



**On the margins of collective work:
new work and the strike**

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*SED Strike Posse WhatsApp thread
[14:02, 3/24/2018] Elyssa Livergant*

While I don't miss the cold and aches of the picket I do miss the rhythm of the strike.

After almost a decade making theatre in ad-hoc and shifting groups in Toronto in 2002 I was privileged to be able to easily move to the UK and spend a year at the, now Royal, Central School of Speech and Drama on the MA in Advanced Theatre Practice, focusing on collaborative theatre making through the lens of dramaturgy. Concerned with the conditions, materials and forces that shape individual and shared action, my practice attended to collective agreements, to the creation of spaces for challenging, negotiating and reflecting on expectations and privileges of participation in the work at hand. Attentive and responsive to varied proposals from collaborators about what might work for the production I also wondered at why it seemed that something worked. Holding open the possibility of a space to re-distribute power, in situ I often found that while I was attending to the production of a theatre process or piece I was simultaneously slowing it down; frustrating and troubling production by continually drawing attention back to the claims being made on its behalf.

The dramaturg often writes their notes on a production in the margins, marking places to remember and return to when looking for a way forward. In what follows I use the spatial frame of the dramaturg, the space of the margins, attached to but supposedly other than production proper, as a tool to begin to ask questions about the relationship between spaces of production and social reproduction (and equally how both work together to constitute each other). Insisting on the importance of activity on the margins of production is not my attempt to romanticize what happens there. Instead, it reflects an essential move in analytical emphasis,

away from reading the processes and objects of theatre and performance production and instead turning attention to the social reproduction of the labour power of the cultural sector, which includes theatre and performance.

The socially necessary work – be it mental, physical or emotional – that is needed to maintain and reproduce people, so they turn up to do the work each day, is a critical site for structural analysis and micro-political learning. As the supposed externality of labour under capitalism, its imagined other, sites of social reproduction can be appropriated by capital but can also shape new forms of being in the world. In their introduction to *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Tithi Bhattacharya explains that ‘if the spatial separation between production (public) and reproduction (private) is a historical form of appearance [under capital], then the labour that is dispensed in both spheres must also be theorized integratively’.¹ Attention to the space of reproduction throws into relief the ways theatre and other collaborative sites of aesthetic production are complex social forms. Forms that reflect, rather than stage, the workings of power, and which are themselves products of racial and gendered disparities. Differences that throw into relief assumed norms around class, social ability and cultural value.

While theatre and performance makers and organisations may have alternative values for production, the sector as an economic entity operates as part of the wider system of capitalist production. Group practices of the 1960s and 1970s in theatre and performance valorised the gathering of individuals committed to an alternative economy that countered capital’s productive value. This valorisation often centred on experiences of collective feeling, on affective encounters, while eschewing issues of economics and social reproduction that determined participation in its formation. The varied affective optimisms attached to theatre and performance as collective work on activist, disciplinary, institutional, sectoral and policy levels continue to operate as emotionally potent ideas. And yet, theatre’s contemporary claims on collectivity – with its creation of images of plurality, participation, resistance and community – often fall short on questioning differences between grassroots power and top down repressive power that disguises management control and profit making.

In contemporary practice the emphasis on a political collectivity expressed through theatre production transformed into what Marianne Van Kerhoven identified in the early 1990s as ‘new

¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, ‘Mapping Social Reproduction Theory’, Verso, 15 February 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3555-mapping-social-reproduction-theory> [accessed 18 April 2018]

dramaturgy', a processes oriented approach with an avowed commitment to multiple viewpoints and contributions generating the form and substance of a shared performance.² This concern, tied to an idea of production and pleasure beyond the division of labour, coalesces in what Nick Ridout has called, the passionate amateur.³ Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Ridout celebrates a figure marked by their dedication to the processual action of working on theatre. This commitment to a praxis of making exceeds, for Ridout, professionalising forces and as such stands as a political act.

While I am enamoured by Ridout's fashioning of the passionate amateur, which I offer a gloss on here, I find it a bit tricky to navigate the regime of passion it narrates. It assumes that the interests of a sector and of the worker are no different and that these interests coincide in the performance of labour experienced as love. The subjectivity of the passionate amateur holds steadfastly to the essential value of 'the work of theatre' and its endurance. But micro-political questions of how one returns to endure each day, how communities reproduce themselves to return, and what they want to return to each day, do not feature in this romance story. This should be a cause for concern, particularly in the face of scarcity that characterises the economic reality of most artists and arts organisations, and wider populations, in London.

For those of us who think about art and politics, questions of collective action and how it might function to support forms of organizing and living that differ than those promoted through the violence of the state and global capitalism must surely be a key concern.

Thinking about and taking action to organize social life differently, requires, in my experience in London's new work sector, acute critical attention to the politics of time and space outside of production. If there is any traction left in the term collectivity, it might be best deployed to support forms of politicized networking that seeks to build solidarities across a shared experience of marginalization (although not necessarily the same one). The focus of these networks' however, is not production, but the creation of new social economies, new modes of organizing social reproduction that extend beyond a localized response.

² Marianne Van Kerkhoven, 'Introduction', *On Dramaturgy*, *Theaterschrift*, 5-6 (1994), 8 – 33 (p. 18)

³ Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013).

New Work

One of the challenges I've found in working on this contribution to the symposium, has been to individually author a critical reflection about collectivity and make visible the workings of sites of live research. It is inevitable that difficulties and problems that are central to the collective work I'm currently involved, work that centres around social and labour organizing in arts and higher education settings, may be glossed over. The other challenge is to rigorously attend to the personal, disciplinary, sectoral, institutional, local and national contexts, and the intersecting and practices and knowledges that shape approaches and understandings of collectivity, including my own. This leads me to my first note on the margin – the new work sector in the UK, a marginal sector that is imagined – through its rhetorical and aesthetic commitments to an alternative politics - as other than traditional and commercial sites of theatre and performance production.

For the last 13 years, I have worked across the new work sector in theatre and performance and higher education in London. I use the term new work here because of its ability to function productively on several levels simultaneously.⁴ New work has operational and disciplinary significance in the UK, denoting a sector that embraces a collection of practices that cut across performance, visual arts, dance and theatre.⁵ New dramaturgies, queer performance, socially-engaged art, performance art, independent dance, and live art all fall in the frame.⁶ New work practices origins might be traced to the breaking down of conventional conceptions of the aesthetic and questions around the basic materials, definitions and traditions associated with disciplines or identities. These practices draw attention to a relationship between practice and maker that is characterised by a rejection of traditional forms and modes of cultural production,

⁴ While there isn't scope in this article to fully unpack the history and myriad function of the term New Work in the UK and its potential in a national and transnational context, I claim that this term is central to understanding the sector and its associated practices, how they relate to the wider cultural sector and shifts in labour more broadly.

⁵ In the UK the New Work Network, which ran from 1997 and 2012, and a more recent call for the establishment of a London New Work Network in 2014 in a piece of research on artist development funded by Arts Council of England are useful points of reference. See Hanna Nicklin, 'Artist Development: Camden People's Theatre and Artist Development – How are we doing? Can we do better', December 2014.

⁶ Genealogical approaches, including recent accounts by theatre and performance scholars Shannon Jackson, Beth Hoffman and Lara Shalson, have drawn out the ways different national and disciplinary bases frame and construct terms, histories and practices associated with the categories of theatre, performance and live art. See Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Lara Shalson, 'On the Endurance of Theatre in Live Art', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22 (February 2012), 106-19; Beth Hoffman, 'Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art', *Performance Research*, 14 (2009), 95-105.

an embrace of risk and experimentation and a celebration of self and collective determination as a guiding force of creation.

Its activities might be subsidized by the state or supported through a do it yourself approach; the forms of organisation that animate it are likely made up of a mix of individual practitioners, ad hoc groupings, charities and not-for-profit ventures; the conditions of its work are marked by ideas of having a practice, informal networks and communities to access work. Unpaid, underpaid, temporary or intermittent employment and fierce competition characterize the sector's working conditions. Its players are, more often than not, university educated and the sector itself is deeply tied up in higher education pedagogy. The sector might also be imagined, by those who populate it, to have an anti-institutional sheen.

I also find the term new work useful because it functions on a theoretical level, corresponding with wider shifts in labour practices associated with de-industrialisation and their attendant emphasis on entrepreneurialism, employee empowerment and precarity. Both new work in theatre and in the wider world are forms of broader transnational political and economic shifts that express neoliberalism's response to capital's over-accumulation in the 1970s – a response centred on a move toward an emphasis on financialized and service sector economies in the global north and the violent dispossession of the means for social reproduction for those in the global south.

I use the term sector rather than field in writing about new work in London to insist on its economic base and to draw attention to the ways it is implicated in wider sectoral economies under capital. New work is a marginal sector within the cultural industries, itself part of the wider sector of the knowledge economy in the UK. Principles of mutual enrichment, autonomous practices and commonality grapple in the new work sector, with the ongoing work of maintenance, self-branding, visibility and project pitching. The conditions of the new work sector, much like the wider cultural industries and higher education, cultivate a sense of self marked by ambiguity, where one's experience of work is both autonomous and exploitative.⁷ New work intertwines a bourgeois concept of work, where the individual associates itself with its work, with a commitment to an ethico-communal scene that counters dominant society.⁸

⁷ For a discussion of the relationship between deindustrialisation and literature that resonates with elements of my discussion here see Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialisation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017)

⁸ I am also drawing here on Ernst Bloch's reading of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* where, as Bloch explains, Marx's 'concept of activity' developed in the new bourgeois age and pre-supposes as a base a society where

Even as it locates resistance as critical to the sector, and its discourse assumes at its base a demand for artistic and social change, the sector posits whiteness, maleness, and ideals of social ability as a normative, unmarked presence. By that I mean, while the nature of the politics between participants is supposedly open, the relationship to labour is fundamentally private.

This leads to a kind of tenacious collective disassociation from labour, where those working the new work sector have difficulty locating labour in themselves. Through appeals to non-hierarchy, self-organisation and passion arts graduates and organisations of the new work sector often respond the unequal access and precarity of jobs through the establishment of artist-led and artist-support initiatives, projects and spaces. This attempt to build (anti-) institutional infrastructure is important and speaks to the pressure artists face in reproducing themselves and communities so they can keep their practice going. Acts of commoning are deeply embedded in the new work sector's claims for production, making it difficult to differentiate between utopian sites created through collective action, specialized sites for social reproduction that exclude consideration of potential solidarities across other categories of workers, and resources that are privatized and appropriated by capital through commodification and monetization

Hyper gentrification, worsening labour conditions and economic scarcity in London have placed intense pressure on those making work in the new work sector, and cultural workers more broadly. It is more and more difficult to have a life in London. Local state actors and arts organisations have recognized the pressure, and through rhetorical appeals to the important role artists play in regeneration, there are several new institutional initiatives under way to protect artist's livelihoods. Following the Mayor of London's 2017 regeneration office report, 'Creative Tensions: optimising the benefits of culture through regeneration', the first bid for a Creative Enterprise Zone is in process. These zones, which promise affordable places for artists to live and work, seek to produce a corrective to the negative effects of gentrification on the very artists who lead the way to increasing property values, and places culture at the heart of state-definitions of responsible regeneration.

May 2017 also saw the launch of a 25-member (and growing) London network called Supporting Theatre Artists and Markers of Performance (STAMP). Made up of large (e.g.

the ruling class sees or wishes to see itself in activity, i.e. work. However, this is only the case in capitalist society in so far as work, or rather: *the appearance* of work around the ruling class, in contrast to all pre-bourgeois societies is here no longer a dishonour, but is respected'. Emphasis in the original. Ernst Bloch, 'Commentary on "Theses on Feuerbach"' from *The Principle of Hope*, Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bloch/hope/commentary-theses.htm> [accessed 07 May 2018].

National Theatre, Barbican), medium (e.g. Artsadmin, Soho Theatre) and small (e.g. Camden People's Theatre, Poplar Union, Theatre Delicatessen) building and non-building based organisations that are part of the institutional infrastructure of new work sector, STAMP was formed to undertake 'practical collective action' to improve 'support for artists and to advocate for the role of theatre and performance makers in London'.⁹ STAMP's website explains that the network seeks to achieve this by sharing resources, producing events for producers and artists, and finally through lobbying 'decision makers to improve living and working conditions, ensuring London continues to be the home for visionary artists and ground-breaking new theatre at a time of economic and political uncertainty'.¹⁰

One of STAMP's early proposed research projects sought to draw attention to the pressures placed on artists to remain in London in the face of rising costs and stagnating wages. As they explain, 'we want to ensure artists' voices are heard and their needs supported to reflect and celebrate the culture of their communities so that they are able to play a positive role in regeneration'.¹¹ The proposed lead organizations on this research project are listed as Poplar Union and Oval House. Both organizations lay claim to a commitment to diverse community arts practices and both are deeply entangled in issues of housing and regeneration. Poplar Union is part of Poplar Harca, one of the largest housing associations in East London, and involved in the de-territorialisation of social housing tenants across a large territory in the area; Oval House is a major player in a large private residential development in South London which precipitated the decanting of long-time residents by local state actors.

I have briefly touched on two instances of current attempts by the state and sectoral actors to strengthen institutional infrastructures for artists and cultural workers in London because they draw attention to the ways artist-led practices intersect with established private and public actors and urban agendas of cultural policy. Both are attempts to create institutional infrastructure that might keep theatre and performance production going in the face of austerity by drawing attention to the role culture can play in mitigating the effects of dangerously uneven urban development. But both rely on making a special claim for arts and culture that preclude wider critical attention to the racial, class and cultural norms that underpin the very idea that capital's regeneration is necessary.

⁹ STAMP website, <http://www.londonstamp.co.uk> [accessed 17 April 2018]

¹⁰ STAMP website, <http://www.londonstamp.co.uk> [accessed 17 April 2018]

¹¹ Cost of Living Research for London Artists, H.E. Partner Briefing Document, STAMP, 2017.

In April of this year, the Precarious Worker's Brigade's general assembly in London, brought together over 70 cultural workers, artists, cleaners, activists, educators, and students to address cultural labour at this moment.¹² The event asked: How can we reclaim the right for cultural activities in London as common spaces of joy and pleasure against imposed austerity and accelerated gentrification? And how might this reclamation be linked to finding new forms of value and income? Drawing the title from red feminist Silvia Federici, who herself drew from feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, the gathering of *Culture + Work at Point Zero* sought to create a space to reflect on the worsening conditions of free and forced labour in society to not only to build resistance but also to formulate new proposals for attack against the capitalist system of production and its attendant reality.

Much like my note on the new work sector, the note that follows, serves as a marker of moments to remember and return to as I search, along with others, for ways forward in the years ahead. I continue to linger in the margins not to invert the hierarchical polarities between the private (the social reproduction of life) and the public (production) but to continue to trouble the idea that they are separate. Through an attention to activities on the margins my aim is to contribute to shaping new proposals for common action rather than mitigate the current state of affairs.

The Strike

It is a Thursday morning in October 2018. Final year undergraduate Drama and JH English and Drama students are gathered in a large classroom at Queen Mary's East End London campus. The stylish corporate-like white chairs and tables are pushed against the sides of the room. The exercise, spectrum voting on student's own micro-political situation in relation to statements about work, is in full swing. Student's arrange their bodies along an imaginary axis between two different positions, one strongly agreeing and the other strongly disagreeing with a statement. Where do you stand on competitive vs co-operative labour? is offered as the final prompt.

'Why did you take that spot?', I ask different people along the line. I start with one of two students, out of the 52, positioned close to agreeing with statement. The rest of the mostly white socially able student body is huddled in middle ground. 'My father was in

¹² The Precarious Workers Brigade have been doing collective work to transform the conditions of unpaid labour for cultural workers for the last decade. They have always insisted that cultural work is not exceptional, and this belief is core to their approach to organizing with others, especially other workers in precarious situations like migrant workers and cleaners in cultural institutions.

a union and I'm from up North' he explains. 'And where I'm from you know that there is management and there are workers. And management is no friend of the worker so workers need to stand up for each other'. Before I ask if he might be able to explain his position any further, I sense a kind of empty silence and turn to the whole group to ask: 'How many of you have heard of a union, or know what it is?'. A dumb silence fills the room for a few seconds. Another student, a young woman, speaks up. 'There was a union at the movie theatre I used to work at.' I ask her to tell us a little bit more. 'They were okay. They told us about our protections and rights as workers'. A few more seconds of empty silence fill the room. Another student, relaxed but perplexed, asks: 'A lot of us didn't seem to understand the question - what is labour?'

Over February and March 2018 members of the University College Union (UCU) took unprecedented strike action in the UK, participating in the largest industrial action in the history of the university Higher Education sector. The early days of the strike unfolded during an unexpected period of snow and arctic winds and many, including the worker's own union, were surprised by how many workers took to the picket line. What many of the over 40,000 workers across 61 universities learned during the time of the picket, including myself, was its effectiveness in helping to build links and promote action. Pickets, along with teach-outs, meetings and demonstrations, created opportunities for workers, including students, to recognize each other's shared (in different ways) situation as labour now and in the future.

The space of the strike, created by the withdrawal of labour from the reproductive work of education, produced conditions to re-attend to the situation of labour under capital. Its official trigger was management's attempt to further privatize the risk for pensions onto individual workers; what was at stake, really, was the material reality of care for the body in the future. In its initial emphasis on life-demands rather than work demands, the strike overlapped with a series of education and social strikes happening simultaneously across the world. For example, ongoing wild cat strikes by teachers in the US and the International Women's Strike (which corresponds with International Women's Day and happened in over thirty countries) all point to growing emphasis on the social as well as the labour contract under capital, articulating the terrain of a broader politicised struggle centred on maintenance and care of life. At the same time, in London, Voices of the World, a grass roots member-led union comprised of mainly migrant, low-paid and precarious workers in outsourced industries like cleaning and security have won a series of stunning victories across higher education and cultural sectors, amongst

others, to end outsourcing, secure the London Living Wage and ensure dignified and safe conditions for its members.

During the strike my co-workers in the Drama Department, many who work across the new work sector and higher education, were still in constant contact with students by email so they knew what was going on. When students were in occupation for 4 weeks to protest cuts to student bursaries for families on low-incomes, members of staff on strike, mostly women and many casualised, made and delivered home-cooked meals. Striking from the work of social reproduction, from the ongoing work of making and remaking people so they can participate in the world the next day, is an impossibility. But creating the space to attend to these situations of impossibility in public is, perhaps, what the strike allows.

So, what happens after the strike? What might the ongoing work of focusing on the collective situation of labour look like in the context of new work and higher education, beyond union organising?

To begin to answer these questions I need to take up my student's question, the one that began this note on the margin. She wondered, in the context of a discussion on work, what labour was and, maybe even, what it had to do with her. Addressing these uncertainties may be particularly pressing for those of us teaching and learning in higher education, in that theatre and performance's emphasis on an experiential pedagogy is susceptible to obscuring labour. The rhetoric and practices that underpin contemporary theatre and performance can often collapse the social into the individual through appeals to empowerment and growth. This emphasis on self-actualization and self-management rest on a discourse of sociability oriented by the assumed principles of 'equality' and 'co-operation' but also, importantly, on the individual's psychic investments in their labour, in themselves at work.

The gap between the critical theory many of us teach to our students and the individualised narratives of practice and research that both teachers and students are subject to often leaves unconsidered the politics of labour being reproduced. This gap grows more and more acute as conditions for labour and pressures on self-reproduction have worsened, both in the university, the cultural industries, and London.

Over the last decade, working as an hourly and fixed term lecturer, I have taught on numerous group practical modules across different Drama Departments in London. The pleasures associated with embodied experience in pedagogical contexts are central for students' learning;

they help to anchor desires and develop understandings that are crucial to their studies in the field. However, the pedagogical workshop in practice-based modules is also framed as an opportunity for students to perform themselves as workers. In effect, the sensory acts undertaken by students doing practice signifies the occasion when they are supposedly being ‘real’ theatre and performance workers.

At the same time, what is rarely explored in the context of simulating work practices, are questions about what kinds of working conditions people are being made open and available to and to what end, both in the university and in the cultural industries. In group practical projects, the obligation to each other and to the yet to come has the potential to co-opt those assembled, leaving unconsidered the politics of performing themselves together as theatre and performance workers in a pedagogic space and as (proto)workers in the wider work space (of the university) and the world of work. By that I mean appeals to collective and collaborative group work simultaneously frame and depoliticizes production as that which replenishes the worker to return each day. This narrative, about the self and others, about belonging and pleasure, which is embedded in group practice pedagogy can blur grassroots participatory practice with practices of theatre production while simultaneously bracketing off the material realities of social reproduction that form (and exclude) the bodies in the room.

Taking up these material realities of social reproduction in the classroom might serve as one way to keep attending to the rhythm of the strike beyond the event of the strike. While I have yet to experiment with how more traditional practice-based modules can be reframed to consider the economy of collective living, the occasion I described at the beginning of this section was drawn from a moment in a module called Livihoods. Originally developed in the context of increasing pressure from employability agendas that move ever closer to the centre of education in the UK I began to bring micro-political questions about social reproduction into the classroom. In this I was inspired by the Precarious Worker’s Brigade (UK) counter-guides to transform the conditions of unpaid labour for cultural workers.¹³

As a final year zero-credit single semester module where students choose which sessions they come to and where attendance is not compulsory, Livihoods is limited in the kind of activist pedagogy it can sustain. But, by placing sessions on debt, housing, grass roots member led-

¹³ See the Precarious Worker’s Brigade website for a collection of excellent freely available material, including their counter-guide Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education. <https://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com> [accessed 01 May 2018]

unions, challenging exploitation in internships and co-operative models for organising alongside meetings with cultural workers and artists, grant applications and CV skills, it also offers an opportunity to make visible critical questions of social reproduction alongside questions of employability. In this way, it can, like the space of the strike, afford the time to ask questions of each other and work collectively to figure out how to live in the future.

The varied discussions, practical and philosophical, around invisible work, the work of care, that connects the work of home with the work of public activities challenges boundaries between them. This paper asks that we extend our understanding of what collective practice is when we talk about theatre, performance and the cultural sector, moving consideration away from reading the work or the processes of the work, or lingering in affect, and instead focusing our attention on the material labour that goes on in the margins. By that I mean the work of maintaining and caring for the body so it can return to take part each day. Approaching the private labour of making and remaking people as a shared issue, a shared site of struggle for equity that extends across people (in different ways), points to how the production of the new work sector is deeply implicated in the social. It is a site of and for collective work.