**Case study article**

**Performing Inequality: Feminist performative acts as protest gestures**

Elena Marchevska

*London South Bank University*

Abstract: This article will look at three case studies of performative political protest, where female activists are raising awareness of the precarious conditions of their lived experience in economic neoliberalism. The research is focused on links between Focus E15 Mothers Group in London, the #protestiram movement in Macedonia and #direnkahkaha (resist laughter) in Turkey. I will analyse these protest movements’ performative acts and argue that these acts are strategically used to draw attention to the inequality faced by women.

Keywords: female protest; gesture; humour; stillness; performance and protest;

**Introduction**

In 2011, *Time Magazine* named ‘the protester’ Person of the Year, arguing that protest has become ‘the defining trope of our times’ and the protester ‘a maker of history’.

The cover image of the ‘protestor’ was a drawing of a young women, her face covered with a scarf, only her eyes looking out from under the beanie hat that covered her hair. The drawing of the anonymous female protestor expresses the editors’ experience of the wave of protest movements that marked that year.[[1]](#footnote-1) More than anything, this image tries to suggest that the making of history is a creative process led by clandestine, but powerful woman. Almost all the movements that were analysed in this issue of *Time Magazine* reconsider older revolutionary positions and forge new cross-cultural visions of alternative wellbeing. In 2011 the rise of these counter-cultural protest movements was seen as motor of socio-cultural change; subsequently, they have all have been challenged and depleted by complex trends of (dis)engagement and (post)democracy since the EU austerity crisis, continued conflicts in the Middle East and recent elections in USA.

With this article, I would like to look at three case studies of performative political protest, where female activists are raising awareness of their own precarious conditions of lived experience in economic neoliberalism. The research is focused on links between Focus E15 Mothers Group in London, UK; the #protestiram movement in Macedonia and #direnkahkaha (resist laughter) in Turkey. These movements are local and comparatively much smaller than movements like Occupy or Los Indignados. However, they share some strategies and gestures with protestors in these larger movements. I am arguing that by borrowing gestural vocabulary from historical and bigger protest movements, these local protests are weaving together a complex network between the social, theatrical and gestural, to draw attention to injustice.

In the first part of the article I will elaborate on the recent history and present state of feminist performance protest. I will also discuss the use of gesture as a crucial element of feminist protest strategy. In the second part of the article, I will discuss the strategies used by each of the three case study protest movements; I will look at three elements: use of space, use of gesture and finally, how they present themselves to the wider public. The aim of the article is to contextualize the different protest practices and look in depth at how they operate. I am arguing that despite their differences, these female-led protest movements have a similar intention: to fight local injustice towards women, and thereby contribute to a global conversation. Furthermore, by appropriating feminist gestural strategies used in historical protest against inequality, the protest movements analysed in this article stage powerful transgenerational political resistance.

**Feminist performance protest strategies: Occupying the space in-between**

I became interested in how protest operates at the site of repression and precarious living, because I experienced a series of protests first-hand in my home country, Macedonia. These protests were very different from global protest movements in scale. However, they were very similar in form and gestural vocabulary. Through my research I also became aware of how gender-blind the analysis of social movements is. Female protestors in different parts of the world were using similar gestural strategies (standing in lines, wearing red clothing, over-feminine make-up, showing off their breasts and bodies in public, talking directly to police forces etc.) to draw attention to injustice. I recognised these gestures from historical images and film footage of women protesting in the 1960s and 1970s. But very little was written about these protest actions and the reasoning behind the choice of gestural acts. I encountered a lack of language to approach this delicate territory.

As argued by Jonathan Dean and Kristin Aune:

Feminists have drawn attention to, among other things, tacit assumptions that the default activist was male (and indeed white, able-bodied and heterosexual); the tendency to consider gender as at best an add-on variable rather than a constitutive feature of social movements; a disregard for the role of embodiment, affect and emotion in the study of social movements and political mobilization; and the often instrumental, goal-oriented thrust of much social movement analysis. (2015: 376)

As they further argue in this article, feminist use of different protest strategies varies across Europe, due to complex cultural and historical differences. Second wave feminism in the Western World (predominately in West Europe and USA) paved the way for feminist activism. According to Cami Rowe, ‘The Vietnam era was particularly key to the trajectory of politicized and integrated art. This period saw the escalation of self-consciously performative tactics among political activists.’ (2013:9). But, in many Eastern European countries this process happened two decades later, after the transition to market capitalism. What I argue in this article is that precisely this historical discontinuity encouraged a re-emergence of specific gestures and strategies in and beyond Western Europe.

The *Time Magazine* 2011 cover image reminds us that the last decade has seen a resurgence of feminist protest and activist movements: female protestors actively joining the Arab Spring, transnational sexual politics movements such as SlutWalk and FEMEN, the performative protest activism of Pussy Riot and most recently The Women’s March which demonstrated unprecedented levels of international solidarity. Feminist activism remains influential and relevant, takes various forms and operates on different scales, from individual actions (such as signing a petition) to group actions (Pussy Riot’s musical performances) to large-scale actions coordinated between countries (Women’s March and SlutWalk). What is common is that all this activism, in diverse ways, challenges gender injustice.

In this article I am particularly interested in how contemporary feminist activists use the body and gesture as tools to protest gender (and wider) injustice. In May 2016, my attention was captured by an image that was widely circulated on social media and by news outlets. It was a photograph of Tess Asplund, 42, with fist raised against the leadership of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) in Borlänge, central Sweden. The photo emerged during a turbulent period in Europe, when the continent struggled with an immense refugee crisis and harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric. The image of Asplund’s was even more important in this context. A young female mixed-race body displaying a clear act of resistance: her fist raised high. A simple gesture, against a line of NRM white men marching in white shirts, immediately illustrated the current political struggle. It offered a fleshy reminder of the thousands who are threatened by the resurgence of nationalistic rhetoric in Europe. By adopting this gesture, Asplund refused the erosion of democracy brought about by this dangerous, ultra-right wing racist movement.

Furthermore, this image is very theatrical. It reminds us that contemporary protest movements draw on performance to enhance their potency and message. Jenny Hughes and Simon Parry are studying extensively how examining gesture and the gestural is pivotal in analysis of the body in protest. For the purposes of this article, I would like to draw on their argument that we need a complex coalition of the social, theatrical, and the gestural in order to understand contemporary protest movements. As they argue:

The gestures of raising arms and standing still *compose* by figuring points of justification, balance, and expression for the body that might reliably bear its weight during moments of crisis. Both gestures produce quotidian clefts in everyday space and time, drawing attention to the incipient potential of small, mimetic figurations, precisely positioned, to materialise and resist matrices of injustice. (2015: 303)

Although it is impossible at this time to comprehensively trace the use and analysis of gesture and the gestural in theatrical history, I would like to draw attention to the feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan’s studies in this area. As argued by Kim Solga, ‘the interplay between loss (part of a traumatic, shared past that lives on in our present world) and hope (for a better and fairer collective future)‘ became a focus of feminist performance scholarship in the years after 9/11. (2016:56) Jill Dolan, in her project *Utopia in performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (2005), establishes a body of work that looks at what she calls ‘utopian performatives’. According to Dolan these are ‘small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present.’(2005:5) Solga argues that this moves the audience towards the consideration of ‘what if’ as opposed to ‘what should be’ and establishes this question as a political one. She further asserts that for Dolan this question is:

…always a political one, always an activist one, and it is always directed at audiences as groups of citizens who share the ongoing project of living in, creating, and sustaining genuine democracy in the face of dispersed global terror movement on one hand, and, on the other, an increasingly entrenched turn towards neoliberalism and corporate rights as a governance model across the globe. (2016:60)

Also pertinent to this article is that Dolan aligns with the Brecht’s idea of gestus. She defines gestus as ‘action[s] in performance that crystalizes social relations and offer them to spectators for critical contemplation.’ (2005: 7). For me it is relevant how these gestures are performed in a protest situation and how people on the outside recognise their meaning. Cami Rowe argues that:

social events have special significance due to their signposts which alert people to their meaning-making import. When members of the public witness an anti-war demonstration, they are socially trained to consider it in a particular way, based on its trappings of theatricality and removal from everyday life.(2013:13)

This also speaks to issues of the sustainability of protests movements and how those on the outside (spectators) are prompted to critically contemplate and/or join their fight against injustice. I will explore this complex territory of gestural, space and protest presentation through the three case studies mentioned above.

**Case study 1: #protestiram movement and female bodies in a/ on the line**

The May 2015 protests in Skopje erupted against the alleged cover-up of the killing of 22-year-old Martin Neskovski, who is said to have been beaten to death by an interior ministry policeman. The country’s fragile stability was shaken by the government’s denial of the allegations and their brutal handling of the protests, when numerous activists were arrested in period of two weeks. The citizens’ protests united under the hashtag #protestiram[[2]](#footnote-2) and the movement demanded that the government take responsibility for recent events and release all detained activists.

I was visiting family in Skopje in May 2015 and joined the protest for a few days. It was a definite bodily experience: a sight that overwhelmed the senses with the colours of the banners, the sounds of music and speeches delivered by young men and women. As a protest movement it was marked by its intense pace and dynamism, and the exhilarating feeling of joining thousands of active bodies organizing, marching, chanting, protesting, discussing, learning. Yet in my memory, what stays most vivid is an unknown female body that stands out against the backdrop of police riot shields, a young woman, a body performing resistance. This moment took place during my last night protesting, just before riot police forcefully dispersed the protest. The intense day was taking its toll on me as I processed the words of other activists, and the excitement and rage I had experienced during the anti-corruption march. Suddenly, I was surprised by the sight of people running, chased by riot police. The police forces kept arriving: by motorcycles, in cars, and in big vehicles, perhaps destined to contain arrested activists. It was a performance of power. In the midst of the chaos that followed, I saw a different kind of performance, by a young female protestor. While the rest of the protestors were running, she calmly stopped and confronted the line of riot police. Two older women joined her, and they formed a line. Their bodies stood still as a way to convey a different kind of message. The police cordon stopped and there was momentary silence, enough time for the other protestors to hide and consolidate. After few minutes, the women turned their backs and left. The police cordon remained on the road for a while. This was a strategic move which was used by female protestors on an everyday basis during the protests.

The female protestors who joined the #protestiram movement used proximity to confront the riot police. What marks this movement is its controlled use of space. Their main goal was to criticise the authorities: the female protestors created a strong visual commentary by standing in a line against a male brute force equipped with full riot gear. This also disrupted the authorities’ network of relationships, by disabling their kettling strategies. By creating theatre of still images, where women remain in lines or openly confront the authorities by standing still, a whole different level of oppression and reality was revealed.

Bodies being in alliance with each other is a migrating gesture that marks the history of protest. The action of stillness also marked the protests in Gezi park that began on 28 May 2013, contesting the urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. After the police violently removed and dispersed the protestors, they defiantly returned, one by one, to stand still and again state their disagreement with the town authorities. Stillness is a powerful theatrical tool; it carries a strong message in the midst of the chaos that usually accompanies protests. In the #protestiram movement stillness as a gesture liberated women to join in again. Although the protests in Skopje did not directly exclude women, there was a huge surge in male protestors claiming the streets after the first brutal riot police intervention. Consequently, the female protestors chose stillness as their protest strategy, to avoid being sidelined and ignored. They immediately claimed solidarity with the dead boy’s mother, and skilfully performed the agony of a mother who has lost a child (personal) in a country run by a corrupt government (political). The city centre streets were littered with chalk outlines of ‘dead bodies’ with a question mark in the centre and motionless bodies next to those outlines, asking the government to take responsibility.

What also marked the movement was the visual manifestation of the over-feminine persona adopted by the female protestors. They wore red lipstick, red nailpolish, red dresses and shirts. These strategies are borrowed from movements like Femen and SlutWalk, in order to prove that female bodies are powerful sites of resistance. As argued by Gale: ‘Contemporary women’s activist bodies–whether undressed or dressed up–contain similar potentials for disruption, in particular, for the layered disruption of public and state owned spaces and women’s social and political agency within those spaces. ‘(2015, 321)

The feminist actions that were part of the #protestiram movement made way for debates regarding the relevance of feminism to the lives of women in Macedonia today. The female protestors demanded responsible treatment of protestors by using strategies used in global protest movements. This resulted in less arrests being made, less violence on the streets and less material destruction. Moreover, for me (born and brought up in Skopje), this feminist protest is a strong signifier that change is possible and that the years of discriminatory policies around female rights in Macedonia will be finally challenged.

**Case study 2:** #direnkahkaha**: ‘Laughter is a revolutionary action’**

Micah White, co-founder of Occupy and editor of Adbuster Today, asserts in an interview with the Brazilian magazine *CartaCapital* that:

social movements ask their participants to do very basic and small actions: to take to the streets, holding posters and shouting. These are very basic behaviors and no longer have a political effect. Occupy Wall Street and the 15M in Spain, brought more complex behaviors, such as participating in general assemblies or utilizing hand gestures, but these are still very simple behaviors. I think we have to ask more of social movement participants. (2015)

And I think that the Internet offer us the space to ask for more. Thanks to social media networks, participants are able to develop sophisticated behaviours and teach each other how to spread their actions globally. According to Lim there is ‘nothing intrinsic in social media that automatically makes it promote social change or advance democracy’, but in the right conditions, ‘social and cultural participation in social media spheres may translate into civic or political engagement’ (2013:638).

The protest movement [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) started in July 2014, provoked by a statement by Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc during a speech on “protecting moral values” in Bursa. In his speech, where he discussed what he viewed to be a general “moral decline” in Turkey, Arinc said that women shouldn’t laugh in public as it was against “our moral values.” His declaration drew much criticism; Turkish women’s response to his statement attracted great attention and global support. As a reaction to Arinc, Turkish women protested by taking pictures of themselves laughing in public. They shared their photos on Facebook and Twitter under the hashtag of #direnkahkaha, which means “resist laughter” in Turkish. They called for others to join the laughing protest under this social media hashtag. From all over the world, lots of people, especially women, joined the protest, taking and sharing pictures of themselves laughing in public.

Initially what drew me to [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) was the way that the online campaign used the images of women laughing. While female protestors in the #protestiram movement used stillness to oppose the riot police, the [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) protestors used the act of laughter as a gesture to challenge the authorities. However, what differs between the #protestiram and #direnkahkaha movements is their use of space. According to Akyel, the #direnkahkaha protest took its inspiration as well from the Gezi Park Resistance which took place in Turkey in the summer of 2013. Akyel argues that the Gezi protest used humour and that many Turkish activists realised that there were new ways of thinking and acting. The #direnkahkaha indirectly uses the strategies of the Gezi resistance movement, transferring them to the digital sphere. Hughes and Parry regard mobile technology as a recent addition to gestural repertoires of protest: protestors now film and photograph everything. They argue that:

Portable media technologies have become central to the way gestures of protest are theatricalised – and, as part of this, to the way they are formed, multiply, migrate, and how they are researched. Arguably, this gesture of recording and transmitting generates new possibilities for solidarity across time and space as well as opens up new domains for theatricality. (2015)

Manuel Castells emphasises that social movements of the information age adopt values and take up organisational forms that are specific to the kind of society where they take place. He says:

So, there is a great deal of cultural and political diversity around the world. At the same time, because power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication, social movements also act on this global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process. They think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere.(2007:

In terms of gesture strategy, #direnkahkaha employs the act of laughter as an imaginative disturbance of state rhetoric. The act of laughter is also used as an act of disobedience and has a sarcastic undertone. In a recent interview with the Turkish performance artist, Işıl Eğrikavuk, I asked about the role of sarcasm in Turkish art, she elaborates:

Sarcasm has always been important in Turkey's history of arts, especially in cartoons and theatre. However, through the recent protests we saw that it was actually the public that owned such language and used it in protests. The best example was [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) online campaign. I think it is the only way to cope with the harshness of reality.  (2015)

As evident from Eğrikavuk’s comment, sarcasm is used as a method to manipulate the Government’s censorship discourse. The [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) is an excellent example of discourse inversion, where laughter is used to challenge the problematic statement made by Bulent Arinc. But the act of laughter holds a destructive potential as well. Stephen G. Nichols argues that:

As a gesture of the body, laughter is extensive, rather than ostensive. It simply bursts out; those present witness it without being able to determine a referent with any certainly (which is one aspect of laughter’s ambiguity and a source of social discomfort, since, in the absence of a designated addressee, we may take it personally as meant for ourselves). (2005:387)

He further argues that laughter has the potential to avoid or expel an intolerable situation. This is precisely why the female protestors of the [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) movement used it. It is the only gesture that can bring relief from a potentially very dangerous statement.

The final element characterising this movement is the use of the diverse bodies who post images of their faces. Donna Dickenson (2007) notes that revealing a sensitive part of the body (in this case the head and hair) is a powerful act of protest because of the history of regulation that the female body is traditionally subject to in Turkey. There is noticeable focus on collectivity in the Twitter images. The women take pictures with their friends, mothers and relatives. It is a strong transgenerational statement of disagreement. Furthermore, by using social media, the message transcends the borders of Turkey. Keller argues that feminists have used social media platforms to form their own networks which emerge ‘around particular discursive feminist identities and issues, coming together, dissolving, and reconvening in a fluid manner’ (2013:160).

The [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) achieved success because it was a social movement by women, for women, that encouraged female citizens to become active parts of the political process and challenge the stereotypical obliging image of Turkish women and their bodies. As argued by Akyel, by using the hashtag of [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha), Turkish women found an effective way of resisting the repressive government’s interventions in their lives.

**Case study 3: Focus E15 Mothers: Performing the right to housing**

Focus E15 Mothers is a group of young women with small children who came into conflict with the Newham local authority in Stratford, north-east London. Living in a hostel, these women were on council waiting lists for houses suitable for families with children. Under austerity measures, they were not offered housing in their local community but instead, they were offered relocation to council housing outside London. Under the banner ‘Social Housing, not Social Cleansing’, these women began a campaign including regular street stalls and a social media campaign to resist relocation, emphasising that the move would mean the uprooting of family and support networks.

What is significant about the Focus E15 Mothers campaign was their use of space. After individual members of the group had received eviction notices, they decided to squat family-size council houses deliberately closed by the council and earmarked for sale to private land developers. These flats, which were unoccupied, became a performative liminal space; according to Victor Turner, such spaces are marked as sites of potential transformation (1982). According to Schechner, there are restrictions on who may enter these spaces, who maintains them, who has authority to speak in them and what kind of behaviour is acceptable in them (2002:58). During the squatting period, the young women of Focus E15 Mothers helped each other with childcare and cooking. They invited anyone who was interested to join them for a meal – with pushchairs, washing on lines, pots and pans on view. Although the space was used in accordance with its original purpose, it was also an alternative use, since the flat had been left empty in order to devalue it. By moving their actions from the streets into the disused flats, the group secured attention from the Council. Although the group was eventually evicted from the four flats in Carpenter’s Estate in early October 2014, the Focus E15 Mothers group have remained as a vocal force in the current housing controversy in London.

The gesture of occupying a space is one that Focus E15 Mothers Campaign appropriated from the Occupy movement. It also has direct links to the Ladies' Home Journal sit-in of 1970s. Dissatisfied with the way that male-run magazine Ladies' Home Journal portrayed women, a group of activists decided to stage a sit-in. On 18 March 1970, approximately 100 women with their children stormed the magazine's office, refusing to leave for 11 hours by occupying their premises. As argued by Rowe, places of protest can become associated with modes of perception and morality. She quotes Gay McAuley who describes the effect in this way:

Making performance in sites marked by their own histories of occupation and use means that artists and spectators experience these places in new ways and are obliged to engage in new ways with the political issues that seem to be inevitable consequences of being in place. (McAuley in Rowe, 2013:31)

The act of occupying the flats raises the issues of power (council vs. benefit claimers), rights (exclusion of single mothers) and histories of gentrification in London, where working class people are pushed out of areas.

The group carefully maintained their appearance in the media and public consciousness. In early 2015, they partnered with the theatre company You should see the other guy, to produce and tour the theatre show *The Land of Three Towers* (2016) as an extension of their protest. Made by an all-female cast including young mothers, people who had experienced homelessness and the actual housing activists from Focus E15, this show educated the audience about the group’s fight against social cleansing.  The unconventional verbatim show was performed both in theatres and council estates around London. It used the autobiographical genre to portray the group’s battle with Newham council and expose/ perform the everyday chores of single mothers. bell hooks has articulated an understanding of autobiography as an instrumental method of mapping political journeys (1981). hooks’ view complements Joanne Braxton’s argument that autobiography is a particularly apt way of telling and claiming ownership of one’s life because it enables the protestor/ performer to tell their version of events through an uninterrupted means (1989). For *The Land of Three Towers*, the performance space is covered with colourful banners bearing slogans such as "Social Housing Not Social Cleansing", saved from the original protest activities. Pegged to washing lines are children’s drawings. In the corner of the room, women from the cast softly sing an uplifting melody. Humour figures strongly in the show, with the fight to retain occupant rights recreated dramatically in funny scenes. The official response from Newham’s Mayor Robin Wales is delivered by a sock puppet in an empty suit, ridiculing the rigidity of the council. The show uses humour strategically to draw attention to the pressing issues of housing in London. However, the cast grimily concludes by sounding a note of alarm as they tell the audience that across London 174,000 residents face eviction and some 30,000 homes face demolition. The play is more than theatre, it is a protest against the social cleansing in London.

**Discussion: The link that ties us all together**

At first look, the only connecting link between this case studies is the fact that these movements are led by women. Otherwise, the movements are marked by a huge diversity in terms of culture, social composition and the nature of political system in which they operate. However, there are also remarkable elements of commonality, first and foremost this movement share a common cause: fighting injustice against women. The movements also share two important elements. First they have transgenerational appeal, demonstrated by their reproduction and appropriation of historical feminist protest gestures. And second, they have similar performative gestural strategies which question what ‘public space’ means for the female protestor. Despite being very local movements, these elements allows us to see them as part of a common protest wave against austerity and precarious living under neo-liberal capitalism.

It is important to note that all three protest movements considered are ‘popular’ movements; movements which appeal to the vast majority of women affected by the local political events. This is reflected in the age and social background diversity of its constituency. In the #protestiram and [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) movements the intergenerational is visually evident. Younger women stand in solidarity with older women against a cordon of police. Mothers and daughters take selfies smiling together. While during the E15 Focus campaign days, single working class mothers were joined and advised by middle class women (artists and solicitors), to fight off the council and establish a long-term strategy. The movements send a transgenerational message, that women are affected by political decisions regardless of their age and social standing. Also, this a reminder of an ongoing battle, something that was started by the older generation, and now is continued (and possibly taken over) by the younger generation. The young protestors are re-appropriating strategies and gestures used historically by female protestors. The methods are passed down, re-appropriated, and adjusted to the new, but ever so old, battle against gender injustice.

The second element that brings these movements together is their use of public space. As argued by Paolo Gerbaudo, we see ‘a revival of the importance of public space, through the actions of the Occupy movement, whose very name carries an incitement to take back the streets from which people had been kept away during the long years of neoliberal consensus.’ (2012:11) Focus E15 Mothers appropriated precisely this tactic of mass sit-in and executed a physical occupation of a public space owned by Newham Council. However, they also transformed this space in the spirit of feminist protest movements like the Womanhouse in USA or The Library Centre in Camberwell, London in 2010. Focus E15 share with these movements the ability to open up a participatory space for sharing of knowledge, legal advice and empowerment. The #protestiram female protestors with their gesture of stillness highlight the struggle of women to remain a visible part of protests in public space. During violent protests, female protestors can be sidelined and their voices can be lost. So, by remaining still, together in a line, they adopt a feminist material gestus which according to Dolan, is useful to projects which acknowledge differences among women (2012:8). On the other hand, [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) invites us to reconsider the struggle for public space through rethinking how women in Turkey use social media to discuss a public topic. This can be regarded as a very removed form of campaigning, done only through the means of social media. But in order to understand [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha), we need to follow Gerbaudo’s argument that social media impact is far more complex than just a means of sharing a message. Through this, we will understand that [#direnkahkaha](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23direnkahkaha) symbolically constructs a safe online space to oppose a chauvinistic government. These gestures of resisting exist in material and/ or online space and are calling others to join and replicate. As argued by Hughes and Parry:

…these gestures mobilise a desire to protect, defend, restore at the same time as, in their emptiness, sustain an openness to alterity. As such, theatrical gestures of protest call on the apotropaic to support the composure of bodies engaged in gesturing towards a different world at the same time as facing the present one, with all of its terrors. (2015:306)

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I would return to the *Time Magazine 2011 ‘Person of the Year’* front cover that gave the protestor a female face. I would argue that the female protestor is the person of this decade; who, even after the big protest movements were frustrated/ defeated, remained to oppose and defy local and global neo-liberal authorities.

The movements that I have analysed took varied forms and shapes. They used place in very different ways, from deliberately subversive actions of standing still face-to-face with the authorities, to occupying council-owned flats for days. They also had various strategies in employing gesture in their work. The act of laughter captured on a mobile phone camera as a gesture can be engaging - but also, a depressing reminder that the right to laugh in public space can be taken away from women. And finally, all these movements deploy the female body in all its variations and shades. Close-ups of faces laughing. Old and young women in a straight line, still for hours. Their presence and bodies palpable in the public sphere.

It is important to also mention here that the movements are very small and significantly unsustainable. While they provide an intense sense of communitarianism and empowerment to defend the rights of the local women, they have neither the capacity nor means to organise themselves to create a global change or impact. These movements are more national than global, so they reflect the specificity of their local context and culture. And this can sometimes frustrate their contribution and connection to a wider protest wave. However, I am not concerned solely with efficiency in this article and I believe that it is important to note what activists do on a local level, which can then contribute to a global discussion.

The female protestors in Skopje, FocusE15 Mothers and [#](https://twitter.com/hashtag/hodderpreview?src=hash)direnkahkaha media campaigners are performing in a powerful way. Maybe these movements are local and small, but they link to a wider network of protests that are unsettling the current neoliberal, hostile rhetoric. Therefore it is important to note the strategy of female protest on a local level, especially in the current crisis that Europe is facing. Politically, the strategies and gestures that these protest movements employ will be iterated into the next wave of feminist protest that we will see.

**Notes on contributor:**

Dr Elena Marchevska is an interdisciplinary artist and Senior Lecturer in Performance Studies at London South Bank University. Through exploring radical performance practices in South East Europe, she has increasingly turned her attention to relationships between protest and performance.

**References:**

Akyel, E. (2014) #Direnkahkaha (Resist Laughter): “Laughter is a Revolutionary Action”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 14:6, pp. 1093-1094

Braxton, J. (1991) Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within A Tradition. *The Journal of Southern History* 57(3) pp.523.

Castells, M. (2007) Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, Available at: <[http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/46](http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/46" \t "_new)>. Date accessed: 17 Mar. 2016.

Dean, J., & Aune, K. (2015). Feminism Resurgent? Mapping Contemporary Feminist Activisms in Europe. *Social Movement Studies*. 14, pp. 375-395.

Dickenson, D. (2006). The Lady Vanishes: What's Missing from the Stem Cell Debate. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*. 3, pp. 1-2.

Dolan, J. (2005). *Utopia in performance: finding hope at the theater.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

(2012). Feminist Spectator As Critic. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

Gale, M. (2015) Resolute Presence, Fugitive Moments, and the Body in Women’s Protest Performance, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25:3, pp. 313-326

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). Tweets and the streets: social media and contemporary activism. London, Pluto Press.

hooks, bell. (1981) *Ain't I A Woman*. Boston, MA: South End Press

Hughes, J. and Parry,S. (2015) Introduction: Gesture, Theatricality, and Protest – Composure at the Precipice, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25:3, pp. 300-312

Egrikavuk, I. (2016) About. Isilegrikavuk.net. Accessed on 25 January 2016

Keller, J. (2013) ‘*Still Alive And Kicking’: Girls Bloggers And Feminist Politics In A 'Postfeminist' Age*. PhD Dissertation. University of Texas Austine

Lim, M. (2013) Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43:4, pp.636-65

Nichols, S. G. (2005). Laughter as Gesture: Hilarity and the Anti-Sublime. *Neohelicon : Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum.* 32, pp.375-389.

Rowe, C. (2013). *The politics of protest and US foreign policy: performative construction of the war on terror.* London, Routledge.

Schechner, R., (2002). *Performance studies an introduction*. London, Routledge.

Solga, K.(2016). *Theatre & feminism*. London: Palgrave.

Turner, V. W. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play.* New York City, Performing Arts Journal Publications.

TIME's Person of the Year (2011). http://content.time.com/time/person-of-the-year/2011/ Accessed 2 March 2015.

White, M. (2015) *The Crisis Within Activism is a Crisis Within Democracy.* Available from: <https://www.micahmwhite.com/crisis-in-activism-interview> Accessed 15 April 2016.

1. Movements that are covered in this specific Times Magazine issue include Occupy protestors in USA, the *los indignados* of Spain, the young men and women on the streets in Greece and the female protestors of the Arab spring. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Large protests occurred in May 2015 in the [Republic of Macedonia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Macedonia) against the government of [Prime Minister of Macedonia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prime_Minister_of_Macedonia), [Nikola Gruevski](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikola_Gruevski), when many people protested against alleged government corruption, with estimates putting the number of demonstrators in the tens of thousands, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister. The protestors were using the hashtag #protestiram to organise and share their activities with the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)