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The Performer Without Qualities. Empathetic Signification, Non- Performative Performance and Mimesis in Artistic Practice and Populist Politics

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Abstract. This article reports on instances of my performance practice developed through strategies of over-identification, while establishing a parallel relation with certain types of right-wing populist performance and their theatrical processes (of identification). By doing so, I question the ethics of these theatrical processes when applied to politics. Departing from Lacan and Laclau's notions of signifiers, I introduce the term empathetic signification, to reflect on the process by which populists re-signify signifiers to construct provisional and multiple political identities. I then draw on iterability and the performative to reflect on how the non-performativity of populist performance constructs a mouldable subjectivity. Finally, situating this subjectivity within the framework of mimesis and plasticity, I examine populists' relationships with their audiences and environments, showing how they strategically acquire power by making themselves sufficiently *plastique* to be shaped by their audiences' affects, and subsequently imprinting a newly created form upon them.

Keywords. Over-identification, empathetic signification, non-performative, mimesis, populism.

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1. Introduction

Between 2019 and 2022, Helena Botto developed performance work through strategies of over-identification. This term was introduced by Slavoj Žižek in reference to the Slovenian group Laibach in the 1980s. I apply it here to describe artistic strategies that involve enacting a magnified version of a given reality, in order to expose and critically interrogate its underlying contradictions and flaws, and often presenting the «worst of the options» (Bavo [2007]: 18). In 2019 I performed the lecture *How to Become a Populist?*, to this followed a series of experiments that culminate in *The Museum of Impropropriety* (2022). The latter event, happening at the Old Operating Theatre, in London, included a stage performance *The Conservatory of Populism*, four-screen performances which were part of the installation *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species*, and an auction.

Botto, over-identifies with right-wing populist rhetoric, exposing how theatrical strategies are co-opted to re-signify signs and produce anti-democratic discourse. Botto is both a non-character and character, who also over-identifies with herself as a performer – trained in Grotowski's methodology of physical actions, and later as contemporary performance-maker and researcher – and as well with certain art practices whose aim for a concrete usefulness and political efficacy could be read as an enactment of Jacques Lacan's «Discourse of the University» (Lacan, Miller, Grigg [2007]).

This article reports on instances of this performance practice, while establishing a parallel relation with certain types of right-wing populist performance and their strategic processes of identification. Drawing upon Lacan and Ernesto Laclau's notions of pure, empty, floating, and master signifiers, I analyse populists' re-signification of signifiers in a process I term empathetic signification. I then deploy Judith Butler's performativity and Jacques Derrida's iterability to reflect on the construction of populist' subjectivity created through the iteration of consistently inconsistent statements, leading to the concept of the non-performative – the deliberate emptying of signifiers to unleash a pro-

liferating field of signification. Finally, with Denis Diderot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Nidesh Lawtoo, I situate the populist figure within the framework of mimesis, arguing that the leader is a plastic subject or a «subjectless subject» whose power rests on their ability to embody multiple positions due to an absence of fixed ideology.

2. Debriefing the notions of signifiers

The «pure signifier» is, for Lacan, «a meaningless material element in a closed differential system», a «signifier without signified» (Evans [1996]: 189). The «master signifier» (S1), which has its origin in Lacan's «discourse of the master»¹, can be seen as a particular operation of the pure signifier: it takes on the function of representing «the subject (\$) for another signifier or, more precisely, for all other signifiers (S2)» (Žižek [1991]: 130). In S1 there is an attempt of totalisation, of hegemony. This attempt fails, however, as the «master signifier» can never represent the subject completely, because there is an excess, «some surplus which escapes representation» (Evans [1996]: 109)².

Laclau's notion of the «empty signifier» draws on Lacan's notions of the «pure signifier» and the «master signifier». He defines the «empty signifier» as a «signifier without signified» (Laclau [2007]: 36). This emptiness does not mean a total absence of meaning, but rather the impossibility of fixing it to any particular demand. Precisely because of this, the «empty signifier» can serve as a deposit for multiple demands, allowing them to be articulated together in an «equivalential chain». In this way, a particular demand can come to stand for universality, becoming hegemonic by representing a wider set of social demands. Laclau illustrates this with the example of Solidarność, the movement led by Lech Walesa at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, Poland, in 1980. The initial demands of shipyard workers gradually expanded to symbolise the frustrations of many other groups that live under oppression. As more groups joined in solidarity, the link to the original, partial demand weakened, and it came to function as more universal «empty signifier» (Laclau [2005b]: 39-40). The «*tendentially* empty signifier» (40) is, according to Laclau, the key to the formation of collective popular identity, and thus central to his understanding of populism.

Laclau also makes a distinction between «empty signifiers» and «floating signifiers», the latter term borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss. As he states:

- 1 For Lacan there are four types of discourses: the «discourse of the master», the «discourse of the university», the «discourse of the hysteric» and the «discourse of the analyst».
- 2 This surplus is the *objet petit a*, which is the unattainable object-cause of desire – an empty form shaped by fantasy, representing what the subject lacks but can never truly obtain.

The first concerns the construction of a popular identity once the presence of a stable frontier is taken for granted; the second tries conceptually to apprehend the logic of displacements of that frontier. (Laclau [2005a]: 133)

A «floating signifier» is one whose meaning is «suspended» (Laclau [2005a]: 131), contested by competing projects until it is temporary fixed. Lacan refers to this temporary fixation as *point de capiton* (quilting point), where «the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification» (Lacan cited in Evans [1996]: 151). This quilting creates the «master signifier», which produces «the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning» (151). However, this supposed stabilised signifier can later acquire divisive and antagonising meanings.

Consider the Union Jack. We could think of this flag as a «master signifier» that assembles other signifiers (S2); this flag symbolises the United Kingdom, a union between several nations such as England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Yet, during the Pro-Brexit /Leave campaign this flag was used by pro-Brexit and nationalist parties as a symbol of the UK's autonomy from the European Union (EU). Within this context, the flag functioned as a «floating signifier», symbolising anti-EU statements, exclusive nationalism, and anti-migration policies. Its earlier hegemonic meaning of Union of Nations was torn down, and it came to symbolise divisiveness and antagonism.

A telling moment that illustrates the implicit antagonism occurred when Nigel Farage, then a Member of the European Parliament for the Brexit Party, together with other MEPs from his party, staged a symbolic act on the UK's last day in the European Parliament. They replaced the small European flags standing at each MEP's seat in the hemicycle with small Union Jack flags. This action provoked a huge stir in Parliament, as it was read as a symbol of anti-European, exclusionary nationalism.

2.1. *A (gestural) production of empty signifiers*

It is September 2019, in Exeter. I am performing a short performance-lecture at Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) annual conference, in the working group *Actor Training*. I am delivering *Training populism: How to become a populist? A toolkit of exercises for almost all emerging populists (or How to exercise a research?)*. The lecture begins with me demonstrating my background in physical theatre and in the Grotowskian tradition of laboratory theatre, which I practiced for many years in the past, but have long since distanced myself from. I, then propose to repurpose my skills and construct a training for a populist physicality. Similarly to Grotowski's *plastiques* exercises, I isolate body parts, the arms, the hands, the torso, and my face, but here to construct a specific physicality for populism,

or what could become populist signifiers. I play with existing bodily signifiers and with semiotics of politics. With the hand, I evoke the communists' raised fist, the Roman salute later appropriated by fascism, the distinctive royal wave of Queen Elizabeth II, and the hand gesture used in Occupy Wall Street assemblies. I play with those signifiers, whilst lecturing on their symbolic meaning. Then, through movement, I morph them into another original gesture, and thereby create a new gestural semiotics for populist politics. From the wrist, a rotative movement is initiated and progressively sped up, until it ends in an immobilised body with only the hands moving at great speed. The audience laughs.

Afterwards, I explore randomness and movements that did not possess any relatable cultural meaning. I stick three fingers out of my hand and move them slightly in a very sparse rhythm. The audience laughs.

Finally, I compose the elements found so far starting with the question «Sir, do you promise to deliver Brexit, on the 26th of October?»³. I answer this question physically, my face becomes sad – an affect I had explored previously – and I stretch it until the whole body mimics the physicality of crying. I suddenly pause to introduce a hand with the three pointing fingers. The audience laughs. But not as much as when I break all the movements to say: «well, at least this is different». Why did the audience laugh?

My interpretation is that this type of out-of-context-gesture operates as «a pure signifier». As Lacan states: «every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is» (Lacan cited in Evans [1996]: 189). This gesture is improper, it transgresses any system of language we already know, in the sense that it resists integration in any pre-existing meaning. When people laugh, they laugh at the arbitrariness of that signifier, because it is empty and signifies nothing, it has the potential to become an empathetic signifier and therefore signify anything.

3 After the 2016 referendum, a majority in the UK voted to leave the EU. The exit, originally set for March 2019, was delayed several times until January 31, 2020, when the UK entered a transitional period lasting until December 31, 2020. Due to successive delays in the process of «delivering Brexit», this was a question often asked by journalists to the then British prime-minister Boris Johnson.



Fig.1 Still from the screen performance: *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species – The Educational Centre 2022*

3. Empathetic signification

It is March 2022, I am in the studio with a head-mic plugged into an amplifier, so I hear my voice resonating in the space. I am trying out ways of enacting a speech by Viktor Órban. However, at some point I only keep repeating: «illiberal democracy»⁴.

With no attempt to rationally re-signify them, I simply take the words as empty signifiers, exploring different pitches, different qualities and affects: aggressive, angry, neutral (without any affective charge), cute, sexy, etc; I explore a variety of sounds, rhythms and intensities: continuous and *staccato*, strong and soft, a mixing of both, different volumes, different languages. I decompose the word in syllables, to test how each vowel and consonant might resonate in specific body parts.

I spend hours in the studio playing with the enunciation of these words and letting my body be transformed by them. Affected by the resonance of these sounds within my body, and by hearing my own voice projected through the

4 Viktor Órban introduced the term «Illiberal Democracy» in 2014 at the Bálványos Summer Free University in Romania, to distinguish Hungarian politics and views on democracy from the western liberal democracies from European Union. Órban's democratic illiberalism takes a conservative approach to politics, based on traditional Christian values and nationalism.

loudspeakers – now detached and externalised – my body begins to move in a transformed manner. As the body acquires other forms, new associations and new meanings emerge, which I continue to explore until they fade or morph into something else.

As if voguing, I enact a series of postures, playing with rhythms, catwalk struts, exaggerated seductions, macho poses, displays of skill, and their simultaneous parody. I vocalise the syllables of i-lli-be-ral-de-mo-cra-cy, exploring different voices, melodies emerge. It evolves into a teaching session for an imagined audience, drafting a score I will later use in the live performance.

As I play with the materiality of those signifiers – the sound, the phonemes, the space resonance, the resonance of the syllables in my body – and the meaninglessness of those words, my body moves and acquires other forms, other associations and re-significations come to my mind and other behaviours to my body. It is as if my body is a sponge, absorbing and being transformed by its own actions and by the external *stimuli* it receives from the space – *stimuli* that, in turn, are transformed into a new embodiment of those sounds, resulting in a new behaviour, action, or character (or, to put it simply, a new performance).

I began by performing Viktor Orbán's speech but gradually I became performed by the act itself. Through a porous and empathetic engagement with the room's acoustic responses, my subjectivity was temporarily constructed in relation to its resonance. This process functioned as a feedback loop: I introduced an input, received external responses, and allowed these to reshape my performative presence. Rather than a fixed identity, this was a contingent, evolving subjectivity formed through an ongoing interaction with the environment.

If we were to think/feel now the words «illiberal democracy», we would acknowledge they have acquired different significations throughout this performance process. They were modulated and (per)formed while the body of the performer was rendering itself reactive to the ambience in the room. This approach emphasises the instability of signifiers and performs their fluidity. It can make us question how signifiers acquire emotional resonance and become politically charged and re-signified. It subverts the notion of illiberal democracy by dislodging its perceived stability and authority, showing how they are constructed and reconstructed through iteration, repetition, emotion, empathy, and context.

As we will see further on, certain trends of populist performance operate similarly. Through a process I term empathetic signification, the populist subject re-signifies signifiers to construct their (temporary) subjectivity that keeps volitionally changing accordingly to the surrounding demands.

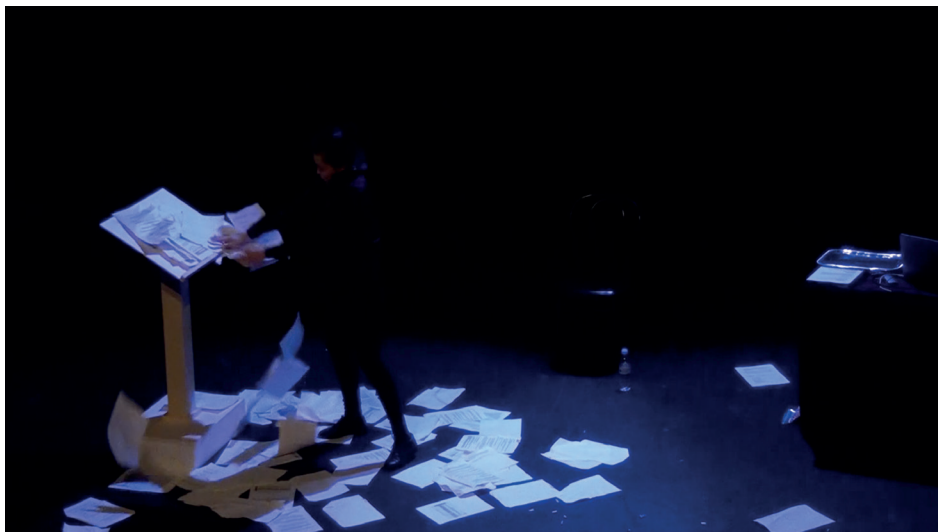


Fig. 2 The Conservatory of Populism – Mladinsko Theatre. Ljubljana November 2022

3.1. *A few examples of empathetic signification in populist politics*

It is August 2023, former US President and then re-candidate to the 2024 US presidential elections Donald Trump has been indicted several times over his attempt to overturn the results of the presidential elections in 2020. He surrendered at the Fulton County Jail, in Georgia, where he had his mugshot taken. For many, this incident would have meant the end of their (political) career, however not for Trump. He published his arrest in the social media platform X, reframing it as election interference (in relation to the then upcoming presidential elections in 2024) under the slogan «Never Surrender», with a link to a fundraising page. In only one day he managed to raise \$4.18 million and by August 27, 2023, he has managed to raise more than \$7 million in funds for his campaign with the mugshot's merchandising. Within a single day, the mugshot was re-signified, from an image of alleged criminality and public humiliation to one of victimhood or heroism, capable of generating political capital. It was swiftly instrumentalised to raise funds for a potential candidacy, the very prospect of which the mugshot would initially threaten to undermine.

When Trump published his mugshot on Twitter with a re-signifying slogan, he aligned with his voters' wish that his arrest and the electoral process are unlawful. By declaring his willingness to keep fighting, he reinforced his power and activated a feedback loop: his supporters, seeing him take ownership of the mugshot, felt their claims of injustice validated. Rather than resisting or feeling

ashamed by the mugshot, Trump embraced and capitalised on it, performing with it and allowing it to perform him – thus re-inscribing his authority as a populist subject. The massive sales and donations generated by this performance enhanced his campaign further, making his subjectivation as a populist leader even more efficacious.

Trump's strategy relies on empathetic identification that produces a performance of re-signification. Like Botto in the studio, he listens to his audience (or to the surrounding ambient) and let himself be performed, and performs, accordingly.

Empathetic performance starts by establishing a process of identification with the ambience in the room, to later modulate and produce a new performance. This performance will then, in its turn, influence the audience who, in a sort of projective activity, re-identify with the leader, who had previously re-identified with them.

4. *A plastic subjectivity*

Philosopher of language John L. Austin has defined a performative utterance to be void, or hollow, if pronounced by «an actor on stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy» (Austin [1962]: 22). He argues language in these circumstances is used non seriously and is «*parasitic* upon its normal use» (22). Derrida critiques Austin's idea that an utterance cannot be felicitous when parasitical of its normal usage. For Derrida, signs are always parasitic, not only when pronounced by an actor on stage. Any sign exists only and always in reference to another sign and the value and signification it acquires is related to the context, in which it operates. As Derrida states:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited* put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. [...] This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called «normal». (Derrida [1988]: 12, author's emphasis)

Derrida denies the existence of a transcendental signifier, a signifier that is at the origin of all meanings, an anchor, and from which all significations would derive or be parasitic of. For him every sign is always parasitical upon other signs; even in a dictionary, a sign requires other signs to define itself. Any use of a sign is already a citation, and thus a repetition of earlier uses of that sign. Furthermore, Derrida extends the logic of citation, affirming that the very fact that a performative utterance is efficacious is exactly due to the force of its iterability within a specific context:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a «coded» or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a

ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a «citation»? (Derrida [1988]:18, author's emphasis)

This idea that there is an iterability of a model in which words and actions acquire a value or a (re-)signification, is further developed by Judith Butler in her views of gender performativity. When a child is born and the words «it is a girl» are uttered, this sentence sets in motion a series of continuously iterated actions that are a product of what a particular time and society identifies as being appropriately female, e.g. wearing certain colours and certain types of clothing, performing certain type of behaviours, working in certain type of jobs, etc. The performative construction of gender happens, according to Butler, through a consecutive iteration of actions, behaviours, and words that are engendered in the social structure of a given society, but it is however seen and often presented as if natural and given by biology.

Drawing on the idea of citationality as a mean for social construction, Butler integrates a view on the performativity of injurious speech acts. She claims that performative acts are «ritualised practices» that conceal their own constitutive conventions points to how social reality is constructed through repetition. The effectiveness of a performative lies in its ability to appear natural, to «cover over» the fact that it is based on historically contingent practices that are performed in an accumulative manner. As she states:

If a performative provisionally succeeds [...] then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*. [...] In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (Butler [1997]: 51, author's emphasis)

If identities, social realities, power systems, hierarchies, and authorities are constructed through the continuous iteration of actions, what type of authority, power, identity – and ultimately subject – is created when the iteration of a consistent inconsistency is performed?

Let us recall the case of Donald Trump, who by 1999 identified as «very pro-choice», but by 2021 shifted to «pro-life» without explanation (Swan and Haberman [2024]: np). By 2016, he briefly supported punishing women for abortions before quickly backtracking under pressure. Nonetheless, his appointment of conservative justices during his first mandate was instrumental in overturning *Roe v. Wade*⁵. In 2024, he was again shifting positions, trying to balance political gain with backlash from social conservatives.

5 *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision granting women the right to abortion, was overturned in 2022 during Joe Biden's administration by conservative justices previously appointed by Trump. The ruling gave states control over abortion laws, and many have since restricted access.

The power and the construction of the populist figure does not seem to derive from its performativity (in Butler's sense), i.e. through an iteration (visible or not) and accumulation of specific set behaviours, actions, routines, but rather through a constant variation – often even contradictory – of statements (and, as we saw previously, through the curated re-signification of signifiers).

If we were to apply Butler's idea of performativity to the construction of the populist identity, one could say the populist subject – in this case Donald Trump – forms his identity, through the iteration of consistently contradictory or varied statements on a same subject. The (right-wing) populist subject is therefore never a stable identity, except in the sense that there is a meta-stability in always adopting varied and contradictory positions. However, there seems to be an extra step in the populist which involves upsetting the boundary conditions that define what counts as varied or contradictory on any given issue.

As some reports noted (McCreesh [2024]: np), Trump's speech varies according to the audience he is speaking to. It is a type of performance that is re-active and constructed to correspond to the expectations of the Other's gaze, in as much as these expectations will help him to remain in power. It is the iteration of an empathetic behaviour, which is then as much changeable as it is its audience or surroundings, what constructs the populist as a political subject or as a political identity. His political identity coherently changes to mirror the audience he has in front of him and to temporarily become and identify with the other's wishes, expectations and fears.

4.1. Performative / Non-performative

It is May 2022, I am at the Old Operating Theatre Museum in London, performing a speech in French. Whilst some people might understand the language, others might not. The speech is a victory speech delivered by a far-right candidate for the French presidential elections, Marine Le Pen, on their high achievement in votes, in the first turn of the elections in April 2017. The speech is celebrating the success but also a plea to stop migration and reinforce security.

I start performing this speech in an aggressive manner, in a strongwoman type of performance, similarly to what Benjamin Moffitt describes as «performances of strength» (2016). At some point, I stop it in an abrupt manner and Botto, the character, in a different voice tone, addresses the audience: «What do you think?». The audience laughs. I am aware that the laugh might have happened because they did not understand the language, the meaning of the words, and nonetheless I am asking them to comment, but it can as well

be because I suddenly and unexpectedly shifted the rhythm, the tone and the performance, from an aggressive politician delivering a speech at the lectern to the PhD candidate, performer, and performance-maker, who is delivering a performance-lecture, in modes of over-identification, teaching an audience how they can become themselves great populist performers⁶. The sudden shift in the performance has a comic effect, that is proved to provoke laughter because it operates with the unexpected. I then, interrupt their laughter to continue the explanation: «I think it's a little bit too aggressive. Don't you think? The performance of the strongmen and the strongwoman... the aggressiveness... has been hugely over-rated. So why not to try something a little bit different? Why not to try something cute? A performance of cuteness?». Some laughter occurs.

I move towards the lectern and restart the same speech again, now performed in a cute tone: «Mes chers compatriots, vous m'avez porté au second tour de l'élection présidentielle» (My dear compatriots, you have brought me to the second round of the presidential election). When I start the second iteration, the audience, even expecting something in a cute tone given that I had just announced it, laughs, nonetheless. As the speech continues, Rob Hart – the sound designer and creative collaborator, who is also performing live with me – starts to process and modulate my voice in real time, shifting it into the register of an even cuter tone. The audience laughs. The speech is chained with a song praising America, and I perform a childish, cute choreography as if parodying musical theatre. I then begin repeating Donald Trump's lines, whilst performing a minimalist routine that moves me across the stage from left to right, and right to left: «I am going to build a huge, huge wall [...]». I finish with a few turns around the lectern, kneeling on the floor as the audience applauds. An applause I interrupt to start the next segment.

In all iterations of *The Conservatory of Populism*, the audience reacts differently to the aggressive and the cute iteration. In the former, they listen attentively and only laugh after the interruption, while in the latter, they laugh immediately when the first sentence is spoken.

In this example, the (mode of) performance seems to empty the signifier, with the audience reacting more to the cuteness or aggressiveness than to the semantic content. It nearly reverses Austin's theory of «felicity» in performative utterances, although not in an infelicitous way. For a performative utterance to be «felicitous», it must be said in an appropriate context, followed by

6 Note that the audience has already acknowledged that Botto, who shares biographic elements with Botto, the non-character or the historical performer, is performing in modes of over-identification. By performing a version of a right-wing populist supporter, she is subverting the logics, showing the flaws and being highly critical of this politics.

an action⁷. Here, however, the performance prevents the words from becoming performative, turning them into non-performative.

Sarah Ahmed used the term «non-performativity» (2006, 2012) to demonstrate how institutions can undo anti-racist commitments simply by uttering them. In her model, the speech act «does what it says» by failing – by allowing naming alone to stand in for real change – so that stating anti-racism becomes a way of not enacting it (Ahmed [2012]: 117).

My use of non-performative does not mean that the efficaciousness of an utterance is reversed or not enacted but that by deliberately emptying the signifiers through performance – by stripping a speech or gesture of its usual meaning – the non-performative is filled with instability, ambivalence, acquiring the capacity for endless re-signification.

This idea echoes Lacan's «non-knowledge» (Miller [2011]: np) the analyst's stance of *tabula rasa* that lets the analysand's speech emerge unmediated by preconceptions. As Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, only by admitting «I know nothing» can the analyst open space for the analysand's own desire – and only by emptying a signifier of its prior weight can new meanings emerge. Similarly, François Laruelle's «non-philosophy» is not a negation of philosophy, but an expansion of thought to include art, technology, or science on equal footing with traditional philosophy. Non-philosophy «enlarges the set of things that can count as thoughtful» (Mullarkey & Smith [2012]: 2), de-hierarchising discourse⁸.

Trump's performance following the mugshot episode – transforming it into merchandising products – is also non-performative. Not only did it undo an established signifier – previously associated with potential crime – but it unleashed a proliferating field of signification, e.g. resistance, entrepreneurship or heroism. An even when taken as a signifier of crime, his performance re-signified it as if a political persecution.

7 For instance, a judge or priest (appropriate role) in a court or church (appropriate space) declares a couple married, an act followed by the signing of documents and a formal change in their civil status.

8 I am thankful to Dr. Simon Bayly for the hints on «non-knowledge» and «non-philosophy».



Fig. 3 Still from the exhibition video *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species – Commemorative Memorabilia* – watercolour paintings printed on china by Sonia Roshal – Old Operating Theatre London 2022

My notions of non-performative performance as a catalyst for fluctuating and expansive signifiers, along with empathetic signification, capable of absorbing and generating multiple meanings, might be useful tools in artistic practice. They raise, however ethical concerns when unscrupulously applied to politics.

5. *Mimesis, and the subject without qualities*

In a critique to Laclau's notion of the «empty signifier», Benjamin Moffitt and Pierre Ostiguy coined the term «overflowing signifier»⁹. For these authors, an «overflowing signifier» is a signifier that can acquire different meanings within the same range of political affiliation. In this sense, the leader can signify different and many things to their partisans, which remain nonetheless their partisans:

with an «overflowing» signifier, partisans of the *same* political camp associate *many* meanings with the term, name, or leader. For example, Trump may mean different things

9 Laclau's notion of «empty signifier» has received critiques through-out the time, even by Chantal Mouffe, who has suggested instead the term «hegemonic signifier» (Zicman de Barros [2023]: 45).

to many of his partisans, but they remain *his* partisans, *his* camp. While there may be internal rivalry to impose a particular meaning, rather than another, on the same object on the part of different partisans, it remains *one broad* equivalential chain and the same broad political camp. (Ostiguy & Moffitt [2020]: 54, authors' emphasis)

An «overflowing signifier» locates the agency on the side of the voters – or the audience – who fabricate different meanings and have different modes of perception in relation to the populist actor. This type of signifier is therefore produced through a particular «mode of perception» (Burns [1972]: 1), through the external gaze and, therefore, is constructed by its own theatricality. Complementary, my notion of empathetic signification also positions the agency in the actor, the populist actor, whose actions are (re-)produced by mimicking and identifying with the behaviours of their different audiences.

Drawing upon Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of mimesis, I argue that populists are a «plastic subject», embodying the qualities of the overflowing signifier. As seen previously, they keep adapting or changing their rhetoric and behaviour, based on what might be more favourable. For Lacoue-Labarthe, «mimesis is not a process of imitation, in that it cannot imitate some prior subject or essence, but consists in the production or fabrication of the subject» (Jane Hiddleston's introduction in Lacoue-Labarthe [2003]: 55). The subject does not have a prior essence, but it is hollow and empty, formed from equally empty models.

In his theory on mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe draws extensively on Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* (1830), which claimed that it is the absence of proper qualities that gives the actor the plastic capacity to perform anything:

The paradox lies, then, in the following: in order to do everything, to imitate everything – in order to (re)present or (re)produce everything [...] – one must oneself be nothing, have nothing *proper* to oneself except an «equal aptitude» for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions [...]. The paradox states a *law of impropriety*, which is also the very law of mimesis: only the «man without qualities», the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject [...] is able to present or produce in general. [...] This is why the artist [...] is not truly a subject: he is a subject that is a nonsubject or subjectless, and also an infinitely multiplied, plural subject, since the gift of nothing is equally the gift of everything [...] the more the artist (the actor) *is* nothing, the more he can be everything. (Lacoue-Labarthe [1989]: 258-260, author's emphasis)

For Lacoue-Labarthe mimesis is a two-fold process, encompassing «passive» and «active» mimesis. «Passive» or «restricted» mimesis relates to receiving/taking form (from the model, even if the model is an empty one) whereas «active» or «general» mimesis relates to giving or producing form. Both processes are however entangled. Scholar Nidesh Lawtoo considers that there is an implied process of plasticity shadowing this double mimetic process:

Mimesis, just like plasticity, is the property of a subject without property whose defining characteristics are, indeed, to receive form and give form. It is both the subject of a passive *reception of form* (the subjective base, or «wax») and the subject of a typical virtuosity to *give form* (the plastic subject who assumes different «roles») (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213, author's emphasis)

In this double and paradoxical mimetic and plastic process, the subject is both a matrix that can imprint form on others and a malleable subject that can be imprinted by them. Thus, «the line between active and passive, copy and original, subject and object, inside and outside» blurs and destabilises equivalences (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213).

This double process of mimesis can be traced in Botto's work, as the following scene shows.

It is November 2022, I am performing *The Conservatory of Populism* at the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana. Midway through, I re-enact Viktor Orbán's response to a journalist who questioned his «illiberal» policies erasing LG-BTQ+ rights in Hungary: «*I am defending the rights of the homosexual guys*» (Blenkinsop, Siebold, Baczynska [2021]). A blackout and house-techno music follow and strobe lights flash as I start dancing to the beat of the music. I move into the middle of the audience while whispering «*God, fatherland, family*», echoing a previously performed speech by Jair Bolsonaro. Though the audience remains seated, our bodies bounce together, in an atmosphere that seems to mimic a gay nightclub.

I have let myself be imprinted/restricted by those words, but in a generative mimetic process I have transformed them into something else.

I step into the stage again and, as I do so, the loud music stops abruptly, and the lights return sharply: «What about our culture?» – I shout. This sentence initiates the beginning of a sequence on anti-migration statements, assembling Marine la Pen's anti-Islamic, and André Ventura's anti-Roma rhetoric¹⁰. In increasing anger, I utter a speech on how western European culture is being erased by Islamic culture: the covering of women's the body, the veils that hide the faces. Whilst doing so, I strip down my shirt and throw it on the floor. Then wearing only a bra and trousers, I utter Marine Le Pen's statement: «My friends, France is not burkinis on the beach, France is Brigitte Bardot»! (Cooper [2017]). With these words I strip off my bra, provoking a sudden outburst of laughter in the audience. Once this image dissolves, I dress slowly again and begin addressing the audience with questions framed for a yes or no answer, followed by my mimetic identification with their response, «do you pay rent?» and to their «yes!» I reply, «I also pay rent!». This interaction progressively mounts into an angry and feverous speech

10 André Ventura is the leader of Portuguese far right party Chega.

against the Roma people – or «Gypsies» (in Ventura's words) ending with my right wrist raised, feverously shouting the words: «Chega!! Chega! Enough! Enough!!», which is both the slogan and the name of this far-right party.

All the sequence, from «what about our culture» until this moment, is repeated three times. I try, as much as possible, to enact the same movements and words. Yet, each time this score is re-enacted, the rhythm and the intensity of the performance decreases. By the third iteration, the words come as if mumbled, barely perceptible, the lips almost not moving, as if I were a puppet of my own ventriloquist act.

My empty gaze drifts into the horizon, my blank face is expressionless, and the body drags itself as if worn out by repetition. I sit on a chair at the back of the stage and remain in stillness for about two minutes. I can feel a dense and uneasy mood in the room now that was imprint in the audience as I hear them shifting uncomfortably on their chairs.

From the moment I utter «what about our culture» to the moment I sit on the chair at the back of the stage, another mimetic cycle unfolds: restricted, then generative, then restricted again. At first, I absorb the form of populist right-wing rhetoric – the words and their affects (restricted mimesis). As I repeat the score with declining intensity and rhythm, these affects shift and transform into something else (generative mimesis). This dense, heavy mood gradually imprints itself on the audience, who receives it. Silence and emptiness now fill the room – mine and theirs. What they will make of it is up to them.



Fig. 4 *The Conservatory of Populism – Mladinsko Theatre. Ljubljana November 2022*

As Lawtoo explains, for Lacoue-Labarthe restricted mimesis can give rise to totalitarian figures whose will to power may «be violently impressed on what he called the “*Masse*” or “unformed populations”». Such passivity entails a troubling political plasticity, rendering «subjects docile and easily subjected to fascist leaders (old and new) who erect themselves as figures of authority» (Lawtoo [2017]: 1212). Yet, as seen previously, restricted/passive mimesis also encompasses general mimesis, an in-potency «*active, creative, productive, or better re-productive supplement*» (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213), which Lacoue-Labarthe links to the poietic process.

What if general mimesis is applied into (re-)producing forms of politics that generate neither emancipation nor inclusion?

In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Trump lost with approximately 74 million votes to Biden’s 81 million, leaving a vast segment of the electorate dissatisfied. This discontent and uncertainty – I am using these words because they are general, vague and ambiguous enough – already entail other feelings and emotions in potency, which were not yet defined¹¹.

Trump absorbed these indeterminate affects, allowing himself to be imprinted by them in a process of self-restricted mimesis. The populist subject is in-formed – in-felt [*empathetic*, from the Greek *en (in) pathos (feeling)*] – by these intensities. These amorphous affects are then transposed, by way of general mimesis, into determinate signifiers, (feigned) emotions – affective constructs strategically staged to empathise with and fulfil his audiences’ expectations. What this generative mimetic process produces then, is new fantasies, new rhetorics, new identifications, and new empathetic significations.¹² New signifiers, which, through a mimetic process, become now a newly formed model, ready to be (re-)imprinted and (re-)impressed into a population that renders itself available to receive it. Between November 2020 and January 6, 2021, Trump transformed amorphous discontent onto feelings of injustice and into the signifier of «electoral fraud». He addressed his voters, inciting them to walk towards the Capitol and show «their strength», ultimately culminating in the assault on the Capitol and the death of several people.

Contrarily to the authoritarian leaders of the twentieth century (Stalin, Mussolini, or Hitler) who operated through restricted mimesis, rigidly adhering to

11 Brian Massumi distinguishes «feeling» from «emotions» and «affects». As the scholar Eric Shouse explains: «Feelings are personal and biographic, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal» (Shouse [2005]: np). An affect is «a non-conscious experience of intensity» and it exists pre-language, pre-signification. It is upon affects that feelings are constructed. A feeling «is a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled» and thus it is «personal and biographic». An emotion «is the projection/display of a feeling. Unlike feelings, the display of emotion can be either genuine or feigned» (Shouse [2005]: np).

12 New, which are not exactly new, but rather a *trans-formation* or *re-trans-production* from the received model.

their ideologies and impressing them upon vulnerable audiences, contemporary leaders are *plastic* subjects. They operate within the realm of productive mimesis, rendering themselves malleable and plastic, and thus harder to break and to contradict, invalidating even democratic dissensus. Like in Diderot's paradox of the actor, the less the leader has his own ideology, the more ideologies he will be able to produce. They are «subjectless subjects» insofar as they are excessive subjects.

In *The Conservatory of Populism*, Botto too reproduces the paradox. By enacting and re-signifying this rhetoric in multiple ways, in embodied over-identification, she shows us that the leader's capacity to inhabit multiple positions rests not on conviction but on performative plasticity.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I suggest that through a process of empathetic signification, the populist subject deploys performance strategies to re-signify signifiers and construct a provisional political identity that plastically adapts to their specific audiences. This reactive, audience-responsive mode of signification makes populist subjectivity not only plastic but endlessly renewable. Botto's performance practice uses over-identification to expose this dynamic, revealing how populist actors mobilise theatrical strategies and theatricality to re-encode signs and temporarily identify with the projective desire of their audiences and thus remain or ascend to power.

Populist performance thrives on the instability of the signifier, on the emptying and refilling of signifiers, which detached from their referents can acquire new ideological charges. Certain signifiers are transformed into non-performatives, here not infelicitous performatives, but processes that intensify ambiguity, which render themselves endlessly open to new significations. Contrasting to Derrida's iterability and Butler's performativity, populist identity is constructed not through repetition and accumulation but through repetition of contradictory utterances and behaviours.

This iterability of paradoxical actions results in a plastic subjectivity, in a subject (a performer) without qualities, whose political efficacy derives from its plasticity rather than ideology or ethics. A plasticity that constructs and is constructed. In a mimetic loop, it takes the form (restricted mimesis) of indeterminate affects and retranslates them into determinate signifiers and affective gestures (generative mimesis). The populist allows himself to be performed as much as he performs.

While empathetic signification may be generative in artistic contexts, its political deployment risks legitimising manipulative forms of identification.

The spectacular re-signification and commodification of Trump's mugshot illustrates how empathetic resonance with audiences is not merely symbolic but materially productive.

In *The Museum of Impropriety* Botto exposes the illusion of populist authenticity. In doing so, her work underscores that populist power resides in the plastic, embodied capacity to perform multiple selves, in multiple forms. Recognising this mechanism is crucial: it reveals the process of right-wing populist subjectivation and confronts us with the ethical urgency of fighting these unethical forms of political performance.

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