This talk will explore how bodies became so productive in contemporary and recent political vernaculars, and will attempt to trace a line from biopolitics to mimesis. With the emergence of ‘the body’ as the central signifier of much poststructuralist and post-foundationalist cultural theory and philosophy some decades ago, and the more recent terminology of ‘bodies’ as the loci of political agency (‘bodies assembling’, ‘Parliament of Bodies’), an ostensible move beyond the humanist confusions of ‘subject’ and ‘people’ rather presents us with the possibility of pseudo-concreteness that often accompanies theoretical projects intolerant of (real) abstraction. The discourse of the body and of bodies elides the question of how and why bodies are *produced*, accepting the bio-, if not necro-, political, premises of the current dispensation – one that capitalises on the fragile, isolated and suffering body - and converting them into an ethical victory. This then tends to exemplify rather than challenge a scenario in which ‘the reproduction of capitalism and the reproduction of organisms become indistinguishable’ (Johnson). In other words, what form of social relation makes such a thing as ‘the body’ not just legible but a departure point for any political subjectivation? Another suggestion comes from the somewhat recessed category of mimesis, here understood as the suspension of the human/nature, human/technology divide by means of struggle, play and performance. I will conclude with a close analysis of Valie EXPORT’s *Body Configurations* series.

This paper begins, as is often the case, from an observation which opens up a question whose solution does not seem to be obvious but which occasions further questions that start to generate several hypotheses. It’s an observation of something which has become established but of having missed the process whereby it came to be so, leading to a slight bewilderment that can be summed up in the somewhat antiquated terminology of ‘did I miss the memo?’ In this case, it was wondering how it came to be in the past decade that in political and in theoretical contexts, the reference to ‘people’ came to be replaced by references to ‘bodies’ and to a ‘person’ by a ‘body’ (the reference to ‘the body’ in the critical lexicon is of course less of a recent phenomenon). It first came to my attention when I read Judith Butler’s text ‘Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street’ which was concerned with understanding the role of occupation of public squares as an emergent shape of resistance in the movements in North Africa and in Spain, but also at that time emerging in the United States and shortly thereafter in the UK with Occupy. In this article, which several years later became the book Towards a Theory of Performative Assembly, Butler was drawing together her interests in precarity and the ethics of vulnerability and exposure to develop an Arendtian argument about public space as the original scene of the political, but going beyond and in some ways counter to Arendt – noting that ‘Arendt’s view is confounded by its own gender politics, relying as it does on a distinction between the public and private domain that leaves the sphere of politics to men, and reproductive labour to women. If there is a body in the public sphere, it is masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created.‘ Butler’s claim is that it is precisely the collective transition of individualised, private, and embodied troubles into public matters through the manifestation of the many assembling in the street which opened up a political space where it had long been unavailable and foreclosed. The principal argument was that it was the dramatization of collective vulnerability in this appearing – a set of structural vulnerabilities made literal by physically coming to and remaining in public spaces mediated by the violence of ownership, policing and damaged social relations, not to mention weather – that was the ground of the political, that it was the sheer fact of ‘bodies assembling’ and making themselves visible, audible, impossible to ignore, prior to and constitutively in excess of any particular or general political demand. Without engaging in more detail in this argument, or any of the other careful arguments Butler sets out in that text, what I was struck by there was the use of ‘bodies’ to speak about the political actors Butler was delineating, and what this move seemed to imply – rather than an ideology, a campaign with clear and achievable political goals, there were only bodies with their vulnerability as the whole content of this emerging politics. It wasn’t that I was suspicious of the idea of a struggle w/o clearly communicated set of demands, it was rather I was surprised that the orientation of post-structuralist critical theory to anti-humanism, multiplicity and performativity had boiled down to this – the overriding of the term ‘people’ by the term ‘bodies’ – a grand abstraction that sounds maximally concrete, in some ways not unlike the replacement of ‘masses’ or ‘classes’ by ‘multitude’ earlier in the century as a unifying category without hints of division or determination – an anti-universal universalism, which discounts the role of division in the composition of any resistant or revolutionary formation (as Jodi Dean writes it may be less helpful to look for structural unities rather than a contingent, subjectifying process coming out of a social field characterised by division). It was as if the ultimate stakes of a critique of representation had to be dismantling the traces of representation carried by the idiom of people or persons in order to arrive, simply, at ‘bodies’ – presumed to be living (not dead) and human (not animal or machinic in an everyday sense) but otherwise free of any determinations or residual dualisms. In a sort of Heideggerian equality of ‘being-towards-death’, equally precarious, equally exposed, the possessors of bodies, bodies themselves assembling, set the scene for a new solidarity of precarity – an alliance of weakness, an equal and indivisible interest in improving their conditions of survival.

However, in alignment to a scepticism I had likewise entertained about the ubiquitous discursive category of ‘the body’, before long I became persuaded that this usage of ‘bodies’ was an instance of pseudo-concreteness. In common with many types of philosophical idealism, it bore the mark of starting with the concrete as if it were self-evident, without getting there by going through the socially effective abstractions of capitalist life. Because what could be more concrete than a body in space, than many bodies in a space? (I know, we could probably get into a similar debate about the category of ‘space’!) And similar to most philosophical idealisms (however well-integrated into positivist methodologies they sometimes may be), the question of how these concrete entities are produced, Butler’s gestures in the text to reproductive labour and dependency aside, is left out of the political picture. The notion of bodies seems to allow us to clear the ground for a new and more timely set of political understandings in the era of atomized subjectivities and acute crises of social reproduction, but the notion of bodies as these exemplarily passive (post-?) political agents is under-specified in a way that, far from providing tools to help us arrive at this understanding it seems rather to pose a block to it. The language of ‘a body’ and ‘bodies’ seemed to reify just as it offered a way out of reification; ‘bodies’ became things, things that gathered, things that were distributed in space.

Since then, ‘bodies’ has become an accepted vernacular in theoretical as well as activist milieus, a signal that one’s political vocabulary has been cleansed of any problematic notions around ideology, consciousness or, at times, identity. The violence and complexity of abstraction disappears in the irreducibility of the suffering body, more detached than ever from the webs of sociality that materialize the abstraction of labour, of health, of relations inversely in daily life as the unarguable concreteness of the body. What seems like a biopolitical common sense thoroughly re-shapes the language of resistance. Bodies signals radicality (in the register or bare life or exposure), a generic vulnerability. We are all precarious inasmuch as we *are* rather than *have* bodies – no ghosts in the machine there. Such an ontology locates the baseline of political solidarity and ethical community in this fact of being a body, or having shared corporeal and affective needs. A second ago I called this a biopolitical common sense and indeed it does evoke Foucault’s discussions of the governance of populations as first and foremost biological entities, with the explicit linkage between economy and living capacity as the secret theology of the secular modern state. The terminology of ‘bodies’ thus seems to demonstrate the internalization of these ideas as they have pervaded the academy and radical politics in the past half-century or so, alongside a number of feminist, queer and intersectional critiques of the control, management and production of bodies, but staying at the level of acknowledgement – yes, we are bodies, and no, we do not want to be governed like that, in Foucault’s well-known phrase. Anxieties about division– philosophically into body and mind, politically by different ideologies or group affiliations – seems to be central to the embrace of ‘body’ discourse. It is an anxiety that seems, at least to me, no less superstitious or one-sided, however, than the old-fashioned idiom of ‘souls’ to refer to numerical aggregates or individuals. As such, it carries with it, despite the very different critical legacy, an element of what could be called ‘jargon of authenticity’, something basic and fundamental, something which is not produced. A site where politics begins and which itself manages to avoid scrutiny as a political problem or a contradictory enunciation. (Eclipsed as well in this usage, interestingly enough, is the older usage of ‘body’ to refer to a corporate entity such as a group or organisation – ‘bodies’ in the current frame are insistently material, physical, vital and animated, in an insistently empiricist register.)

The idiom of ‘bodies’ is now widespread enough to have become prevalent as well in cultural and art institutional spaces – witness the title of Documenta 14, ‘The Parliament of Bodies’, about which Adam Szymczyk notes, in conversation with Michelle Kuo in Artforum, that the title means to signal the contemporary situation of precarity and mass movements of refugees: ‘People bring very little with them, so they mostly bring their bodies, and these bodies add up to a problem that is dealt with through the power of nation-states, which means more borders and more repression against these “illegitimate” bodies.’ In turn, Kuo notes that the title is in pointed contrast to the ‘thing-orientation’ of recent theory, such as Bruno Latour’s 2006 ‘Parliament of Things’ exhibition event. Here with the invocation ‘bodies’ the suggestion is that politics have been invited back into an arena of fetishism in a gesture partaking as much of constitution as of pathos, with the hope of sublating the polarisations of the situation of holding Documenta in Athens in an overall attention to the vulnerability that equally connects all bodies – if it does. Art migrants, migrant migrants – all can participate in the Parliament provided they bring nothing but their bodies. Again, it is the projection of a political collectivity united by the sheer fact of exposure to harm (a strikingly uniform one, here), in other words, the wholly biopolitical nature of this notion of bodies, which both takes – Parliament - and evacuates power in the same moment, turning to appeal to a protective sovereign in the common fact of humiliating weakness – or to one another’s empathy, undivided by antagonisms of property, race or gender. As the artist Jonas Staal, in an enthusiastic application of Butler’s work to his own, notes, ‘This means that the collective gathering of bodies in the form of an assembly is an inherent act of resistance against the lack of care that a given regime provides to these bodies.’ At this juncture, we can just note that even if bodies are perceived as relational to infrastructures of care and reproduction, this relationality is politically valuable insofar as it is a source of dependency, not a source of power or conflict. These fundamentally biological units seem to have no political dimension, much less contradictory interests. We can call it a managerial conception of politics as well as a biopolitical one, because it is about governing a population in terms of pre-determined goals of flourishing and productivity, not hearing any political claims rooted in disparities of power but rather adopting the familiar empiricist brutality of management which just ‘wants to make sure everyone is taken care of (not causing any problems)’. At first it is rather challenging to see where the politics actually are here, since antagonism and history are cancelled from the outset, and suffering only registers as obstacles to the survival of a biological unit. Engaging with such a managerial, or, in other terms, solution-oriented politics means engaging with the politics of management on the global scale, through its interfaces in the NGO complex and how it manages the bare lives of those excluded from political subjectivity since permanently on the brink of death, and needing to be rescued. This is what I would like to investigate further to get a more comprehensive reading of where ‘bodies’ came from and how they infiltrated the vocabularies of radical politics. Didier Fassin’s book, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* seems like it could be useful here, noting that ‘‘Humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence.’

Here it might be worth mentioning, if unfortunately only in passing, Hortense Spillers’ influential discussion of the enslaved and gendered body as transvalued by the signifying regime of white ownership into ‘flesh’ – a passive, exploitable, de-humanized and formless substance which can produce or be abused and destroyed – and the challenges this brings to compelling and difficult projects such as Fred Moten’s, who’s interested in seeing what individuations emerge form collectivities of flesh, those who are no longer commodities and not yet human, and what political and aesthetic power this might be said to generate for thought, art and politics. The reason I mention this category of ‘flesh’ here, without quite being able to get into it, is that it strikes me as rather distant as an instance of attempted concreteness in critical thinking from the pseudo-concreteness I am arguing ‘bodies’ presents us with, seeing it to be so mediated by forces of history, violence and law, as well as sensibility and fugitivity.

I am interested in this move of projecting a unity on the one hand and an absolute irreducibility on the other, this body without qualities, so to speak. In her book *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, the feminist labour scholar Melissa Wright is interested in how the bodies of women workers, especially those employed in electronics assembly in Mexico and China, come to represent at the same time tremendous value – employed in great numbers, admired for their docility, patience, nimble fingers, etc. – and the acme of waste and disposability for the transnational proprietors and managers of the companies in question (with the social expression of the latter running from reluctance to train or promote transient pools of ‘girls’ to the systematic murders of factory worker women and girls in Ciudad Juarez and elsewhere in Northern Mexico in the 1990s and early 2000s). Clearly there is no body in this equation without a certain kind of subjectivity – deficient, passive, adaptable – being associated with it, and Wright wants to emphasize that just as we are used to the critical vocabulary of the production of subjectivity as a feminist and materialist line of inquiry, we should also be asking after how these bodies are produced, or, perhaps more aptly, ‘manufactured’ on the global factory floor of the gendered and racialized capitalist division (or multiplication, as Neilson and Mezzadra say) of labour. Just as there is the abstraction of ‘labour’ as use value for capital, or the seller of the special commodity of labour power which Marx called variable capital and contemporary apologists call human capital, the body that is the bearer of this labour power is also an abstraction insofar as it is produced in specific social relationship characterised by the homogenizing and unifying form of value: ‘‘The disposable third world woman’s body is not the same as the one that women workers bring into the workplace. Rather, it is a body manufactured during the labor process via discourses that combine bits and pieces of workers’ bodies with industrial processes and managerial expectations. As I intend to show here, this discursive production of the materially disposable third world woman’s body does not, however, focus exclusively on the manufacturing of solely female bodies. It is a discursive process in which material entities cohere around an array of differences, such as first world/third world, female/male, valuable/disposable, and other traits often paired as binary opposites.’ So here we see that the common unit of analysis does not begin with a body or with bodies but arrives there – it is rather the crude empiricism of the boss, the owner and the manager – not to mention many sociologists – which begin and usually end with bodies, bodies which come complete with subjectivities appropriate to and determined by the status of the disposable yet ultra-profitable exploited body, bound by gender and something called culture to occupy its allotted place. Whereas the (gendered) bodies determined to be capable of advancing in the workplace hierarchy become individuated, bearers of skills and destinies.

With the hypothesis of a body as something which is produced or manufactured, distributed or allocated, we can also think about the means of its production, which I’ve sketched out already in terms of the critique of political economy, but also can be conceptualised in more detail through the application of technologies of power, in this case, in Theresa de Lauretis’ terms, ‘technologies of gender’ – the deployment of legal, economic, institutional, aesthetic and affective technologies (in Foucault’s terms, ‘complex political technologies’). I invoke the category of ‘technology’ in its connotation of institution as well as device – apparatus, in other and perhaps more familiar terms – to bring this dimension into view, as a different path to approaching concreteness, but also as it bridges to my final section, which will focus on mimesis. Mimesis refers to nonsensuous similarity, the register of emulation and play which short-circuits an instrumental and dominant approach of humans to nature. Mimesis has gradually and inevitably decayed, though it returns anew in the relationship between human societies and their technologies. I will confine myself here to citing Theodor Adorno’s deployment of mimesis He accepts the account of mimesis as a mode of enacting a nonsensuous similarity that is in contrast to the subordination of nature that confirms the irrational rationality of Enlightenment – the domination and exploitation of internal and external nature by the calculating subject. It is in the artwork that the entanglement of play and domination stages a concept of mimesis as *aesthetic rationality*, also since art represents a historical advance towards rationality from its ‘dark precursors’ in magic and ritual: ‘The survival of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as “rational.”’

The reason I bring mimesis into the discussion is that it suggests an account of humanity as something which is relationally produced in its historical difference and antagonism with nature, as well as the space in which this difference is averted, transfigured or overturned. The body is produced here as sovereign in its domination of natural forces through culture, politics, war (by means of technologies and as technologies) but through mimesis it can become other than what these forces of teleological (or, conversely, gratuitous, in a nod to the fascinating Elettra Stimelli book am reading now) domination and accumulation have shaped it collectively and individually to be. Crucially, in this view, the body is not separable from subjectivity. Mimesis is emulation, a performance of imitating and by imitating trying to bridge a gulf – and Walter Benjamin, in his discussion of first and second technology (a dialectically imbricated but basically technology of domination/war and a technology of communication or redemption/play), talks about the *Spielraum*, the space of play that technology as an infrastructure for mimesis can enable. In better-known work, the visual and behavioural mimesis made possible by technologies of reproduction such as photography and film were poised as emancipatory in tendency, if not always in prevailing form. Yet with contemporary fields of exercise which envoke notion of mimesis, the optimistic – and optimisjng - forces of biological reductionism can take hold, as Elizabeth Johnson shows in her essay ‘Reconsidering Mimesis: Freedom and Acquiescence in the Anthropocene’. In her discussion of the development of bio-mimetic technologies with innumerable consumer and military applications, such as emulating the construction of the skin texture and anatomical detail of geckos’ feet for greater adhesion in climbing, she points out how, just as I tried to show in the discussion of bodies, a transgression of an established framework – there the political discourse of subjects or people, here the assumption that technology is here to help us dominate nature not learn from it – can end up securing the operative logics embedded in that framework through renewal, a sort of epistemic ‘Leopard-ism’ (di Lampedusa’s novel where the famous line appears ‘everything needs to change so everything can stay the same’). An entrepreneurial nature, in other words, constantly investing in and developing itself, just like the bodies who only need to watch and learn to acquire the best-practice in adaptation strategies – this seems to be the ideological as well as technological idiom Johnson detects here, warning that the case of biomimetics shows how ‘mimesis too easily serves as a double mirror—rather than transform production, nonhuman life at the level of biology becomes a force *for* production. While biomimicry reconfigures what matters in contemporary capitalism, valuing life becomes ever more intensively a matter of capital, to be lauded for productive capacities alone [..] we require more than “alternative” consciousness; we must enhance capacities of confrontation against a machinery of production that self-actualizes across bodies, species, and spaces.’

Finally, however, I’d like to take up Adorno’s posited relation between mimesis and art into a direction which I have long been captivated by but only intermittently worked on: Valie EXPORT’s photographic series *Koerperkonfiguratione*n/Body Configurations. In these images you see women arranging their bodies to emulate the shape of street furniture such as curbs and monuments. Sometimes they try to follow the shape quite literally, sometimes they outline an axis, say of horizontal and vertical, forming a junction between a wall and a bench. Sometimes EXPORT adds a diagram to the image, a geometrical repetition (or another layer of mimesis) to visualize what the figure is doing in relation to the architecture, though sometimes the shapes do not strive to echo the physical posture assumed, making them easier to read as vectoral syntagmata of an 'internal state'. The series bears the subtitle *Visible Externalisation of Internal States: The Body Arranging Itself Within its Environment*. More specific subtitles occasionally appear written in the corner of the print: ‘Human as Ornament’, ‘Encircling’, etc. We see here one of the sharpest materialisations of EXPORT's abiding interest in the body as a sign in a differential network of power relations, countering any body politics premised on a humanist or spiritual authenticity: a body that deliberately swerves from the protocols of behaviour in a public street may de-code the protocols, and is at once over-coded by a flurry of others. The body as sign is the mutual imbrication of flesh and signifier; far from a discursive abstraction, it is an embodied contradiction in narratives of culture, gender and labour. As much as the actions proclaim an intensification of subjectivity in codified public behaviour in urban space through the dislocation of nature/culture membranes (humanising the city), EXPORT is just as interested in the process of objectifying the human – the de-subjectivation of the city dweller and the mutation of the human entity into an extension of the urban fabric, as *The Human as Ornament* seems to declare. Such a line of investigation arguably has ramifications beyond EXPORT's overt linguistic and feminist concerns (how the woman functions as a sign in an over-determined patriarchal symbolic economy – fighting nature, she tries to blend in with culture but cannot 'possess' herself as subject; she can only display herself as a sign of power relations) to invoke related modernist discourse and its breakdown – a few touchstones could be Loos's ‘ornament as crime’, Le Corbusier's 'machine for living' and the transgressive rituals of the male Aktionists that were premised on alternative uses of the body in public space (EXPORT penned a ‘Manifesto for Female Aktionism’), a nearly symmetrical riposte to every 'clean' variant of modernist utopia.

The 'body configurations' try to impair the functionality of this urban subjecthood, its techniques of placement, stratification, mobility, optimisation and, in Vienna, the emblems of heritage and imperial civilisation. They re-configure this well-regulated space by making a corporeal and affective claim to the territory that refutes the terms of urban alienation by materialising it, a form of sympathetic magic yielding antidotes through mimesis. The social space is annexed through mimesis, a chaotic attempt to fuse first and second nature by using a feminized body, a site of visual pleasure that can turn in an instant to a source of friction and abjection. The friction is corrosive to the parameters of thinking, feeling and moving in urban space, and how these become naturalised in a process of instrumental amnesia replicated by architecture and infrastructure. Some of EXPORT’s chosen sites in Vienna are nondescript (curbs), while others are avatars of a distended grandeur (flowing pediments of imperial kitsch sculpture). Compared to the visions of ‘assembling’ we heard earlier (if not compared to what we could think about as the ‘actual experience’ of occupying space those descriptions either try to capture or cover over), there are two big departures: these are highly gendered (and of course racialized – all white, probably German-speaking women, often EXPORT herself) occupations of public space in the singular and not in the collective, and they are mimetic-antagonistic – the attempt to become-like or to merge with is hard to dissociate from the attempt to overcome or to attack. Meanwhile, the correspondence between the sovereign subject and the architecture of sovereignty is clearly marked on the surface of the photograph itself by the line tracing the success of the emulation and the equivalence established between individual subject/urban-subject by the corporeal adjustment to the street feature. All that we see are bodies trapped in space, made of human and stone, trying to escape the trap by blending (in Adorno as well as Caillois’ discussion of mimicry) but only becoming more conspicuous in the process. At the same time, the formalist line marks the equivalence and the non-equivalence. The lines do merge but remain as asymptotes – they diverge to make a space where other potentials can emerge.