Social Inclusion
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9042
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.9042

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Open Access Journal

The Body as a Tool for Demanding Climate Action and Justice

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Submitted: 26 July 2024 **Accepted:** 20 January 2025 **Published:** 11 March 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Public Participation Amidst Hostility: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern" edited by Olga Zvonareva (Maastricht University) and Claudia Egher (Utrecht University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i419

Abstract

The escalating frequency and intensity of natural disasters underscore the urgency of the climate crisis. Against this backdrop, the global climate movement has surged, amplifying awareness of the climate emergency and pressuring governments and corporations to take decisive climate action. In climate manifestations, activists are increasingly using their entire body for/in climate activism, with Extinction Rebellion activists barricading driveways, and Just Stop Oil and Greenpeace activists gluing or tying their bodies to objects. These bodily ways of participating in climate activism have provoked public and political hostility, with concerns being raised about these so-called "radical" forms of bodily activism. In response to these growing hostilities towards bodily climate activism, this study maps how the body is intimately connected to other actors when performing activism. We conducted interviews with nine European climate activists and, based on their stories, we mapped themes of relational practice of bodily activism. Our findings suggest that the body as a tool for climate activism manifestations is in relation to other material agencies, including (a) the public space, (b) other climate activists, (c) material objects, (d) law enforcement, (e) the general public and media, and (f) climate governance and policy. The body is not a stable and autonomous figure, but a dynamic and ever-changing political tool through its socio-spatial configurations that co-constitute climate activism, making the role of the individual body in climate change activism manifestations elusive. Through its relational transformative collectivity, bodily climate activism proves itself as a valuable form of non-violent participation in politics.

Keywords

bodily activism; climate activism; climate change; embodiment; public participation; social constructivism

1. Introduction

In the last decades, climate crisis has become more discernible due to the increase in natural disasters such as California wildfires and Hurricane Harvey in the USA, floods in Rwanda and DR Congo, Millennium Drought and bushfires in Australia, and heatwaves all over Europe (Braun, 2023; Bureau of Meteorology, 2015; California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, 2025; "Death toll from eastern DR Congo floods," 2023; Fitzpatrick & Spialek, 2020; Tondo, 2023). The risks of these climate disasters disproportionately affect people living in the Global South, while countries in the Global North bear more responsibility for climate change (Auer Frege et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2023). Relating to the escalating frequency of climate disasters and its related injustices, the climate movement has gained momentum globally. Mobilized by a shared concern for the climate crisis, the public increasingly participates in collective actions and manifestations, raising awareness about the climate emergency, and pressuring governments and companies to take climate action. Here, we approach climate activism as a participatory practice that is both shaped by and responsive to matters of climate crisis (Amelung & Machado, 2019).

In advocating for climate action and justice, activism as a form of public and political participation has manifested in an array of ways, from organizing global marches, suing companies and governments for failing to shield the citizens from climate dangers (Di Sario, 2024), to publishing articles on online fora, creating and sharing videos on TikTok about sustainable living, and so on. Increasingly, activists are using their entire body for/in climate activism, with Extinction Rebellion activists barricading driveways, Just Stop Oil and Greenpeace activists gluing or tying their body to objects, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (The Landless Workers' Movement) activists occupying Brazilian latifundia, and activists of Fridays for Future sitting outside in harsh weather conditions. However, the role of the body in climate activism and the tactics of using the body as a tool in public spaces are poorly understood (Hohle, 2010). In the last decades, the interest of research has shifted from physical public space to virtual public space (e.g., Eileraas Karakuş, 2020; Ferreday, 2017; Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019; Johansson, 2021). The internet has surely changed the nature of physical demonstrations as there is now a new emphasis on catching the attention of social and traditional media (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement using social media in "Blackout Tuesday" to protest against police brutality and racism, or globally shared videos on TikTok on climate change and climate injustices).

While activism in online spaces has grown in intensity and significance, the censorship of social media platforms such as the governmentally-induced internet shutdowns in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 led to growing physical protests across various Iranian cities, exemplifying the necessity for physical demonstrations. Butler (2015) stresses that in order to apprehend the effect and power of activist manifestations, we need to reflect on the bodily dimensions of activism and look at what the bodies require and what they can do. Although the body in activism in the public space has been researched before, there seems to be a lack of consideration of cases where the body is a tool for activism fighting against the exploitation of natural territories. Here, the body can be conceptualized as an essential geographic reference for human beings that contains not only a memory of the past but also a desire for the future that it shares with meaningful others. Several studies have investigated the role of bodies in the public space in relation to social movements. Notable examples are Foellmer's (2024) work on climate organization Letzte Generation's (Last Generation) civil disobedience actions as communal choreographies, where seemingly passive bodies pro-actively stop traffic flows in road blockages, the work of Eileraas Karakuş (2020) and Kraidy (2012) about the use of the body as a medium in the Arab Spring, Karakaş' (2018)

work on dissident communities' relational encounters with bodily dimensions, as well as Alaimo's (2010) work on the nude body and its mutual vulnerabilities with human/animal/environment. In addition, the intertwines of the affect and embodiment in activism manifestations have been researched, for example, by Protevi (2009, 2011). In his exploration of "political physiology," Protevi examines how bodies, minds, and social settings are intertwined. His work highlights how politically induced emotions in activist movements can bypass subjectivity, generating somatic and social connections. Further, Rousell et al. (2024) have studied affect and activism in their work on young climate justice activists' participation in politics in "dynamic affective relationalities that re-orient and re-organize social life" (p. 1294), which goes beyond the usual approach of advocating for demands from the state. Perugorría and Tejerina (2013), in turn, have been focusing on cognitive, emotional, and relational processes in identity-synchronization that allowed people from different backgrounds and worldviews to feel part of the "15M movement." However, the role of the body in public manifestations, its relations with some of society's most powerful structures, and how this affects the body has to be further explored.

The empirical question of how climate activists use their body in a particular territorial context is important to examine in the current atmosphere of growing hostility towards climate activist manifestations, where the public and politicians have engaged in a discourse about "good" and "acceptable" activists versus "bad," "terrorist," and "radicalized" activists. This is particularly related to bodily ways of performing activism in the public space. During the spring of 2023, newspapers from all around Europe captured this tension, reflecting negatively on climate change activism and merely focusing on how activists use their bodies during manifestations in the public space. According to *The Times*, French conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*'s research shows that 73% of the French population thinks the authorities should treat climate activists as terrorists (Chazan, 2023). Additionally, the French environmental platform Les Soulevements de la Terre was almost shut down by the then Minister of Interior Gérald Darmanin because the police claimed the activists of the platform were inciting violence, and thus faced direct hostility from governmental institutes (Chazan, 2023; "La dissolution du collectif," 2023). In Germany, the newspaper *Der Spiegel* published Economy Minister Robert Habeck's claims that protecting the climate is the whole society's responsibility and that radical activists like the German Letzte Generation harm this shared concern ("Habeck kritisiert neue Klimaproteste," 2023) while a few months later the cover of the paper stated in German "The new public enemies. Letzte Generation: About the inner life of a radical movement" ("Die neuen Staatsfeinde," 2023, our translation). These articles showcase how only a limited range of activist practices is deemed acceptable by the media and certain ways of bodily activism are met with hostility.

During her fieldwork on the protests of Letzte Generation as choreographic interruptions, dance and theatre scholar Susanne Foellmer experienced this hostility also on the ground, as she observed activists using their bodies as roadblocks, which triggered the passersby to use violent language towards the activists, such as stating that they wish to have them violently killed (Foellmer, 2024). These public discourses reflect the growing hostility towards bodily ways of participating in climate activism. The bodily actions of activists often make them the focal point of public and media scrutiny, which contributes to the hostility. However, what often has been left unnoticed is the non-violent character of these bodily actions. Butler (2015) claims that the media has great responsibility to showcase the nonviolence of activists' civil disobedience action: "Such demonstration is not easy to do when there are those who can only read the tactic as hatred and the continuation of war by other means" (p. 192).

In response to this growing concern of the public towards bodily activism, we explore the bodily participation practices climate activists engage in amidst growing hostility towards such activism manifestations. More specifically, this study *maps how the body acts as a tool for climate activism, and how such engagements create meaning*. We study these dynamics within a European context, because public climate activism manifestations are legal and allowed in this region, while activism in other regions and situations might face direct hostilities where authoritarian institutes control and demobilize activist manifestations (e.g., across Latin America where environmental activists are being sued and arrested; Carrere & Romo, 2021). Through interviews with climate activists, we aim to acquire insights into bodily activism practices that are deemed "radicalized" in the media (Chazan, 2023; "Die neuen Staatsfeinde," 2023). We further aim to offer a theoretical framework to analyze bodily performative manifestations in the context of climate activism in the public space.

2. Theoretical Framing: The Body as a Tool

The role and potential of the body in public manifestation is a critical area of inquiry, particularly in connection to various power structures. How these structures affect the body and its use in activism warrants further exploration. In this exploration, we draw on social constructivism articulated by Berger and Luckmann (2018) to conceptualize the "body as a tool" in climate activism manifestations. Social constructivism argues that reality is constructed through social interactions and that the body plays a crucial role in these processes. In conceptualizing the body as a tool, the eccentric relationship between the self and the physical body is central to the theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). As an individual develops, learns, and creates in the social world, their eccentric connection to their body plays a central role in their lived experience, with the body being both an integral, biological part of the person and something they possess, a medium; a person is the body, but at the same time, a person also owns the body (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). Understanding the self involves searching for a balance between having a body and being a body, affecting how one behaves and participates in meaning-making practices (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). The feeling of having or owning a body implies that one does not identify solely with their body, but sees the body as an entity of being possible to rule (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). In this state, the body can be treated as an object or a tool, which emerges through specific practices. This can be used strategically, for example, to better express one's political opinion in street activism, rallies, or political art.

3. Methodology

We studied the body as a tool in climate activism through a qualitative research design consisting of semi-structured interviews. We analyzed the stories shared by interviewed activists by mapping themes of relational practices of bodily climate activism through the concepts of relations, affects, and capacities (Fox & Alldred, 2021).

3.1. Data Collection: Interviews

Berger and Luckmann (2018) regard language as the main means by which logic is attributed to the social sphere and forms the foundation for legitimation. With this in mind, we conducted interviews with nine climate activists from various regions across Europe. Here, interviewees did not take on a privileged role within a socially constructed setting. Rather, interviewees were considered key informants providing insider knowledge about a certain setting, in this case, climate activist manifestations in Europe between 2020 and

2022. Interview topics related to the interviewee's experience with climate activism, specifically relating to public space, the body as a tool, relationality to other people in the manifestations, and personal experiences with climate change. Example questions that were asked were: Where have you performed climate activism? What are the reasons you engage in activism in the offline public space and not (only) online? If you have acted violently during a manifestation, then what led you to this approach of activism? How do you and your body influence political discussion about the climate crisis?

The participants (see Table 1) were found by contacting the communication personnel of different climate activist organizations, posting adverts in Telegram and WhatsApp groups of activist organizations, and through writing personal messages to people close to activist circles, followed by snowballing. The interviews were conducted through the video conferencing software Zoom in April and May 2023, sometimes encountering problems with internet connections, which affected the flow and openness of the interviews. In addition, the conversations took place in English, while none of the interviewees and researchers were native speakers of the language. We have used pseudonyms to anonymize the interviewees for their personal safety.

Table 1. Overview of the selected interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country where the activism was performed	Climate activism organizations
Annika	24	Female	Estonia	Fridays for Future, Estonian Greens
Bruno	32	Male	Belgium	Extinction Rebellion
Carmen	20	Female	Portugal	Fridays for Future
Damiano	44	Male	Italy	ASud, Ultima Generazione, Extinction Rebellion
Emmi	36	Female	Finland	Greenpeace Nordic
Ferdinando	53	Male	Italy	Extinction Rebellion
Gabriel	44	Male	France	Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future
Hans	24	Male	Germany	Ende Gelände, Die Falken, Antifa
Ingel	24	Female	Estonia	Fridays for Future

The interviewees were part of nine different climate organizations that approach climate manifestations in the public space in their own way. The two most common organizations in this study, Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, are known for shifting the focus of climate activism more strongly on state actors, rather than on non-state actors (de Moor et al., 2020). While the activist part of Fridays for Future often engage in standing at a square in assembly, holding signs, listening to speeches, and chanting in unison, Extinction Rebellion activists lean more towards civil disobedience in the form of using bodies as roadblocks, disrupting events and meetings, playing dead on the road, locking body parts to cars and fences, occupying spaces, and in more extreme cases, breaking property. The other organizations mentioned in Table 1 mainly use civil disobedience as their form of climate activism manifestation, except for the Estonian Greens, which participates in peaceful demonstrations usually together with other climate organizations.

3.2. Analysis: Mapping Themes of Relational Practice of Bodily Activism

The analysis of the interviews focused on mapping themes of relational practices of bodily activism, seeking to deepen our understanding of how the body serves as a tool in climate activism. From Fox and Alldred's ethological toolkit (2021) we borrowed three concepts—relations, affects, capacities—that corresponded

with our analytical focus on the relational practice of climate activism in a specific material and cultural environment. These concepts—relations, affects, capacities—are key meaning-making components in/of climate manifestations, found in the stories of the interviewees. They focus primarily on the interactions between various humans (e.g., activists, passers-by, law enforcement), places and spaces (e.g., public squares, driveways), and material and cultural environments (e.g., urban infrastructures, regulations). Themes stemming from these concepts can be human and non-human *relations* during climate manifestations, as well as *affects* and emerging *capacities* that (re)produce climate activism. These relations, which have the ability to affect or be affected in varied capacities, shape how the body is constructed as a tool during climate manifestations. It is crucial to note, however, that such mappings are manifold and dynamic: Our approach led us to generate only one of ample possible mappings of the body as a tool advocating for climate action and justice.

4. Findings: The Relational Practice of Bodily Activism

To understand the body as a tool in climate activism, we mapped various relations: the body as a tool for climate activism in relation to public spaces, to other climate activists, to material objects, to law enforcement, to the general public and media, and to climate governance and policy. Within these relations, we explored how affects and capacities are formed in and are forming these relations.

4.1. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to Public Spaces

When discussing activism approaches such as stationary activism (i.e., holding signs, listening to speeches, shouting, and chanting) and more active forms of activism (i.e., performing civil disobedience by using the body as roadblocks, sitting in front of driveways, and locking body parts to cars and fences), the body relates to space in order to participate in shifting public opinion (to affect psychologically and socially) and changing policies (to affect socially and economically). The public spaces not only enable the climate activism manifestations to happen and aid climate-related communication, but the manifestations also change the very capacities of the public spaces. This might be done by staying in one space for prolonged times or marching around the city. The interviewees described using the latter method when there did not exist a meaningful public space, such as a square in front of the town hall, and thus the streets themselves must be politicized through walking in assembly. A good example of the former came from Ingel, who explained how the parking lot, in front of the house of the parliament in Tallinn, Estonia, transformed through a gathering of people into a perfect place for demonstrations:

> There's a big space, it's almost like it's made for protests because it is like right in front of the building there. It should actually, if you think of city planning, there should be like a park or a nicer area there. There shouldn't be a car park right in front of the main parliament building. But that's how it is and at least it leaves space for protests. (Ingel, interview, 28 April 2023)

More obvious ways of accommodating a space, to make it more suitable for a manifestation, is by creating new living arrangements and communities inside the action, such as the creation of care-units or even play areas for children: "You have a community for those days. For those hours. Kids are taking it. There is a playground for the kids. It wasn't [there], the government didn't put a playground for the kids in. We did" (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023). In the extract, Bruno described a week-long occupation of a place of power

in Paris, during which he and other climate activists created an alternative system of living and managing daily activities by birthing a new "law enforcement" (which included designating individuals to regularly check in with newcomers, rotating responsibilities for policing both the police and other activities), childcare (e.g., building a temporary playground), and sleeping and living arrangements (e.g., bringing haystacks and hammocks for sleeping, portable toilets and kitchen utilities for taking care of the bodies, and organizing workshops to pass the time). This results in a diffraction of the usual relations between the activists' bodies and the space, forming new affects and widening the capacities of the assembly.

4.2. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to Other Climate Activists

Across different civil disobedience climate manifestations, the large assembly of bodies is divided into smaller unnoticeable assemblies of 5 to 12 people, which are usually called affinity groups, that take care of each other and operate as a unit (Ferdinando, interview, 28 April 2023; Hans, interview, 19 April 2023). Hans described the importance of performing activism in a group and not alone: "It's important because that's your safety net. You trust those people. You see those people almost on a daily basis, and you fall back on them and it makes you feel safe" (Hans, interview, 19 April 2023). These affinity groups thus serve as networks of care and additional support amidst hostility, which fosters a strong sense of belonging and life force, helping with individual experiences of anxiety relating to climate change and/or manifestations. The focus of the activists shifts from an individual account of climate-related challenges to the shared cause. The feeling of belonging in the affinity groups and the climate activism organizations is either friendship-like or based on common agreement to fulfill a task. Inside this activist community, there exists a strong sense of "we," a mark of relations full of affect. This was directly reflected in the ways the interviewees told their stories during the interview: They often answered questions about their experience with stories about the common experience in their organization. While the common experience was highlighted, interviewees also emphasized the variety of lived experiences of activism and how there exists solidarity towards individual precarious situations of peers, for example due to their family situation or physical health. Bruno, for instance, explained that his female acquaintance experienced a huge trauma as she did not know the police would strip search her (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023).

While gathering in the public space, verbal actions occur as a crucial tool for creating affects in the assembly. Verbal bodily actions like chanting a slogan or singing in unison functions, according to Annika and Ingel, as a way to keep up the spirit of the participants and get the message across (Annika, interview, 20 April 2023; Ingel, interview, 28 April 2023):

> Singing is also something…that unites people….It's kind of similar to chanting, but singing somehow is maybe calmer, it's not so angry. [It] kind of tries to get the message through in a softer way. And it's even more, [in] that it's something meant for us, it's not meant for others. You know, chanting we want the others to hear it, but singing is more like for our own group. (Annika, interview, 20 April 2023)

Besides establishing such a sense of belonging, the activists also described having a strong sense of *life force* which is experienced as a therapeutic, healing or fueling of the body with energy and adrenaline, aggregating the activists' capacities as a group. Here, life force refers to a strong feeling of vitality or feeling that one is living their life in the moment and to the fullest extent. For some, it helps with their own mental health struggles. For others, this ensures the creation of a safer space among fellow activists: "I went through depression with

[the help of] Extinction Rebellion, and it was really helpful. Also, regenerative culture [a collective form of after-manifestation self-care] was…very hype [exciting]" (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023). The aforementioned ways of relating to others with affect relieve mental health struggles and feelings such as ecoanxiety which preceded joining the movement. Climate activist manifestations are not only a place for supporting climate policies, but become a place for interpersonal relationships as well.

4.3. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to Law Enforcement

One of the groups of humans that activists' bodies are closely related to is law enforcement. The police, for instance, is either seen as a potential protector of activists (law enforcement as an enabler of capacities) or as a hostile power institution which activists protect themselves from (law enforcement as a constraint of capacities). Here, the previous police encounters and individual experiences shape the expectancy of law enforcement interactions. While Emmi expressed feeling surprised when the police arrested her during the civil disobedience action in Finland, Bruno, who grew up in Iran, was surprised the Belgian police did not strike and pound him during a stationary form of activism and "just" arrested him (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023; Emmi, interview, 6 April 2023). This situatedness is closely connected to the imagined threat, and co-determines activists' preparations beforehand for protecting themselves and others based on certain perspectives and expectations on how the police could act.

While the more passive activists performing stationary forms of activism typically did not describe prior preparations for protection against law enforcement, those involved in civil disobedience activities take extensive measures to protect their bodies from potential hostility in police interactions. They rely on support from their affinity groups, in which they choose a person whose function is to calm down the situation by talking with the parties involved, express care during and after the action, and use their bodies to form physical shields to protect the most vulnerable ones (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023; Damiano, interview, 8 May 2023; Gabriel, interview, 10 May 2023; Hans, interview, 19 April 2023). Ahead of a manifestation, potential physical and mental struggles are discussed. For example, Bruno described how he was advised not to participate in certain kinds of action to ensure he would not lose his residence permit, and Hans explained how in his affinity group, there was a person with asthma whose body was first in the line to being protected by the group (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023; Hans, interview, 19 April 2023). In their relations with law enforcement, the activists also use playfulness and creativity as tools for protection. Many of the interviewees extensively talked and reflected on their playful interactions with the police or on their attempts to look for holes in the police system, for example, by building tree houses to avoid the trees from being cut down, as law enforcement was prohibited from climbing the trees or cutting down those with people in them, or playing football in the police cell among the activists or with the police in order to turn the repressive situation into a playful one (Damiano, interview, 8 May 2023; Hans, interview, 19 April 2023).

4.4. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to the General Public and the Media

Besides law enforcement, activists are related to the general public and the media through reliance on their bodies, especially in the context of more "disobedient" forms of activism sparking irritations and hostility towards activists for blocking the passers-by's and car drivers' way. Gabriel described: "I would have people just yelling at me, insulting me from time to time" (Gabriel, interview, 10 May 2023). However, at the same time, the passers-by and the media serve as protectors of the activists as they witness or document everything that

is taking place on the streets. The existence of media on the streets was described as something that brings a sense of safety to the activist manifestations as they are policing the police: "The more visible we are, the more I'm relaxed that the police is not gonna offhand. I was always looking for cameras. I was always looking for bystanders, for normal people looking out" (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023).

In the context of contacts with the media, the body serves as a tool for physically representing feelings, ideals, and arguments of the movement to the general public with the objective of affecting them and bringing them closer to the cause. The interviewees particularly mentioned how they consciously used their body to show despair:

> When you are on your knees, you are sending a completely different message than when you are just sitting down. And for people who are angry, when you are just sitting, you are like the asshole who is blocking their day. But when you are on your knees, you're fragile. So, you are sending a completely different message just by the position that you have. (Gabriel, interview, 10 May 2023)

By putting his body in an uncomfortable position in which he could not protect himself from the blows and pushes, he sent a message of desperation and sacrifice. This physical and thus emotional representation of the cause, which engaged the audience on the level of emotions, was described as one of the important reasons for performing activism offline and not only online, as this type of physical engagement and affective relation was not possible online.

The media further functions as a vehicle activists use to louden their voice. The articles, posts, pictures, and videos in the media enhance the capacities of the body as a tool to change politicians' understanding of public opinion. The face and its expressiveness were seen as especially important mediums by Carmen as she explained that emotionally loaded pictures travel faster in social media (Carmen, interview, 1 May 2023). With the help of these emotionally loaded videos and pictures, the message of the cause has spread around the world, creating a shared understanding of the climate crisis. Furthermore, the number of people that attend the manifestations and their expressiveness are important, as all of those have an effect on how newsworthy the gathering is regarded.

4.5. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to Material Objects

Material objects used in climate manifestations also play an important role as these are related to activists' bodies and with the aforementioned humans, places, and spaces, and with establishing units of care among peers. For example, Hans described taking food and water for at least two people. He carried extra water bottles to wash out tear gas from the eyes and umbrellas to protect activists from the blows of police (Hans, interview, 19 April 2023). Other instances of using material objects in climate manifestations are gluing one's body to a car, using makeup and costumes, and using performative or symbolic objects, e.g., a replica of the DeLorean time machine from the movie *Back to the Future* (Bruno, interview, 3 May 2023; Damiano, interview, 8 May 2023).

According to the interviewees, the usage of facemasks during the Covid-19 pandemic affected how the body could be employed as an emotional representation of the feelings of the masses. The mandatory facemasks and other caution measures impacted encounters with law enforcement and passers-by: "Masks,

to be honest, I don't like it much but I think the reaction of people to activists with masks can be more aggressive" (Gabriel, interview, 10 May 2023). Masks covered the activists' faces, which they regarded as one of the most important areas of the body for influencing the audience. Not only are the emotions hidden, but the element of being there on the square or street fully identifiable is lost. Consequently, activists' capacities to affect are constrained when wearing a mask.

4.6. The Body as a Tool for Climate Activism in Relation to Climate Governance and Policy

Expanding upon previous sections, activists have increasingly utilized their collective bodily presence in public spaces to challenge and reshape climate governance. This approach stems from a widespread perception that existing policies and institutions are either unwilling or incapable of effectively addressing the climate emergency. As argued by Emmi from Finland:

> It is just [by] the sum of the bodies of people gathered that it looks like there are many people who care….I think it is important to create pressure on the decision makers that there are people who care and who come to the street to demand action. (Emmi, interview, 6 April 2023)

The bodies as a matter taking physical space have a socio-spatial impact by changing the narrative of climate matter being a niche subject, thus affecting the material reality of climate change. Moreover, by gathering in assembly, the individuals who lack political power—for instance, not having the right to vote or influence the political discussion through their work—gain political legitimacy and aggregation of capacities. This is especially the case in the weekly gatherings of Fridays for Future, as the schoolchildren can be seen as pre-political or extra-political subjects who belong to the private sphere and are not carriers of the popular will (Butler, 2015). Twenty-year-old Portuguese Fridays for Future participant Carmen described her feelings relating to the impact of her actions which took place a few years earlier:

> They [a new Portuguese political party focused on environmental issues] brought to the parliament issues, environmental issues. So, they could say, for example, like, see those kids outside protesting, we need to hear them. And they actually did. Like they were passing laws. (Carmen, interview, 1 May 2023)

The importance of bodies on the streets for climate governance was especially felt during the Covid-19 pandemic when the bodies could not gather, which affected the capacities of the assembly. The pattern of the number of participants in the climate activism movement diminishing was mentioned in various interviews, attributing it to there not being any physical personal meetings in addition to the media's and politicians' focus shifting from new climate policies to solely focusing on topics related to the Covid-19 pandemic. After the pandemic, the number of activists and the interest of politicians in new climate policies did not return to the same level.

5. Discussion: The Body as a Political Tool

We initiated this study process to acquire insights into the practices in climate activism and to offer a theoretical framework to analyze bodily performative manifestations in the context of climate activism in the public space. Here, we engaged with climate activism as a participatory, relational and political practice that is mobilized by shared matters of concern. Within this practice, we approached the body not as a stable

and autonomous figure, but as a dynamic and ever-changing tool through its socio-spatial configurations that co-constitute climate activism, making the role of the individual body in climate change activism manifestations elusive. Therefore, we argue that the body as a tool negotiates the political regimes of climate change through its relation to other agencies including (a) the public space, (b) other climate activists, (c) material objects, (d) law enforcement, (e) the general public and media, and (f) climate governance and policy, through which the body is being constructed as a political tool.

The climate activists found in the movement great feelings of belonging, which emphasized the strong bond of relationality among the activists and their surroundings. The activists defined their bodies through collective relational and affective terms, for example by being part of a mass, a cell of a community, or a protector of others. The terms elucidate the simultaneous existence of a body as a tool and the assembly of bodies as a tool which are in relation with other humans, material environments, and objects. The sense of belonging and its blooming life force enlarging the capacities of the group among a heterogeneous population was one of the central outcomes of the action and something that was born out of the aggregating power of affective flows in the gathering of people. In their work on the topic of assembling masses within the physical public space, other scholars have highlighted that social media has an important aggregating power as a tool of emotional narration as it constructs an affective sense of togetherness among heterogeneous participants (Gerbaudo, 2012; Juris, 2012). However, our analysis shows that while social media is an effective tool for gathering different people and spreading the message, the relief from climate anxiety and loneliness is found in the community on the ground.

In addition to the body as a tool being sustained by other bodies and the public space, the activists were accompanied by the police and the media, both being simultaneously the enablers and constrainers of the capacities of the action. Law enforcement was repeatedly mentioned as the main threat during climate activism manifestations, with hostility from the police often perceived as a significant risk. Nevertheless, the simultaneous sense of safety created by the presence of law enforcement enabled the activists to continue their actions. In a complex way, the activists protested against the state, while law enforcement simultaneously protected the activists and acted as a source of hostility leading the activists to protect their bodies from the police. As such, the activists and law enforcement navigated through and tried to balance hostility and protection. This "dance" of power dynamics has been conceptualized as "communal choreographies," where in road blockage actions the bodies of the activists stopped the movement of the traffic, while the law enforcement enacted their own choreography by directing the movement of protesters (Foellmer, 2024). Through the directing of the bodies of the activists, law enforcement restored the standard urban rhythms that the bodies of the activists had disrupted (Foellmer, 2024). At the same time, our analysis sheds light on how diffracting the standard urban rhythms with the bodies is a tool to catch the attention of the media.

The activists used the presence of the media as one of the ways to protect their bodies from the police. In addition to having the capacity to protect, the media has the power to change a local incident into a politically potent one (Butler, 2015). The press does not function only as a reporting tool but is a vital part of the activist manifestation as it "constitutes the scene in a time and place that includes and exceeds its local instantiation" (Butler, 2015, p. 91). As both law enforcement and activists are aware of this socio-spatial configuration, they change their behavior based on the presence of cameras. Here the experiences of activists differed greatly based on their situatedness as there existed great differences in the normative

action of the police, the level of power of the media, and how the latter assesses the former's actions. These are not static relations, as Cuerpo-Territorio—a Latin American decolonial, Indigenous community and feminist epistemology—has demonstrated by regarding the body as the first territory one occupies, thus being an active site of struggle against capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial logics of extraction, exploitation, and dispossession, that impose violence on marginalized people's bodies and the land (Cabnal, 2010; Schmidt, 2024; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2020). Here, the dynamic and relational nature of the body as a tool, which was reflected on in our analysis, comes forward.

Within this activist–police-media configuration, material objects such as Covid masks co-constructed the actions of activists during manifestations. Constraining the capacities of the body as a tool, the mask hindered activists from showing their emotionally loaded, identifiably face to the media, which generated different affects: Not only were they deliberately identifiable to the police and through this materialized the extent of the sacrifice they were willing to make for the climate, but they were also showing their most vulnerable feelings to the wider public in order to affect the passers-by, both on the street and online. As the interviewees narrated, and Gerbaudo (2012) has written, these "spontaneous" emotional moments seen online can sometimes take place due to thorough previous organizational work by a nucleus of organizers of the manifestation.

The climate activists define their bodies through collective terms. Through this understanding of "bodies" rather than individual "body," they highlight the relations between the bodies, the physical conditions of climate change, and the streets as the place of protests. Although some of the civil disobedience actions can seem violent and unpredictable for the viewer looking at them from the outside, inside this action there exist networks of care and solidarity. Still, in the public space there exist various potentially hostile institutions of power which the activists' bodies are in relation with, for example the law enforcement and the media. Interestingly, the activists use the latter to protect themselves from the former and use the help of the former to sustain their activist manifestation. In the context of the climate crisis activist manifestations, the body is being constructed as political in its relations to other bodies and other matter.

Hostilities to bodily climate activism, rooted in the belief that it is radical, diminish the legitimacy of activists' responses to the climate emergency. However, drawing on our results, we argue that bodily climate activism is a valuable avenue for non-violent public participation because of its relational transformative collectivity. This collective and relational approach creates opportunities for politicizing topics normally seen as non-political and transforms the discourse on climate change from an abstract natural science dilemma to a clear socio-economic problem. In the socio-spatial configurations that shape bodily climate activism, the body is a dynamic, ever-changing, and relational political tool, which goes beyond our usual understanding of the body as a stable and autonomous figure performing individual actions. This relational transformative collectivity holds particular significance in the European context, as the willingness of an assembly of bodies to risk arrest or harassment challenges the existing rationalities and core values of European countries. This tension is reflected in the responses of the politicians and the media.

Collective bodily public participation questions "the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political" (Butler, 2015, p. 9). The activists are pushing the climate issue to be a political and material issue, emphasizing the role of public spaces. The stories of the interviewees demonstrate that these spaces enable emotional encounters, which are crucial for their cause, as the affective relational encounters

emphasize the bodily dimensions of the climate crisis. Unlike LGBTQIA+ activism or healthcare issues, climate politics is not commonly seen as an issue of the body. Bringing the bodily dimensions forward outlines how the climate protests are not only about abstract challenges related to global warming—they are also about concrete socio-economic circumstances such as access to food, decent living conditions, having or not having children in the future, mass migration of climate refugees, and systemic inequality (e.g., in access to resources, or in the toxicity to which some bodies are more exposed than others). In this manner, bodily climate activism can be taken as an exemplifier of Butler's (2015) understanding of sustaining the body by being at the forefront of future activism manifestations.

6. Conclusion

In their work on assemblies as plural forms of performative action, Butler (2015) discusses the role of the physical body in activism:

> It matters when public squares are filled to the brim, when people eat and sleep there, sing and refuse to cede the space, as we saw in the gatherings in Tahrir Square, and continue to see in other parts of the world. (p. 94)

Due to the growing and dynamic impacts of the climate crisis (e.g., shifting ecosystems, frequent and severe weather events, rising sea levels, as well as increased poverty, climate migration, etc.), activists gather in public spaces concerned about livable futures on this planet. During such gatherings, the activist's body becomes a participatory public tool, advocating for change in environmental policy regulation, and demanding responsibility and urgent change in climate policy. Here, the activist's body is not a stable and autonomous figure participating in climate activism manifestations. Rather, the body and its participatory practices (e.g., barricading the driveway, sitting on public squares, tying their body to objects, etc.) are part of socio-spatial configurations of the climate activism manifestation itself, which include (but are not limited to) the public space in which they operate, other bodies, law enforcement, etc.

As recent media articles reflect increasing hostility towards bodily ways of performing activism, often labeling them as "bad" or "radicalized" (Chazan, 2023; "Die neuen Staatsfeinde," 2023; "Habeck kritisiert neue Klimaproteste," 2023), our study provides insights into how such bodily ways of performing activism come into being and make meaning. Further, we challenge the notion that bodily activism is a violent and illegitimate way to participate in politics. Instead, we regard it as a valuable non-violent form of public participation through its relational transformative collectivity, which has the ability to redefine what matters are regarded as political. As they advocate for climate action and climate justice, we suggest so-called "radicalized" forms of activism are established in relation to surroundings and practices. In other words, the bodily ways of performing activism are in constant conversation with hostilities practiced by the media and law enforcement. Such hostilities and bodily activism mutually constitute each other: The activists engage with these hostilities in relational ways as they use the media to protect from law enforcement and use the help of the police to sustain their activist manifestation, while the attention they receive from the media is one of the main reasons why the activists gather in the public space. In these interactions, the body becomes a dynamic tool to negotiate the political regimes of climate change through being in socio-spatial configurations with other humans, material objects, and environments. This is prevalent in the context of bodily climate activism in the public space in Europe, as it offers a valuable ground to emotionally engage

both physically and through the media with passers-by and the larger public. It also offers a ground to collectively negotiate existing rationalities and political questions that are central to the changes in living conditions taking place due to the global climate crisis. Through its transformative collectivity, bodily climate activism asserts itself as an important non-violent participation in politics, in which the socio-spatial configurations are more momentous than the individual body.

Our study centered on the human body and investigated activists' accounts of how they relate and engage with different agencies during climate activism manifestations. This study thus serves as a first step in gaining in-depth insights into the bodily meaning-making processes of climate activists. Future studies that draw inspiration from the corporeo-cartographic research tradition or the Latin-American decolonial feminist method of mapping body territories (Cuerpo-Territorio) in order to illuminate the fight against capitalist notions of exploiting nature and that include instances beyond the European context can complement this study. Regarding the theoretical framework, social constructivism has been critiqued for taking a representational approach—that is, trying to provide descriptions and presentations that mirror reality, which, according to Karen Barad among others, deems matter passive and overlooks material agency in the construction of reality (Barad, 2007). Despite this, there are bridges to be built between the two theories to conceptualize the body as a tool for demanding climate action and climate justice during activism. For future studies, the new materialist approach could be something to explore further. In line with Karen Barad's thinking, future studies might conceptualize the body not as a static entity operating in the world but instead as being "constituted along with the world or rather, as part of the world (i.e., 'being-of-the-world,' not 'being-in-the-world')" (Barad, 2007, p. 160). While Berger and Luckmann's original conceptualization of "the body as a tool" implies that the body has strict human-centric boundaries, as an author collective we acknowledge that the body as a tool is dynamic and ever-changing through its intimate entanglement in material and discursive practices that co-constitute climate activism.

Studying the body as a tool for climate activism necessitates reflexivity on the research practices that we used to conduct this research. Such reflections create a space for thought about how to position oneself as a researcher, being part of the research-configuration of people, (research) practices, ideas, and bodies as (socio-material) matter that matter. Being part of the research-configuration is directly related to the relationship one builds with interviewees as participants, the narratives being produced, and the texts that represent them, including this article. It is also a silent witness to the trust and solidarity achieved in this study process. In that sense, in future research we will build more on that trust to have participants help analyze the data and feed meaning to the themes in full negotiation about what matters in the relational practice of social change.

Acknowledgments

We are sincerely thankful to the nine interviewees who shared their stories with us. In addition, we would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers and the editors. Of course, we are also grateful to our families and friends who support us for better or worse.

Funding

Antje Jacobs extends her gratitude to the Research Foundation Flanders for funding her PhD (11Q4S24N), which co-facilitated the development of this article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data will remain available on a protected server of KU Leuven for 5 years upon publication of this article and will then be deleted.

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