

OLGA NTENTA'S GREEK PRECARIOUS BODY: THE BODY IN THE COSTUME OF CONFLICT

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Abstract: This article explores the tension between freedom and constraint in contemporary political and social contexts through Olga Ntenta's performance project, *Greek Precarious Body*. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's critique of the depoliticization inherent in deliberative democracy and the naturalization of precarity, the article examines how performance and scenography stage the embodied experiences of vulnerability and agency. Through the Classical figures of Oedipus and Jocasta, Ntenta's work enacts the restrictive language of costume as a metaphor for externally imposed limitations that simultaneously evoke states of precarity and enable new forms of engagement. The performance's dialogue with the Classical Greek concept of fate reveals that vulnerability might be not only a passive condition but also a generative force. This reframing has broader implications for political theory and performance studies. For the former, it suggests new ways to understand political pluralism and social agency; for the latter, Ntenta's work positions performance as a vital space for imagining and enacting social and political transformation beyond conventional oppositions, offering possible lines of flight from entrenched binaries and fostering richer modes of collective engagement. Ultimately, the essay positions Ntenta's work as a critical intervention that resonates with agonistic pluralism and imagining social and political transformation beyond oppositional frameworks.

Keywords: Olga Ntenta, Chantal Mouffe, costume, agency, constraint, freedom, performance

In an era increasingly marked by global crises, from economic instability to environmental degradation, modern society often struggles to frame its most pressing issues in political terms, frequently resorting, as Chantal Mouffe argues, to technical or moral solutions. Mouffe's critique of the deliberative model of democracy foregrounds that obscuring the inherent antagonisms that shape our collective realities ultimately undermines genuine political pluralism. Within this

landscape, two outcomes ensue. On the one hand, the sense of precarity emerges not merely as an induced condition defining contemporary existence, but as a state of naturalized vulnerability. On the other hand, freedom and constraint are often cast as opposites, framing the binary between liberation and limitation, which overlooks the complex interplay shaping embodied and lived experience of social and political agency.

It is precisely into this critical space that Olga Ntenta's *Greek Precarious Body* intervenes. The performance of the restrictive language of costume by two Classical figures, Oedipus and Jocasta, stages the conflict between body, desire, and external contingency through the embodied experience of precarity induced by the constrained movement of performers. The project, presented in a range of scenography and performance events since 2017, was also the topic of Ntenta's Flash Talk during the Prague Quadrennial Symposium "Technologies in Theatre, Performance, and Exhibition Design" in October 2024. Based on the performance engaged with the Classical Greek concept of fate and the joint performance of the body and the costume, the talk addressed the dilemma of hindrance and innovation that ensued from embracing restrictions. This article discusses the Flash Talk and asks two questions. The first one concerns the nature of the interplay between liberation and constraint. The second deals with the performance's and scenography's roles in staging such a clash to suggest possible lines of flight from oppositional thinking.

Ntenta's project is clearly a good case in point. While the costume serves as an externally imposed contingency, it also foregrounds that constraints do not only limit freedom and create states of vulnerability or precarity but also give rise to new possibilities of engagement. This dynamic bears contemporary significance. Analysing these intersections I argue that Ntenta's work positions constraints, often perceived as oppositional to freedom, as the very conditions for its emergence. These constraints initiate new possibilities for engagement, grounding the concept of freedom in the everyday embodied interaction. In doing so, Ntenta's project also suggests wider implications for the role of performance in outlining possibilities of social and political engagement.

The Body as a Site of Contestation

The scenographer's initial point of departure in costume design for *Greek Precarious Body* is Judith Butler's propositions in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009). Exploring the ways the media and state frameworks selectively shape only certain lives as grievable and worthy of mourning, particularly in contexts of war and global violence, the book challenges the notion of the body as

a bounded, autonomous entity. Butler emphasizes the body's inherent sociality and its dependence on external relations, norms, and political organizations and develops a concept of the body as permeable and interdependent, rejecting any fixed essence of corporeal being.

Butler develops this conceptualization of the body along with the differentiation of precarity from precariousness. Precariousness refers to the ontological condition of the body, which, as a living organism, is vulnerable and prone to injury and dissolution: hence, precariousness as the basic condition of all living beings precedes the political allocation of protection and survivability. Precarity, on the other hand, "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death."¹ As a result of this correlation, "precariousness that establishes a certain equality of exposure is denied in favour of a differential distribution of precarity."² Within this context, Butler positions the body as an "unbound" entity that does not belong to itself because "in its acting, its receptivity, in its speech, desire, and mobility [it] is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector."³

Drawing on these theoretical propositions, Ntenta posits costume as an articulation of dynamic relationality: the body interfaces with external forces in a state of extreme proximity while being enclosed and shaped by them. This understanding gives rise to a design-oriented conception wherein these external forces manifest materially on and around the body, akin to the costume.⁴ Such a point of departure, both theoretically and practically, aligns with costume's function to "reveal the relationship between dress, body and human existence [and] guide movement, define place, and structure relationships."⁵ According to Donatella Barbieri, costume plays a crucial role in the "defining of social interaction, individuality, and inner conflict" by shaping and communicating these dynamics to the audience.⁶ That is to say that contemporary performance employs costume as an active element that embodies and reveals complex interactions among attire, the body, and human existence.

¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 25.

² Butler, *Frames of War*, xxv.

³ Butler, *Frames of War*, 52.

⁴ Olga Ntenta, "Greek Precarious Body: Designing and Performing through the Materials," Flash Talk, 6 August 2020, by Costume Agency / Critical Costume 2020, YouTube, 8:42, <https://youtu.be/9NmgSE5EsZI>.

⁵ Donatella Barbieri, *Costume in Performance: Materiality, Culture, and the Body* (London, Oxford and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), xxii.

⁶ Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, xxii.

Similarly to the individuated body as simultaneously social and political, the performative nature of costume is a site of meaning-making and critique of social realities and tensions enacted through materiality and embodiment. This expanded understanding views costume not merely as an aesthetic or representational tool but as an active force integral to the spatial, relational and affective dimensions of performance, and sustaining "a discursive agonistic space" where the body in the costume is, in Clare Wallace's terms, "metonymic of a social body."⁷ On the other hand, costume becomes a nexus where embodied experience and cultural meaning dynamically intersect, foregrounding the agency of material culture in performance and the body as a site of sociopolitical inscription. In other words, the costumed body acts as a vector where a range of social and cultural relations are inscribed. Last but not least, through its metaphorical and visceral communicative power, costume establishes a direct, embodied connection with spectators, drawing attention to the performer's corporeal presence in the here-and-now shared with a present, sentient audience.⁸

In its performative nature the costume in *Greek Precarious Body* embodies Chantal Mouffe's conceptualisation of agonistic pluralism, which the political theorist sees as a more viable alternative to the model of deliberative democracy with its focus on the search for morally or rationally justified solutions, which ultimately results in the limitations of political pluralism. The ultimate objective of the dominant paradigm of deliberative democracy is the creation of a rational consensus based on impartial outcomes that meet everyone's interests equally. This, Mouffe argues, eradicates the ineradicable aspect of politics, i.e., the antagonistic dimension linked to the "ever-present possibility of the friend-and-enemy groupings."⁹ Relational and constructed through a constitutive outside, "political identities, which are always collective identities, entail the creation of an 'Us' that only exists by distinguishing itself from a 'Them.'"¹⁰ For Mouffe, it implies that any form of social objectivity bears the traces of acts of exclusion and cannot be eradicated or wished away. The costume in Ntenta's project analogously performs the ever-present precarity, induced and not to be cast off, but worked on.

While Mouffe does not directly deal with the notion of precarity, her propositions nonetheless echo Butler's thought in the emphasis on relational constitution of identity through the inescapable impact of external forces, the

⁷ Clare Wallace, "Embodying Agonism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Mosquitoes* and *The Welkin*," *Litteraria Pragensia* 32, no. 63 (2022): 37, 35.

⁸ Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, xxii.

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy* (CSD, 2002), 6.

¹⁰ Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*, 7.

dimension that Ntenta seeks to illustrate in her costume design. Butler calls for a collective, political and ethical response linked to the “responsibility for the minimisation of precarity [through] the ontology of the body [as] a social phenomenon [...], exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.”¹¹ Mouffe suggests a model of agonistic pluralism, aiming to transform potential political antagonism into “agonism,” a controlled struggle between adversaries who respect shared democratic principles. Arguing that politics is inherently characterised by an “agonistic” struggle where conflicts are not eradicated but transformed from antagonism (enemy) to agonism (adversary),¹² Mouffe not only recognizes the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints but also foregrounds the positively adversarial foundation of freedom in the political and social sphere, which should, as Ntenta’s project demonstrates, stage the tensions of agency and constraint within pluralistic contestation and negotiation.

Oedipus and Jocasta: Constraint and Agency

Greek Precarious Body articulates a rigorous yet generative dialogue between bodily agency and constraint. By physically restricting the body and shaping the performers’ movements, the costume acts out a tangible manifestation of external socio-political forces. This way, the performance of two characters, Oedipus and Jocasta, is delivered not only by the acting bodies but also by their costumes.

Jocasta’s costume is crafted from industrial material, which, as an aesthetic choice, represents a functional barrier, restricting her arms and vision. Her arms are locked into one sleeve, signifying the lack of agency. A high collar physically embodies an inhibited perception of the surrounding space. The costume encloses Jocasta’s body, positioned high on a pedestal made of cubes. Stepping off the pedestal safely is impossible since obstructed vision precludes measuring the risks of this endeavour.

Oedipus, on the other hand, wears large metal springs on his feet as an explicit reference to Sophocles’s tragic character, whose name – meaning “swollen foot/ankle” – evokes the physical deformity inflicted by his parents in an attempt to escape the prophecy. Alternatively, the name is also linked to the Greek verb οἶδα (*oída*), meaning “to know,” thus referencing the Sphinx’s riddle about the number of feet. This pun symbolically ties the body and knowledge. While the springs disrupt Oedipus’s balance and make movement difficult, in contrast to Jocasta’s cube pedestal, the support bar enables him to move within the bar’s safety radius.

¹¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 33.

¹² See especially Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 98-107.

The interplay between Oedipus's nearly naked body and Jocasta's body, fully concealed by costume, enriches the performative dimensions of both body and costume, as the exposure of one performer's muscular tension in the attempts to move implicates the latent tension of the other, hidden from view. This way, "the power of the costume [residing] in the interplay with the body underneath" becomes even more pronounced.¹³ While, as the scenographer notes, Oedipus and Jocasta are trapped in their own individual suffering, each physically constrained in a way that reflects Sophocles's tragedy, the performance of the bodies equipped with different props and limited by the specificity of their costumes presents a joint choreography of negotiating their precarious situations.

Both performers wear Kinect skeleton tracking modules and sound recording devices. The soundscape created by the interaction between their bodies and the costume materials amplifies the dynamic interplay of agency and constraint. Moments of near stillness highlight faint creaks and groans, while movement generates layered rhythms of scraping and snapping. These embodied sounds communicate the performers' struggle to move within immovable costumes, and the sonic environment conveys antagonistic and agonistic relationships between agency and constraint, compliance and disobedience. Hence, the struggles of the characters are not only visible but also audible.

Despite the precarious positioning of their bodies as they struggle to maintain balance, Oedipus and Jocasta reach toward one another and ultimately succeed in making contact. Oedipus lets go of the bar in order to move toward Jocasta, who, in turn, lifts her arms toward him, even though this threatens her own balance. Albeit framed by the notion of fate in the context of the Greek tragedy, the characters, as Ntenta notes, realize that they should "understand the restriction and work with it."¹⁴ This goes in stark contrast to the decisions made by Sophocles's characters to blind oneself and to end one's life. From the scenographer's perspective, understanding and working with precarity, which in its pessimistic undertones is similar to tragedy, is particularly valuable as such a proactive approach enables the development of coping mechanisms and fosters a sense of hope. Herein, Ntenta echoes Simon Critchley's assertion that understanding tragedy simply as misfortune is a significant misunderstanding; rather, Greek tragedies reveal how we unknowingly collude with the calamities that befall us.¹⁵

¹³ Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, 135.

¹⁴ Ntenta, "Greek Precarious Body."

¹⁵ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 12.

Ntenta's project stages such a collision foregrounding that both agency and constraint are relative and constructed. In Ntenta's words, there emerges "the shared agency" between the body and the costume, illustrating the relation between precarity and precariousness.¹⁶ The costume, as much as any attire, demonstrates not only the essential vulnerability of the human body. The natural reaction of the audience, wondering why the characters do not attempt to get rid of their restrictive costumes, also signifies the blurred boundaries between the imposed, standing for precarity, and the essential, standing for precariousness. Butler asserts the blurred boundaries between essential and imposed constraints, just as the divide between sex and gender, body and the world:

The outside is constantly taken in in order to live, which is why the politics of food, water, air, and shelter are crucial to living, to living on, and to living well. In its porosity, the body lets in the external world in order to survive, and when its boundaries are fully closed off from what is outside, it falters. [...] If the body and its sex are both understood as relational, then the social has enveloped and entered us way before we enter into any deliberate relation with the social.¹⁷

This relational ontology directly informs the ambiguity of encloded Jocasta's precarity on the pedestal: her restrictive costume does not merely constrain the body but enacts gendered norms as performative constraints, whereby sex appears as an essential attribute yet emerges through sartorial/social imposition. The rigid fabric of the costume and the limited space of the pedestal immobilize the body as a corseted and elevated feminine figure, thereby citing the patriarchal ideal of femininity. Jocasta's body is compelled to use only the limited repertoire of bodily gestures. This blurs the boundaries between corporeal and social coercion, vulnerability (precariousness) and culturally inscribed femininity (precarity) and justifies two readings of the performance. First is Ntenta's own reading: the restriction of the costume signifying the precarity imposed on the character is analogous to the conflict in Greek tragedy, where fate as a phenomenon beyond rationality and choice also foregrounds the relation between precarity and precariousness. Second, via Butler's sex/gender critique, encloded Jocasta foregrounds how gendered embodiment naturalizes social norms as biological, precluding both the awareness of the processes that lead to its emergence and the search for ways of coping with it. Thereby, the critical point in Ntenta's approach

¹⁶ Ntenta, "Greek Precarious Body."

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 181.

to Sophocles's plot lies not in eliminating this constraint but in seeking ways to work through it. This approach destabilizes the boundary between precarity and precariousness, fostering an awareness that many of the conditions structuring our embodied experience, often regarded as natural, are in fact products of social and political forces. Both the spatial environment and the costumes challenge the body, but, more fundamentally, they interrogate the mechanisms by which awareness of available choices is constructed.

In this context, a series of critical questions arises concerning not only the materiality of constraint but also of its 'everyday' nature. The mundane is a stage where agonistic interactions both between individuals and their environment, as well as among individuals take place. The tension between agency and constraint is not merely an embodied experience but a mundane performance of the public and the private. Sophocles's Oedipus well exemplifies that. The embodiment of both the individual's and the ruler's fate, Oedipus symbolizes the inseparability of private and public responsibility. As the king of Thebes and a figure of political authority and civic order, who gains his leadership status for his ability to solve problems and safeguard the city, Oedipus treads his personal journey as deeply entangled with the fate of the polis. His origin and familial history are expected to have direct and catastrophic political consequences for Thebes. In an attempt to assert his free will by rejecting oracular prophecy and basing his legitimacy on merit alone, Oedipus himself sees personal and political realms as intertwined. This entanglement exemplifies how the 'everyday' constraints intertwining with individual embodiment also permeate political life, where private histories and choices inevitably reverberate within the public sphere. While Oedipus's public role is performative in the sense that his legitimacy and moral authority are constantly enacted and tested through speech and action, his agency as a private body in Sophocles's tragedy is self-constrained by internalizing the constructed nature of prophetic speech act and naturalizing it to the level of a non-negotiable given, i.e., fate.

Ntenta, however, stages the performance with the layers of intertwined political and personal signification that opposes this dynamic. The performative in Ntenta's project emphasizes that the political is not only embodied but also staged through mundane acts represented by movement not only in the vicinity of props but also in relation to the other. These acts are not merely expressive but constitutive, actively shaping the reality of the political community. In *Greek Precarious Body* this finds realisation in the fact that Oedipus, whose vision is unobstructed, decides to let go of the support bar. Such an act is intricately entwined with the performative nature of scenography and costume, and the audience's role in witnessing it. The mundane acts of negotiating the discomfort

of such a phenomenon as clothing and endangered bodily balance become a contested space that can illustrate agonistic negotiation, where power relations, social norms, and political authority are performed, challenged, and reimagined. Therefore, the audience is invited to decode and respond to these layered enactments. This structural invitation suggests a potential for empowered engagement, where spectators might negotiate the work's ambiguities through their own interpretative labour.

Performativity and Scenography of the Mundane and the Precarious

Scenography of the everyday is not merely a setting but an immersive and at times coercive environment. It is not merely confined to the stage but is experienced and engaged through embodied participation. As Lotker and Gough observe,

we move through many scenographies during the day; we go from one environment to another – from actual to virtual, from private to public, from staged to un-staged, from known to unknown. We perform scenographies and they perform us.¹⁸

This underscores that everyday scenography is active, participatory, and constitutive of the social fabric. Rachel Hann emphasizes that “scenography sustains a feeling of the beyond where the crafting of a ‘scene’ encompasses a range of distinct methods for atmospheric transformation that score how encounters of ‘world’ are conceptualized and rendered attentive.”¹⁹ Material and technological interventions orchestrate continuous processes of worlding, shaping and understanding environments and experiences dynamically. This intersection highlights that scenography, in both theatrical and quotidian contexts, is inherently performative: it stages and produces social realities moment by moment.

That scenography is performed admits little doubt; more significantly, performativity underlying the construction of social and embodied practices across space and time can be seen to manifest what Rachel Hann terms “scenographics.” While performativity denotes citational iteration of normative world-making beyond discrete acts, scenographics is an umbrella term for elements like costumes, lighting and sound that subtly guide and shape our attention to a place or situation. Unlike scenography, as the deliberate design and

¹⁸ Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough, “On Scenography: Editorial,” *Performance Research* 18, no. 3 (2013): 3-6.

¹⁹ Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (London: Routledge, 2019), 2.

crafting of sets and environments (for example, for a theatre set), scenographics refers to the orienting effects and traits that any object or event can have without being scenography *per se*. From this perspective, performativity's scenographics emerges as an embodied iteration of the normative, manifest not the least through attire, among other things. Kathleen Irwin's concept of spatial performativity echoes this point, illustrating that spatial and material arrangements shape social interactions as performative acts.²⁰ In this context, Ntenta's work similarly exemplifies the intertwining of performativity and scenographics in two ways. For one, Jocasta's costume is crafted from industrial tracer fabric, a material engineered for high-visibility tracking in low-light conditions. Far from mundane, this fabric's luminous glow under stage lighting would transform constraint into a spectral presence, illuminating the violence of constraint. Conversely, Jocasta's costume, whose constituents, i.e., sleeves and collar, are stripped of their mundane functionality, generates meaning, and along with it, identity and social relations.

Thereupon, a peculiar dynamic takes place. The mundane functionality of the attire is a ground shared by Oedipus, Jocasta and the audience; yet the material of the attire subtly tampers with the shared nature of this ground. On the one hand, any member of the audience can easily identify with the discomfort caused by its constraints: we all know what it feels like to wear ill-fitting shoes or shirts with tight sleeves or an improperly fitted armhole. On the other hand, the sensation of fabric constitutes a highly individual experience because tactile perception varies across bodies, shaped by physiological differences (e.g., skin sensitivity) or contextual embodied states (e.g., tension). Hence, the sensation of constraint heightens collective awareness of attire's performative dimensions, yet the fabric's tactile impact, albeit imagined, would remain irreducibly elusive, varying across individual audience members. Using Merleau-Ponty's framework, such perceptual singularity arises because "the other who invades me is made only of my own substance: how could I conceive precisely as *his*, *his* colors, *his* pain, *his* world, except as in accordance with the colors I see, the pains I have had, the world wherein I live?"²¹ Consequently, while costume design renders the tension between agency and constraint an immediately perceptible and collectively embodied experience, its material simultaneously underscores the elusive, far from self-evident nature of this shared dimension.

²⁰ Kathleen Irwin, *The Ambit of Performativity: How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance* (Helsinki: University of Art and Design, 2007), 75-84.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 11.

Just as the performance space and costumes in Ntenta's project frame the Classical Greek conflict, the everyday scenographic environment influences how individuals negotiate their agency within constraints, revealing that the boundary between precarity and precariousness is fluid and subject to the ongoing process of worldmaking, mediated through embodied, spatial, and material practices. This points to a broader understanding: scenography and performativity are mutually constitutive, each shaping and being shaped by the other, continuously reconfiguring the social and existential environments we inhabit.

In addition to the intertwined nature of performativity and scenographics along the lines of the (non-)mundane, Ntenta's reimagining of the Oedipus myth converges these in an exploration of precarity. Drawing on Butler's understanding that the body is always shaped by external forces, Ntenta uses costume as a metaphor for the 'others' as constraint, which evolves throughout the performance from antagonism to agonism by negotiating the terrain of the precarious. The materials of the costume and the performance set physically challenge the performers, compelling them to navigate constraints that demand compliance. However, it is precisely this demand that opens spaces for agency, when the tension is not necessarily resolved but enacted as a productive conflict. By referring to the body itself as precarious, Ntenta emphasizes the ongoing embodied negotiation between agency and constraint, where the transient contact the performers strive for illustrates the transient balance rather than long-lasting resolution.

Ntenta's work aligns with Chantal Mouffe's propositions on political conflict, underscoring the inevitability and necessity of agonistic engagement. Mouffe's framework of productive political conflict as essential to democracy elucidates the performance's distinct Greekness, rooted in Ancient tragedy's motifs of fate's inexorability and human limits against cosmic order. This is particularly relevant considering what Dan Rebellato has termed "Grentrance," referring to the post-2015 surge of Greek Classics on British stages. Rebellato attributes this revival to "unadorned severity," whereby tragedy's archetypal conflicts, individuals against the state, kin against kin, mortals against destiny, strip life to "bare" political crises.²² Foley similarly observes that "Greek tragedy permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical." Noting its recurrent use across times and contexts, from *Antigone* in occupied France of World War II to *Prometheus Bound* in modern China, Foley observes that on the American stage, in particular, Greek tragedy's "spareness, raw candor," and over-determination address embodiment amid political crises.²³

²² Dan Rebellato, "Enter the Greeks," *Spilled Ink* (blog), Dan Rebellato (personal website), 5 July 2015, <https://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2015/7/5/enter-the-greeks>.

²³ Helene P. Foley, "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014) 129, no. 3 (1999): 3-5.

The parallels between politics and embodiment characterise many of the adaptations from Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996) to Milo Rau's *Medea's Children* (NTGent, Pražské křižovatky, 2024), where Greek tragedy repurposes mythic motifs to interrogate contemporary crises of conflict, agency and embodiment. *Greek Precarious Body* fits well with this tradition. Just as Ntenta's performers navigate tensions between constraint and agency, Mouffe reminds us that political agency emerges through acknowledging a conflict and productively engaging with it, rather than seeking ways of its tenuous resolution. Thus, Ntenta's performance and Mouffe's political theory mutually illuminate how precariousness and agonistic confrontation are central to both embodied experience and democratic politics, weaving together the performative and the scenographic as sites of negotiation, resistance, and transformation.

Performance, Restriction, Liberation

With the considerations of embodied agency and constraint, it is now possible to address the questions of the interplay between liberation and restriction and the role of performance in staging such an interplay. Both questions, first and foremost, foreground the affective space of individual embodied experience within community. As Harvey Young rightfully notes, "although we can approximate the experience of another, ours will never be the same."²⁴ Nevertheless, the viability of community is constitutive of a certain degree of experiential overlap whereby everyday social performances form what Pierre Bourdieu terms *habitus*, a generative matrix where shared internalized social expectations are performed and used towards judging the performance of others. While the performative nature of these social acts is ignored and the latter function as "intentionless invention of regulated improvisation,"²⁵ the body within these social acts is hardly an objectively seeable phenomenological entity. It is to a large degree rationalized and mediated as either imagined by the self or 'witnessed' by the other. From this perspective, the body is on the boundary of in/visibility and mis/recognition.

Affective space of such a body is therefore hardly a pre-cognitive state that Brian Massumi speaks about. Communally, it is also influenced by the processes of filtering similar experiences shared by the members of the community and individually perceived forms of engagement. Hence, when the audience becomes

²⁴ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 61.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 79.

a witness of Oedipus's and Jocasta's struggle with constraints, the figures of the Greek tragedy are hardly the sole stakeholders in the performance. The mundane functionality of the costume

works as a lived affective experience [implicating the performers and viewers]. It is a lived process in time, a shared community, a felt experience. [...] Costume refuses thought and returns us always to the body in motion and its cognitive "affect" upon us, [...] transforming the body, affecting the "mind" that wears and the mind that watches.²⁶

Hence, the role of the performance is twofold. One, it foregrounds that costume design used in Ntenta's project grounds the abstract concept of precarity in a tangible, almost oppressive, materiality. Ntenta's aesthetic decision directly comments on the dehumanizing aspects of socio-political conditions with constitutive constraint on existence. Second, the choice of constraint related to specific elements of the performers' costumes is itself illustrative of various modes of restricting of freedom. For example, Jocasta's sleeves are like those of a straitjacket, typically used to restrain people who may cause harm to themselves or others. Since freedom is only viable when there is the self and other, 'us' and 'them,' Ntenta's design and the materials of the costumes are central to articulating not only the experience of conflict and constraint but also the politics of consensus that Mouffe writes about, claiming that liberal theorists fail to acknowledge both the persistent presence of social and political strife and the indispensability of this conflict in a well-functioning democracy.²⁷ The precarious embodied interaction between Oedipus and Jocasta, constrained and shaped by their costumes, captures the interplay between imposed restriction (precarity/conflict) and vulnerable response (precariousness/constraint).

Just as the performers' struggle toward contact is framed within constraints that are not accidental but structurally integral, democracy's vitality emerges not from eliminating conflict but from institutionalizing it within shared allegiance to democratic principles. Mouffe insists on the necessity of agonistic confrontation between democratic adversaries, players in a contest where disagreement is both legitimate and constitutive. Similarly, the costumes signify conditions imposed by 'fate' beyond rational choice, yet the performers' bodily responses and movements reveal the potential for shared agency and contested meaning within these

²⁶ Melissa Trimmingham, "Agency and Empathy: Artists Touch the Body," in Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, 138.

²⁷ Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*, 10.

constraints. This mirrors Mouffe's "splitting of the summit," wherein democratic life demands clear opposition and the possibility of political identification through difference rather than enforced consensus.

Therefore, the performance staging Oedipus's and Jocasta's precarious physicality and mutually threatening gestures unfolds as an embodied metaphor of agonistic democracy. The integral presence of conflict and constraint, as structured by costume and enacted through precarious balance, echoes Mouffe's claim that democratic politics is sustained by the productive integration of dissent, packaged within a common adherence to democratic norms and institutions. The performance, in effect, materializes the democratic paradox: unity contingent on pluralism, consensus enabled through conflict, and lived experience shaped by the constant negotiation between body, imposed limits, and the persistent strife for political and existential contact and connection.

Politically, these costumes actively articulate a critique of societal structures that generate and perpetuate precarity as 'fate,' a non-negotiable given. By rendering 'them' (the forces of constraint) physically present and audibly impactful through the costumes, Ntenta's staging invites the audience to perceive, and thus potentially contend with, the subtle, yet pervasive, violence of symbolic forms of control. Yet, the performance also suggests a powerful counter-narrative: that constraint itself can become a condition for the emergence of freedom. Oedipus's and Jocasta's costumes, therefore, do not merely illustrate oppression; they also highlight the potential for responsive, shared agency between the body and the very elements that seek to limit it, emphasizing that even within stringent limitations, the body finds ways to assert itself and engage in ongoing negotiation.

As to the role of performance, as an artistic genre since the early stages of its development as a field, it has been endowed with the power to transgress boundaries. With its origins in ritualistic practices and linked by Victor Turner to liminality, performance has always been of communal and social nature with its own peculiar social structure and hierarchy, legitimately different from the one that guided everyday life. As such it articulated the alternative set-up that operated with its own social scenography, performative attire, and specific roles assigned to certain bodies. Constrained by such assignments, yet agentic, the bodies performed and were judged for their roles and functions, with little or no effort to obscure the fact that they are performing in a theatrical sense. While an anthropological perspective is beyond the scope of this article, it would suffice to mention that the performance of overcoming one's adversary was one of many in the repertoire of these ritualistic performances. Hence, the conflictual dimension was at the heart of anthropological performances as much as it is at the heart of Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism. Recognizing that conflict and passionate

disagreement are inevitable and enduring features of life, performance provides the space for staging compromises and alternatives. The most important is that it renders them possible but always provisional, temporary pauses in an ongoing confrontation.

Ntenta's restrictive costumes in the performance function as a physical embodiment of the political, the inherent antagonistic forces, norms, and power relations that enclose the body and create conditions of seemingly inescapable conflict and constraint. These costumes are not simply obstacles to be overcome for a harmonious resolution; rather, they represent fundamental conditions that the characters must engage with, much like the unavoidable antagonism present in any society. The costume's "affective *material* performativity"²⁸ juxtaposes precarity and precariousness to show that Oedipus and Jocasta exercise agency within adversarial space. The performance does not offer an escape from this precariousness; the performers do not attempt to cast off their costumes. Instead, they explore and work with their adversarial design, much like political agency unfolds within the constraints and possibilities of the political field.

To conclude, Olga Ntenta's performance *Greek Precarious Body* offers a physical, embodied, and material exploration of themes central to agonistic pluralism. Through the metaphor of costume as external forces and the body in the costume of conflict, Ntenta stages precarity and constraint as essential to human existence, "as generating improbable moments of connectedness" while reworking the Classical Greek concept of fate.²⁹ Performance, in this context, becomes a dynamic space where these struggles are enacted and made visible. The body in the costume of conflict thus performs the vector of social and political relations while maintaining its embodiment and materiality within scenography of the ongoing coexistence and negotiation of difference, possibilities for connection and transformation within precarious realities.

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²⁸ Barbieri, *Costume in Performance*, 30.

²⁹ Wallace, "Embodying Agonism," 38.

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