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The choreographic politics of a staircase

A duet by Kirsi Heimonen and Leena Rouhiainen

In this duet, Heimonen and Rouhiainen discuss their approach to site-informed textual choreography by examining its applications at the staircase of the Parliament House in Helsinki. They present the full textual choreography generated in tandem with this site, that is reiterative poetic text, and introduce the political interests motivating their undertaking. Important to their choreographic approach is a multifaceted score and the urban sites they work in. Relying on insights from Sara Ahmed and André Lepecki, they explore the political opportunities that experimental co-authored choreographic writing has as a mode of queering the familiar. The duo describes their experiences of engaging with the staircase and how it permeates their writing and text. They underline that otherness conditions both their experience and the sharing of their collaborative endeavour. They discuss textual choreography as a plan that involves others and enables the freedom to explore and initiate alternative ways of perceiving, writing, moving and being together, alternative choreographic futures. Important is that the choreographic process is repeatedly engaged with and that in reading others continue to enact the published texts as performance. The authors propose that, as a continuous and progressive collaborative practice that engages others, their textual choreography is public political activity.

*Striding across the beloved nation, trauma freezes my blood. Propriety at the parliament polices spontaneity and refuses bodily accommodation.
May I exist? Frenetic teetering, an unnoticed bodily statement. A war, dare I oppose?
The infinite skies are observant when harmless artists bend over authority and perform a far-reaching display.*

*Who supports the eroding shrine of might, any demonstrations of worship here?
The erosion of the citizen, family, police and artist exist and are monitored here.
Leaning on granite and infinite skies, the body protects the right to exist.
Bending over, reaching for spontaneity, permission is not allowed on that
road. Is the demonstration a mere façade of war trauma and at the corner of
destruction?*

*Am I written by lies of authority, teetering at the corner, a harmless crumbling
onlooker? An empty view on the distant might, this scene freezes my body and
blood. An invitation to a serious stride?*

May I lie here on the snow, unnoticed?

A removal of this performance from the gates of authority?

My blood, my frenetic existence opposes the might of war.

*The eroding body demonstrates its trauma and strides across the statements of
authority.*

*A harmless display of propriety and spontaneity bends across the infinite skies. An
unnoticed authority demonstrates a worship of accommodation.*

*Any nation that does not dare to oppose freezes. The police perform a display of
might.*

Observant artists reach far to the parliament, over and over.

*At the bottom of one edge, escaped from the patterns of dominance, breathing
with the wind and the flags. Relaxation is frozen, lost in between the severity of
dominance and submission.*

*This rocky every-and-no-one's-site escapes the touch of protestors, movements for-
gotten, the severity of greyness does not go away.*

The trace of this face is left on the snow, the site defies the safety vests.

Bending away from the sky, the head goes down.

Vertigo: lost touches and compact severity.

Pausing.

Pausing to breathe, why resist?

*What to resist? Snow leaves protective patterns on the stairs. Its movements escape
the dominance of the site.*

Time pauses. The wind, only. Forgotten time, forget time.

The delicacy of the snow allows defiance to pause, waving to the children.

A safety vest defies the invisible protest. In the delicate snow a rocky resistance.

*At the edge of dominance and submission, children. Bending over they mock ver-
tigo, and the skies open. Forgotten, the futility of their movement, a mere curtsy.*

No safety when breath and touch is forgotten.

A bottom on the building, pausing in touch, relaxing.

There is a forgetting of time and all vertigo escapes.

Delicate snow, wind, like frozen movement, protest the traces of dominance.

Aresistance, the grey granite of the building protects the site of everyone-and-no-one.

Do not go away.

The snow, purifying the blood. War trauma. Frenetic teetering.

The resistance of everyone and none.

Bending over into vertigo, a protest, a bodily statement... Is it allowed or will the police remove me?

Who protects this all-encompassing site? I got lost.

The rocky resistance refuses bodily accommodation, its right to exist.

Who writes us as citizens, mocking propriety?

May I, can I, do I dare, anyone? Rejected spontaneity. Forgotten breath and touch submitted to monitored existence.

Not allowed to pause or relax here.

Exhausting greyness erodes spontaneity, severe wind removes resistance. The patterns of teetering by harmless artists are written on the frost, lost in an empty site. A curtsy, a delicate submission to the compact granite house.

Defiance is frozen.

Bodily corners are visibly invisible, forgotten and futile at the façade of might.

Faced by rocky dominance and all-encompassing propriety.

Surveillance reaches my breathing monitored by cameras and gazes. Can trauma be purified by lies or snow?

The head leans on an empty scene, a serious vertigo clears all traces, is all lost?

The wind and the infinite skies resist the patterns of time. Pausing to perform a display of escaped opposition.

Vertigo touches forgotten traces and traumas. Nothing unnoticed.

Frozen flags and harmless movements bend over the rocky building. The severity of statements leaves the dominance to the site. My blood, only my blood defies the eroding might.

The bottom reached, who leaves safety vests for children?

Dominance and submission leave traces on our accommodations. This building, an eroding shrine of might, is teetering.

Why resist, there is protection in the safety vests?

Bending over, we touch the stairs as bodily statements and pause. Time pauses. The wind moves the delicate snow and the forgotten flag and escapes into the infinite skies.

Severe vertigo, a protest.

Propriety freezes blood and refuses bodily accommodation. Can I escape performing this trauma?

Worship is a far-reaching display: the permission to curtsy and bend over at the bottom of some corner.

To exist is to protest, pause and breathe in the greyness of the eroding snow.

The harmless movement of all exhausted visitors opens up to the windy skies.

A frenetic visitor teeters at the edge of the lost defiance.

The severity of war trauma harms the existence of the nation.

Nothing forgotten, nothing opposed.

The stairs, the site for curtsy, reaches the sky demonstrating all-encompassing frozen distances at the scene.

*The crumbling site bleeds, a corner lost, the rights of citizens removed.
All and nothing.
Only the wind clears rejection and mocking.
Breath pauses in between the granite and snow: the erosion of might?*

* * * * *

The previous piece of site-specific textual choreography was initiated at the staircases of the Parliament House in Helsinki. In generating the text, we drew inspiration from Sara Ahmed's (2006) contributions to queer phenomenology and André Lepecki's notion on choreopolitics (2013). In our duet, we questioned the possibility to reorder socio-cultural relations inherent to public settings and how this might involve a politics of disorientation. This thematic derived from the perplexity we experienced when European nation-states, Finland included, enforced restraints to manage the global pandemic. As we engaged with this concern, the Ukrainian war broke out. The political leadership of Finland was faced with the threat of an invasion by Russian forces. Since Finland has a 1,300-kilometre border and previous war history with its eastern neighbour, the risk became quite tangible to us. Both situations highlighted issues of governmental authority, control, surveillance and, in contradistinction, the freedom of citizens. Consequently, we decided to explore a site of political significance. We chose one that was visible in TV newscasts related to national security during the pandemic and continues to be so in relation to Finland's new NATO membership processes.

At the staircase, we examined and challenged conventional place-related actions and meanings associated with the Parliament House building. We did so by questioning how our bodies carry and disrupt timely socio-cultural meanings, values and narratives. Integral to our textual choreographic process is the aim to generate alternative forms of performative agencies (cf. Hunter 2015). Our bodily explorations and writings at the site were framed by the choreographic approach we have been developing over the past few years (Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2021; Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022). It is a phenomenologically informed collaborative score that includes embodied and written exploration of urban sites, eventually generating detailed reiterative choreographic texts. The intention of this choreographic approach is to allow the impact of the bodily sense of being in contact with the chosen urban location to permeate our activities in writing.

We visited the staircase leading up to the parliament building twice: on February 4 and April 5, 2022. The wide and long staircase is in the open air. If lined up end-to-end, the granite stones of the staircase would be 2.7 kilometres in length. When we first spent time there, the stairs were partially covered in snow and the temperature was well below freezing. On our second visit, the weather was merely chilly and windy, typical for the time of year. On both

occasions, we explored the place for a few hours, observing its features and moving in relation to it and then wrote down words and phrases evoked by the site. Our explorations began with orienting ourselves to the site, lingering in different parts of it. The staircase invited us to test how it might act as a support for our movement. We also experimented with movements and bodily actions which felt appropriate and inappropriate in and to the site. We touched, leaned, sat, lay and crawled on the stairs. We bent over, lay on our backs and threw our arms and legs in the air. We marched, crept and ran up and down the stairs. We trembled, emitted vocal sounds and spoke in gibberish. The massive stone pillars of the building at the top of the staircase, allowed us to play with both hiding and coming into view. We perceived the environs with all of our senses: the loudness of traffic, the view of downtown Helsinki, cars, buses, trams and pedestrians passing by on the main street, Mannerheimintie, tourists and demonstrators at the staircase itself.

The building is on a hill, so the staircase is very prominent in the landscape. This makes the people on it very visible too, underlining their performativity. Our intention was not to perform for an audience, yet we were clearly exposed to the gazes of the passers-by. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid evoking a sense of performance. We were also conscious of the fact that we had not notified the police of our activities in the public place. The police closely monitor the staircase and the entire vicinity of Parliament House. We witnessed them too. Parked in their car on the side street, they saw us but left us alone.

* * * * *

*Deeds of the past, traceless and traced, are sheltered in this fortress of rock pillars.
Soaring to the heights in solitude, it beholds the city with might.
The empty façade hides a shrine of false virtue, accessibility ignored except for oligarchy.
The demonstrators steadfastly feast by the temple to attain power: Paasikivi, Kekkonen... Niinistö and Marin.
The dispossessed, baffled by the King of the Castle, ever only fall.
A steadfast powerless demonstrator at the empty facade of the grandiloquent mausoleum.
The unattainable might of the stern fortress soars to the heights.
Falling away from the sturdy non-place, baffled and hiding in solitude around the hill.
Traces from the past feast, hidden from the dispossessed, accessibility sternly ignored.
The hubris of hard rock drives away? A hideout of the shrine?
Forever unattainable. Forever plain false virtue, an empty shelter.
The fortress of the oligarchy's hidden might. Rock pillars shelter inaccessible power.
Deeds of Paasikivi, Kekkonen and past kings fall.
The empty façade demonstrates the castle of solitude, inaccessible to the dispossessed.*

*Demonstrators baffled by the steadfast castle of traceless deeds.
Only to fall, ever, only to fall.
Humbleness opens at the façade of the unbreathable symmetrical bunker.
A servant marching through the sediments of rules, silenced violence, interrupted shouting, inflexible extremities, sweat and closed papers.
Not fitting here in-between the pillars of harsh realities, breathing is silenced.
Knees follow the echo of the rustle of paper and ink structuring the citizens.
The sealed secrets from the making of the big granite monument:
shouting, sweating, gravel, spades, hail, storms and crumpled whispers from the past touch my spine.
Sharp cracks in-between the sky and stairs, isolation exhausts everything.
Now, just here, compressed into the visible centredness.
Inflexible servants march echoing the gap between realities. Untouchable citizens closed in their isolation.
Shouting through the past decades, structured violence bend knees and seal secrets.
Compressed whispers in an unbreathable bunker. The monumental granite pillars rule. Interrupted shouting sealed into secrecy.
The sky cracks. A visible storm, hail.
Violence bends knees and exhausts the spine. Unbreathable humbleness fits reality.
Servant citizens. Sealed papers and the granite monument rule.
A baffling gap of invisible traces, deeds and whispered rejections. Empty might? False rules?
A stern non-place rules the city centre, demonstrators isolated, citizens driven away.
Secrets rise from hard rock, not fitting the stairs of the mausoleum.
Hail touches the sun, the shouting of the servants openly ignored. Sturdy rejection by invisible ink.
Unattainable might beholds sealed secrets. A hiding place for the oligarchy.
A gap between realities, false virtue. The sweat, speech, swearing, shouting of demonstrators silenced and driven away. The knees of humble citizens bend in the violence.
Exhausting deeds of the past traceless, forever dispossessed.
Silenced shouting exhausts the demonstrators. The past compressed into the granite temple, sediments of isolation and violence visible to the marchers.
The granite bunker is possessed by ignorance. Extreme might falls in between the sky and the stairs. Big empty deeds hide the breathing virtues. Traceless solitude never falls.
The King of the Castle ever only falls.
Dispossession exhausts humbleness.
Past whispers touch the spine.*

* * * * *

Our actual choreographic process is framed by the following score:

- 1 Explore the site by being attentive to how it resonates in and extends your body. Move in response to it. After some time at the site, and sensing its impact, respond by writing down single words or two-word phrases in your notebook.
- 2 In the next few days, allowing the impact of the site to linger with you and using the words written at the site, write five to ten sentences, again conveying the sense of contact with the site.
- 3 Then send your words and texts to each other.
- 4 Allowing the silent impact of the site, as well as the resonance of the already-written words and sentences, to inform your writing:
 - a Write sentences or a short text by using the first list of words that you yourself did not generate.
 - b Write sentences or a short text by using the first sentences that you yourself did not generate.
- 5 Then send these new sentences or short texts to each other and use all the previously produced texts in the next phase of writing.
- 6 Again, allow the silent impact of the site, as well as the resonance of the already-written words and sentences, to inform your writing:
 - a Write sentences or a short text by using the first list of words generated by both of us.
 - b Write sentences or a short text by using the first sentence groups generated by both of us.
 - c Write sentences or a short text by using both the first list of words and the first sentence groups generated by both of us.
- 7 Edit all the generated texts into one piece of textual choreography (cf. Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022).

The score, and our intention to attend to political themes, had an important influence on our duet and informed how the textual choreography took shape. Underlining the importance of these starting points, Ahmed (2010, 245) notes that “what is reachable is determined by the orientation we have already taken. [...] Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not others in our reach.” However, crucial to our textual choreography are the places that we choose to explore. At the Parliament House, the staircase strongly directed the contents of the text. It was as if the site demanded which words were to be written, and the place inscribed itself in the text through our writing. Ahmed (2006; 2010) relates to this by relaying how orientations do not fully determine how we act in any given situation. Aside from our habitual compartment and the tasks we choose to do, the things we are in relation with impact us. According to Ahmed, other

beings, objects and places, have agency in that they move us in certain ways and directions, often doing so without us being aware of their effects (Ahmed 2006; 2010). She continues:

Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future. The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.

(Ahmed 2006, 554)

Here, the queer relates to the opportunities we have to disturb the order of things by inhabiting things that seem to flee our grasp. The oblique approach may open new perspectives, but it also demands that we tolerate the disorientation of not knowing (Ahmed 2006, 555, 556).

The site confronted us with many challenges and made many kinds of impressions. These related to the uncomfortable contours of the stairs, our lack of formal permission to be there and do what we were doing, our personal family histories and related trauma, the societal status of citizens, marginal groups and families, the historical sediments of the building, the national war history and related politics of Finland. Directly derived from being in contact with the staircase, these impressions came to us as fragmentary moments of affect. They moved us in many ways, both in our actions at the site and in generating the initial words and ultimately the full text. The words and text seemed to continue to emanate from the site even once we resumed our collaborative writing elsewhere.

We believe our experiences relate to the embodied and gestural base of language as described, for example, by Shaun Gallagher (2006, 121) in the following manner: “Even if we are not explicitly aware of our gestures, even in circumstances where they contribute nothing to the communicative process, they may contribute to shaping our cognition”. For him, gestures are expressive movements, which are activated in communicative situations. Even when they are not consciously thought of beforehand, they contribute to the accomplishment of thought. He asserts that: “[...] we do not have to be conscious of embodied functions for them to effectively accomplish thought. Gesture and language shape cognition in a prenoetic manner” (Gallagher 2006, 123). This notion points towards how our encounter and inter-relationship with the staircase intrinsically underpinned our writing. The embeddedness of writing is further discussed by van Manen (2014), who finds that writing is both a manner of making contact with the world and a process through which we learn how we relate to the world. Indeed, in the aftermath of our physical exploration, we were surprised by

the qualities relating to command, subjection, control, powerlessness and power that the finished text contained. Even if our interest was to observe the political opportunities of our approach to textual choreography at the staircase, the contents of our collaboratively generated text highlighted political issues to a far stronger degree than we expected.

In one of his articles, Lepecki (2013) discusses his term “choreopolitics,” describing what he views as the inherent political force of choreography. In doing so, he relies on the insights of two seminal thinkers, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière. Rancière (2004/2011) argues that as experiential events, artistic works and aesthetics acts open up new ways of perceiving, and simultaneously, enact novel forms of political subjectivity. Arendt (1958/1989; 2005), in turn, forwards a notion of political action which appreciates the plurality of human life. She suggests that this activity is about engaging with common interests that set in motion unforeseeable futures. This is where she understands freedom to be actualised.

In writing about politics and art, which reconfigure our ways of seeing and speaking, Rancière opines:

Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. [...] They reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycle of production, reproduction, and submission. [...] The channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of “literary” disincorporation. [...] The “fictions” of art and politics are therefore heterotopias rather than utopias.

(Rancière 2004/2011, 39–41)

He, therefore, argues that art can question and decompose conventional positions in multiple ways. Co-relatively, to overcome totalising order and government, Arendt (2005, 112) asserts: “In other words every new beginning is by nature a miracle when seen and experienced from the standpoint of the processes it necessarily interrupts.” She continues: “[...] the most important activity of a free life moves from action to speech, from deeds to free words” (Arendt 2005, 124). In positioning us differently in relation to reality, art thus can shift the manner in which we are actualised, are in contact with the world and indeed ways the world may open up to us. Here lies the chance to witness the previously unforeseen, which is where freedom comes into play.

What might be said in relation to our work is that the chosen site and the frame of the choreographic score positioned us queerly in relation to our conventional everyday relationship with downtown Helsinki, where the Parliament House stands. Together they called us to reconfigure our attention and confronted us with abundant sensation, innumerable observations, affects, memories, imaginations and visions of historical events we had not previously

experienced in the same way. As said, these all concretely moved us. They did so affectively and emotionally, pushing us into physical action at the site as well as into a writing that revealed the complex significance the site carries. The site pushed itself into the text, a text that is characterised by strong power-related tensions and oppositional forces and the sheer magnitude of the material formation that the staircase is. The text performs the staircase of the Parliament House as a stern, severe environment.

Even though the text came into being through us, it was, and continues to be, unfamiliar to us. In writing it, we did not actively decide on its contents or quality, and therefore it practically taught us, something which relates to Lepecki's discussion of choreopolitics as an opportunity to learn. He writes:

[...] choreopolitics requires a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom.

(Lepecki 2013, 20)

In our site-specific writing, we were questioning, perhaps even reinventing, how we and others might relate to the Parliament House staircase. However, Lepecki reminds us that freedom requires collaboration and does not occur without constraints. He claims:

Choreographic planning is crucial because [...] the political is not a given to the subject, it is not even a given of the human species. Rather, it is a social and personal force and a promise that must be built with others, must be set into relation, and must be dared, collectively, into existence. Once in existence, it has to be learned, sustained, and experimented with. Again and again. Lest it disappear from the world. It follows that if the political is not a given, if it needs to be (re)discovered and (re)produced, then the political is always a kind of experimentation. It comes into the world through the experience of experimenting.

(Lepecki 2013, 22)

The above quotation underlines the importance of the collaborative aspects of our choreographic process, the fact that we have co-designed, co-experimented with and co-authored our textual choreographic practice over many years. However, it also points to the specificity of our co-inhabitation with the Parliament House staircase during our site visits.

We have written elsewhere about site-specificity and the collaborative dimension of our approach to writing choreography (Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2021). In addressing our previous choreographic processes, we recognised that, in the related collaborative writing, our individual authorship disappears.

The sharing involved in the writing is based and dependent on our individual experiences, yet, what we experience is always co-dependent on the relationships we acquire through contact with other people, other beings and things. In relation to the Parliament House site, our sharing depended on the inter-relationship not only between the two of us, but also between us, the staircase and its environs. In general terms, the sense of sharing and community generated by our duet was contingent on us being exposed to otherness. The perceived specificity of our embodiment was momentary, situationally defined by our tasks, our collaboration and our embeddedness in the material environment.

The above quotation by Lepecki also points to planning and repetition. Our explorations of different urban sites via the textual choreographic method we have created, includes and involves practices of repetition and reiteration. At the Parliament House staircase, these repetitions and reiterations related directly to choreopolitical dimensions and opportunities. We could thus be understood to be involved in an experimental choreographic programme. In relation to the political significance of planning Lepecki continues:

Thus planning, programming, and experimentation (always corporeal, always social, as Deleuze and Guattari insist) become synonyms of choreography, which can now be defined as the necessary *minimal condition of sociality* so that (1) the political may appear in the world; (2) the political may move across agents, short-circuiting policed systems of obedience and command; and (3) the political may surface, persist, and be performed thanks to (choreographic) planning.

(Lepecki 2013, 22, emphasis in original)

He also states:

I propose the notion of the choreopolitical as the formation of collective plans emerging at the edges between open creativity, daring initiative, and a persistent — even stubborn — iteration of the desire to live away from policed conformity.

(Lepecki 2013, 23)

We stubbornly persist with and repeatedly engage with our textual choreographic score, which experimentally questions our relationships with familiar urban settings, queers their existence and performs them differently. In so doing, it opens them up for new kinds of relational possibilities. On the one hand, our work persists via our repeated site-specific undertakings. On the other, it persists through the performance of a textual choreography, which is enacted when the published texts are read by others. They may be lured, puzzled or moved through reading the reiterative textual choreography. Readers

can also adapt the score to their lived environments, if they so wish. In this way, the textual choreography continues to enact and embody otherness in diverse ways. It is here that our duet truly becomes socially engaged, and we concretely enter the public realm, which for Arendt, is the dimension in which political action becomes possible. She highlights the vital importance of political activity by stating that, “Here the issue is not just freedom but life itself, the continuing existence of humanity and perhaps of all organic life on earth” (Arendt 2005, 109). On the basis of the previous insights, we propose that it is via open-ended and thoughtfully framed communal or social action that the past can move the present and yield various unexpected choreographic futures, which can, in turn, generate fresh outlooks. Our collaborative, situated, embedded, progressively extending textual choreographic duet aims at doing exactly this.

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In isolation, the sheltered traces hide a shrine of virtue: a breathable access to the soaring skies.

A feast in-between the baffling reality of the closed bunker, this fortress of rock pillars and sealed secrets.

The baffling softness of round rock, a steadfast hiding-place.

Deeds of the past whisper in the sediment of the compressed pillars. Their inflexible extremities breathe and rustle with these traceless traces.

The rise and fall of this fortress reverberate in every step.

Silent echoes of sweating, speaking and shouting by invincible citizens soar to its grandiloquent heights.

In solitude, the mausoleum beholds the hybris of the dispossessed.

The king, an architect of sheltered secrets and fallen traces.

Rock pillars hide the asymmetrical breathing.

The sky closed, sweat and exhaustion of the citizens invisible to the rulers. The city silently follows the grandiloquent power of the oligarchy.

An access to the fortress through the cracks in power, a hideout sealed. Plain humbleness belongs to the past, now hidden power of invincible persons steadfastly structures the spines of the citizens.

Inflexible followers ignored.

The visibility of virtue does not fit the harsh façade of the monument. Silenced shouting soars to the heights. If persons do not belong to the might, they are compressed into the granite.

Secrets sealed by hail.

The reverberations of interrupted silence open the invisible traces of the past for the powerless.

Forever, for the powerless.

Total silence empties everything.

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