



## Practising Embodied Collectivity in Post-Fordist society

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### Introduction

If at the beginning of the new millennium, belonging was observed as a problem of global proportions, almost twenty years later - in the midst of growing international social polarization - the challenge that this phenomenon offers for rethinking and re-experiencing the individual and the collective (Massumi 2002: 88) has become even more manifest.

Cooperative processes of creative practices have been appropriated by the institutional order. However, in the last decade, a surge of social and artistic practices – including many contemporary choreographic platforms – have also adopted strategies of collaboration and solidarity to address political and creative issues. This tension between the wider appropriation of artistic strategies and a resistance to neoliberal agendas also informs the discourses that traverse the field and practice of performance including its education, training, and its places and modes of production.

Alternative embodied performance practices, such as Alexander, Feldenkrais or group improvisation (including CI) are often considered as a rupture from more traditional performance training (Claid, 2016). However, the rapidly shifting socio-political backdrop of economies produced by post-Fordism invite a re-assessment of the nature of this disruption. According to Berardi Bifo the revolutionary potential of disruption in contemporary society has been undermined by neoliberalism. Bifo argues that '[n]ow we are facing the opposite effect. [...] Instead of resulting in revolution, disruption is resulting in the consolidation of power (2012: 31).

This paper will consider the ways in which embodied practices of theatre often point to an ever shifting relationship between the individual, the collective and the social environment, I argue

for the need to consider these performance practices against the contemporary political and social background. In an effort to examine the underlying ideology around the production of the contemporary body, the first part of the article problematizes the effect of neoliberal global forces on theatre and performance practices by outlining key aspects of the politics of togetherness. Drawing on discourses on affect, I discuss the ways in which the intensification of self-responsibility for innovation and well-being in post-Fordism reveal the appropriation of embodied strategies by neoliberal agendas concerned with resilience to the anxiety created by capitalism. The second part argues that there is still scope to re-orient affective practices towards the development of a somatic and ethical ‘responsiveness’, which in turn allows for the formation of alternative model of political relations. If framed as ‘a social dispositive of the service economy’ which does not only reflect it, these practices are capable of performing a critical resistance by forming alternative social relations (Harvie, 2013: 61).

## **Part One**

### *Crisis of togetherness*

The framework of this article emerges from a number of hypotheses with regards to the relationship of performance and the politics of togetherness. The first hypothesis is that there is a crisis of collaboration in creative practice. While collaboration emerged at the end of the last century as a dominant component of the creative process and cultural policy, popular ideas of its democratising effects on arts practices should not be taken for granted. At a basic level of investigation we can observe that the cross-pollination model of collaboration, bound only to the ‘vitality’ of the exchange between co-workers, offers a way of working together that is already subsumed under the safety of institutional order and neoliberal policy. The term neoliberal refers here to a theory of political economy which encourages individual entrepreneurship and skills within a free market. A neoliberal logic of capitalism, as I am framing the notion, aims at privatising public services to commercial ventures including education, health and social care, and the arts. I am proposing that the discontent with collaboration and collective endeavours in capitalist systems of cultural production can be understood as ‘an excess in the logic of the system’ (Ranciere 2013). The crisis of collaboration can then be explained by the overflow of collaborative processes in working methods today - or what has been identified as the creative and collective excess of contemporary labour (Negri 2008). Therefore the capacity of collaborative strategies in theatre to foster social change in a neoliberal logic of performance production appears under threat. The idea of ‘working with’ in

the term collaboration (the latin verb *collaborare* “work with”) is problematised by the nature of contemporary artistic labour. However, I propose to focus here on the notion of collectivity, *collectivus* (to collect, to gather) in the light of the recent application of the notion of the common in performance discourse (Cvejic & Vujanovic 2012; Laermans 2015; Lepecki 2016; Burt 2017). Practising embodied collectivity in performance offers clearer directions towards the mobilization of citizens.

Embodied collectivity in the context of artistic cooperation and ‘communing’ can be found in the expanded form of dance as social choreographies. Practices within the field have been interpreted as offering a new model of social relations whereby political participation and civil protest intersect (Klein 2013; Cvejic & Vujanovic 2012). The notion of social choreography is useful for thinking about a public ‘choreographic’ practising of collectivity as a way to rehearse an alternative community. As a performative self-organisation of bodies in time and space, social choreographies not only allow for the reclamation of the public space but also point to an idea of community which does not define itself in something shared prior to its establishment – but rather something defined in the action of continuously practicing its understanding of the ‘we’. As such, practising collectivity might be understood as a self-organizing embodiment of a coming together; but a coming together which does not impose its own rhythms or seek to implement its own laws. We might here want to think about bodily practices as fleeting, spontaneous and unannounced forms of collectivity as found in political protests or flash mobs (Klein 2017: 17). Such practices can be framed in relation to their potential to displace normative procedures.

### *The ephemerality of moving together in post-Fordism*

My second observation complicates the disruptive aspect of embodied collectivity in recognising the notion of ephemerality as a common characteristic of performance, collective practices and also capitalism itself. Ephemerality, unpredictability, unexpected or sudden movements of groups of people working together can have an unsettling effect on established control. But how can collaborative endeavours maintain a level of persistent commitment necessary for social change? This question, I argue, points to one of the forms of isomorphism between performance and capitalism which should not go unnoticed.

The ephemerality of live performance as a political device has been widely theorised and contextualised (Kunst 2014; Lepecki, 2004) ‘Performance interventions’ which encompass a

collaborative ethos in its idea of bringing people together, refers directly to its Latin etymological meaning: *intervenire* “to come between, interrupt”. Similarly, the process of working together in the contemporary advanced technologic society is seen to offer the possible political emancipation from dominant labour conditions because of the unpredictability of its outcomes (Schneider 2009).

However, capitalism has embraced ephemerality as the ultimate quality of cultural production. This shift in capitalist social relations was observed as a characteristic of the postmodern condition at the end of the millennium. ‘The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernity has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodern aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodification of cultural form’ (Harvey 1989: 156).

The efficacy of ephemerality to operate as a rupture, a break, an interruption to the static of over-determined structures of the everyday needs to be re-assessed in relation to the current crisis of solidarity. Movement theorist Randy Martin put it:

For precarity to yield some form of debt that generates an expansive sociality and not simply be all subsuming or consuming – as the recent financial debacle threatens – attention will need to be paid to what is made in movement together.

(Martin 2012: 63)

This raises questions about our time together. How do we resist a fast, fragmented, interrupted sense of time in our coming together in the studio, on stage and in the streets? How do we question the flickering duration of our practice together? How do these decisions impact on the heightened crisis of belonging whereby privilege afforded to some bodies increases the risks that burden others? Does the ephemeral economy of movement remain efficient beyond the urgency? Can embodied approaches of togetherness create alternative economies of relevance to longer-term crises? These questions are bound to the economy of production of artistic labour which informs creative and logistical decision-making processes in performance and theatre. Equally, there are related questions concerning the degree of autonomy underlying pedagogical approaches.

#### *Affective practices under post-Fordism*

My next observation problematises the intertwining of bodily practices with current political

systems and, more specifically, the ways in which the isomorphism between performance and capitalism might impact our understanding of an embodied collectivity through somatic practices. One of the driving forces of this mimetic process in post-Fordist society is the capitalization of affects by neoliberal agendas. While Fordism refers to a process of standardisation of work through the serialised of production of endless repetition, my use of the term post-Fordism, accounts for working practices which have emerged from the shift from the exploitation of heavy manufacturing production to the fields of information and digital communication. This contemporary labour has been described by a number of scholars – particularly those involved with European Autonomism – to be constituted of intangible sources such as intellectual, creative and social skills and affective services. These services are based upon the exploitation of the bodily capacity to affect and be affected or, in other words, upon the lucrative utilisation of the ways in which bodies are able to act, to engage and to connect. At the same time, this phenomenon has been extensively theorized and criticized within the academia by what has been called ‘the affective turn’. One of the important points that the affective turn reveals is the intensification of processes of self-reflexivity as internal functions of late capitalism (Ticineto Clough, 2007). Reflexivity is encouraged as a process to evaluate our capacity to adapt to changing conditions, to apprehend our strengths and weaknesses and to identify areas of improvement in oneself. We might think about the infamous market research strategy of conducting SWOT analysis and its application to students’ reflective learning and personal development strategies, staff appraisals or even audience feedback forms. Reflexivity, as the activity of folding the individual back on himself or herself (Fleming 2009:6) while compulsively emphasising the individual experience, is shaped by market forces. It is important to note neoliberal appropriation of affective discourses when considering the criticality of embodied pedagogies against the backdrop of post-Fordism.

Affective workers, including performers, are modelled to the flexibility of the market because the flexible, autonomous, self-reliant and disciplined aspect of capitalist labour inscribes itself into our bodies. In their research on performing the self, Anna Vujanovic and Bojana Cvejic problematise this idea in contemporary dance practice. They observe (2017) that the mind in the advanced neoliberal society ‘has become yogic’. In this yogic state of capitalism, flexibility is the exact characteristic of methods of production which differentiate post-Fordism from Fordism (or the mass society of Fordism from the flexible socio-economic organisation of post-Fordism).

Furthermore, the affective turn is linked to a wider political context whereby the state uses ‘discourses of affect’ to produce resilient individuals capable of managing the uncertainty pertaining to the current era of neoliberal globalisation. In the wake of cuts to the welfare state, cultural policy has been awarded a role supporting society’s social needs. In her examination of somatic pedagogies, Rhiannon Firth describes the development of a ‘therapeutic culture’ which emphasises individualised action while depoliticizing and undermining collective social action:

This emergent social structure causes widespread anxiety throughout society, which is harnessed by the state using discourse and policy ostensibly designed to reduce fear, by promoting ‘well-being’, resilience, therapeutic practices and ‘security’.

(Firth 2016: 122)

The rhetoric around ideas of ‘well-being’, emotional support and self-help has gained increasing currency in mainstream education and in popular culture. Gabriele Klein observes (2013: 206), ‘in *liquid modernity* (original emphasis) also more and more of performance practice – is being called on to find solutions for the damage done to the social.’ Theatre and performance practice have become a significant contributor to the therapeutic ethos permeating all facets of culture.

The main argument against the neoliberal appropriation of discourses of affect is that it leads to individualist and depoliticized behaviours, or the promotion of self-responsibility and individualized *care for the self* supporting entrepreneurial capital (Brannelly et al. 2015). This discourse on neoliberal *self-care* theorises subjectivation and self-governance in post-Fordism and denounces the ways in which practitioners are made responsible for their own well-being – a process which is seen to deflect attention from socioeconomic struggles.

### *Problematizing authenticity in post-truth*

Firth (2016: 122) argues ‘that any viable resistance to state structurations of affect needs to critically reveal existing structures of affect, and resist these through a reconceived understanding and the creation of new affects at an embodied level.’ Under post-Fordism, the nature of affect has changed. While Fordism was characterized by the *boredom* of the mechanisation of our relations in the first part of the twentieth century, the *anxiety* created by the precarious nature of our contemporary existence represents the dominant affect in the post-

Fordist era. The World Health Organisation (2008: 51) projected that depression will be the primary cause of burden of disease in 2030. This trend is reflected in UK universities where the number of students dropping out due to mental health issues has trebled in the last decade (Marsh 2017). Anxiety is a physical affect and powerful political tool. Bifo (2012) argues that the speed of information flows, combined with the fragmentation of life, leads to a constant bodily excitation without release which marks the presence of the body in society in an aggressive way. He observes that the repressed and denied energy – created by economic exploitation and virtual communication in the last two decades – ‘is coming back as aggressive energy, which can be observed in current and political aggressiveness’ (37). There are numerous recent examples of this aggressiveness of affect in the public life of politics - from the quiet acceptance of genocide to the seemingly casual issuing of nuclear war threats.

In addition, Capitalism has been quick to develop the market on authenticity to sell the branding of a lifestyle – promoting a more ‘sincere’ connection with clients and investment in new product developments offering an ‘alternative way of life’. Today, the realization of the self through the body is undermined by capitalism’s need to confirm the possibility of changing ones’ sense of being. Authenticity is equally threatened by the danger of being conflated with those ideas of ‘traditional values’ which have returned to a central place in mainstream political rhetoric. What has been called ‘authentic capitalism’ in theoretical arts discourses (Boltanski & Chiapello) might be problematized with a view to reorienting embodied theatre practices away from the idea of ‘true’ self expression. Any arguments for a critical somatic education would need to address the feedback loop of the post-Fordist context.

The argument against a hegemonic cognitive understanding of the individual subject – common to embodied theatre practices and affect theory – points to a collective and multiple nature of being. From an anti-Cartesian perspective, the conception of subjectivity is understood away from an ‘autonomous self’ towards the development of a ‘relational ethics’ which redefine the idea of responsibility to otherness. David Slater proposes that ‘[t]his responsibility can be linked to a notion of radical interdependence, in which the ethics of intersubjectivity are in the foreground’ (1997: 68). Therefore rethinking an embodied collectivity through somatic practices foregrounds a relational ethics which recognises the capacity of bodies to affect and to be affected. Following Spinoza (1989), this process is pre-personal and can never be anticipated or pre-determined.

## Part Two

### *Re-orienting somatic practice in the intensification of cultural capitalism*

The new context facing us is a politics that has elevated the post-Fordian principle of creativity as a rule of society within a disappearing welfare state. As Andreas Reckwitz (2017: vii) observes, '[t]he tension between an anti-institutional *desire* for creativity and the institutionalized *demand* (original emphasis) for creativity' has now reached a peak. Workers are responsible for a continual production of innovation. Creative industries are at the centre of the 'innovation economy' which promotes an ideal of creativity where economic and personal growth conflate.

Klein (2013) highlights the ways in which contemporary forms of political participation differ from those of 1970s social movements. If previous artistic initiatives supporting civil protest were focused on human rights (including the politics of gender, ethnicity and warfare), Klein argues that current protest movements - which she frames as social choreographies (demonstrations, flash mobs and some participative performance projects) – are reacting against the corruption and the management of politics itself. Klein argues (2013: 197), '[i]n their creative practice, political acting does not exclusively take place as a resistance to, but also as part of the post-Fordian regime of creativity.'

Recently a number of scholars have reacted to aspects of the critique of the neoliberal appropriation of somatic practices (Firth 2015; Kinnamon 2016; Cook 2016). While problematizing the neoliberal practice of well-being self-responsibilization, the perspectives emerging from their concerns offer a reassessment of embodied theatre practices as a tool to re-politicize culture and its capacity for collective social action. The central argument for the limit of neoliberalism is that the appropriation and subjectivation of these practices is not total. Collective relations embrace different forms of contemporary responsibility which intersect with neoliberal logics of self-responsibility and self-care but which can also be shaped by interpersonal responsibility and obligation. From an ethnographic perspective, Joanna Cook (2016: 149) points out that there is still scope 'to explore the practices of people who recognize collective and structural causes of suffering at the same time as seeking practices of subjectification for improving wellbeing.' It is with this wider understanding of contemporary responsibility that I examine the conditions for the development of an ethics of engagement in affective practice of embodiment. I refer below to three aspects of the politics of somatic

collectivity which I argue account for a resistance to the aesthetics of individualism permeating contemporary society.

### *The politics of attention*

The first aspect is bound to a specific practice of time in collective movement based improvisation - as found in many somatic classes associated with theatre practices but also public interventions – which involves the synchronization of participants’ duration as an alternative to unison practice. I want to link this capacity of synchronization with the idea of social participation – as an instance of practices of the ‘we’. Synchronization does not point here to perfect uniformity but rather to an attention to difference of rhythms from which synchronized patterns can form but remain transitory. This ‘flocking’ aspect of embodied collectivity can be seen as a kind of participation which is bound to specific somatic understandings of attention. For Kai van Eikels (2009:9) ‘[i]t is not I who participate with a part of my attention, but rather a certain partition of my attention that performs participation’. The capacity of somatic practice for embracing the temporal indeterminacy of our multiple selves points to an idea of participation whereby the synchronization of rhythms does not involve ‘me’ as an entity but allows me to continue practicing different collectivities. It creates occasions for performers, as well as audience members, to carry on organising life with others while continuing to connect to different parts of their lives. For example, ‘thinking in movement’ in improvisation develops an embodied ‘interactional’ mind which points to this ‘attentional practice’ (De Spain 2015: 167). I have argued elsewhere (Colin 2015) that the distribution of attention and presence in movement improvisation can be understood as a collective thinking which embraces the temporal indeterminacy of our multiple selves and thus intensifies the process of ‘becoming plural’ inherent to what I am referring here as a somatic embodied collectivity.

### *Affective persistence*

Notwithstanding the optimism surrounding the potential of collectivity, my argument for the relevance of somatic collectivity in the face of neoliberal forces is based on the understanding of the importance of a persistence of its practice. The weakness of the ephemerality of somatic collectivity in post-Fordism – as described above as fleeting, spontaneous, unannounced forms of political gathering, or in the specific dance context, unstable and ontologically bound to an ephemeral self-expressed presence of movement – is countered by the persistence of its

relational repetition. The persistence of embodied somatic practice is understood as a repeated ‘insistence on going against the flow’, to borrow from Sara Ahmed’s feminist metaphor of wilfulness as creativity. Ahmed (2010) advocates a ‘wilful politics’ as a collective politics: ‘willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence.’ The persistence of somatic collectivity offers ways to continuously reformulate and re-invent different grounds for existence by developing wilful practices of attention together. Persisting as a quality of performance practices which adopt an ‘ethics of keeping it going’ to develop anarchic forms of social organisation (Burt 2017: 172).

### *Embodying enjoyment and ethical agility*

While Ahmed (2010) positively refers to wilful subjects as ‘killjoys’, I suggest we can extend Ahmed’s idea to examine enjoyment as another condition for the criticality of somatic collectivity. Eikels (2012: 17) argues that ‘the pleasure in performing that which is easy’ offers a political orientation ‘towards performative equality’. Practising a democratic collectivity, in these terms, is about ‘performing things that everybody can do’ because ‘the easy does not need a leader’ (Ibid.).

Re-assessing pleasurable practice through the notion of enjoyment in somatic collectivity offers interesting terrain from which to consider the excess of creativity under post-Fordist production, because it points to a process irreducible to neoliberal commodification. Alfred North Whitehead proposes an economy of enjoyment whereby the private emotion of enjoyment must be coupled with a public concern. Each occasion of practice becomes ‘an activity of concern’ [...] with things that in their own essence lie beyond it’ (1938/1968: 167). Concern for practicing collectivity is in itself a kind of enjoyment. Engaged in our rhythm of practice we attune to a concern with the universe that lies beyond it. For Steven Shaviro (2008: 250), Whitehead’s notions of concerns and enjoyment ‘are so closely connected because they are both movements, (or pulsations) of emotion’. As such, responsibility in somatic collective relations can be understood as entailing a persisting movement between public concerns and self-enjoyment. Grasping these ‘in and out’ movements is part of the agility developed through attentional practices.

Moreover, in the context of performance, the egalitarian aspect of Eikels’ practicing of the easy, combined with the affective persistence of synchronisation of bodies in somatic collectivity, might be paralleled with the emancipatory potential of a new virtuosity.

Examples of instructions and scores for group practice or group versions of solo movement exploration have become more widely available in the last decade (everybody's performance scores, Nobody's Business). The dissemination of this collective research offers a range of task-based explorations of elaborated forms of the exercise 'Follow the Leader' whereby the embodied activities of following, leading and observing are questioned in practice. A good example of performance of this collective process is the group solo performance *Togethering* (2015) by French choreographer Alice Chauchat where dance is presented as a social activity or 'a means and an end to togetherness'. A somatic collectivity is explored through the use of scores and poems. A deck of cards offers starting points for improvisation and performance. Amongst other propositions, the idea of companionship is presented as following:

you keep your dance company  
your dance keeps you company  
your dance keeps other people company  
you keep their dance company

(Chauchat 2015)

Composing the attention of the self (for both the performer and the audience members) is a spatio-temporal process. The time and space of the performance is proposed as a reality to experience 'here and now' while offering strategies to envisage other occasions of coming-together. As Chauchat (2015) explains, 'it is an invitation to address those occasions as experiments that are each time re-formulated and that we invent together.' Distributing the self through negotiating the inherent division of attention in somatic practices develops an ethical *agility* or *a responsiveness*, which I argue is necessary for resistance. It is through the practice of this belonging that I am able to freely synchronize my doing, thinking and feeling with others. Here the word 'freely' is paramount to my idea. For this practice to offer a critical model of the alienation of time by capitalism, somatic collectivity needs to be rooted in a practical freedom. Practising collectivity through synchronizing our time and duration together is bound to an ethics of engagement which I suggest can be located in the self enjoyment of this practice in concerns with others.

While this paper is intended as a theorisation of the concept of somatic collectivity, it is beyond its scope to offer extended ideas of practice. Nonetheless, I have pointed to the ways established somatic practices based on improvisational principles such as flocking, scoring and task-based performance, can be re-politicized by the adoption of embodied collectivity bound to an ethics

of engagement with social realities.

We can think of critical practices which continuously re-assess an awareness of the underlying ideology around the production of bodies. We can also think of practices which aim to re-experience the individual and the collective by persisting in asking ‘what can a body do to be safe?’ (Paxton 1997: 87). The recent accounts of performative protest linked to local movements of resistance are examples of acts of affective persistence as an embodied collectivity for survival. The Egyptian’s choreographer Adham Hafez (2011) describes ‘the power of moving together’, experienced in the streets of Cairo during the early days of the Egyptian revolution:

In me, I felt where togetherness could start sometimes where the place of connecting to another person could be. Sometimes it was in the eyes, sometimes in the whispers or screams. But, most of the time it was desire. It was in attraction. And, perhaps in the space between self-survival instinct and making peace with the fear of pain and of being terminated.

(Hafez 2011)

Similarly, the protest dance *The Standing Man* (2013) initiated by choreographer Erdem Gündüz implies the re-orientation of well-known improvisational strategies (Paxton) towards an anarchic social organisation. This ethics of engagement involves participants in a political coming-together.

While I began these reflections on embodied theatre practices by highlighting crises of belonging in post-Fordism, it is now clearer that the political significance of these practices resides in their ambivalent relationship with neoliberalism. On the one hand, the constant need of capitalism to find new sources of authenticity to validate its development contributes to an appropriation of somatic practices by neoliberal agendas. In turn, this may result in the fragmentation of collaborative endeavours into individual intentions. Conversely, they might offer scope – from an embodied and political perspective – for resistance to the commodification of affects under post-Fordism.

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