibas del barrio? ¡Nada! Jamás íbamos a hacer algo que tampoco tenía ningún sentido, cuando podíamos mostrar la potencia hermosa de la cultura del barrio...el absurdo popular sería cualquier acto raro que contribuya a la lucha, pero sobre todo tiene que contribuir a esto’ (Of course there are loads of things that don’t make sense inside those galleries, and what do they do for the neighbourhood lads and lasses? Nothing! We were never going to do something that didn’t make any sense either, when we could display the beautiful potency of neighbourhood culture...the people’s absurd would be any strange act that contributed to the fight, but above all it has to contribute to this).

The notion of something that does not make obvious sense and without clear political referent - closely matching my definition of the supra-tactical absurd - is here bemoaned as an element of establishment, Europeanized culture, part and parcel of vapid culture-washing shrouding the oppressive reality of government actions. This sentiment was shared by Martina’s appraisal of the action, also displaying commonplace reification of ‘Europe’ as a place without significant problems and its conflation with politically detached activity - ‘*la gente no podía tan fácilmente visitar su palacio de arte y actuar como si estuviera en Europa*’ (people couldn’t so easily visit their art palace and act as if they were in Europe). Meanwhile, the notion of an ‘*absurdo popular*’ offers an Argentine cultural inflection upon dominant notions of tactical absurd

performance, exaggeratedly transgressive intervention still framed as one component within a purposeful repertoire, but a repertoire that must necessarily be tied to more ‘Latino’ Argentine working-class culture.



Fig 7-5: Members of the ‘masa’ during the ETP escrache against the night of the museums.

I observed the notion of an ‘*absurdo popular*’ evoked in multiple culturally specific expressions such as Jesús’ reference to ‘*payasos choripañeros*’ (sausage sandwich clowns) in the opening vignette of chapter five or Majo’s assertion during our ‘workshops of the absurd’ that “*vamos a tener que armar un absurdo tanguero*” (we are going to have to create a tangoing absurd). The Argentine sausage-sandwich, *choripán*, ubiquitous at football matches and demonstrations alike, is widely perceived as a Latino working-class symbol. More middle/upper-class conservative commentators commonly deride *choripán* as ‘*grasa*’ (unrefined; literally: fat). For example, during my fieldwork Macri praised an event in support of him for occurring “*sin colectivos ni choripán*” (without buses or sausage-sandwiches) making side-eyed reference to the union/movement buses and food that typically accompany leftist demonstrations. The notion of ‘*payasos choripañeros*’ thus exemplifies how I observed absurd

performance to be necessarily tied to repressed, working-class, Latino culture amongst activists in BsAs, calling serious suggestions of a reified, superior strain of apparently 'European' culture and politics into question.

Meanwhile, an '*absurdo tanguero*', like the tango itself, would be uniquely Argentine rather than a product of colonizer or indigenous cultures, transcending perceived divides between 'European' and 'Latino' influences. The practice of absurd performance in BsAs is here interpreted as part of the unique *porteño* cultural fabric, not imported from elsewhere nor to be straightforwardly exported as universalizing NYC-based creative activist 'toolboxes' like those developed by Beautiful Trouble and the Center for Artistic Activism would suggest. The point is that '*la lucha*' (the fight) to which tactical absurd performance in BsAs was seen to have to contribute was not the same 'fight' spoken of by activists in NYC. For those in BsAs it was just this - '*la lucha*' - an ambiguous yet omnipresent sense of broad anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist resistance. Such ambiguity mirrors the undefined, unstable cultural and political surroundings characterized by mutually informing ethereal ideas of *argentinidad* and Peronism, as outlined in chapter four. In contrast, activists in NYC typically held a clearer political and cultural identity, as illustrated in above discussion of NYC exceptionalism, acting in turn upon more defined goals of displacing a particular politician or changing a specific legislation and less interested in broad notions of 'the people' or 'the fight'.

Activists in NYC, within the US cultural context characterized by emphasis upon maximized productivity, wished to get from 'a' to 'b' as rapidly as possible, using absurd performance if perceived to be the swiftest method. In contrast, activists in BsAs were more content to dance, so long as this dance was positioned in explicit solidarity with the oppressed, and more specifically an Argentine cultural understanding of who constituted the oppressed: the Latino working class. Activist absurd performance in BsAs, then, whilst still tactically conceived, was typically less confined than equivalent practice in NYC, indicating a more supple cultural backbone undergirding the differential position of BsAs activist absurd performance on the spectrum between tacticality and

supra-tacticality outlined in chapter six. Following the ‘*Huevonazo*’ (grand spectacle of giant eggs) intervention that we had planned during our workshops, wherein a cast of a penguin, a cat in boxing gloves, an oversized eye, a princess, and a spoon distributed eggs full of automatic poetry around the Plaza de Mayo, I asked Majo if she thought we had produced an ‘*absurdo tanguero*’. She responded with a devious smile - “*Aún no sé, tenemos que hacerlo otra vez...nunca podemos dejar de bailar*” (I still don’t know, we’ll have to do it again...we can never stop dancing).



Fig 7-6: A scene during ‘*El Huevonazo*’.

The engagement of Etcétera’s performances with the same cultural institutions attacked within the above *escrache* of ETP could barely be more distinct, numerous members of the collective performing or exhibiting within these galleries, maintaining a distinct (un)professional network including multiple curators as friends and collaborators. For example, during my fieldwork Etcétera were invited to perform at the *Museo de Bellas Artes* and gave a sold-out performance lecture at *Centro Cultural Recoleta* - two of the exact same targets of the above ETP intervention. Further, the then co-ordinator of education at MALBA, Renata Cervetto, was one of the ‘*maestros errantes*’ of the

Errasmus Mundus series of (no)work(no)shops. Such affiliation with more European styled formal cultural institutions in BsAs is connected intrinsically with the collective's numerous projects in Europe and the USA, Fede and Loreto travelling to exhibit, perform, and teach in Italy, The Netherlands, and USA during my fieldwork alone. This in turn feeds back into their activity in BsAs, such as longstanding collaboration within the artistic projects of the BsAs branch of the German *Goethe Institut* following previous participation in the *Ex-Argentina* exhibition at Museum Ludwig in Cologne, later exhibited at the *Palais de Glace* - another direct target of the above ETP intervention. When hearing about ETP as a comparative group within my fieldwork, Cecilia of Etcétera commented blankly -

“me parece que ellos están trabajando en una línea más tradicionalmente latinoamericano, mientras Etcétera, como ya sabés, encuentra mucha inspiración en movimientos artísticos europeos como el surrealismo y dadaísmo” (it seems that they are working in a more traditionally Latin American line, whilst Etcétera, as you know, find much inspiration in European artistic movements like surrealism and dadaism).

Still, despite their extensive involvement with both more symbolically and literally 'European' formal cultural institutions and their self-mythologization in relation to the European avant-garde canon, other core members of Etcétera regularly emphasized during my fieldwork a perceived *latinidad* or *argentinidad* within their actions, eager to evade the potential stigma within radical circles of being seen to bow to pretentious, elitist 'European' norms.

As Etcétera enacted part of their ongoing piece *Por el Fin del Infierno* (For the End of Hell), collecting signatures for a petition asking the pope to abolish Hell on the outside steps of the *Museo de Bellas Artes* as part of the *Buenos Aires Bienal de Performance*, I asked Loreto if they had ever performed there before. She responded, with a hearty laugh signalling towards their helium balloons bearing anti-Hell slogans - *“Sí, pero siempre en la puerta, y siempre con globos”* (Yes, but always in the doorway, and always with balloons). This suggested humility of their actions 'always in the doorway' and with the unsophisticated objects of balloons in comparison to the grandeur of the

surrounding entranceway plinths of Argentina's largest fine art gallery serves as an example of consistent attempts by Etcétera to maintain their warm, 'Latino' groundedness and accessibility despite their proximity to cold, 'European' fine art pomp. Their organization of free, open to all (no)work(no)shops testifies further to this ambition, feeding some of the resources acquired through their funded international participation in more formal arts settings into engagement with other local publics¹²⁸.

Fede and Loreto's own contribution as *maestros errantes* during the *Erasmus Mundus* series circulated around the theme of gentrification - itself an issue inextricably connected to divides between conceptions of the 'Latino' and the 'European' in BsAs, with European-aspiring middle classes displacing poorer, more classically 'Latino' populations. On a walk through the Chacarita neighbourhood whilst devising the culminating performance of these (no)work(no)shops that sought to question the influence of a recent influx of independent galleries upon gentrification - resulting eventually in the giant beard intervention mentioned above - both Fede and Loreto made concerted effort to express solidarity with local businesses. Passing a *parrilla* (steakhouse equivalent to a greasy spoon cafe) named *El Chetito* with a couple of workers smoking outside, Loreto raised her fist and shouted '¡Aguante El Chetito!' (Go on Chetito!). Meanwhile, Fede purchased an ashtray carved out of a brick by a street-seller from a neighbouring shantytown, expressing enthusiastic support for his art and how he wanted to see more of it in the streets and less stuffy galleries. The leading pair of Etcétera thus wished to maximize their solidarity with working-class BsAs. Other collective members generally followed suit, consistently cautious not to distance themselves from working-class *latinidad* within their absurd performance practice.

On one occasion, Fede defined the art world for me by imitating sucking a penis, then added "y es una pija muy blanca y que habla bien inglés" (and it's a very white dick that speaks good English). It was evident throughout my

¹²⁸ These self-organized and self-funded initiatives then reinforce future funding applications, leaving the distinction between 'institutional' and 'community' projects a little blurry.

fieldwork that Etcétera did not consider themselves cocksuckers but rather wily manipulators of a cocksucking system. They consistently moulded their creation of absurd performance according to the balance of maintaining an artistic reputation and career within a system dominated by the expectations of, to continue the metaphor, white, English-speaking penises, whilst concurrently leaving space for these performances to critique such dominance both within and without the art world. Jérémy, speaking to this (un)professional balance, told me -

“Etcetera son bastante expertos en morder la mano que les da de comer. Es una practica que ellos obviamente van desarrollando, y a veces ellos mismos han sido comido por el programa, pero siempre buscan como morder” (Etcétera are experts in biting the hand that feeds. It’s a practice that they continue developing, obviously, and sometimes they have been eaten by the programme, but they always look for how to bite).

Here the hand that feeds is dominant Western capitalist arts funding infrastructure and the biting tooth is the expression of Etcétera as anti-capitalist Latin American artists within it. Within their series of (no)work(no)shops, Fede and Loreto distinguished between ‘*maquinas que vuelan en aire libre*’ (machines that fly in free air) and ‘*maquinas que vuelan en aire privado*’ (machines that fly in private air). As an example of the former they posited their *errorcóptero* as detailed above, whilst as an example of the latter they suggested ‘Freelancer’, a work by Eduardo Basualdo exhibited during the 2017 edition of the art fair ‘ArteBA’ constituting a full size helicopter exhibited within the white-walled gallery of *Espacio Chandon*. The errorcopter involved extensive direct interaction with people on the street and social struggle whilst ‘Freelancer’ engaged solely the clients of a ‘high-brow’ art fair, playing with the same controversial symbolism but without teeth. The occasional funded flights within private air of Etcétera, this notion of private property itself an imposed export of colonial European cultures, were then presented as intended to facilitate their continued flights within, and attempted expansion of, free air as an intrinsically anti-capitalist, anti-colonial concept.

In this sense, Etcétera too, for all their participation in the gallery sphere, appeared to entertain a similar notion to ETP that performance within a state and/or corporate sanctioned space was a problematic, European-styled enterprise in contrast to more accessible, autonomous, and ‘Latino’ street intervention. Unlike ETP, Etcétera did not carry this perspective through to an outright rejection of participation with such institutions, but rather to a more critical participation. Fede and Loreto as de facto leaders of the collective attempted to gauge the benefits to their careers and causes against the potential costs to their credibility, therein hoping to play the system against itself, such as by accepting aforementioned funds from the Dutch royal family in order to sustain interventions against the Argentine government. Appraisals of their success in playing the system observed during my fieldwork varied greatly, some, as Jérémy above, heaping praise on their countercultural canniness, others critiquing leftist posturing as a sheen to ease the consciences of ultimately assimilated artists¹²⁹.

6. ‘You can call it ‘White Privilege’’: US racial tensions

One night, riding by bicycle with Kalan of The Cart Department, we took a one-way street in the wrong direction and were pulled over by the police. As we waited as they checked our identification, Kalan removed a stuffed rabbit from its usual position of crucifixion upon his handlebars to begin a puppet show for the officers, walking the rabbit along the edge of the sidewalk and up to the car window. He was told to move away over the vehicle’s loudspeaker and made the rabbit leap back in exaggerated shock, before repeating a similar routine. A passerby took out their phone and asked ‘Hey, Bro, do you mind if I put this video on Instagram’, to which Kalan replied, “Sure, you can call it ‘White Privilege’”. This serves as a prime example of how concerns surrounding race, inextricably interconnected with socio-economic class in the US context, were prominent amongst almost all my research co-performers in NYC. Kalan here

¹²⁹ As aforementioned, my access to more critical voices was limited by my operation as participant observer within the current iteration of the collective, with Fede and Loreto as my primary gatekeepers. Nonetheless, it was reported to me on numerous occasions during fieldwork that some former integrants of the group were critical of the collective’s operations within the formal art world in recent years.

recognized the privileges he wielded as an educated white man in being able to antagonize and provoke authority figures within absurd performance with less fear of the consequences than a darker-skinned, working-class person, suggesting that any documentation ought to focus on critically highlighting this inequality. Indeed, on numerous occasions, some to be dissected below, I observed members of The Cart Department, as a white central group, attempt to incorporate within their performances an oblique critique of the privileges that enabled such transgression without becoming tokenistic.

Having been invited to perform at the annual NYC Anarchist Art Fair, Kalan recruited a number of artists to help him create an “apocalyptic utopia” by performing different roles within a chaotic ‘society’ created and destroyed within the performance. Participating artists included myself, Jamie, Cranberry, Kevin, and JME, as well as numerous semi-regular collaborators of The Cart Department, and some others whose presence during my fieldwork was limited to this one event. Approaching a black member of this latter, more peripheral group of participants, African-American regular collaborator of the collective Crackhead Barney commented, laughing loudly - “Oh you’re in Kalan’s shit? He just asked you because he wanted some black faces”. The anxiety of radical white artists in NYC to evade appearing complicit with white supremacy, which I observed repeatedly throughout fieldwork and that Kalan had sardonically alluded to the day before, remarking “it would be better if we didn’t look like the KKK”, was here mocked as in itself potentially exacerbating racial othering. This mention of the Ku-Klux-Klan was also a barbed reference to a performance by another NYC collective, Wild Torus, of which Kalan, amongst others, had been a vocal critic. This notorious performance had involved numerous white artists using costumes similar to those of the KKK. Regarding this episode, Kalan remarked to me -

“the least I think we can do as hyper-privileged white performance artists is make sure that our performances aren’t perpetuating the oppressions of others”.

Meanwhile, Crackhead Barney, as an African-American artist, made regular use of a KKK hood in her street performances, which I never heard criticized by members of the NYC performance community of any race. The use of symbols associated with racism, even within absurd performances undermining the solidity of all meaning, was thus generally seen by artists in NYC as only acceptable of performers from oppressed racial groups. This coincided with commitment across the NYC performance art scene to the liberal US cultural norm that black people may freely use the word 'nigger' whereas white people must avoid using it at all costs, employing euphemisms such as 'the n-word'. In a milieu characterized by transgression, such lines were still not for crossing. Thus I observed repeatedly in NYC that if an artist was white or black, or at least generally 'read' or 'passing' as more white or more 'of colour' to use the more nuanced language I found preferred by some artists, then this impacted what kind of transgressions they felt able to perpetrate and that the broader performance community would support or tolerate from them. At the same time, as underlined by the anecdote detailed in chapter five of an observing black artist commenting that should he have attempted a similar act to mine, he would have likely been arrested, possibilities for public absurd intervention in NYC varied according to the race of the performer as tied to histories of ingrained institutional racism and 'broken windows' policing detailed in chapter four.

On another occasion, having been granted a week-long residency culminating in a show at Grace Exhibition Space, the day of the show was approaching and multiple female and ethnic minority performers who had been invited to participate had declined or cancelled. At the prospect of a show solely composed of performances by himself, JME, Jamie, Kevin, and me, Kalan asked incredulously - "What are we gonna call it - the white boy experience?" JME responded that they had invited a diversity of artists but on that date "so far it's just us who can do it, it's not our fault if other people have work or have to study or whatever". Cranberry, in turn, commented that "I really don't think that's gonna fly well as an excuse...we're talking about a show that's five white

dudes and one of their white girlfriends¹³⁰ ...I honestly think we need to try a bit harder”. In the end, Crackhead Barney collaborated within Kalan’s contribution to the night, whilst a brown-skinned, female Puerto-Rican singer/dancer opened the night alternating between Spanish folk songs and heavy metal sound poetry. Producing racially sensitive material and displaying racial diversity within collaborative projects were then both consistent concerns amongst The Cart Department throughout fieldwork, perceived failure to maintain these standards sometimes evoking shame, moulding absurd performance practice accordingly.

As illustrated in chapter six, the white core members of The Cart Department were generally conscious of how their ‘cocktail of privileges’ facilitated their ability to create absurd performances and wished to enable those typically lacking such advantages to also engage in transgressive acts. However, throughout my observations they were simultaneously confronted with the reality that their attempted undermining of white supremacist hierarchical logic within absurd performance might itself at times inadvertently perpetuate the issue. This might simply be through their presence as “another white guy smashing stuff” as Kalan critically self-appraised one performance, taking up space that could be occupied by a more marginalized artist and contributing to the potentially intimidating disproportionate whiteness of the broader NYC performance community, regardless of anti-hierarchical ideological motivations. Meanwhile, obversely, positively discriminating attempts to include artists of colour partially on the basis of their skin tone risk appearing patronizing and tokenistic, potentially exacerbating the disunion they seek to elide, as Crackhead Barney’s accusation of ‘wanting some black faces’ underlines.

Progressive white performers in NYC, for all the good intentions they might harbour, have to contend with the reality that embracing artists of colour in part because of their colour/otherness - or at least in a way that could be

¹³⁰ In this show Cranberry was not contributing her own performance but rather assisting a performance by Jamie, whilst Mrs. Kipling, the only other female core member of The Cart Department could not attend due to waitress work commitments. Under-representation of women and ethnic minority performers were often discussed at the same time as intersectionally connected issues, although the latter typically garnered more attention, perhaps because the number of white, female performers was significantly larger than that of artists of colour.

perceived to be prioritizing their colour/otherness - risks reifying such status/stigma and associated divides rather than transcending them. Simultaneously it risks evoking 'white saviour' discourses. This is a particular bind in relation to absurd performance that seeks to obliquely undermine the supposed legitimacy of all hierarchies, racialized ones included. In response, I witnessed members of The Cart Department attempt to counterbalance the inevitable limitations upon the anti-hierarchical, anti-racist import of their performances with emphasis upon more humble indirect impacts. This appeared to be one of the considerations that informed Jamie's declaration that -

'We're not gonna change the world with our performances, I'm kind of sick of the expectation that I think's growing in this scene that a performance has to have a political purpose...we can do a performance on a street corner where a load of people usually take drugs¹³¹ and involve people who maybe don't often see a weird puppet show and maybe that night one less person will OD, but that's not why we do it, I don't know why the fuck we do it...I guess we're just egotistical white hipsters'.

The grandiose notion of wholly 'changing the world' is jettisoned in favour of emphasizing the practical involvement of an economically and racially marginal audience on a more equal level within street performance. The reference to 'white hipsters' was a sardonic reference to a commonplace derogatory accusation in the comments of online videos of Cart Department performances, intersecting with wry acknowledgement of the "anti-gentrifier's dilemma" (Gurr, 2017) discussed in chapter four. Indeed, every core member of The Cart Department, and many close collaborators, spoke with me about fears of their irreverent interventions inadvertently contributing to flows of racially inflected urban displacement. Acting against such accidental sanitization was sometimes expressed as part of the inspiration for the incorporation of grotesque elements within performances, such as Jamie and Cranberry's gory blood spurting and vomiting puppets, Kalan tugging carts full of bottles of 'the

¹³¹ This was a reference to a specific streetcorner in Bushwick, frequented by a large number of homeless, mainly African-American men with substance abuse problems, where Jamie, Kalan, and Cranberry had performed to reportedly large audiences prior to the commencement of my fieldwork. More recently the police had clamped down on the area, prompting the homeless population to disperse and the collective to stop performing there.

artist's urine' for sale through the streets, or Kevin's use of disfiguring masks made from parcel tape.

Kevin on another occasion referred to the 'white hipsters' denunciation as emblematic of a society so paralysed by racial prejudice that no act, no matter how obscure, could be perceived outwith a racialized lens -

“we make performances that break all the boxes of what people are expecting and then they see we've got lighter skin and they're like 'You fucking white hipsters!' without even thinking. They don't know I'm Puerto-Rican, they just want to put us into some kind of box that they can reject and feel like their making sense of a totally fucked up thing”.

When I asked Kevin if by 'totally fucked up thing' he meant the performance or society, he responded - “Both, you fucking white hipster!” That the norm in NYC was to interpret any given act in relation to race was acknowledged and mocked, Kevin later being careful to specify that he recognized that someone's perceived race had an enormous impact on their life in the USA but that this reality did not negate, in his opinion, the possibility of imagining a society beyond these 'boxes', which is something that absurd performance might offer when not disparagingly pigeonholed as, for example, a 'white hipster thing'. Herein, whilst the absurd performances of The Cart Department sought to obliquely undermine the baseless socio-political absurdity of racism, the artists nonetheless acknowledged the entrenched racialized power dynamics of US society, and their position within them and associated trends of gentrification, so as to transgress in a way that was more likely to offend the powerful than the powerless. My observations of such negotiation of foundationless-yet-forceful constructed matrices of domination even within more supra-tactical absurd performance informs the pragmatism within the model of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism outlined in chapter two.

In contrast, with activists in NYC I observed their tentativeness surrounding absurd performance to be exacerbated in relation to issues of racial injustice, the mere suggestion that absurd performance could be mobilized

regarding racism in the USA often appearing offensive to activists of all colours. One, white, member of Occupy ICE, to the nodding approval of a racially mixed group, responded when I asked if they had ever encountered the use of absurd performance within anti-racist activism in NYC -

“You do know what you’re talking about, right? Generations of slavery, rape, lynching, and all the micro-aggressions that back that up? You can’t just make some weird-ass performance about that”.

Regarding racial issues, then, I found even tactical absurd performance to be almost prohibited, an unwelcome departure from perceived obligatory sombreness in actions surrounding this theme. Given that Trump’s presidency is widely considered to be the most damaging government for people of colour in recent history, this may also partially explain the general sensitivity surrounding absurd performance I observed amongst NYC activists. Here no political issue was easily disentangled from the spectre of white supremacy and the solemn, unambiguous action that activists typically saw this necessitating. This appears profoundly entangled with the Trump administration’s brutal immigration enforcement detailed in chapter four. Anti-ICE campaigns, such as the Occupy ICE movement within which the above anecdote took place, were uniquely prominent within the NYC activist landscape during my fieldwork, foregrounding consideration of the racist persecution of those considered ‘other’ yet further. The insights of previous tactical performance literature are confirmed here that much activist absurd performance centrally seeks to maintain “balance” between irreverence and seriousness so as “to flip the tone of the performance at just the right time to make the point” (Bogad, 2016a: 132). I found such balance to often be deemed impossible in relation to charged issues such as racism, typically eliciting a more straightforwardly earnest selection from the ‘repertoire of contention’.

The possibility of picking absurd performance as an option from within this ‘repertoire’ appeared itself to vary according to the race of those making the selection. My observations here correlate with Bogad’s point that

race or class privileges lessen the risks and penalties of confrontation with the state...clowns of CIRCA wore white facepaint, but most were also white beneath the paint (2016a: 138).

Absurd transgressions, performed by darker skinned people, are popularly perceived as potentially holding greater risk of being interpreted as 'threatening' by authorities within a racially profiling, white supremacist 'carceral society' (Wacquant, 2001) as detailed in chapter four, thus carrying greater risk of arrest or worse. As such, where racial injustice was commonly seen in NYC as only to be touched by white activists with deferent reverence, ostensibly attempting to take their lead from more affected populations of colour, this 'lead' appeared often forced to follow more conventional options from the 'repertoire', such as marches and public memorials, partially as a consequence of feared greater oppression of absurd acts by browner people.

7. (Un)Safe(r) spaces and (lack of) faith in electoral politics: Trump, Macri, and the consequences of populist right-wing governments in Argentina and the USA

As detailed in chapter four, shortly preceding my fieldwork, populist, business-oriented, ultra-conservative presidencies were elected in both Argentina and the USA. The blow of these results for both activist and artist absurd performance practices across both fieldsites has been enormous. Many NYC activists expressed still being in a state of shock concerning Trump's ascension to power, sometimes attributing this to their current lack of enthusiasm for creating absurd performance. One member of Gays Against Guns reported to me -

'How can we have this monster who gloats about molesting women and calls all Mexicans rapists as our president? I think it's a bit harder for people to come out and do something fun and silly when that's the reality'.

Contrastingly, for NYC artists Trump was often taken as a further example of the obscene baselessness of power, firing their anti-hierarchical irreverence further.

This included largely indirectly political transgressions and occasional more direct mobilization of Trump himself as an absurd character, such as Kalan dressing as Trump and inviting people to beat him up or asking children to dress up as sharks¹³² and chase him around, or Crackhead Barney putting on a Trump mask and a nappy and rolling down the street smashing dolls. While distinct from the on-the-nose demands for impeachment preferred amongst activists, The Cart Department’s performances in relation to Trump offered more explicit, clear messaging than concerning perhaps any other topic, testifying to the weight of their rejection of Trump overwhelming usual tendencies for more oblique action.



Fig 7-7: Kalan during a ‘Beat up Trump’ performance.

In parallel, activists in BsAs were occasionally suspicious of the notion of absurd performance in relation to the gravity of the current political situation, yet remained more open to the possibility than NYC activists, in the words of Mariam: “*siempre y cuando sea contundente y bien anti-imperialista, es decir anti-macrista*” (so long as it is convincing and properly anti-imperialist, that’s to say anti-Macri). Meanwhile Etcétera, echoing The Cart Department, appeared to take Macri’s presidency as another oppressive step in an always ludicrous political system, similarly finding inspiration for indirect irreverence as well as

¹³² Donald Trump reportedly has an extreme phobia of sharks.

more directly parodying the president using masks of his face in numerous actions. For example, in such masks they held a welcoming ceremony for the WTO upon their arrival to BsAs in December 2017 with a banner, pointedly in English, reading ‘Welcome to Paradise’. This was a reference to the paradise papers scandal that had incriminated Macri, mock-joyfully suggesting Argentina as an ideal place to steal and embezzle from. In this way I observed the endemic corruption of Argentine politics, as detailed in chapter four and reaching a recent zenith with Macri, to fire both more direct, tactical and more indirect, supra-tactical absurd undercutting of the political charade of respectability.



Fig 7-8: Etcétera welcome the WTO to paradise.

As discussed in chapter four, in the wake of Trump’s election and associated ‘#MeToo Moment’, safe(r) spaces discourses have become more prominent within both activist and artist performance milieus in NYC. When asked if these guidelines were flexible with regards to performance, the

reaction of activists was generally to defensively reaffirm their sanctity. For example, the response of a group of Occupy ICE activists included one woman telling me - “There is never, ever any flexibility surrounding consent. Period.” - another later adding - “It’s simple - if you’re a racist or a homophobe, you’re not welcome here, I don’t care if someone wants to call it a performance”. On few occasions during my fieldwork did I encounter criticism within activist groups of such militant inflexibility. When I did come across such critique it was generally tempered with defeatist acceptance that defensive intransigence was currently an inevitable condition. For example, one activist with environmentalist and bicycling-rights network ‘Time’s Up’ commented to me -

“I don’t know if we’re doing the right thing on the left right now being so uptight about how everything should be done, when Trump, and the Proud Boys, and all those fascists are presenting themselves as the free, funny, anti-politically-correct guys...I think we’re playing into their hands but I also don’t see it changing any time soon”.

The omnipresence of safer spaces discourse amongst NYC activist networks thus appeared to me as another doorstep restricting absurd performance. Irreverent intervention here was often rejected as disruptive to attempts to firmly delineate what constitutes acceptable or ethical behaviour against a societal context characterized by recently emboldened bigotry.

I did not observe safer spaces rhetoric to be such a heavy presence within the performance art community of which The Cart Department formed part, though it had filtered in to the practice of some underground performance spaces. However, within a community centrally focused on creating boundary-pushing, controversial acts, the notion of imposing explicit boundaries was significantly more contentious. A particularly rich illustration of this tension came when, following a performance at The Glove where he lightly bit a member of the audience without their explicit permission, Kalan was banned from returning by the organizers of the space¹³³. This quickly became hot gossip within the NYC performance art scene, some expressing support for the stance

¹³³ It is noteworthy that this audience member did not protest, nor request that Kalan be banned from the space, this decision being taken independently by the organizers of The Glove.

of The Glove in eliminating ‘creepy’, ‘entitled’, and ‘abusive’ behaviour under the guise of art, whilst others wished to defend Kalan and the need for truly ‘open’, ‘free’, and ‘uninhibited’ spaces for the flourishing of avant-garde performance. The reaction from the core group of The Cart Department and regular collaborators was broadly of bemused dismay. Cranberry began referring to Kalan’s backyard where we often hung out and planned performances as a ‘dangerous space’, which caught on as a jocular definition of group activity - ‘Oh, we’re just here making a dangerous space!’ Later that week, Mrs. Kipling had organized a show at The Glove where Kalan had been due to perform, and Kevin suggested that we all attend wearing masks of Kalan’s face. When this plan was enacted, Jamie also selling a selection of ‘anti-Kalan badges’ of Kalan’s face with a red line through it like a no-smoking sign, the immediate reaction was minimal, some friends buying and wearing the badges, others, uninformed, asking what was going on. Later however, when supporters of The Glove’s decision heard of the intervention, it was subject to some online and in-person critique as “apologism for abuse”.

At the moment of writing, the ban against Kalan still stands. A refrain from those advocating the introduction of safer spaces policies into arts spaces that came to surround this incident was that “especially at this moment” it was important to be cautious surrounding acts that could be considered abusive. I heard these words - “especially at this moment” - repeatedly, underlining the connection drawn between the current Trump era, the interconnected ‘#MeToo Moment’, and an increased perceived need within performance communities to counteract potential abuse within their domain. This, while recognized as a valid concern within The Cart Department, was often seen as snowballing into overkill, the scripting of rigid regulations concerning acceptable performance content conflicting with the oblique antagonism of absurd attacks upon the dominant distribution of the sensible. Voicing disdain against this perceived restriction of avant-garde experimentation, Jamie and Cranberry opened a performance that I saw in numerous venues and street locations by shouting - “We’ve got a trigger warning, this show contains peanuts!” - before proceeding to eat a bag of peanuts through their masks. The idea that a performance was like a meal that could be classified in terms of allergens or ‘triggers’ was thus mocked, begging

the question of where such circumscription could lead, potentially declawing the capacity of absurd performance to shock, disturb or unsettle normativity in the name of protecting the audience short-term. The potential lack of capacity within safe(r) spaces discourses to differentiate between the heinousness of different offensive or abusive acts was then taken by many NYC artists to throw the baby out with the bathwater. For example, many voiced concern of the necessary reprimanding of severe abuse being taken to equate to the rejection of any physical contact without consent established following predefined procedures, delimiting performance possibilities in the process. To insist upon explicitly stated subscription to the pre-defined behavioral norms dictated by a given safe(r) spaces policy was then often seen as outruling the ambiguity of absurd performance, casting oblique acts as at best out-of-touch and at worst complicit in abuse.

An equivalent tightening of subcultural regulation was not evident in reaction to Macri's government during my fieldwork in BsAs, although on a few occasions research co-performers linked the growing feminist *Ni Una Menos* movement to a rejection of the misogynist culture that Macri represented. The common derogatory title of *Macri Gato* (Macri Cat), after all, refers, in part, to the president's purported history as a disrespectful womanizer - *gato* as slang for a treacherous man. In line with this current, within ETP a 'masculinities' working group had been established for male-identifying activists to attempt to collectively deconstruct any internalized patriarchal tendencies, or, in the words of one participant - "*para que no seamos gatos izquierdistas*" (so that we are not leftists cats). However, these activities did not seem considered to place further restraint upon potential absurd performance. Meanwhile, Argentine cultural norms of regular not explicitly consented touching throughout social interaction, commonly mirrored within performance, appeared unaffected and broadly unquestioned, this limit upon absurd performance possibilities appearing squarely as a product of the NYC cultural context.

A greater influence of the Macri neoliberal regime upon absurd performance practice was the situation of hyper-inflation and increasing

unemployment and hunger facing people across Argentina. This was referred to by numerous research co-performers as the '*macrisis*' in direct echo of the crisis of 2001, many predicting an impending repeat, as discussed in chapter four. For both artists and activists in BsAs this appeared at times to closedown possibilities of absurd performance as the policies of an elitist government causing ever-increasing numbers to go hungry was seen as necessitating more traditionally 'serious' intervention. However, simultaneously, the sensation of '*otra vez sopa*' (soup, again - an Argentine colloquial equivalent to 'same shit, different day') at times bred exasperated humour, maintaining open some consideration of absurd performance. Indeed, for many of my research co-performers it was 'soup, again' quite literally - some members of ETP participating in the reanimation of street kitchens that had operated during the previous economic crisis, while Etcétera reminisced over the sustained relevance of an intervention from 2003 wherein they had served plates of '*arte-alimento*' (art-nourishment) comprised of a diversity of objects extracted by ladle from a huge saucepan in the streets. Meanwhile, following a show at *Teatro Popular La Otra Cosa*, Martina introduced me to friends as '*nuestro amigo inglés que está haciendo una investigación del absurdo en Buenos Aires*' (our English friend who is doing an investigation of the absurd in Buenos Aires), to which one responded

"Ay, pero debería ser muy fácil, no? Sería más difícil encontrar cosas que no sean absurdas en Argentina, aún más ahora" (Oh but that must be very easy, no? It would be more difficult to find things that are not absurd in Argentina, especially now).

This was representative of a common self-deprecating joke that Argentina, or at least the current Argentine political climate, in itself, was senseless, often allowing consideration of absurd performance even as the political situation grew more desperate.

I found faith in the conventional political system to be far lower amongst activists in BsAs than NYC. As aforementioned, during US midterm elections, I observed most NYC activists to be pragmatically pushing Democratic Party candidates, resisting Trump by injecting more energy into electoral canvassing, broadly seen as more tactically effective than absurd performance. However, in

BsAs such activity was more often eyed with suspicion, seen as gullibly participating in an irrecoverably corrupt system, Macri simply as the latest chief manipulator and executor of relentless state violence, both structural and direct. *Movimiento Popular La Dignidad*, in partnership with other grassroots social movements, did launch an opposition party - *'Izquierda Popular'* (Left of the People) - during my fieldwork, yet this was met by distrust by many within ETP. Jesús, speaking of how he had witnessed political candidates across the spectrum directly buy votes and participation in their rallies from residents of the shantytown where he grew up, often with ever-decreasing amounts of cash or food, told me -

'una persona vale más que dos pesos...eso de tener un candidato en las elecciones no me interesa para nada...tampoco vamos a poder encontrar una solución política a través del teatro, pero por lo menos sí podemos reaccionar a la falta de una solución total...y a veces algo absurdo nos ayuda hacer esto' (A person is worth more than two pesos...having a candidate in the elections doesn't interest me at all...we will not be able to find a political solution through theatre either, but at least we can react to the lack of a total solution...and sometimes something absurd helps us do that).

Representative of opinions voiced by numerous other members of ETP, a lack of faith in electoral politics and singular political solutions here directly motivated a turn to, occasionally absurd, performance, in contrast to NYC activists who remained more invested in an electoral system oft believed to still maintain integrity.

However, this conviction was not so widely shared by NYC artists, JME telling me on voting day of the US midterms - "I could vote but I prefer to do something actually productive with my day and masturbate". Cranberry and Jamie in turn showed me photos of their street intervention on the day of the 2016 presidential election, both sat in full black outfits and balaclavas behind a table stacked high with bricks beneath a hand-painted sign reading 'Bricks - \$1'. Thus while NYC activists often doubted the utility of absurd performance, for The Cart Department the canvassing work of activists was a waste of time and,

in the honest words of Mrs. Kipling, “fucking boring”, investing in a tedious system that was seen as incapable of providing the kind of radical change they desired. This may be seen to further account for the greater gap between activist and artist practices of absurd performance in NYC detailed in chapter six. Meanwhile shared dubiousness concerning direct involvement with Argentine electoral politics united the more similar absurd performance practices of Etcétera and ETP. Etcétera mocked corruption within Argentine politics recently in their erroristic intervention during the commemorative 24 March demonstrations in 2019. Here, in a variety of masks including of Macri and Trump, and in reference to Juan Guaidó’s Trump and Macri-supported self-proclamation as president of Venezuela in January 2019, they took a cardboard podium to the streets and invited members of the public to declare themselves president of Argentina and give a wildly cheered speech. With reference to the above-detailed controversy of the errorcopter, the group published the following statement on the *Internacional Errorista* Facebook page:

“En 2017 nos dijeron golpistas. 2019 la Internacional Errorista se proclama democrática y lanza su movimiento de presidentes autoproclamados” (In 2017 they called us wagers of a coup. In 2019 the International Errorists proclaim themselves to be democratic and launch their movement of self-proclaimed presidents).

As Argentina’s economic situation remains precarious, Etcétera consistently assert in the face of oppressive power the necessity of irreverence and, intrinsically wrapped up with this, their definition of art. Returning to the concept briefly mentioned above of ‘*arte-alimento*’ (art-nourishment), amidst a returning situation of increased hunger for the Argentine poor, Etcétera maintain in their autobiographic text:

la importancia equitativa entre alimenatción física y espiritual...El cuerpo social necesita el arte-alimento saludable y orgánico para subsistir. En tiempos donde el hambre reina y el arte-alimento transgénico domina la producción mundial, es nuestra tarea crear una nueva alimentación (2017: 204/5) (the equivalent importance of physical and spiritual nutrition...the social body needs healthy and organic art-nourishment to

subsist. In times where hunger reigns and transgenic art-nourishment dominates global production, it is our job to create a new diet).

That is, in the face of political trauma and physical hunger, art and cultural expression does not become less significant, rather the feeding of the 'spirit' must accompany that of the stomach. In this way Etcétera have been motivated to create avant-garde, often absurd performance throughout varied episodes of political turmoil, even taking inspiration from and directly referencing such events in a consistently irreverent manner. This irreverence may be taken as a key manner in which dominant 'transgenic art-nourishment' - that is conventional, serious, artificially constrained cultural expression, like uniformly straight and orange carrots - may be undone and a new, more diverse 'diet' of knobbly, crooked, unwieldy crops/performances may be proffered that declaim all baseless hierarchies that suggest a vegetable, performance, or person ought to conform. The consequences of Macri's administration, for Etcétera, appeared to deepen this argument, firing commitment to producing transgressive performances as resistance to all monoculture, as expressed in the collective's ongoing project *El Museo de Neo-Extractivismo* (The Museum of Neo-Extractivism). Here Etcétera offer tours of different iterations of this 'imaginary museum', often in costume as human-sized genetically modified corn cobs, lampooning the greenwashing exhibits encountered at the headquarters of neo-colonial, neo-extractivist companies such as Monsanto and lambasting normalized government support of such corporations.



Fig 7-9: Fede and Loreto presenting The Museum of Neo-Extractivism.

8. Making the most of summer: Contextually inflected interpersonal motivations for absurd performance

Beyond the divergent socio-political histories and (sub)cultural norms differently influencing absurd performance practices in BsAs and NYC documented above, I observed multiple interpersonal motivations shared across fieldsites. These included drives to have fun, form part of an affective group and nourish friendship and romantic bonds around shared practice and interests, follow the example of a charismatic and/or respected leader, open opportunities to meet new people, reinforce aspects of self-perception for example as a 'wild' or 'politically-active' person, and express and overcome personal trauma. These motivations were also, of course, inflected in their expression by their surrounding context, such as the more sexualized, queer collective identity of the NYC performance art scene permitting more overtly flirty performance intentions or the stronger cultural emphasis upon

'*compañerismo*' (comradeliness) amongst BsAs activists meaning that displaying solidarity was a more commonly emphasized consideration. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, these drives were shared across fieldsites, many at root in common with much other collective human activity. Absurd performance in this social respect, for all its transgression and courting of controversy, is shown by my ethnography to be not so distinct from, say, pigeon fancying (Jerolmack, 2013) or boxing (Wacquant, 2004), if underpinned by distinct contextually contingent socio-political ideologies as outlaid above.

All my groups of research co-performers were also close friendship groups, their performance practice inseparable from their emotional bonds. Romantic unions were also present within all the collectives of my fieldwork, Fede and Loreto and Cranberry and Jamie serving as prime examples. Meanwhile shorter-term lovers of core members of each collective flowed in and out of performance participation throughout my fieldwork, both longer and shorter term involvement in absurd performance often buttressed by romantic and sexual ties. Where Shepard notes that "sometimes attraction to a specific person can be an important part of the passion to build a better world for everyone" (2011: 264), I would add that this plays in to the pursuit of a stranger world too.

Members of the ETP regularly referred to their collective as "*una familia italiana*" (an Italian family) in reference to the extended group comprising a multitude of relationships from romantic love to in-law style antagonism yet characterized overall by reciprocal care. In turn, if a member of the group had committed to participating in an activity yet did not follow through, this was routinely criticized as "*una falta de respeto a tus compas*" (a lack of respect to your comrades), if, ultimately, generally quickly appearing forgotten and forgiven. Still, this sense of quasi-familial obligation did sometimes appear to drive participation in absurd performances planned by others, even if an individual was not personally wholly invested. Ceci summarized this view, saying

'No estamos igualmente emocionados por cada propuesta, pero nos apoyamos con todo y así aprendemos. Si vos querés hacer algo absurdo, dale, vamos, y si yo quiero experimentar con algo más realista me ayudás

también' (We're not equally excited by each proposal, but we support each other and in this way we learn. If you want to do something absurd, okay, let's go, and if I want to try something more realist you help me too).

This solidaristic drive for participating in absurd performance was less prominent in NYC, activists there appearing more likely to dismiss such a suggestion for not towing the currently dominant line of expected sobriety, still occasionally referring to their networks as a 'family' yet seemingly one seeking greater uniformity and less supportive of innovation.

Etcétera was formed by a group of friends in the nineties, in its current expression circling around a romantic couple that grew out of the initial collective. When they write that "*errorismo es la llave del juego del amor*" (errorism is the key to the game of love) (2017: 271), it is not then solely an ambiguous phrase of avant-garde rhetoric, but also a recognition of the central role of loving relationships in the existence of the collective. In the case of Etcétera such emotional relationships have also led to conflict and the separation of some former members of the group, yet without such volatile bonds in the first place it seems unlikely that many performances would have come to fruition, Fede informing me -

'en el principio de Etcétera peleamos mucho, muy fuerte, hasta sacar sangre, pero con mucho amor también, con celos creativos, pero siempre creativos...no había otra manera con un grupo de artistas narcisistas' (at the start of Etcétera we fought a lot, very hard, until we drew blood, but with much love too, with creative jealousies, but always creative ones...there was no other way with a group of narcissistic artists).

Amongst The Cart Department, in comparison, intergroup conflict was rare, all core group members and oftentimes multiple wider collaborators typically invited freely to participate in the idea of a given member but without a strong sense of obligation to do so nor prominent jealousies surrounding others'

work¹³⁴. Despite little evidence of these drives that I observed amongst other performance networks, participation in each other's projects within The Cart Department was high, seemingly bred more directly from shared interest and enthusiasm. Much of the spare time of the core members of The Cart Department was spent hanging out with each other, thus when inspiration hit one member of the group it could more easily trigger excitement amongst the others. The support of this friendship group cum creative partnership was thus more spontaneous rather than regimented as in the above activist cases, interventions occasionally occurring within an hour of an idea whereas activists preferred to plan and enlist the agreed help of others with more anticipation.

Devotion and camaraderie overlaps with influences of charismatic leadership, the suggestions of some more enigmatic individuals typically attracting greater enthusiasm. This often appeared to self-perpetuate over time as a charismatic individual's magnetism became reified by their wider community as a central character trait, reinforcing informal hierarchies of influence. For example, the dominance of Fede and Loreto within Etcétera was only sustainable because the other members of the collective were willing to preserve this dynamic, appearing persuaded to do so by the perceived charm of this couple and associated reputation as superlative long-term creators of disruptive performance. Jérémy and Cecilia, reminiscing over past actions during an *Errasmus Mundus* (no)work(no)shop expressed this, Cecilia stating "*Loreto y Fede son genios, hacer una acción con ellos es...*" (Loreto and Fede are geniuses, to make an action with them is...), followed by a long pause involving elaborate hand waving by both Cecilia and Jérémy until Jérémy concluded with laughter - "*eso, una acción errorista*" (This, an errorist action). Cecilia added "*Sí, hay que vivirla para entenderla...y tampoco...*" (Yes, you have to live it to understand it...and even then...) to which Jérémy responded with the mock rhetorical question - "*¿Qué hicimos?*" (What did we do?).

¹³⁴ This may be seen as a reflection of the different (un)professional positionality of The Cart Department in comparison to Etcétera, wherein the relatively equally invested NYC artists did not have to navigate the potentially divisive hierarchies between profit-reaping 'founding' members and supporting artists that characterized Etcétera.

Meanwhile, although the core group of The Cart Department operated without significant hierarchical tensions, it was notable that Kalan possessed the capacity to generally recruit larger numbers of wider collaborators, being better-known having maintained a consistent street and gallery performance presence in NYC during almost ten years and having been involved in numerous scandals such as the biting controversy detailed above. Indeed, both Jamie and I were mistaken on numerous occasions for Kalan whilst in costume, though I never observed this happen in reverse. This notoriety came at a cost, Kalan being banned from numerous venues and maligned by some members of the performance art community¹³⁵, yet still appeared to render him a more broadly influential figure, typically piquing the interest of a greater number of potential collaborators eager to get closer to this controversial enigma. This even became a joke within the collective, Cranberry referring to it as “a cult of personality”, the occasional participation of some more peripheral figures within absurd interventions recognized as resulting from Kalan’s charismatic leadership.

In contrast, amongst activists in NYC, scandal worked against an individual’s typical influence, charisma perhaps less important than command of respect. As summarized by one member of MACC, it seemed that those with more “woke points” - that is towing the most politically correct line - typically held more influential positions prescribing what actions would take place. As aforementioned, the ‘wokeness’ of absurd performance was often considered ambiguous, more powerful and respected members of activist groups appearing more prone to deride absurd performance in this moment than propagate it. Amongst the ETP, too, prevailing power structures relied more upon respect than charisma. A clear semi-formal, semi-flexible leadership structure, itself sitting below the formal leadership structure of MPLD, existed in ETP’s imitation of a school, as detailed in chapter one. A suggestion, or rejection for that matter, of an absurd action made by a *profe* or *egresado* then appeared generally more likely to receive more support. For example, the above night of the museums action and its controlled transgression was planned exclusively by

¹³⁵ When at the outset of my fieldwork in NYC Kalan gave a me a list of people he thought it would be helpful to contact in relation to my research, it came with a chain of disclaimers about certain individuals such as “They’re great, you should one hundred percent talk to them, but don’t tell them you know me because they hate me”.

egresados under the supervision of some *profes*. When during rehearsal the proposal emerged from some *primeros* and *segundos* to alter the plan, Martina for example suggesting “*algo más extraño, más inquietante*” (something stranger, more disturbing), Mercedes, one of the *egresados*, responded with a plea to the crowd -

“No es el momento de este cantidad de dudas, disculpen que sea así pero en el momento lo resolvemos. Ahora arranquemos” (It is not the moment for so much doubt, I’m sorry it’s this way but in the moment we will resolve it. Right now let’s get started).

This rejection was essentially respected, rehearsal recommencing shortly afterwards with no further discussion of making the intervention stranger. Meanwhile, in contrast to the more totalizing rejection of absurd performance by activists in NYC, absurd acts with lesser participation could still be incited by any member of ETP, as the ‘workshops of the absurd’ that I facilitated with five other members exemplify.

Surrounding the reinforcement of certain aspects of self-perception through absurd performance, this varied from individual to individual, if with a certain tendency for artists to emphasize the ‘wildness’ or ‘avant-gardeness’ of their acts and activists to underline their ‘righteousness’ and ‘defiantness’. In a particularly stark example of self-prescription as ‘crazy’ artists, when a passerby approached JME while he was busking to ask why he was swinging a rat puppet in circles on a length of twine, JME responded - “I guess because I’m one of the only people crazy enough to do it”. On another occasion, following a street performance that involved Jamie foaming at the mouth and writhing on the pavement while Cranberry shouted that she needed a new roommate “because I just lost one”, and which resulted in the arrival of two police cars and an ambulance, Jamie commented - “Well, I guess that was the best performance of the night”, emanating pride in the disturbance caused.

Etcétera, too, emphasized their identities as provocateurs through absurd performance, as their continual revelling in the scandal of the errorcopter

illustrates. In contrast, members of ETP more typically framed their absurd interventions as serving, as in their slogan during the night of the museums, ‘*una lucha que no cesa*’ (a fight that doesn’t give up), generating defiant *alegría rebelde*. This central concept to their production of absurd performance in itself facilitates self-perception as joyous, rebellious individuals. However, I draw these divisions between artists and activist self-perceptions in relation to absurd intervention faintly, noting how activists occasionally relished the ‘madness’ of their acts such as one former rebel clown in NYC telling me of the ‘crazy thrill’ of teasing police officers. Meanwhile members of artist collectives sometimes spoke of their participation in vaguely militant terms such as Jérémy telling me of his performances with Etcétera -

“hago errorismo como militante, y ahí me conviene un poquito de pragmatismo cínico...nunca me gustó la militancia total, entonces cuando errorismo me llama hacer dos cosas por año, hago dos cosas militantes y me quedo bien, todo el mundo me quiere y yo en realidad me cuesta muy poco, por eso digo que es cínico porque es un cálculo un poco así” (I do errorism as a militant, and here I’m helped by a little cynical pragmatism...I never liked total militancy, so when errorism calls me to do two things a year, I do two militant things a year and I’m alright, everyone loves me and in reality it costs me very little, that’s why I say it’s cynical because it is a calculation a little bit like that).

Processing personal trauma as a drive for absurd performance appeared in my observations to vary drastically dependent upon the personal experience of each individual artist or activist, sometimes overlapping considerably with the collective traumas outlined above and sometimes less so. Cranberry and Jamie, for example, now vehemently ‘straight-edge’¹³⁶, previously had serious substance abuse problems that I observed them channel into some of their performances such as a father who gives his son, both in grotesque foam masks, meticulous, deadpan instructions on how to prepare a crack pipe. In such performances the relatively isolated suffering of drug addiction appeared attempted to be processed and bypassed through absurd presentation, the

¹³⁶ ‘Straight-edge’ is an often overtly politicized term for teetotalism stemming from the US punk movement (Haenfler, 2004).

intricacy of the crack pipe instructions becoming increasingly tragicomic with each step. In other cases a cause of suffering was more shared, but still translated uniquely in its emotional resonance for each artist or activist. For example, numerous fieldwork co-performers in BsAs spoke about their personal experiences of losing relatives or being displaced during the dictatorship years, each individual experience within this collective ordeal carrying its own singular emotional weight, some speaking of being driven towards the absurd by the senselessness they perceived within their own suffering, others pushed oppositely towards more earnest reproach and sombre reflection.

Personal trauma thus played an omnipresent, yet entirely ungeneralisable, role in driving artists and activists towards or away from absurd performance. One research co-performer who asked not to be identified in relation to this information spoke with me about how an experience of rape and thwarted attempt to prosecute their abuser had eroded their hope in direct action and driven them towards absurd acts as an indirect attack on the system of supposed 'sense' that they saw as ultimately supporting the already powerful, such as their rapist. Taking an autoethnographic step back, I partially trace my own fascination with the absurd as both performer and researcher to my history of severe childhood illness. Between the ages of six and sixteen I suffered from Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (M.E./C.F.S.), with wide-ranging symptoms including extreme fatigue, widespread muscle pain, and light sensitivity and confined to a wheelchair for all but the shortest of journeys during several years. I still remember, as a child of around eight years, asking myself why this had happened to me, being entirely unable to encounter a justification, and concluding that there was no reason for anything. This was a realization of the existential absurd that remains with me, and that further illustrates the potential of personal trauma, alongside socio-political context, to motivate and influence absurd performance.

Reflecting on mortality, JME told me, semi-literally and semi-metaphorically, that, all other more profound motivations aside, he was also driven to make absurd performance so as to "make the most of summer" - that

is, to capitalize upon a temporary window of time and coming-together of like-minded creators before, like summer and like life, it inevitably faded. I too, then, following the rich examples of my research co-performers, have attempted to 'make the most of summer' within this project. With this spirit I have tried to learn how(not) and why(not) absurd performance was(not) created across the shifting seasons of BsAs and NYC during my fieldwork. I hope to preserve and interpret these moments within this ethnography, in so doing opening the door for broader practices and investigations of absurd performance beyond current restrictive frames of tacticality within other transgressive seasons to come.

9. Chapter conclusion

My central intentions with this chapter have been twofold. Firstly, to illustrate the intricate sculptural influences of multiple contextual factors upon my observations of different activist and artist practices of absurd performance in BsAs and NYC. Secondly, to use this very illustration to demonstrate that suggestions within the tactical performance literature of an identifiable, universal, and cross-culturally teachable 'best practice' of absurd performance may be problematized by comparative ethnographic work such as my own. In place of the current dominant mantra of exportable trainings and toolboxes of optimum political absurd performance practice based on the findings of US-centric research, I assert the need to pay close attention to the unique political histories and actualities that mould absurd performance possibilities in any given (sub)cultural context. Indeed, as stated in chapter three, it was precisely to be able to draw this kind of contrast that I elected to conduct a comparative ethnography, Bourdieu's (2010) aforementioned promise of the comparative method avoiding the unjustifiable universalization of a single case ringing true. Here I provide an example of how Performance Studies may integrate comparative ethnography to produce more nuanced investigations of multiple performance realities. Thus I contribute a further methodological arm to the aforementioned growing flow of Performance Studies research (McKenzie, 2006; McKenzie, Roms, and Wee, 2010) seeking to undo previous disciplinary

tendencies towards ethnocentric universalization such as that which I critique as having characterized recent assessment of political absurd performance.

As explicated in chapter two, multiple attempts have been made in recent literature to catalogue political absurd performance, often via the application of selected concepts from more structural branches of Social Movement Studies. For example, Bogad (2016a) and Shepard (2011) exemplify the trend to frame absurd performance as an innovation complementing the existing 'repertoire of contention' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007). This resonates through numerous mobilizations of the dichotomy proposed by Curtis and Zurcher (1974) between 'expressive' and 'instrumental' actions (Smucker, Russell, and Malitz, 2012; Smucker, 2014; Halcli, 1999), suggesting that the latter, more rational and tactical mode must trump the former, auxiliary form of intervention. Others have attempted new taxonomies, such as Duncombe's (2016) attempted exhaustive list of fourteen potential aims for activist art with absurd performance apparently accounted for alongside all other potential politically motivated creative acts. My comparative ethnography suggests that such structuralist exercises attempt to apply universalizing logics upon a host of profoundly culturally variegated practices of absurd performance. Much of this literature extrapolates from activist case studies from 00s NYC (Shepard, 2011; Bogad, 2016a; Kauffman, 2017; Boyd and Mitchell, 2013) that already do not correspond fully with the contemporary reality of NYC observed during my fieldwork, let alone with the comparative case of BsAs. A primary indication of my research then is that attempts to establish universal rules governing absurd performance ought to be abandoned in favour of recognition of inevitable historical and cultural variations in absurd performance practice between different places at different times.

The studies that inform the tactical performance literature here become valuable as rich snapshots of the performance realities that informed them, not as indicators of universal trends. I would frame my research in the same way, as an irreplaceable snapshot of the performance communities with which I worked, yet in contrast to much previous scholarship on this topic I take the step to

acknowledge this positionality rather than feign universalistic relevance. What I do proffer, as illustrated throughout data analysis, is the co-existence of multiple contextually contingent (supra)tactical absurd performance practices ranging in ever-shifting positions upon the continuum between the ideal types of tactical and supra-tactical performance. In this chapter I have endeavoured to show how the different socio-political contexts of BsAs and NYC may be seen to have pushed comparative sets of research co-performers towards occupying different general positions upon this spectrum.

Relating the findings reported in this chapter back to the conceptual framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism that they inform, as outlined in chapter two, the revelation of the profound contextual contingency of (supra)tactical absurd performance practices in different locations informs the necessary pragmatism of this theory. Combining the insights of Camus' (1942/2013) absurdist philosophy and Goffman's (1964) symbolic interactionism with the (sub)cultural relativity of absurd performance practice illustrated by my ethnography, we may assert that, while all beings in all places are ultimately equally meaningless within a shared condition of existential absurdity, the way in which interactionally co-constructed meanings are (un)made, the major historical events or pre-established cultural norms in relation to which they are (un)made, and thus what eventually constitutes such '(non)meanings', all continue to vary between different (sub)cultural contexts. Therefore, while, following Foucault, we cannot escape the "omnipresence of power" (1978: 93), neither can we escape the variety of cultural systems which produce different power/knowledge hierarchies. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly recognizing this, my research co-performers in BsAs and NYC adjusted their absurd performance practice according to their respective surrounding cultural norms, even as they reflected within such actions upon the ultimate meaninglessness and relativity of such norms. Here, for example, Etcétera were careful to frame their actions as connected to an essence of '*latinidad*' or '*argentinidad*' at the same time as they rejected reified notions of correct cultural comportment, whilst The Cart Department, renouncing the ultimate symbolic significance of such dichotomization, still cautiously operated in relation to the divisions of the US culture wars.

This adds further nuance to the anthropologist Michael Brown's notion of "relativism within reason" (2008: 371) wherein an embrace of cultural relativity as a theoretical heuristic does not equate to the denial of the actual persistence and validity of cultural variations that typically operate as if they were based in non-relative, fundamental 'sense'. The many different ways of being and understanding being on this earth thus persist despite their shared foundationlessness, or, indeed, perhaps sometimes because of it, such as the 'leaps of faith' in flight from consideration of ultimate nothingness emblemized by Kierkegaard (1844/2015), as detailed in chapter two. Thus, no matter how roughly we pull the rug out from under cultural constructions of meaning and power, whilst they may shift, they do not tumble. Any rug-pulling, then, must pragmatically negotiate its practice in relation to the surrounding normative frameworks it seeks to undercut, which is precisely what the contextual contingency of absurd performance documented by my ethnography illustrates.

Nietzsche's 'madman' was apparently stigmatized as such for declaring the death of God "too early" since "deeds, though done, still require time to be seen or heard" (1882/2001: 182). However, my research may be seen to suggest that the exaggerated transgression of the 'madman' breaking his lantern in the marketplace, paralleled by the contextually contingent absurd performances documented throughout this comparative ethnography, appear stuck in a perennial state of too-earliness, forever immersed in intransigent cultural webs of constructed meaning that they critique yet that regardless still surround them. The declaration of the death of God, that is the death of all metanarratives and notions of absolute meaning upon which a stable distribution of the sensible may be based, thus appears ever-ongoing and destined to fall on ears conditioned to ignore it in different ways. This chapter illustrates how these different forms of cultural conditioning influence the manner in which a counter-hegemonic absurd performance may be made in a given context. This indication that contemporary absurd performances inspired to explore our ultimate equality within fundamental meaninglessness still vary in accordance with the different influences of surrounding dominant matrices of constructed power/knowledge

allows us to consider how such actions, in and of themselves, may be considered as evidence of the continual paradoxical self-undoing of many deconstructive or counterhegemonic projects. My research thus adds empirical weight to Derrida's claim that -

borrowing from the old structure all the strategic and economic resources of subversion, borrowing them structurally...the enterprise of deconstruction is always in a certain way defeated by its own work (Derrida, 1967/2016: 25).

The varied contextually-specific major influences upon absurd performance practice in BsAs and NYC documented in this chapter thus suggest that attacks upon a given distribution of the sensible are not immune to the influence of that same distribution of the sensible, but rather remain pervaded by it. This is not to say that a reconfiguration, or even some destruction, of the sensible is unimaginable, but rather that any performance that attempts to break free from a normative framework of power/knowledge does so from a position inescapably initially ensconced within this critiqued matrix of domination. It is thus that I observed The Cart Department to remain hypersensitive to the racial implications of their absurd performances that, whilst fired by a philosophy that rejected all baselessly constructed hierarchy, still took place within a society they knew to be characterized by racialized inequalities and wherein their groundless-yet-existent light-skinned privileges enabled their transgression. Similarly, whilst Etcétera extolled the liberating force of 'error' and exhorted the wayward crossing into new realms of being beyond dichotomized notions of 'correctness' and 'incorrectness' within their absurd performances, they still knew and personally felt the weight of collective memory of the dictatorship in Argentina and acted in accordance with conventional subcultural expectations of respect and contribution to the direct anti-fascist resistance seen to represent the fallen. By documenting such divergent influences upon absurd performance practices within my comparative fieldsites, I hope to have begun to undo tendencies towards ethnocentrism in the existing literature on this topic and opened the doorway for many future investigations of contextually contingent (supra)tactical practices of absurd performance elsewhere.

Chapter Eight - Conclusion

As I conclude this thesis, I would like to reiterate the central research questions that have guided it and which have been bouncing relentlessly within my head throughout all the (not)happenings documented above and subsequent processes of fieldnote writing, data coding and analysis, and finally the inscription of this text. These questions, that have dictated the past four years of my life, and promise to fire much more research and practice into the future, are as follows:

1) Why do activists and socially-committed artists engage in absurd performance?

2) What differentiates artist and activist absurd performance practice?

3) How are both modes of absurd performance impacted by socio-political context?

This thesis shows that perspectives concerning how or whether we can or should answer this first question - 'Why?' - differ depending on who we ask. For NYC activists throughout my observations, addressing this question was often considered key to the practice of absurd performance at all. An absurd act here typically needed to be able to justify its contribution to the pursuit of a political end or be rejected. My findings in this sense largely correlate with those of the currently dominant tactical performance corpus of literature exemplified by Bogad (2016a), Shepard (2011), and Duncombe (2016), itself largely based upon research with activist collectives in NYC. Here NYC activists mostly created exaggeratedly transgressive performance with the express intention to reconfigure the sensible in a certain, pre-planned manner. However, by expanding the purview of study to include consideration of socially committed

artists and the comparative fieldsite of BsAs, I have developed upon the tactical performance literature in two significant interconnected ways.

Firstly, I demonstrate how a tactical orientation of political absurd performance, previously widely presented as a universal explanation, rather only accounts for a partial section of politically driven exaggeratedly transgressive acts. Here I identify a gap in the tactical performance literature that has broadly failed to consider the possibility of absurd performance that seeks to surpass and undermine hegemonic expectations of means-end rationality as an important political act in itself. I fill this opening by counterpoising the established tactical absurd performance paradigm against a comparative ideal type of supra-tactical absurd performance and defining and ethnographically evidencing a spectrum of actual (supra)tactical absurd performance practices running between them.

Secondly, I show how where the absurd performance practice of a given set of activists or socially committed artists is observed to fall upon this spectrum is crucially determined by surrounding (sub)cultural norms and local political concerns. Here I critique the ethnocentrism of the tactical performance literature making generalizations based upon research disproportionately focused upon US activist case studies. In contrast, my comparative ethnographic work displays how, for example, prominent histories of dictatorship and economic collapse or cultural tensions surrounding notions of *latinidad* and *europiedad* mould absurd performance in BsAs in a unique fashion. Thus I problematize previous drives to define exportable, one-size-fits-all 'best practices' of political absurd performance without attention to the distinctive characteristics of each intervention locale.

A definitive answer to my first research question, then, is not forthcoming, nor could it ever be. Rather, what my ethnography illustrates is that previous attempts to frame tacticality as such a definite answer, drawn from research largely limited to US activist cases studies, have been under-informed and subsequently mislead. In place of this paradigm I proffer that my comparative

ethnographic data shows how activist and socially-committed artist absurd performance practices occupy shifting positions upon a spectrum of contextually contingent (supra)tactical possibilities. I have theorized this new, flexible model - alongside other key conceptual contributions such as the interconnected theoretical framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism - as a result of consistent, synergistic interweaving of reflection upon existing literature, autoethnographic experimentation, and grounded theory devising of conceptual categories from my ethnographic data, as outlined in chapters two and three. Here, for example, the framing of this proposed spectrum of political absurd performance possibilities in relation to orientations towards tacticality is informed both by the central concentration upon notions of tactics within the dominant existing literature on this topic - *and* - my own observations of calculated tactical considerations of absurd performance in the field, especially amongst activists, as detailed in the first half of chapter six. Meanwhile my drive to expand upon previous accounts of rational calculation as an all-encompassing explanation for political absurd performance stems both from theoretical consideration of the potential political resonance of (ir)rational, supersensible transgression to undermine reified distributions of the sensible and associated power/knowledge hierarchies - *and* - my ethnographic documentation of absurd performances motivated by more oblique counterhegemonic possibilities, especially amongst artists, as detailed in the second half of chapter six.

Within this milieu of influences upon my conceptual work, I have attempted to give precedence to insights coming from my ethnographic data as the nucleus of original material around which this thesis circulates, whilst recognizing that this is always intertwined with my engagement with pre-existing philosophical currents as detailed in chapter two. For example, the windows for experimentation with absurd performance with political intent yet without direct aims observed to be variously opened by the contextually specific concepts of *alegría rebelde* and *autogestión* within ETP were a major influence upon my foregrounding of a critique of the ethnocentric use of inflexible tacticality as a universal explanation for activist absurd performance. Meanwhile, the valorization of 'error' amongst Etcétera and innovation of the deliberately ambiguous practice of performance (c)art by The Cart Department both

exemplified different ways in which socially committed artists might attempt to forego hegemonic expectations of defining a purpose for their exaggeratedly transgressive acts. Such observations centrally inspired my conceptualization of more supra-tactical absurd performance that may reach beyond frames of obligatory positivism and potentially corrode dominant regimes of truth and power/knowledge.

The simultaneously ethnographically and philosophically informed theoretical implications of this thesis may be seen to break new ground within my area of study. Through the documentation and analysis of more supra-tactical absurd performance as a politically motivated (in)direct action, conventional notions of what constitutes 'the political' that have informed recent assessments of political absurd performance are drawn into question. The necessity of a rational goal orientation that undergirds the notion of a repertoire of contention (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007), often reductively borrowed within the tactical performance literature without attention to existing critiques within Social Movement Studies (Melucci, 1996; Eyerman and Jamison, 2003), is problematized by my assessment of the oblique political drives of more supra-tactical absurd performances. I thus contribute to widening the scope of what kinds of performance may be considered and researched as political acts. This is reflected in my blending of absurdist metaphysical philosophy, anarchist political philosophy, and a Foucauldian post-structuralist conceptualization of omnipresent power/knowledge, alongside continual reflection upon my (auto)ethnographic observations, to innovate the new conceptual framework of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism. In this theoretical exposition, and ongoing autoethnographic experiments with Howling Spoon in pragmatic absurdo-anarchist praxis, I signal how the classical pursuit of the anarchist imperative to resist all hierarchy in a carefully calculated manner only represents one potential approach. Here my research brings to light the alternative option of exaggeratedly transgressive counter-normative acts to undermine the dominant rationalistic distribution(s) of the sensible upon whose illusory foundation(s) hegemonic structures of power/knowledge are constructed.

Within the broadened melange of (supra)tactical absurd performance possibilities that this thesis identifies, I have attempted to tentatively identify (un)professional tendencies in order to answer my second research question. Here, as chapter six illustrates in depth, across fieldsites I observed a general greater tactical proclivity amongst activists and greater inclination towards more supra-tactical experimentation amongst artists, as differently moulded by surrounding socio-political conditions. This leads directly on to the broad answer to my third research question, illustrated in depth in chapter seven, that both modes of absurd performance are impacted by socio-political context in multifarious, uncountable ways. I do not pretend to be able to offer a more conclusive or generalizable answer, rather following the densely context-specific complexity of my ethnographic data to assert that to understand the influence of socio-political context upon absurd performance practice, attention must centrally be given to each unique context in turn. Broad generalization from a specific case is thus renounced. Rather than reproducing this flaw identified in the tactical performance literature on a new scale, I frame this thesis as opening a new avenue of investigation dedicated to documenting the particularities of (supra)tactical absurd performance practices in different contexts, rejecting their deceptive homogenization within rigid models.

I am able to report with confidence, then, only in relation to the specific contexts that I focused upon. Here I affirm that my data is not sufficient to make generalizing claims such as ‘a history of extreme repression leaves a population more wary of absurd performance’. Rather, what my ethnographic account allows for is a depiction of how, for example, the memory of dictatorship in BsAs specifically, in contrast to the more stable recent political history of NYC, played a consistent role in considerations of whether and what kind of absurd performance was appropriate or not in that context. Future research in other fieldsites with similar histories of totalitarianism may work toward establishing if this is a shared trend or if dictatorial rule in another cultural context has different effects upon absurd performance practices. I thus recognize the boundaries of this research, yet leave signposts for how they may be expanded in future work. It is in this vein that the answers that this thesis provides to its central research questions are left necessarily open. My work

does not artificially close off its sphere of study, as the dominant tactical performance literature has often done, but rather prizes it open for ongoing research of an incondensable constellation of contextually contingent (supra)tactical absurd performance practices.

All of the above academic contributions have been allowed by my use of comparative ethnographic methods in contrast to the tactical performance literature characterized by less intensive observations of solely performance situations or interview research largely based in single fieldsites or occasionally multiply located - typically within the global North - but paying little to no comparative attention to these shifting contexts. It is only through the deep hanging out (Rosaldo, 1989; Clifford, 1996; Geertz, 1998) of spending extended periods of time immersed in the everyday ins and outs of my different research co-performers that I have been able to attain such a rich grasp of their diverse motivations for and practices of absurd performance and elaborate upon existing paradigms so comprehensively. Indeed, beyond my topic of absurd performance, my introduction of comparative ethnographic methods into Performance Studies may be seen to signal a new methodological pathway through which the findings of a diversity of previous studies may be freshly assessed. The insights promised from such expansion of ethnographic inquiry amongst performance communities are extensive, the application of a methodological framework like my own by Performance Studies researchers investigating other topics potentially fortifying the discipline.

In evaluation I must note that the very process to have participated in absurd performance in order to 'explain' it within a thesis and later 'defend' my arguments within a viva might be seen as contributing, albeit accidentally, to continued dominance of frames of sense that may ultimately prop up oppression. To have engaged in an earnest academic investigation and produced a thesis carefully edited and re-edited in order to meet the examination requirements of a PhD concerning this topic of absurd performance may in itself be seen as an extended farcical performance, as my performance writing experiments detailed in chapter three have contemplated in action. There is a profound irony in

framing the identification of pragmatic absurdo-anarchism and supra-tactical absurd performance as some of the ‘major contributions to knowledge’ of this project when, as illustrated throughout this text, the drive of such ideology and acts is precisely the dismantling of established power/knowledge hierarchies that are supposedly being contributed to. The ambition to dissolve normative structures, as noted with reference to Derrida (1967/2016) earlier, here once more stifles itself.

I submit this thesis, whose subject often seeks to problematize the legitimacy of constructions of ‘expertise’ and ‘professionalism’, in order to attain a professional qualification to demarcate me as a supposed ‘expert’. Resonating with the embrace of ‘error’ that I learnt from Etcétera, my success in this project may signify a certain kind of failure. Regardless, through the error of this thesis, following the institutional conventions of a system of power/knowledge that is ostensibly critiqued but ultimately undergirded through such an obedient exercise, I maintain that we may still (un)learn. All the more, I would argue, for acknowledging the potential hypocrisy and contradiction of the enterprise. Here my research itself embodies pragmatic absurdo-anarchism, its production growing out of considered reflection of how to balance a drive to dismantle all power as baseless in the light of shared existential absurdity with a recognition of the ultimately inescapable omnipresence of only partially alterable matrices of domination and infrastructures of power/knowledge.

Indeed, despite all the critical academic contributions that this research offers, in its attempted contribution to the anti-normative and anti-hierarchical struggles under study it has at times felt constrained. As I write, in the shadow of increasingly unavoidable catastrophic climate change, harbingers of yet more phenomenal suffering, hunger, and death of yet more human and non-human beings are already cawing amidst the pre-existing groans of unceasing conflict and oppression. For example: the deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon and genocide of indigenous peoples and extinction of animal and plant species therein is increasing rapidly (Watson, 2018; Solar et al, 2015); the Rohingya people continue fleeing racial cleansing in Myanmar into one of the world’s

largest refugee camp in southern Bangladesh (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019); homophobic and transphobic violence and killing with impunity remains commonplace in Russia (Amnesty International, 2018), Iraq (IraQueer, MADRE, and OutRight International, 2019), Uganda (Mugisha, 2017), and many further places aside; Saudi bombs, mainly supplied by UK and US manufacturers, continue to rain down on Yemen (Stavrianakis, 2019; Amnesty International, 2019); state and paramilitary murder and torture remain commonplace in Egypt, Colombia, the Philippines and many more places aside (Human Rights Watch, 2019); an estimated 12,432 migrants attempting to reach Europe have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea since 2014 with numbers rising weekly (International Organization for Migration, 2019). This is but a crude smattering of possible examples of extreme socio-political absurdity worldwide.

During the composition of this thesis, I have received calls from close friends and research co-performers in BsAs who have gone days without food within the ever-deepening economic '*macrisis*' or in NYC who fear being forced onto the streets as they struggle to make rent. Meanwhile, both sites have been ruled over by multimillionaire, bigoted, egotists such as Mauricio Macri and Donald Trump. At times, a sense of overwhelming futility regarding the political intentions of this project has been hard to escape. Power remains omnipresent and seemingly more polarized in its distribution than ever. Extreme socio-political absurdity is thoroughly normalized. Overcome by omnipresent injustice, I have been left asking many times: what can absurd performance, or academic investigation of this topic, offer to struggles for a less unjust world?

Answering myself, as displayed throughout this thesis, I assert that a major contribution of absurd performance and its interpretation to social justice is to facilitate audiences, targets, and/or participants in acknowledging their fundamental meaninglessness and ultimate equality within this. Juxtaposed against the actual relentless continuance of unjustifiable violent oppression illustrated above, this may seem trivial. However, I maintain that fostering this realization potentially sows the seeds, one by one, of a greater embrace of diverse modes of being as equally foundationless and equally valid, thus

loosening the grip of oppressive power/knowledge hierarchies. The extent to which this impact is achieved is, as outlined in chapter three, incalculable, yet remains an aspiration I observed to be shared by many of my research co-performers in relation to their specific contexts, as illustrated throughout data analysis.

This evokes once more Camus' (1956) rebel, discussed in chapter two, who recognizes the fundamental meaninglessness of being and of resistance yet goes on being and resisting regardless, therein exemplifying the equal right of all within shared nothingness to do just the same, to be. What many of the absurd performances that I analyse in this thesis do is pose an exaggeratedly transgressive example of being in vivid undercutting of the fundamental baselessness of power/knowledge structures that exhort certain ways of being as superior to others. They do this both in spite of and because of dominant distributions of the sensible that normalize pervasive inequality and injustice, sometimes in calculated pursuit of their reconfiguration and other times in supersensible attempt of their destruction, yet consistently fired in reaction to such sense of socio-political disharmony and maybe, sometimes, bit by bit, retuning it a little.

On another plane, beyond discourses of hope or hopelessness, the actual achievement of the above counter-normative, radically equalizing impact may be secondary to a nod to the universe acknowledging the transgressive performer's own nothingness within it and rejection of foundationless hierarchies that, as much as they persist and must be pragmatically negotiated, at least at core do not command their respect. Absurd performance, then, may keep our hearts pumping to strange and unruly rhythms while our bodies, and some bodies much more than others, remain in chains. Perhaps, one day, we'll all be able to make our shackles into puppets.



Fig 8-1: The End...

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