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COLLECTIVITY? YOU MEAN COLLABORATION

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About a year ago when Emil Hrvatin and I proposed a performance project addressing collectivity, I couldn't anticipate the resistance and confusion the term alone would bring.

A dozen responses from programmers, critics, and theorists from the experimental field of European dance and performance, whom we asked for a critical reflection on the project proposal, resonated in a consensus of questions:

"Aren't you aware of how ideologised and outmoded the term is? Do you mean collectivity as a *modus operandi* or as a topic of research? In other words, are you working collectively or on collectivity? We would be happier if you substituted 'collectivity' with a term more suitable to contemporary practices - **collaboration**, namely - as collaboration involves a space of negotiation of individual differences."

If collaboration is a buzzword for a working *habitus* in performance today, collectivism is abandoned, or even repressed and repulsive in its very idea. The uneasiness with collectivity is more than a symptom of the politics of liberal individualism in performing arts.

It entangles intersecting interests in a few "c-terms": collectivity and community, criticality and conceptualization. Here I will resume a number of questions and points I discussed in a speech held at *Context #1*, Berlin, Hebbel-am-Ufer, January 2004.

Collectivity: the libertarian heritage

What does an investigation of a concept, more social and historical than artistic and contemporary as we were told, reveal about the current state of experimental performance in Europe? Is authorship always already assigned to the one who initiates a project? How can an initiative to invite authors for research reassure an egalitarian basis of collaboration, a frame of collectivity without central leadership?

Does collectivity in Western societies today only conjure images of collective political action in a strong ideological vein abolished after 1989? Is collectivism necessarily understood – and therefore, dismissed - as the tool for emancipatory politics by an obsolete model of the theatre and performance practices in the 60s?

"When we feel, we feel the emergency: when we feel the emergency, we will act: when we act, we will change the world." (Julian Beck, Living Theatre)

It is the collectives founded upon the essentialist premises of humanity being at work or the mythology of merging life and art in the 60s, that are all the more responsible for concluding an end to the interest in collectivism. The dramaturgy of the ascending ritualist voyage of an individual within a collective, be it in the life of a tribal commune or in stage representation – as the theatre collectives in the 60s pursued – dissolved its own project of social

and political change, because in the final stage of the process, it narrows it down to the abstract idea of individual freedom. What I'm saying here is that we should thank historical collectives from the 60s for providing food for liberal individualism today. They handed down a legacy of libertarian depoliticizing thought: practice freedom as the exercise of free will. Take one of those imperatives of Living Theatre, like "Change is the natural state of being", strip it from its 1960s-anarchist vogue, and what you get is a slogan "free, different, creative", who? The sovereign individual chooser nowadays: the author, the programmer, the spectator.

Collectivity in the models we chose to remember is relegated to ideological disasters or social breakdowns, as if doomed to always fall into fascist regimes of collaboration. What should be more important is to examine the present-day situation why collectivism isn't just abandoned but repressed or, why the very idea of collectivity is repulsive or, are we allowed to rethink it in new terms which would serve the critical needs of the present?

Such scenes from the performances of Living Theatre, Performance Group, even from some of Judson Dance Theatre performances, have also transfigured into a hidden matrix of self-expression, appearing in the format of solo work or communal improvisation set-ups today.

Individualist self-expression makes a fetishist aura of dance in Western society: "And what was your experience, what did you feel, what did you learn from it, what kind of openings did it create for you?" The interrogations we so often hear reflect both the spectator's and the performer's New-Age-like occupation with the individual self.

The individualism of artistic or cultural producers, especially in the corporeal outfit of the dancer is, moreover, the admirable capital of the values such as creativity, complexity, mobility, flexibility, or innovation.

It is the individual and not the collective enterprise of performance which inspires the figure of the contemporary worker in the context of neo-liberalism. Does s-/he belong to the frame of collectivity or community today?

Inoperative community: the networking

The political history of **community**, a word forgotten or reserved for the European community more than twenty years ago, shows that "community" emerges as a term more appropriate than "communism" was fifteen years after May 68 when the French leftist intellectuals brought forth the subject of collectivity again.

In 1983, the editor of the magazine *Aléa*, Jean-Christophe Bailly, proposes the topic of community "*la communauté, le nombre*":

The collapse of communism was met with a liberal response that involves an eager repression of the very question being-in-common (which so-called real communism repressed under a common Being) (Nancy, 2000, 43).

But in neo-liberalism we do enjoy a "being-together," if you like. What we have in common is commerce and communication – in one word: the network.

Networking provides the illusion of surpassing the boundaries of local professional community and breaking into the international

field of the discipline contemporary performance. Such a mechanism can be illustrated by the well-known cartoon and metaphor, Willy the Coyote and the Roadrunner, as I discussed with a group of makers at the Tanzquartier's lab on research in April 2003.

The Coyote tirelessly chases the bird over the flat boundless surface of the desert, keeping always the same never-to-be-bridged distance from the bird, until he flips over a cliff, the end of the road. He never dies, just leaves the full imprint of his body at the bottom of the abyss.

The desert expands in a movement of deterritorialization, each action generating a fresh re-departure, and a line of flight only measured by the inventiveness and speed of movement. According to this see-saw model, research happens when it breaks a new ground that can potentially develop into a field.

And the sudden break of the chase marking the fall from the cliff, the inevitable pull-force of the community, the localization - drags the fleeting individual down into personal history and cultural and political contexts of regulation.

The field is not just a plane of consistency, as the popular Deleuzian discourse would have it. In effect, it is represented by networks of venues, festivals, research labs, flying programmers, showcase platforms, online criticism platforms etc.: in one word, the institutional market on which makers are invited to seek a niche for a desirable commodity.

The only tactic of resisting the institutional market for the freelance artist is to become the mediating machine him/herself, producing productivity and a self-governed networking. His/her work shifts to a multiplication of activities, contacts, formats of

work, collaboration and presentation, allowing for the work-in-progress character to take on almost his/her entire opus, a working without work.

The kind of immaterial labor the artist undertakes is to: either operate in self-organized conditions of working together with other self-organizing artists – independently of the supply demands and opportunities artistic venues provide – or produce the production of one-individual-self as the spectacular commodity in the institutional market. The latter shapes the immaterial production as information in the form of a performative promise: "I am a project of myself," where the works of performances are taken as temporary, unfinished 'previews' of a project in process. The freelance artist, in order to pursue a so-called independent position in the institutional market, is forced to *commune* with the programmer, his/her material producer on the grounds of this promise. But if s-/he steps out of this relationship, as I propose in the former tactic, s-/he is to organize her/his own field in cooperation with other artists and cultural producers, which necessarily involves transforming and mobilizing a community into something based more on the need to collaborate, a frame of collectivity.

Whether operated by state- or private-funded apparatuses or hacked by a free entrepreneurial self of the author, the artistic community likens a community without project and end-product, *communauté desœuvrée*, where *desœuvrement* (inoperativess and idleness) should be understood in politico-ethical terms.

Community is a given fact, rather than an agency of mobilization, for there is nothing to mobilize for collectively. The demands which brought performance artists to new experimental frames of working in the 60s are now fulfilled: there are networks supporting

experimental work; the urge to experiment and go cross-disciplinary is no longer transgressive. The then pressing concern for collaboration arose from the climate of political and social movements calling for cooperation.

However, for the artist to act as her/his own producer rather than the self-produced commodity of the programmation, s-/he is to redefine and reconstitute collaboration and production beyond the needs for individual self-affirmation.

Self-determination and the question of art labour

In the types of collectivity and collaboration practiced today dominates an instrumental logic: artistic affinity plus instrumentally rational needs to collaborate. A saturating number of theatre groups, actors' collectives without directors, such as Tg Stan, Dood Paard, De Roovers, 't Barreland, sprung in the Low Countries under the influences of the then innovatory practices of Maatschappij Discordia, organized a system of circulation independent of city theatre repertory houses.

They represent a sustainable model for continuous collaboration that does not question its foundation and methodology or seek political or social action. On the other hand, contemporary programmation favors a star-system matching of authors like Meg Stuart and Gary Hill, Jan Ritsema and Jonathan Burrows, Jérôme Bel and Forced Entertainment, whereby the phenomenon of temporary productive contact is motivated by an exchange of different specialities so as to hopefully arrive at something new, unknown, "third" to the respective disciplines of collaborators.

However the encounters between established authors can be intriguing in themselves, they are primarily stimulated by taste and box-office measurement of the programmer.

The more collaboration is spoken of, the more it is lacking, symptomatic of crisis, says Myriam Van Imschoot: "We shouldn't forget that collaboration doesn't undermine the aura of the Artist, but it multiplies it"(Van Imschoot, 17-18). Collectivity and collaboration, thus, no longer appear as viable models of experimentation and critique as they are already subsumed under the institutional order and a cultural policy trend.

However, it is **criticality** as an antiessentialist stand that has formed a new *common* and *shared* perspective in the choreography of the 90s. Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Tino Sehgal, Mårten Spångberg have developed a non-affirmative focus on strategies and tactics in which the spectator is confronted with the displacement of dance as an aesthetic and modernist phenomenon and object.

The spectator is forced to deal with his/her own disposition to receive choreography as a writing of a performative text. These choreographers have contributed to a distinct type of authorship based on discursive intervention, or the effect of disturbing the spectacle of performance. One thing is certain: *they are doing it alone*.

I want to stress: this work can only be done by the author of concept alone. At most, these authors share a **community of discourse**, out of which collaborations can spring occasionally, even conceptualize the contractual basis of authorship such as the performance *Xavier Le Roy*, commissioned and signed by Bel and realized by Le Roy.

But there is no need for collectiveness as such to help establish the sovereignty of these authorial interventions. Confined to the object "dance" and "theatre spectacle," these critical practices target the 19th century theatre-goer by producing the "meaning" of a work in self-reference and self-determination.

The power of self-determination in the concept of dance could be potentially transformative if it also applied to the frame of working, production and presentation. At this moment, it is capable of articulating something like a speech-act: "This is performance, this is choreography," assuming the role of analytical or critical self-interpretation, similar to the conceptualism in visual art.

So far it produces open, flexible and contingent definitions of dance and critique in how we are habituated to perceive it, but it remains dependent on internal, medium-specific matters of dance because operating in the institutional context of theatre makes its critique bound to the theatre *dispositif*.

Would the circularity of conceptual methodology be broken through if authors collaborated on the exchange and confrontation of concepts, risking their constructions? Such a framework would allow but not force production of contacts, not in terms of progressive searching for new phenomena like contact-improvisation but as an opportunity for singular connections, frictions, mutations between independent agents, experimentation which demands readiness to disown one's intentions or materials, because one isn't primarily concerned with establishing his/her authorship?

What could be the conditions for such a collectivity of authors, as well as its specific difference to the frames of collaboration we

know of today? I'll conclude this text with four points redefining such collectivity in its potential.

There is a growing number of performance practitioners engaged in experiments and new concepts of performance, theatre, and choreography. As usual, there are always a number of participants gathering around a project.

What is the importance of the number? Increasing the number of people involved in interaction, even if only from two to three qualitatively alters the situation. What are the qualities of interaction that could result from working outside labor market requirements and cultural policy orientation?

There is no pre-given sense, essence, identity or meaning for which to collect or mobilize with ideological confidence. Fair enough. "Decisive here is the idea of an *inessential* **commonality**, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence."

We can exemplify solidarity when our differences are the commonality we trust. Nancy says: "We do not "have" meaning anymore, because we ourselves are meaning..." (Nancy 2000, 1). "We" could only stand for the circulation of possibilities, resistances and experiences of limits when differences between one another are constitutive for collaboration.

So, for "us" or to be able to say "we," there is only something like this phenomenon taking-place. The "taking-place", in other words, signifies a contact of singularities and the law of touching in this contact is not fusion, but separation.

It is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other; heterogeneity that stimulates further heterogenesis, and not

homogenization under the responsibility of one or the attraction to one author.

But the virtual taking-place needs a space that would allow production and experimentation without the theatre *dispositif* hovering above it. Should we transform institutions (studios, performing spaces) into resource centers or platforms for working rather than presenting?

The fourth term. To rethink collaboration in terms of undesired contacts; that "we" isn't unison, but taking responsibility for relations "with" in working with one another, with no compromise of tolerance, but sustaining the differential in contact.

"We" as "with" wants to push for a bit of violence. For the desire in persisting in a process whereby irreducible and not desirable and manageable differences are productive for new configurations of working, a process whereby no overarching conception should provide safety to a prior self-regulation.

Perhaps, redefining the "working-with" frame, taking this condition rather than the autonomous self-validating concepts by individual author, has the power of becoming a starting point for experimental collaboration – a collaboration between authors.

One thinks that such collectivity would better be called *collection*, if it is defined by a "number of working-with-one-another ones without an essence." A question would be how a collection of authors-performers without one author initiator comes together. It's not merely a technical question as it puts forward a more important concern. What might be worth doing together in dance and performance vis-à-vis society today?

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