

Lauren Berlant

Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness¹

The impasse of the global urban present is shaped by the dramatic confrontation of the Precarious Peoples with the Austerity State that was voted in out of a sense that *something* was out of control that required a conserving hand. This state, in turn, has conserved its own decisionist privilege by continuing to desiccate the public institutions that have, since WW2, in Europe and the US, mediated its resource obligations to its citizens and denizens. The Austerity State's claim is that it is bankrupt and therefore that the people are too expensive for their own maintenance, such that they must undergo both an expectation and resource shrinkage *and* a transformation of the fantasy of the state.² But fantasy can't be garbaged in the same way that governmental infrastructures have been: for the state's legitimacy to continue appearing sovereign and performative, the state finds it still imperative for citizens and denizens not only to appear to consent to the law, the police, and the tax code, but also to harbor the sentimental collective memories of suffering and optimism that maintain the fantasy of the common that still floats the nation form's promise, even as its material presence, sold off to the highest private bidders, disappoints, defunds, and deserts the mass of the people who rely on it. The Austerity State is a response, indeed, not to the ordinariness of mass precarity that capitalism inevitably induces but to the mass precarity that found its symbolization when, when, during the 2008 financial crisis, it became apparent that *the state was in the same abject and contingent relation to private capital that ordinary people are*. The authoritarian performance of the Austerity State is an attempt to reattach collective fantasy to the state's aura as sovereign actor and to block recognition of the similarity of their debt pathos and the corrupting influences of capitalism.

On the other side, as a slogan, precarity has a longer history and wider idiomatic reach than the present crisis too. In *Cruel Optimism* my interest in precariousness is in the class incoherence of the populations claiming precarity—it's a universalizing claim at the moment³—and therefore in the slogan's work as an organizing tool across different class, regional, ethnic, and gendered circumstances. Precarity has taken shape as many things: a realist term, denoting a condition of instability created by changes in the compact between capital and the state; an affective term, describing the historical present; and an ideological term, a rallying cry for a new world of interdependency and care that takes the public good as the apriori whose energies do not exist for the benefit of private wealth and which should be protected by the political class. Its performative desire has become to redirect and bring new tones to the forced improvisation of a contemporary life that is increasingly not only without guarantees but without predictables. My aim now is to float infrastructures for a time of transition. The historical present is always a time of transition: but crisis is an emergency in the reproduction of life, a transition that has not found its genres for moving on. Phrases like “precarity” and “occupy” are placeholder affordances while aims and fantasies become both disordered and take shape. In my final minutes I present to you an image of some broken genres of the historical present and the infrastructures of the awkward in an austere time.

A genre is a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take. A situation becomes-genre, finds its genres of event. Any historical present is an impasse that appears in multiple temporalities of movements that have anchored themselves to a cluster of conventional genres. In the ordinary of crisis, defined as a disturbance in the reproduction of life, there's a shift both in norms of comportment in the world at the microlevel of expectation and relationality and in structural terms, as the state loses its own bearings in

governance and the regulation of persons and markets. No longer with resources or the will to be proactive, the state becomes an emergency responder, stumbling over broken roads and expectations; meanwhile the people experience the state of emergency not as an exception but as an embedding in the ordinary in which they are always tipped over, walking ahead while looking around, and feeling around their pockets for something, both focused and distracted and getting by, without assurance. A crisis ordinary such as this one appears therefore when the transitions of the present are revealed as precarious by the loss of genre and a hyperactive scavenging for genre. These scatterings of agency are crises of genre, and crises of genre are crises of the common. As predictable relations of cause and effect no longer obtain, the concept of event itself suddenly appears post-normative, which is to say that during crisis times the event emerges not as a thing that goes without saying but as a genre whose conventions are stunned, disorganized, and open for change.

What is the appropriate response to, and who is accountable to, a catastrophic event? No one knows, even when the catastrophe is “natural,” an effect of the weather, and not an effect of news about criminal effects. The situation becoming event is an effect of a cause, and we expect the exemplary and the extreme ones to become causes of effects: crimes, traumas, broken promises. Instead the becoming event of a situation is so often an impact with no resonance, passing by the spectating public like a stock market tickertape or a gang of frolicking dogs, unconverted to causes because even the simplicity of what happens next can be overwhelming when so much is happening. People are not sure what’s possible or what’s bearable, and the event recedes into the archive of the residual, not the archaic.⁴ In a moment of crisis ordinariness, anything can be reanimated: but the profoundly transformative cause remains elusive, as though so much fraud and betrayal homogenizes the pitch without adding up to

something. The time without genres of the event is the time when the narratives fade toward the lyric.⁵

My current work looks toward rethinking relationality through infrastructures derived from practices of the reproduction of life: I use infrastructure rather than institution because an infrastructure requires patterns, habits, and norms of use, in contrast to institutions, which are defined by their concentration and distribution of resources and legitimacy. In this the work takes energy from Latourian associology and Joao Biehl's work in and after *Vita*, but focuses on the interregnum of hesitation when the relation of living to a fantasy of life has to be reinvented.⁶ Aesthetic projection is central to the becoming event of the situation. The loss of assurance and rebuilding of a world happen all at once and require attention. Let me tell you a story about about a story about it.

Liza Johnson's *In the Air* is a film about her home town, Portsmouth, Ohio, although she doesn't name it: it could be any post-industrial US landscape where the two dominant affects are distraction and boredom, and where the question is whether the burned out and "wasted" parents, who spend time drunk and antagonistic in cars and bars, will leave for their children what Patricia Williams calls the inheritance of a disinheritance.⁷ The town in this film has been abandoned not only by its elders but by capital. It seems to have one industry, a junkyard; and the aspiration of the junkyard is that there are no events to speak of in it, that it be a silent space with no accidents, as though the world of this town is one punctured membrane away from becoming the scrap it now organizes. There are empty streets and buildings, and they are being maintained as a ghost town in case something returns to refill the infrastructure.

The film is about the kids: they are protagonists in training. The training comes from the only live collective space we see in the town, a circus school that is called, in real life, but not in

the film, *Cirque D'Art*. We see the teacher in the front of the room, and she is getting the group in sync, to do tricks. The kids are learning to spin and to fall. They are learning to lean on each other. A little light romance might be starting, but also autonomy and abs are developing to help hold a whole body up in the air while the body swings inverted. None of this feels like the preenactment of fantasies of stardom. It does not feel fantasmatic, or allegorical, at all: learning to be awkward, to be graceful, to leap, and to fall is a training in attention and also in revisceralizing one's intuition. There can be no change in life without revisceralization. This involves all kinds of loss and transitional suspension. The circus schooling changes what threatens and what comforts, it changes what Virno calls the dread and the refuge that shape the materiality and fantasy of the commons.⁸ It does this by foregrounding the difficulty and pleasure of maintaining footing in conversations, in the world, and in performance.⁹ The high point of the film is difficult to describe because it's so simple, but the point of rebooting relationality from within the present is that one has to reinvent life by transforming what reciprocity means from its most simple to most complex and unclear exchanges. The kids want a ride somewhere. The parents are fighting or they are drunk. Finally they track a mother down while she is doing her job. For a living, if you can call it that, she sweeps an empty building by herself. She is a maintenance engineer for an abandoned architecture, hired to preserving the hoarded architecture of capital just in case.

The kids approach her. She barely looks at them, repeating, what do you want, what do you kids want? They refuse to speak, and assume an expressionlessness interrupted only by sideways movements of the eye. Their collective lateral glances induce a new infrastructural rhythm: the kids surround the mother and make her flip over them, backwards. At this point the film becomes not allegorical, but analogical: everyone who has been in the film comes out of an

imaginary space on the periphery of the shot and begins to do circus movements on a mysteriously appearing launching and landing pad. For the most part their faces are still and composed; they have the stiff bodies of people trained only for rhythms of work. Except for the one chubby girl, who makes a victory sign with her arms when she does a split (and she gets her own frame for this achievement), everyone else is focused with a set face on the matter at hand, the attempt to become and to stay in synch, and to wait for the next collective movement. They embody not socially necessary labor time or normative intimacy, but something simpler and often unbearable in ordinary time--socially necessary proximity. The analogy between all persons in a world abandoned by capital, by public interest, and by any notion of world-building that we can see in any of the town's buildings becomes the condition of the convergence; and the space that some individual or corporation probably owns becomes the commons made by movement.

The soundtrack to this scene is a 1998 song by the group Alice DeeJay called "Better Off Alone," whose two lyric lines are "Do you think you're better off alone?" "Talk to me," a rhetorical question and imperative phrase. This song has had a major life in clubs and has been remade and remixed a number of times¹⁰: there's nothing to it except the profundity of the question, its apostrophic address to the "you" who hears it, and the political desire to convert the rhetorical into an actual question. Usually it appears in a dance site where people are alone together, singular and various, intimate and mostly anonymous, looking for a minor release from their sovereignty. The song delivers the message of popular culture, that you are not alone, and challenges its listeners to be able to bear sociality.¹¹

Johnson's film's magical realism, locating the destruction of life and desiccation of optimism under late capitalism and neoliberalism, alongside of an optimistic pedagogy of mute

embodiment and semi-confident intentional proprioception, converts the pop to the serious without sifting the humor from the situation. It is trying to extend the teaching of the circus to the bread and circus, to the place where the fraying of intimate communication threatens to disperse the social into a singularity that has no energy for self-organization: but there's pleasure and wonder in breakdown too. What is "the air" in "In the Air"? "Atmosphere, world, and song. The film asks, what is in the air, what turns the air between the fingers that circulates the scrap from the junkyard, the kitchen, the school, the bar, the sidewalks, and the humidity from the lake into our lungs and muscles? What is in the air that might protest the nervous fraying and numbing self-medication of the body politic and how can a discipline of the body toward pleasure and skill in the ordinary create a new atmosphere for a new economy, a new good life that does not begin with where the wealth is and who's deserving? What is in the air for making new genres of convergence? The air is the common and it requires a minimal beat.

During the first AIDS crisis wave we learned that, in a crisis, generational progress is one of the destroyed genres. Here, now, too, the abandoned of all ages don't have a project or a program but a want in common and mobility has become literally awkward, more sideways and falling than upward. The figures in the film might have used a political idiom to figure out how collectively to inhabit the same space: but the aesthetic here is magical. Realism does not get us from here to a there beyond the body's singular skills--yet. But if the pedagogical magic is literal-bodied and minded, it is as though to embody the *sensus communis* requires converting the body's humble gracelessness into a minor collective courage to refuse the gestures of self-attrition and desperate askesis that have constituted the austere wisdom of neoliberalism. To reinvent teaching for the present moment requires a non-mimetic pedagogy for the common to come. It's not "the people," but the common. Not "citizenship" or social membership or

“belonging” but “being with.” Not suffering or precarity, but awkwardness and a world-building endurance. Nonetheless, one might respond to my metaformalism here that any artwork is at best an episode to hang a wish on. Yes, but what isn’t? The episode is, like a situation, a genre that leads to something, material from which worlds are made and not forced. Peter Linebaugh concludes, “[i]t might be better to keep the word [commons] as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive (279), as in “to common” land, life, history and memory.¹² To common the interregnum of collective life, to common sociability and the event, requires generous genres that can take the hit of our aggressive need for a world to accommodate us and it, and that, at the same time, hold out a scene worth attaching to that’s something better than a hope’s bitter and brittle good life echo.

¹ Citation: Lauren Berlant, “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,” (November 2011), posted at www.supervalentthought.com. (or whatever the real URL will be).

² Some of these comments extend from Lauren Berlant, Gesa Helms, Marina Vishmidt, “Affect & the Politics of Austerity: An Interview Exchange with Lauren Berlant,” *Variant* 39/40 (Winter 2010): 3-6.

³ See Judith Butler’s work during and after *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

⁴ The attempt really to foment a historiography that can periodize without relying on narratives of succession and progress is grounded in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976, 1983) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44-47.

⁵ This argument summarizes discussions throughout Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2011).

⁶ João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, Torben Eskerod, photographer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 2007), 9.

⁷ Liza Johnson, *In the Air* (2009), 22 minutes. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 217.

⁸ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, introduction, Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotexte, 2004).

⁹ On “footing” see Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 124-159.

¹⁰ Thanks to Luis Manuel Garcia for sending me evidence of this song’s credibility as an anthem for a solidarity that calls not on full subjective or affective convergence but concerted practical activity that manifests attentiveness, tenderness, respect, and pleasure:

http://www.whosampled.com/sample/view/1427/Wiz%20Khalifa-Say%20Yeah_Alice%20Deejay-Better%20Off%20Alone/

http://www.whosampled.com/sample/view/112754/40%20Cal%20feat.%20Duke%20Da%20Go-d-South%20Beach_Alice%20Deejay-Better%20Off%20Alone/

¹¹ On the promise of popular culture to relieve one of one's abandonment to private suffering, see Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), ix.

¹² Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: U. CA Press, 2007).